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## Promoting the rights of older persons in Africa through cultural competence in social work practice

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### ABSTRACT

*Africa protocol on the rights of older persons requires that state parties protect them by preventing discrimination against them and guaranteeing their access to healthcare, social protection and support. Older persons are often discriminated against within families, during service delivery and by the legal system. Integrating culturally competent approaches in the provision of social work services is recognised as a promising strategy for protecting and promoting the rights of older persons. This article aims to present the current landscape in the promotion of the rights of older persons and research within Africa through cultural competence using a scoping review. The scoping literature review followed eight methodological steps to analyse the reviewed data. The findings of the review reveal three significant focus themes in the literature. Firstly, human rights challenges experienced by older persons. Secondly, the review outlines cultural competence strategies to promote the rights of older persons. Thirdly, barriers to cultural competence are revealed as significant setbacks in promoting older persons' rights. The paper concludes that promoting the rights of older persons is a complex process that requires a radical and critical approach to deal with systemic and structural realities experienced by marginalised individuals.*

**KEY TERMS:** Africa, cultural competence, indigenous strategies, rights of older persons, scoping review, social work,

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## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to determine the current landscape in the promotion of the rights of older persons and research within Africa on cultural competence intervention in social work practice. The study utilised a scoping review methodology to provide a snapshot of interventions that promote older persons' rights in social work using a cultural competency framework. The paper reviewed research published between 2014- 2024 and peer-reviewed within the domain of gerontology practice in social work. The study discusses three major themes: Theme 1, human rights challenges experienced by older persons; Theme 2, cultural competence strategies that promote the rights of older persons; and Theme 3, barriers to cultural competence are revealed as significant setbacks in the promotion of the rights of older persons.

## BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) estimates that over 36 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are 60 and over. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2022) reported that there are more than five million people who are aged 60 or older. There is an undisputed agreement that older persons are a vulnerable population. In 2014, the African Union (AU) endorsed an Africa Common Position on the Rights of Older Persons. In 2016, an African protocol on the rights of older persons was adopted by the AU, which requires each member state to adopt legislative or other measures to give effect to a number of issues. Firstly, to eliminate and prevent discrimination against older persons; secondly, to guarantee them access to justice and equal protection before the law; thirdly, to ensure that they have access to social protection; fourthly, to protect them from abuse and harmful traditional practices; fifthly, to ensure that they are provided with optional and affordable residential care; and sixthly, to ensure that they have access to education and health services; and lastly, to make sure that they participate in programmes and recreational activities.

Over the past three decades, African member states of the AU developed policies and legislative frameworks for older persons. In South Africa, the Constitution Act 108 of 1996 mandates all legislation and policies to address discrimination and protect the human rights of older persons (Lombard & Kruger, 2009). The Aged Persons Act 13 of 2006, as amended, brings about a transformative social welfare policy aimed at an inclusive approach responsive to the needs of all demographics in South African communities. The International Labour Organization (2014) on social protection reported that countries like Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Eswatini have achieved or nearly achieved universal pension coverage for older persons, and that currently, few countries, such as Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia are piloting universal old-age social pensions.

As much as some progress is made in Africa in promoting the rights of older persons, it is not deniable that older persons continue to face abuse emanating from families, communities and residential care, as well as systematic oppression as a vulnerable group (Adamek, Kotecho, Chane, & Gebeyaw, 2022; Lombard & Kruger, 2009; Turok, 2006). The gerontological social work literature identified macro challenges faced by older persons: poverty, lack of aging professionals, lack of government attention to older persons, and lack of sub-Saharan African networks for the demographic shift (Adamek et al., 2022). Some challenges identified as faced by older persons concerning their rights are the inadequate provision of healthcare services, lack of family and community-based care support, increased cognitive and functional impairment, emergency visits, and hospitalisation (Bambeni, 2024).

To mitigate the challenges confronted by older persons at a community-based level, social workers are trusted to understand their needs and rights (Dhemba, 2023). One of the needs of older African persons is the right to social, emotional, religious, cultural and political views. Therefore, the scoping review aims to understand social workers' intervention within cultural competence practice concerning older persons' cultural rights and needs. The primary question of the review is: What is the landscape of safeguarding and promoting the rights of older persons in South Africa within a cultural context. Cultural competence, which is considered an ethical imperative and a central tenet of social work practice (Zimba, 2020), can be defined as follows (Atwine, 2021; Shokane & Masoga, 2018):

[A] process in which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognises, affirms, values, and preserves their dignity.

In the context of this scoping review, understanding how social workers interventions respond respectfully to the culture, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, and immigration status of older persons in practice is vital to answering the research questions. Zimba (2020) and Thomas (1998) agreed that social workers must understand the culture and the behaviours derived from simultaneous membership and participation in various contexts, including language, age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status,

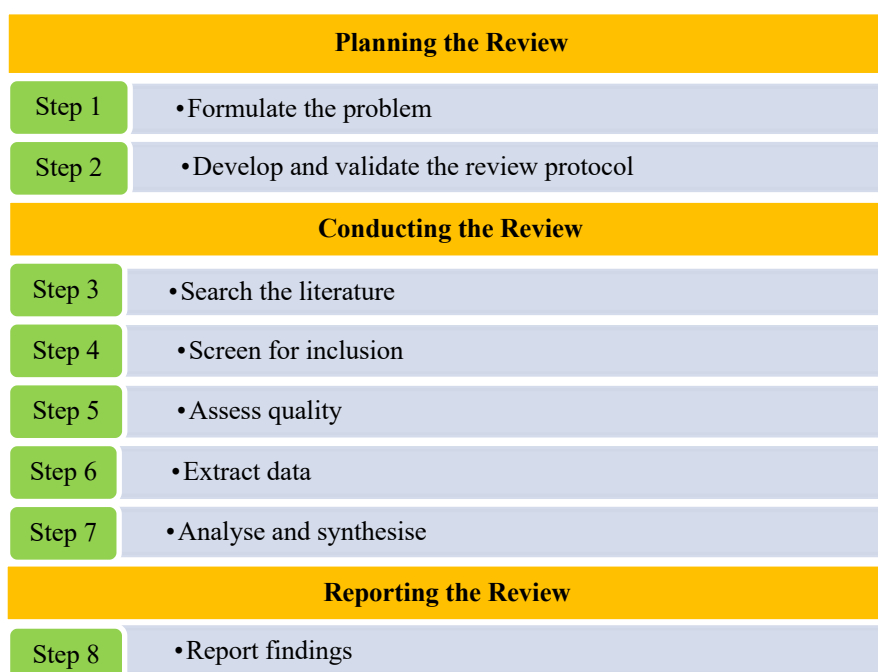
education and sexual orientation. Chick (1997) argues that it is vital for social workers to acknowledge the complex nature of social problems and to be able to think in a complex way about the interventions that may be required to address social problems using cultural knowledge, skills and strategies known by local communities

Silverstone (2005) indicates that in working with older persons, social workers are required to demonstrate cultural competency. Other authors such as Hardy and Laszloffy (1995), Santiago-Rivera (1995), Schim, Doorenbos and Borse (2006), and Collins (2011) allude that social workers working with older persons in the context of culture are required to show respect, awareness of language and culture, and understand the importance of spirituality and religion as sources of support. Furthermore, working within a cultural context requires us to show cultural awareness, knowledge of diverse people, and skills of combining awareness and knowledge (Danso, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, a scoping review was conducted of literature between November 2023 and April 2024. The aim was to extract as much relevant data as possible from each piece of literature. The review provides a snapshot of the field and a complete overview of what has been done to identify the conceptual boundaries of a field (older persons, human rights, and cultural competence). In this review, I followed the following steps as illustrated by Xiao and Watson (2019).

Figure 1. Process of a scoping review adapted from Xiao and Watson (2019)



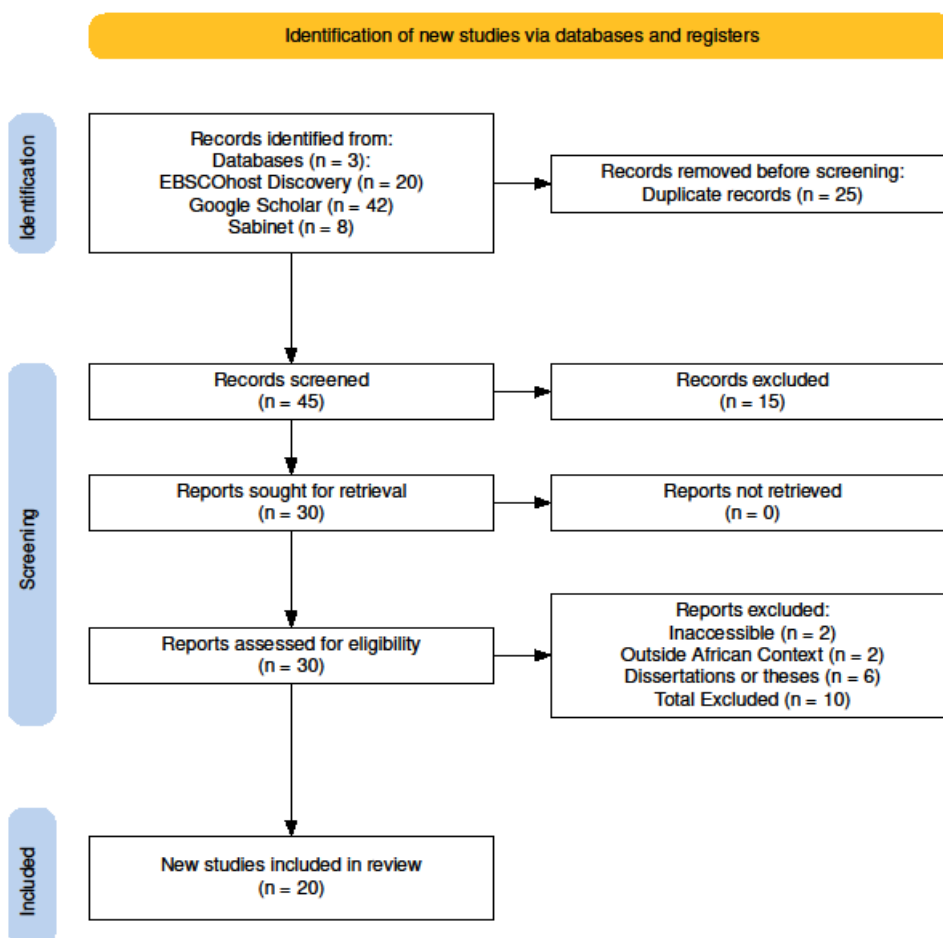
Xiao and Watson (2019) point out that despite differences in procedures across various types of literature reviews, all the reviews can be conducted following eight common steps: (1) formulating the research problem; (2) developing and validating the review protocol; (3) searching the literature; (4) screening for inclusion; (5) assessing quality; (6) extracting data; (7) analysing and synthesising data; and (8) reporting the findings. In step one of this scoping review, a research problem was formulated based on understanding the AU protocol on the rights of older persons and social work cultural competence intervention in an African context. To explore the research problem, the review was guided by three sub-questions:

1. what are the human rights issues regarding older persons requiring cultural competence intervention in social work?
2. What are the cultural competence strategies and initiatives in promoting the rights of older persons in social work?
3. What are the barriers to cultural competence integration in interventions aimed at promoting the rights of older persons?

In step 2, a review protocol was developed with inclusion criteria, which were that publications must be journal articles (including reviews), newspaper articles and book chapters relevant to older persons' rights, social work and cultural competence in Africa. Dissertations or theses, reports, speeches and blogs were excluded from the review. Search strategies in the review used the following keywords to search the literature: “older person” and “social work”; “older person” and “human rights”; “social work” and “culture”; “older persons” and “cultural competence” and “social work” and “older persons”. Research questions were used to select journal articles and book chapters to assess quality in the criteria and screening procedures for data extraction. Article titles and abstracts with keywords were used for screening. Peer review of the selected articles and book chapters was used to validate the selection.

In step 3, literature was searched on platforms such as EBSCOhost Discovery, Google Scholar and the Sabinet databases. EBSCOhost Discovery accesses multiple databases (e.g., Academic Search Complete, Social Work Abstract, Directory of Open Access Journals, PubMed, SocINDEX with Full Text, Science Direct, Social Sciences Citation Index and Supplemental Index). In step 4, each article was screened to decide whether data should be included for extraction and analysis. Two-stage procedures were followed: articles for inclusion based on the abstract review and assessment based on a full-text review. In step 5, after screening for inclusion, I obtained full texts for the quality assessment stage and ranked texts based on a checklist for quality assessment. After the exclusion process had been completed, information from each article was entered into a Google questionnaire form to check the quality of the articles. The Google questionnaire had five questions: (1) what year was the article published?; (2) What are the keywords in the article or book chapter?; (3) Is the article or book chapter written in a sub-Saharan African context?; (4) What are the identified issues of “human rights”; “social work” and “culture”; “older persons” and “cultural competence” and “social work”?; and, (5) What are the challenges of older persons in Africa? The Google questionnaire was exported into an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. The process of inclusion and exclusion is depicted graphically in Figure 2 using PRISMA 2020-compliant flow diagrams by Haddaway, Page, Pritchard and McGuinness (2022). In step 6, data was extracted, similar papers were coded together, and themes were created. In step 7, data was analysed using qualitative texts, finding descriptive themes, and distilling them into analytic themes. In step 8, findings are presented using thematic presentation.

Figure 2: PRISMA 2020 Open Synthesis Campbell Systematic Review flow diagram adapted from Haddaway et al. (2022)



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The scoping review presents the findings of studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, namely South Africa (n=9), Kenya (n=1), Uganda (n=3), Namibia (2), Uganda (1), Rwanda (n=3), Zimbabwe (n=1), and a cross-country study (n=1). All the studies reviewed were qualitative research studies with older persons, social workers, and policymakers in the study population.

The reviewed studies yielded three themes: human rights issues experienced by older persons requiring cultural competence intervention in social work practice, cultural competence strategies and initiatives, and barriers to cultural competence integration on intervention.

### **Theme 1: Human rights issues experienced by older persons requiring cultural competence intervention in social work practice**

The literature reviewed (Ananias, Salonika, Black and Strydom, 2016; Kang'ethe, 2018; Kang'ethe, 2024; Kotzé, 2018; Wamara, Strandberg, & Bennich, 2021) pointed out various human rights-related issues that older persons experience. The first human rights issue was various forms of abuse (Ananias et al., 2016). The forms of various abuse identified are associated with abusive behaviours towards older persons by primary carers, which include screaming, yelling, abandonment, use of physical force, withholding food and financial misuse. The finding of this review reveals a similar argument made by Fang and Yan (2018) that various forms of abuse of older persons occur both within residential care facilities and in private domestic settings. The human rights issues revealed in the review intersect with the argument that cultural competence is a fundamental tenet of social work practice in confronting critical issues of injustices and discrimination (Danso, 2018). Cultural competence in social work practice is proposed as a framework that can serve as a link of collaboration between social work and law (Melendres, 2022). Thus, human rights violations and abuse experienced by older persons require cultural competence intervention in social work practice.

Other human rights issues revealed in the review are weakened food security, lack of proper housing, and disregard for cultural rights (Noyoo, 2017; Kang'ethe, 2018; Sobantu, 2021; Kotzé, 2018; Wamara et al., 2021). The review reveals that the need for cultural and structural solutions to aging challenges is well-articulated in the writings of Kotzé (2018) and Wamara et al. (2021), who identified elder abuse as a structural and cultural issue that necessitates culturally appropriate interventions. The findings on older persons indicate that housing is a basic human right the government must protect. Thus, the lack of housing for older persons contravenes national and international rights to modest and decent housing (Noyoo, 2017).

### **Theme 2: Cultural competence strategies and initiatives**

The second question the review wanted to answer was the cultural competence strategies and initiatives in social work used to promote the rights of older persons. The review identified five strategies and initiatives, which are (1) indigenous social work intervention, (2) informal care, (3) strengthening family and community support, (4) culture-oriented and cultural care strategies, and (5) language-oriented strategies.

Concerning indigenous social work intervention, the review reveals that local problem-solving approaches, such as traditional/customary courts are used to promote justice for older persons. A study by Mabeyo and Kiwelu (2019) found that respecting preferred indigenous ways of healing known and needed by older persons during social work intervention is one of the strategies that demonstrate a culturally competent practice.

Informal care, such as community-based care in which primary care relies on family members and communal care, is founded on African care philosophies for one another. In the review, a study by Nhapi (2020) reveals that the rights of older persons in Zimbabwe are promoted through community-based care. The third strategy in the review is strengthening family and community support (Ananias et al., 2016). This strategy argues that social workers provide families with psychosocial education on caring for older persons.

The fourth strategy revealed is the provision of culture-oriented social work interventions and cultural care strategies (Ananias et al., 2016; Uwizeyimana et al., 2024). Culture-oriented and cultural care entails services aimed at meeting the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health and well-being of older persons (Okoye, 2024). Ananias et al. (2016) found three primary forms of culture-oriented and cultural care in which social workers made interventions to promote the rights of older persons, which are full language adaptation, partial language adaptation, and the creation or translation of written and audiovisual resources. Zimba (2020) argues that cultural competence practice in social work requires understanding and using the local language to address social problems from the local context. The last cultural competence strategy in promoting the rights of older persons in social work practice found in this review is the language-oriented strategy, as pointed out by Nhapi (2020), and Mabeyo and Kiwelu (2019). In social work literature on culture, language is argued to be a body of knowledge and a tool for decentralising power to the local people and thereby empowering them to be at the centre of constructing the change they want to see (Fook, 2022).



### Theme 3: Barriers to cultural competence integration on intervention aimed at promoting the rights of older persons

The third question the review sought to answer centred around the barriers to cultural competence integration in interventions aimed at promoting the rights of older persons in social work practice. The review identified five barriers to cultural integration in interventions aimed at promoting the rights of older persons. The first barrier is the lack of enforcement mechanisms for the various rights conferred on older persons (Kotzé, 2018; Dako-Gyeke, Hervie, Abbey, Mort & Kodom, 2023; Nouman, Levin, & Lavee, 2020). The lack of express enforcement mechanisms detracts from the significant advance in protecting older persons (Meenan, Rees, & Doron, 2015). The review finding agrees with the argument made by Fisher-Borne, Cain and Martin (2015) that many current cultural competency models fail to account for the complex history and reality of present health, economic and social inequalities. The primary barrier to enforcing laws that promote the rights of older persons is the lack of implementing policy practices that fully realise the protection of vulnerable populations (Nouman et al., 2020). Other authors argue that systemic challenges create weak state capacity, inadequate partnerships, and a low level of citizen participation to enforce mechanisms that promote the rights of older persons (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2023).

The second barrier is the understanding of adequate care and rights within a context of culture in most African communities, which is flagged as a barrier to cultural competence integration in interventions aimed at promoting the rights of older persons in social work practice (Ikeorji, 2024; Mabeyo & Kiwelu, 2019). In cultural competence literature, there is an agreement that incorporating cultural knowledge within a wider, structural framework focuses on social position, education and socioeconomic status to explain rights at a communal level rather than individual behaviours and beliefs (Jongen, McCalman, & Bainbridge, 2017; Obioha, 2014).

The third barrier to cultural competence integration is the lack of institutional learning and knowledge of the cultural needs of older persons (Van Rooy, Mufune, & Amadhila, 2015). Most older persons in Africa are seen as custodians of culture and are trusted to transfer tradition, values and principles from one generation to another (Gutsa, 2017). Thus, understanding the cultural well-being of older persons is significant in promoting their rights.

The fourth barrier identified in the gerontological social work literature studies in sub-Saharan Africa highlights the infusion of technologies in social work practice (Adamek et al, 2022; Motiwala & Ezezika, 2022). Technology and electronic help in social work practice have been noted, and technology development is lacking (Safodien, 2021), adding cultural competence elements as an intervention to promote older persons through technology as electronic resources require infrastructural development. Zimba (2020) argues that cultural competence practice in South Africa is challenged by neoliberal policies and a pro-market economy rather than social services that benefit marginalised people.

The last barrier to cultural competence integration in interventions aimed at promoting the rights of older persons in social work practice is service accessibility, which refers to both geographical accessibility (which is the physical location of service units) and administrative accessibility (which means whether transport and escort services are provided) (Kan, 2024). The lack of social workers qualified to work with older persons contributes to the lack of access to older persons care services in social work practice (Ray, Bernard, & Phillips, 2018). In social work cultural competence practice, social workers are identified as integral in promoting the fulfilment of the rights of local people (Zimba, 2020).

### IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The findings of this review show that African member states of the AU that signed the protocol on the rights of older persons are committed to promoting the rights of older persons. The scoping review focused on the literature promoting older persons' rights using cultural competence practice in social work. Thus, the limitation of the review is that it could not explore the intersection between cultural competency practice and social work cultural competence education concerning the care of older persons. The scoping review findings draw the following implications:

1. *Social work practice*: Social work practice must engage in advocacy and mobilise for policy reforms that will propose harsh sentences for perpetrators of older persons' rights.
2. *Social work policy*: Social work regulatory bodies may need to consider the professionalisation of care of older persons as a category for training and specialisation in social work practice.
3. *Social work research*: Research on the cultural needs of older persons needs to be conducted.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between human rights, older persons and social work is a vital element that defines social work as a profession. Based on this scoping review, it is concluded that some progress is being made in developing and promoting the rights of older persons. However, older persons continue to face ever-growing challenges ranging from lack of adequate care, poverty, shortage of health care, and other systematic challenges. Social workers are found to have a critical role in protecting the rights of vulnerable populations. The review revealed that gerontological social work literature widely focuses on the rights of older persons on various focus, including issues of culture. However, the question of cultural competence practice seems to be a considerable gap to be explored.

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