

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE THE HEART OF JUSTICE: SOCIAL WORK INNOVATIONS IN AFRICA

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## **Professionalism and Social Work Values in Practice**

This special issue has generated the interest of people from many parts of the world. Although only a few among the many who submitted abstracts and articles have made it to the publication stage, we are indebted to all those who showed interest in the special issue and hope they will maintain their interest in submitting abstracts and articles to the Journal.

As special-issue editors, we have tried to strike a balance between maintaining rigor and supporting the voices of professional practitioners as they reflect on the dilemmas encountered when trying to apply social work theories to practice. Like the social worker professionals, we also take note when they perceive that social work values and social justice are at risk of being compromised.

Through the eyes of contributors we see the continent of Africa for what it is: a continent full of contradictions, beauty, and glory, but also ugly wars, victimization, famine, and other man-made and natural disasters. However, we also see heroic acts of people who get up, search into their culture and their faith to pick up speed and march forward each time they fall. From Rwanda to Uganda, Israel, South Africa, and Tanzania, we hear stories of how it takes the best of us to heroically overcome the challenges of life exemplified by the ills in those among us.

The human race is capable of both good and evil, but when we look for good we find it, even in what appears to be a situation of despair and hopelessness. Social workers aim at strength, even when the need appears to be overwhelming. In war there is hope for peace. In death there is hope that the cause of death has taught the living something about finding a

meaning in life and working hard for a better world. We strive for a world without injustice, where people can live in dignity, respecting the worth of each person; and where untimely death due to preventable causes can end.

## **Interventions**

In this special issue Hadidja Nyiransekye gives testimony of how social work practice and African cultural practices complement each other. Healing is an act of God, but it takes an act of will in people who become a vehicle through which the healing miracle occurs. As one reads through "Social Work Practice in Rwanda: Drumming and Weaving for Healing," one witnesses how the interwoven relations between human sweat and human spirit give spiritual renewal to a nation and a people who rise to realize dreams of a future in the health of the generations to come.

In "Supporting Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Northern Uganda: Muse and Reflections from the Activities of Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), 1994-2010," we join Eric Awich Ochen and Robert Okeny in witnessing endurance in the human spirit. We feel for the formerly abducted children as if they were our own and also feel for the social workers as they battle with issues of controlled emotional involvement.

Itzhak Lander, in "Perspectives on Assisting African Refugees in Israel," takes us through an emotional journey of finding meaning in a common history of a people living in two nations, i.e., Israel and Ethiopia, but still bound together by a common cultural heritage. Africa embraces all and is embraced by many as a mother of children separated by the forces of history to reside in all continents while still

cherishing parts of the mother that they left behind.

Susan Rice, on the other hand, in "Teaching Nonviolent Conflict Resolution: A Form of Ubuntu," recounts how a conflict resolution curriculum embraces the dignity and worth of a person. This was possible with the Rotary Grant program at Stellenbosch University in Capetown, South Africa, where Rice taught non-violence. It also should be possible with similar programs elsewhere in Africa and the world.

### Health

In "Prolonging Despair: Antiretrovirals Without Social Support in HIV-Positive Youth," Stephanie Pulliam introduces us to AIDS patient Lilly, an adolescent born to an HIV-positive mother. We are taken on a journey through agony, hope and despair, a test of human endurance. Lilly represents a generation of adolescent children and young adults born to HIV-positive mothers long before the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) program was invented. Some were started on antiretroviral therapy, with little preparation and psychosocial support to their families, and limited or no follow up. Professional intervention issues include policies of disclosure of the patients' status, and what support is available from friends and peers.

Julie Drolet makes a case for "Integrating Culture, Gender and Human Rights: Supporting Community-Level Strategies to Eradicate Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Africa." Drolet shares her perspective on female genital mutilation (FGM) as a health issue that demands sensitivity to the culture that influences people's perceptions of feeling healthy or having a sense of self-worth. The countries mentioned by Drolet are only a few among many in Africa and elsewhere in the world where FGM is common.

There is need to address what aspects of culture influence resistance to the efforts of civil society and government institutions towards eliminating such forms of social injustice to women and children in the respective countries. It takes both genders to agree on how to embrace what is good in those

cultures and confront what needs changing in the inequities in gender power relations and in the gender roles that are enshrined in traditional institutions, including the family.

### Education

"The Challenges of Re-establishing Social Work Education at Addis Ababa University: A Personal Reflection" is the story of a lifelong journey into academia by Wassie Kebede. This is a story of higher education as well as professional training in Africa. Kebede's heroic story represents many similar stories on the continent. What is special is that his is not only a personal journey, but also a journey of a nation and its institutions: the School of Social Work and Addis Ababa University. It is also a journey of the social work profession in Africa.

In "Despite a Flawed System, Northern Ugandans Seek Hope through Education," Sarah Klingler, through her work with the non-governmental organization *Invisible Children Teacher Exchange* program, takes us to Anaka, formerly a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP). This is a village bordering Sudan, in the Gulu district of northern Uganda. Here, we learn to see a glass as half full rather than half empty, and we see the strength perspective at work in Sarah.

Nancy R. Williams and Sharon Nickols, in "Traversing the Bumpy Road of Learning: Exploring Faculty and Student Experiences in an International Service-Learning Program in Tanzania," introduce us to the students involved in international or immersion service-learning in the Ukerewe Island of Lake Victoria, in the Mwanza region of Tanzania. We become acquainted with the lived experience of faculty and students as they go through life in Ukerewe, Tanzania. We join Williams and Nickols in "meaning-making," as they reflect on their role as faculty, helping students find their calling and make sense of their motivation for choosing service learning abroad, away from the comforts of home in the US.

In her "Scholarly Writing as a Tool for Empowering Change Agents in Ethiopia," Margaret E. Adamek advises us to learn from those we serve, in this case, her students at the Addis Ababa University School of Social

Work. In the Social Work profession, we give and receive: each time we give we must acknowledge what we get back. As for the African continent, its generosity is abundant in its culture, people, and their language, geography, and history. Adamek and her doctoral students inspire us to see the reciprocal relationship between us and those we serve.

### Book Review

Finally, Dianne Rush Woods reviews the inspiring book *The Price of Stones: Building a School for my Village*, authored by Twesigye Jackson Kaguri with Susan Urbanek Linville. For those who care about Africa and its people, this is a good read. It is a shining example of a native villager, who, having achieved success in overcoming the poor odds dealt him by circumstances of birth, returns to better the lives of those he left behind.

### Conclusion

This special issue on “The Heart of Justice: Social Work Innovations in Africa” inspires us to look for meaning in our everyday work as social workers, whether we teach, conduct research, design policy, or practice social work in Africa or anywhere in the world. For those of us privileged to live and work in Africa, it is important to appreciate that gift. See hope in every soul touched, look for strength and courage rather than weakness, and encourage a smile on every gloomy face.

Finally, smile back and generate laughter. Seek and you will find beauty, peace, and love in Africa. There is potential for good and opportunity for innovation in every challenging situation. So let Africa not be defined by what it does not offer, but by what it does offer. This is true for every nation and continent in the world.

~Theresa Kaijage

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~James J. Kelly

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