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## Social justice and human rights of older persons in Africa

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This special issue of the *African Journal of Social Work* includes contributions made to the research symposium held in June 2024 at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa that invited robust discussion and deliberations under the theme: *Social Justice and Human Rights of Older Persons in Africa*.

The symposium was part of the research focus of the Interim South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARCHI) Chair on Welfare and Social Development and was jointly hosted with the Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg, University of Pretoria, Nelson Mandela University, University of Cape Town, The Association for The Aged, and Ikamva Labantu. The two-day symposium gave researchers, postgraduate students, social work practitioners and policymakers from across Africa the opportunity to share empirical evidence, experiences and insights regarding older persons and their contributions to enhancing a developmental social welfare agenda in Africa and beyond.

In contemporary Africa, with a nexus of social and economic challenges that confront families, the indigenous social and material support systems are strained and dwindling. Older persons are at a high risk of neglect, financial, physical and emotional abuse, poverty, and crime (African Union (AU), 2016). A shift of consciousness is urgently needed to challenge negative stereotypes of older persons and ageing and to acknowledge their valuable contribution in contemporary times. Furthermore, the social work profession must explore and centre decolonial social work practices that are fit to serve older persons living on the African continent.

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015) provides social workers with an opportunity to redefine their roles and ethical responsibilities pertaining to the human rights and social justice of older persons in contemporary society by, amongst others, researching, implementing and evaluating decolonial social work practices.

This special edition coincides with the United Nations' International Day of Older Persons. Since 1991, the international day (entire October) is observed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October in terms of Resolution 45/106. The topics covered in the special edition, dovetail with the four key areas of action as espoused in the *UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030*, and which also informs the annual themes of the international day. These are as follows: "change how we think, feel and act towards age and ageing; ensure that communities foster the abilities of older people; deliver person-centred integrated care and primary health services responsive to older people; and provide access to long-term care for older people who need it" (World Health Organization, 2020).

This editorial introduces seven papers as an outcome of the key themes presented at the research symposium. One paper focuses on a human rights issue, namely elder abuse in South Africa. Thereafter, three papers offer different perspectives on social assistance, a human right, from three African countries, namely Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The potential of digital gerontological social work services is outlined for South African older persons in residential facilities in an attempt to promote their human rights and social justice. The final two papers centre around decolonial gerontological social work debates, i.e., the choice between ageing in place or institutionalisation in South Africa, and a scoping review of African literature on the promotion of the rights of older persons through cultural competence in social work practice.

The paper by Murugen, Raniga, and Glaser offers a qualitative overview of older persons' and key informants' understanding of elder abuse in South Africa. Risk factors for elder abuse were identified as socioeconomic factors, substance misuse, and diminished traditional family values. Protective factors against elder abuse include access to community networks, social support, and awareness of rights. Knowledge of the former could inform developmental social work practice in South Africa.

Conducted in the Northern region of Ghana, Konlan's paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study that explored the contribution of the Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP) cash transfer programme to the sustainable livelihoods of older persons. The study found that older persons utilised the cash to buy the much-needed medication for old age-related health complications such as diabetes, blurred vision and joint pains. However, the programme is not without challenges. The paper calls for policy advocacy by professionals such as social workers and civil society organisations for more integrated sustainable livelihoods for older persons.

Raniga's qualitative paper employed the capabilities approach to examine the socio-economic challenges that are faced by older persons who are receiving the state old age pension in South Africa. The paper indicates that older persons vary between those who can still work to augment their old age pension and those who rely on remittances from their children and mothers of the children who they stay with. The paper recommends restructuring of the social security system to make it more relevant in meeting the needs of older persons. More importantly, social workers are called to incorporate developmental social work to ensure sustainable livelihoods for older persons.

Mushunje and Mupedziswa offer a scoping literature review on the welfare conditions of older communal farmers in Zimbabwe during a period of financial meltdown. The paper highlights how older persons' well-being and overall food security have been compromised amidst the adoption of a neoliberal agenda. Hence, recommendations are offered for social work practice with older persons, and public policy to establish universal social protection systems for older persons.

In the quantitative study of Geyer and Crafford they outline the results of a survey among older persons in South African residential facilities concerning their access, use and acceptance of technology. Older persons

mostly accessed the internet with cell phones and mobile data. Older persons use platforms, such as messaging, reading news, and social media independently. Overall, older persons showed high acceptance of technology. Considered from a developmental social work framework, digital gerontological social work services are recommended to render services through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) when direct service delivery is not feasible, and amidst the increased use of ICTs.

Sobantu's paper explores the factors that influence older persons in one residential facility in Johannesburg North, South Africa to opt for residential care as opposed to ageing in place. The qualitative study revealed that deteriorating health and illness, loneliness, and the influence of financial and social support are key to opt for institutionalisation. The paper creates the opportunity for social workers to theorise both the concepts of ageing in place and institutionalisation.

In his scoping review, Zimba offers an overview of the current landscape of African literature on the promotion of the rights of older persons through cultural competence in social work practice. Three themes unpack this topic, namely 1) Human rights issues experienced by older persons requiring cultural competence intervention, 2) Cultural competence strategies and initiatives that social workers could implement, and 3) Barriers to cultural competence integration on the intervention aimed at promoting the rights of older persons. This review informs decolonial gerontological social work practices.

These papers are tightly linked to the themes on which the presentations at the symposium were organised. These are: care economy and aging in place; disasters/pandemics and conflicts/war, environmental factors; resilience and agency of older persons; and the social justice and human rights of older persons. The dominant idea that cuts across almost all the papers about social justice for older persons in Africa is that very little is understood about age and ageing by families and communities. The immediate- to long-term impact of such a misunderstanding is that older persons will lack the necessary support to realise their full social and economic potential in their communities. Furthermore, they are more likely to be prone to various forms of abuse and neglect particularly in low-income communities owing to poverty and information gaps on ageing. It is thus recommended that future social work research focuses on older persons from marginalised communities who are likely to be at risk of having limited ageing options such as residential facilities and access to health care. Except for one paper that utilised a quantitative approach, the other papers employed qualitative research methodologies and various insightful designs to capture in-depth insights into the realities of older persons that impinge on their social justice and human rights in Africa. For future, it is recommended that Afrocentric research methodologies be also used to understand older persons in Africa in their local settings.

We enjoyed the scholarly journey to put this special edition together and trust that the papers will challenge social work scholars, practitioners, and policy makers to think anew about older persons and how we serve this growing and vulnerable group on the African continent. As the African proverb goes "*Agbalagba ti o joko nilé, rí ju omode tí o gun ìganná ní orí oke*". The proverb in the Yoruba language reminds us about the value of wisdom and experience that comes with age. Despite physical limitations, older persons possess deep insight and understanding, which often surpass the youthful energy of younger individuals.

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