Research Article

The relevance of indigenous knowledge systems in social work education and practice in Zimbabwe: A human rights perspective

Kudzai Mwapaura iD
Women's University in Africa, Department of Social Work, Zimbabwe

Mildred Mushunje (PhD) iD
Midlands State University, School of Social Work, Zimbabwe

Sunungurayi Charamba iD
Midlands State University, School of Social Work, Zimbabwe

Netsai Risinamhodzi iD
Midlands State University, School of Social Work, Zimbabwe

Tapiwanashe G. Simango iD
Midlands State University, School of Social Work, Zimbabwe

Abstract

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) are central to communities in Africa. They shape, influence, and define the behaviour of societies. Most communities in Zimbabwe have consistently recognised the human rights of individuals. Understanding how IKS can influence social work theory and practice to uphold human rights is important. Human rights are an inherent part of the social work profession. The article explores the views of social work educators in Zimbabwe on the intersection of IKS and human rights in social work education and practice. Data were qualitatively collected from ten purposefully selected social work educators using an instrumental case study design. Evidence from the participants shows four essential aspects, which are, the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems in social work

Corresponding Author: Kudzai Mwapaura; Women's University in Africa, Manresa Campus, Harare, Zimbabwe, kudzaimwapaura@gmail.com

education and practice in Zimbabwe, the role of indigenous knowledge systems in the application of human rights in social work in Zimbabwe, ways to utilise IKS best to uphold human rights; the challenges faced by educators in utilising indigenous knowledge systems in social work in Zimbabwe. The article concludes that IKS upholds human rights perspectives in social work theory and practice. The article recommends that IKS, informed by a human rights perspective, be integrated into social work education and practice in Zimbabwe and practised at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Keywords: Curriculum, education, human rights, indigenous knowledge systems, social work, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Although the need to promote and protect human rights within the development process is vital, success has, in most cases, been elusive. There is widespread questioning of the relevance of human rights standards in economically and socially deprived communities and societies. This has led to claims that human rights values are culturally relative and that the human rights movement largely manifests Western liberalism. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the two Covenants (the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) reflect Western values post the era of state sovereignty, which lasted until the 2nd World War (Ife, 2009; Ife et al., 2022). Although there is a widely held belief that human rights are universal and inalienable, culture and language often determine the form of values and principles. For example, the right to freedom of expression can have very different implications in different cultures. In Africa, human rights values accord with traditional African beliefs which pay homage to the inherent dignity and worth of every human being known as Ubuntu/hunhu (Mugumbate & Naami, 2023), while colonialism and westernisation have undermined indigenous cultural structures, systems of governance and law and which has compromised human rights principles.

The relevance of IKS in the application of human rights in Zimbabwe focuses on the potential of the indigenous knowledge systems in realising human

rights principles. IKS can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community gains over generations living in a particular environment. While there is growing recognition of the need to promote and protect human rights within the development process, the indigenous knowledge systems used in realising human rights principles have primarily been an unexplored area of research and policy advocacy. There is widespread questioning of the relevance of human rights standards in economically and socially deprived communities and societies. This has led to claims that human rights values are culturally relative and that the human rights movement largely manifests Western neoliberal ideology. This research allowed the authors to scrutinise Zimbabwe and contribute towards improvement in social work curriculum and practice for sustainable solutions to social problems through the integration of indigenous knowledge systems.

Background

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa and has 16 official languages. The populace comprises many ethno-linguistic groups, the majority of which are Bantu. Indigenous knowledge (IK) and learning systems have long been recognised as indispensable components of peoples' livelihoods, including drought preparedness (Mandiopera, 2023) and addressing many other social phenomena. In this light, indigenous knowledge is integrated into mainstream educational curricula to raise self-esteem and relevance of curriculum content to indigenous communities and to contribute to nation-building (Banes & Cruz, 2021). Moreover, it is observed that IKS plays a significant role in poverty alleviation in contemporary Zimbabwe and that the education sector plays an important role in preserving, protecting, and transmitting IK from generation to generation (Muguti & Zibengwa, 2022). Most communities in Zimbabwe have consistently recognised the human rights of individuals. Understanding how IKS can influence social work theory and practice in contemporary times is essential.

The importance of IKS in applying human rights in social work practice in Zimbabwe needs to be included in the literature. Maunganidze (2016) looked into IKS and rural development in Zimbabwe. Mahuntse (2021) focused on

a social work program on the contribution of IKS to child protection among Tsonga in Zimbabwe. Simbine and Le Roux (2021) looked into the indigenous mentoring and monitoring system amongst Vatsonga-speaking people towards child protection. Hari (2020) examined the relevance of IKS in Bulawayo City Council, Zimbabwe. Sithole (2020) studied the use of IKS in crop and livestock production and its implication for social ecology in the Chimanimani District of Zimbabwe. Mapira and Mazambara (2013) explored IKS and its impact on sustainable development in Zimbabwe. Chikoko et al. (2022) and Mushunje (2014) interrogated the challenges and opportunities for indigenous social protection systems in Zimbabwe. Mwapaura (2024) and Zvokuomba et al (2024) suggested that social workers can engage local leaders in disaster by providing indigenous communication channels. Chikoko et al. (2024) observed that asylum seekers and refugees at Tongogara Refugee Camp utilise IKS through informal social safety nets. All these articles had limited interrogation of how IKS can inform social work theory and practice and uphold human rights. This study is an attempt to fill this empirical gap.

In the post-independence era, the Zimbabwean education system has been described as Western-based and discredits communities' IK and indigenous learning systems (ILS) (Muridzo et al., 2022). The use of IKS implies the de-colonization of knowledge, which Mushunje (2023) argues is critiquing existing power structures and dominant culture at multiple levels. Decolonising knowledge through IKS can be appreciated as a method of centring research, methodology, and practice within Indigenous communities rather than rooting research and conceptualising it in colonised institutions and epistemologies. Hence, there is a human rights imperative for educators and educational institutions to build bridges between indigenous and Western systems to achieve meaningful outcomes for IP, including non-IP learners.

Increasingly, IKS is recognised as inherently encompassing principles of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Systems at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in collaboration with the Sikh Human Rights Group, uses its multi-and transdisciplinary, cultural, and community-based nature to promote the role of traditional

medicine, food security, biodiversity, environmental management and curriculum development, human rights and justice, for sustainable community livelihood and development, through research, human capital development, knowledge brokerage, networking and community engagement.

IKS developed before modern scientific knowledge systems followed colonisation and "Western" education. IKS encompasses agriculture, food processing, preservation, water, health, and holistic well-being of life (Buthelezi et al., 2024). Aside from the indigenous peoples in different regions globally and nationally, the IPs in Zimbabwe have IKS that sustained them despite the negative consequences of colonisation and globalisation threats. Hence, IK is linked to sustainable living that needs exposure to younger generations. The young generations are inheritors of the present and the future. Their education in the academe prepares them to actively participate in solving their societies' needs and concerns through their acquired knowledge, skills, and experiences. Thus, IK should not be seen as alternative knowledge but as one domain of expertise. This perspective inspires the different higher educational institutions (HEIs), accommodating IP and non-IP students, to be more forthcoming in developing a culturally responsive curriculum.

This study sought to explore the views of social work educators in Zimbabwe on the intersection of IKS and human rights in social work education and practice in Zimbabwe. By embracing IKS, social workers in Zimbabwe can better serve their communities and promote human rights, social justice, and cultural diversity. From a human rights perspective, IKS principles such as human dignity, non-discrimination, solidarity, and civic and cultural are important (Wronka, 2016). The study also sought to determine the relevance and challenges encountered by social work educators in incorporating IKS and human rights in social work education and practice. Lastly, the study sought to elicit strategies for integrating IKS and human rights in social work education and practice in Zimbabwe.

Intersectionality between IKS and human rights

IKS and human rights may seem like distinct concepts, but they are intricately connected. IKS encompasses the traditional beliefs, practices, and values of indigenous peoples, while human rights aim to protect the dignity and well-being of all individuals. The intersectionality between these two concepts is crucial for reconciliation, justice, and the empowerment of Indigenous communities. IKS is rooted in indigenous peoples' cultural, spiritual, and ecological practices. They encompass a holistic understanding of the world, emphasising the interconnectedness of all living beings and the connectedness to the land. These knowledge systems are passed down through generations, and their preservation is essential for the survival and well-being of indigenous communities. Human rights are universal and inalienable, aiming to protect the dignity and well-being of all individuals. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognises the specific rights of indigenous peoples, including their right to self-determination, cultural preservation, and land rights.

The intersectionality between IKS and human rights lies in their shared goals of promoting dignity, well-being, and justice. IKS can inform and enrich human rights approaches, while human rights can provide a framework for protecting and recognising indigenous knowledge systems. Key intersections include IKS, which is essential for cultural preservation and encompasses indigenous peoples' rights to their lands, territories, and resources, as these are crucial for their survival and well-being. In addition, indigenous peoples' right to self-determination is essential for their empowerment and autonomy and for promoting environmental justice and human well-being.

Theoretical framework

The study utilised the human rights approach to integrate IKS in social work teaching and practice. The study aimed to explore social work educators' views on the extent of applying human rights principles in social work education and training in Zimbabwe, such as human dignity, non-discrimination, solidarity, and civic and cultural rights (Wronka, 2016). Human rights are complex as they encapsulate natural rights (universal), state obligations, and constructed rights (contextual) (Ife, 2009; Ife et al., 2022).

Core principles of a human rights approach include (i) universality meaning human rights are universal and apply to all individuals, regardless of race, gender, nationality; (ii) inalienability meaning human rights cannot be taken away or surrendered; (iii) interdependence that is, human rights are interconnected and interrelated; (iv) active participation meaning individuals and communities have the right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives; (v) accountability that is, states and other duty-bearers are accountable for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights (Ife et al., 2022). A human rights approach is a robust framework for addressing social and economic inequalities, promoting dignity, and empowering individuals and communities. This approach recognises that all individuals have inherent rights and freedoms and that these rights are universal, inalienable, and interdependent.

The principles of social justice, human rights, and respect for diversity and dignity of all persons are central to social work. Hence, the need to incorporate the human rights discourse is the central premise of this paper. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) definition aptly captures social work as a social justice and human rights profession. These international bodies recognise that the "interconnected historical, socio-economic, cultural, spatial, political and personal factors serve as opportunities and barriers to human wellbeing and development" (IASSW & IFSW, 2014). Since its inception, social work has been a human rights profession (Lombard and Twirikize, 2014; Ife et al., 2022). This approach is hinged on Article 1 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The human rights approach has been used in several social work studies, including responses to substance use, child welfare, and ritual killing (Chikoko & Mwapaura, 2024; Mwapaura et al., 2022; Muzingili et al., 2024).

According to Spitzer and Twikirize (2019), African societies have long been overdue to embrace culturally sensitive interventions that are relevant through integrating IKS into social work curricula and practices. Therefore, the need to learn and intensify IKS is critical as principles of love, responsibility, and humanity align with the Afrocentric perspective in social

work. Social work contributes immensely to attaining the 17 sustainable development goals, of which the Human Rights Approach hinged on the rights to life, health, shelter, education, and food provision. Shokane and Masoga (2018) posit that African realities can be adopted by focusing on the realities of IKS in the social work discipline and education. IKS promotes the inclusion of everyone in society by accepting Ubuntu values; thus, everyone is not left out in fulfilling the SDGs. Human rights prioritise psychosocial, environmental, and economic sustainability for future generations. The African Union Agenda 2063 is a strategic policy for the continent's socio-economic transformation over the next 50 years and seeks to accelerate the implementation of past and existing continental initiatives for growth and sustainable development. The document also recognises the importance of human rights. It has seven aspirations, one of which is to be an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law. IKS plays a crucial role in ensuring that progress towards Agenda 2063 is fulfilled.

Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research as conceptualised by Alston (2020), who states that the inquirer makes knowledge claims based primarily on a constructivist perspective. In this context, using an instrumental case study design, the socially and historically constructed meanings were solicited from in-depth interviews conducted with ten social work lectures that had information on IKS and human rights in Zimbabwe. This was appropriate as it allowed for a multifaceted exploration of complex issues, such as the role and application of IKS in promoting human rights in Zimbabwe (Alston, 2020; Marlow, 2023). Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-step data analysis process was adopted, which included familiarization of data, generation of codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing themes, determining the significance of themes, and reporting of findings.

One of the main challenges was the busy schedules of the social work educators. We had to book appointments 3-4 days before conducting the interviews. We conducted member checking by sharing the results with the

purposefully selected social work educators to ensure accuracy and authenticity. The social work educators came from different parts of the country and had at least two years of lecturing experience. We collected and analysed data as a team, facilitating a clear audit trail.

The research took several ethical considerations to reduce the risks of harm, including obtaining written consent, protecting privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity (Marlow, 2023). The researchers obtained ethical clearance from two universities offering accredited social work programmes (one state and one private), which include the University of Zimbabwe and Women's University in Africa. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants. The authors also consulted with the African Independent Ethics Committee and African Social Work and Development Network, guided the researchers throughout the study and in generating this article.

5. Findings

The in-depth interviews raised intriguing insights on IKS and human rights in Zimbabwe. Table 1 presents an overview of the biographic profile of the participants.

Table 1: Biographical profile of the 10 participants

Participant (Social Work Lecturer -SWL)	Gender	Age	Institution type	Years in academia
SWL1	Male	30	Private	5
SWL2	Male	32	State	6
SWL3	Female	40	State	10
SWL4	Male	48	Private	12
SWL5	Male	55	State	22
SWL6	Female	27	Private	2
SWL7	Female	28	Private	2
SWL8	Female	31	State	4
SWL9	Male	33	Private	3
SWL10	Female	35	State	3

Relevance of IKS

This theme discusses the perceptions of social work educators on the relevance of IKS in social work education and practice as an instrument for upholding human rights.

All the participants believed that IKS and skills are critical to social work practice in Zimbabwe. These systems and skills are rooted in indigenous people's cultural traditions and practices and based on understanding the interconnectedness of all things. They often focus on community-based solutions to social problems and are grounded in a deep respect for the natural world and the importance of relationships. SWL 1 commented:

> "I believe indigenous knowledge systems and skills are critical and have many applications in social work. These systems and skills have been passed down through generations and are often integral to the community's cultural identity. They are based on the unique experience of a particular group and have the potential to be a powerful tool in the social work context."

Similarly, SWL 4 had this to say:

> "In my view, indigenous knowledge systems and skills have much to offer in the social work context. By understanding the unique perspectives and approaches of indigenous communities, social workers can better meet the needs of their clients and provide culturally appropriate services. This can help to foster better relationships between clients and social workers and ultimately lead to more successful outcomes."

Role of IKS and Human Rights

This theme discusses findings on applying human rights in the professional mandate of social work in Zimbabwe.

Cultural competence

Data revealed that social work educators and practitioners who can incorporate IKS and skills into their practice can better understand and work with people in Zimbabwe.

This is essential for building trust, establishing rapport, and effective interventions. SWL 3 stated:

> "I believe that indigenous knowledge systems and skills can be beneficial in the social work context to provide clients access to culturally appropriate services. By understanding and incorporating indigenous values and beliefs, social workers can better understand the dynamics of the clients' lives and develop services and interventions tailored to their needs. This can help foster better relationships between clients and social workers and improve the effectiveness of social work interventions."

Empowerment

The data showed that IKS and skills often focus on community empowerment and self-determination in Zimbabwe. Social work educators and practitioners who can incorporate these approaches into their practice can help empower indigenous communities and support their efforts to address social problems. SWL 6 had this to say:

> "In my view, indigenous knowledge systems often prioritise community empowerment and collective decision-making, which aligns with social work values. By working with indigenous communities in a culturally sensitive and respectful way, social workers can help to support community-led initiatives and empower marginalised groups."

Holistic Approach

Data revealed that IKS and skills are often based on a holistic approach to health and wellness, emphasising the interconnectedness of a person's life's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects. This approach can help social work educators and practitioners better understand and address the

complex needs of indigenous individuals and communities. SWL 2 had this to say:

> "I believe indigenous knowledge and skills offer a unique perspective on social issues and can provide insight into how a community has traditionally addressed and managed its problems. This knowledge is often based on a holistic, interconnected understanding of the world, which can be beneficial in the context of social work. Indigenous knowledge systems can also provide alternative approaches to problem-solving, which can help social workers address their clients' needs effectively."

By embracing IKS, social work educators and practitioners can adopt a comprehensive approach to human rights, addressing the intricate relationships between human and environmental well-being. SWL3 observed that:

> "IKS emphasises the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being, aligning with a holistic understanding of human rights. This approach recognises that human rights are indivisible and interdependent and that the realisation of one right is contingent upon the realisation of others."

Environmental Sustainability

The data demonstrates that indigenous knowledge and skills are often based on a deep respect for the natural world and understanding the importance of preserving the environment for future generations in Zimbabwe. Social work educators and practitioners who can incorporate these approaches into their practice can help promote environmental sustainability and support efforts to address climate change. SWL 8 had this to say:

> "Many indigenous cultures deeply respect the natural environment and understand the importance of sustainability and conservation. This can be a valuable perspective for social workers promoting environmental justice and sustainability."

Ways to utilise IKS to uphold human rights

This theme discusses how best IKS can be used to uphold human rights. This section highlights researchers' views on how IKS can be used to uphold human rights and promote cultural responsiveness and justice.

Cultural Responsiveness

IKS prioritises cultural responsiveness, recognising the diversity of indigenous cultures and experiences. By incorporating IKS into human rights work, social work educators and practitioners can ensure that human rights initiatives are tailored to Indigenous communities' specific needs and contexts. This approach challenges the dominant Western perspective and prioritises Indigenous voices and experiences, promoting a more inclusive and equitable human rights discourse. SWL1 had this to say:

> "IKS prioritises cultural responsiveness, recognising the diversity of Indigenous cultures and experiences. By incorporating IKS into human rights work, we can ensure that human rights initiatives are tailored to the specific needs and contexts of Indigenous communities."

Community-Centered Practice

IKS prioritises community-centred practice, empowering Indigenous communities to address their needs and challenges. This approach recognises the importance of community self-determination and autonomy in realising human rights. By supporting community-centred initiatives, social work educators and practitioners can promote the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, cultural preservation, and land rights. SWL7 highlighted that:

> "IKS prioritises community-centred practice, empowering Indigenous communities to address their needs and challenges. This approach recognises the importance of community self-determination and autonomy in realising human rights."

Environmental Justice

IKS offers a unique perspective on environmental justice, recognising the intricate relationships between human and environmental well-being. By incorporating IKS into human rights work, social work educators and practitioners can address environmental degradation and promote sustainable development that prioritises the rights of indigenous peoples. This approach challenges the dominant Western perspective on environmental justice and promotes a more inclusive and equitable approach. SWL5 shared that:

> "IKS offers a unique perspective on environmental justice, recognising the intricate relationships between human and environmental well-being. By incorporating IKS into human rights work, we can address environmental degradation and promote sustainable development that prioritises the rights of Indigenous peoples."

Innovative Solutions

IKS offers innovative solutions for addressing complex human rights issues, such as land rights, self-determination, and cultural preservation. By embracing IKS, social work educators and practitioners can develop new approaches that prioritise the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples. This approach recognises the importance of Indigenous knowledge and experiences in addressing human rights challenges and promotes a more inclusive and equitable human rights discourse. SWL5 highlighted that:

> "IKS offers innovative solutions for addressing complex human rights issues, such as land rights, self-determination, and cultural preservation. By embracing IKS, we can develop new approaches that prioritise the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples."

Decolonizing Human Rights

IKS can help decolonise human rights discourse, challenging dominant Western perspectives and prioritising Indigenous voices and experiences. This approach recognises the historical trauma and ongoing disparities faced by Indigenous peoples and seeks to address these injustices. By embracing

IKS, social work educators and practitioners can promote a more inclusive and equitable human rights discourse recognising Indigenous peoples' dignity and rights. SWL 9 shared that:

> "IKS can help decolonise human rights discourse, challenging dominant Western perspectives and prioritising Indigenous voices and experiences. This approach recognises the historical trauma and ongoing disparities faced by Indigenous peoples and seeks to address these injustices."

Challenges and issues on the use of IKS in academia
This theme presents the challenges in using IKS in social work academia and practice in Zimbabwe.

Availability of IKS reference materials
Data shows that the top challenge for social work lecturers is the limited IKS reference materials readily available in libraries, such as books, research on local cultures, documentary videos, material cultures, and other related instructional materials. During the face-to-face interviews, the social work participants mentioned that they wanted to integrate IKS into their teaching, but updated reference materials were limited, specifically on the content. There is scarce published research on IKS explicitly dealing with human rights issues available to lecturers. Some of the IK materials are privately owned by some participants and are unavailable in the library for common use. SWL7 had this to say:

> "The main challenge is the limited IKS reference materials readily available in the library. Although a section in the University library on IKS contains limited updated reference materials."

Limited cultural exposure
Data revealed that most social work lecturers have limited exposure to the IKS of the indigenous communities, especially the culture of the minority groups. Thus, the challenge was to integrate something unknown and translate it into the curriculum. As a result, they opted not to integrate because they feared that what they teach would not be similar to how the IPs practice

it. Among the ten participants, only two had in-depth knowledge about indigenous knowledge systems. Some lecturers admitted that they had personal cultural biases and stereotypes in integrating IKS into the curriculum due to a lack of cultural exposure and the influence of their Western-based training. Data also showed that the lecturers who integrate IKS in their teaching methodologies have deep cultural exposure and orientations from their indigenous communities. As a senior social work lecturer mentioned, his advocacy to integrate IKS in teaching started from exposure to elders in indigenous communities. Thus, he tends to exercise what he has been exposed to in the academe, which is a considerable shortfall. Suppose this knowledge is not documented and popularised. For example, he uses indigenous knowledge in socioeconomic development and child protection modules. SWL10 had this to say:

> "It is worth mentioning that my travels to other places in Zimbabwe further enhanced my appreciation of indigenous cultures. I had long and deep conversations with the elders from various communities. I use the information in some modules I teach, such as socioeconomic development and child protection."

Changing contexts

Changing context also contributes to some social work lecturers' lack of IKS appreciation. Due to education and job opportunities, lecturers migrate permanently to the city (for example, Harare). They seldom go home to their indigenous communities. Through the years, they are not aware of their cultural practices. In addition, they have imbibed the lifestyles in the city. The non-practice of these cultural practices in the city posed a threat of vanishing or disappearing the IKS of their elders. SWL 9 had this to say:

> "In the Universities, social work lecturers and students have diverse cultural backgrounds and come from different regions. This simultaneously promotes one national culture and one language (English) at the expense of minority Zimbabwean cultures."

Discussion of findings

The findings from the study showed the importance that social work educators accorded to IKS and in applying human rights in social work practice in Zimbabwe. Evidently, through understanding the unique perspectives and approaches of indigenous communities, social work educators and practitioners can better meet the needs of their clients and provide culturally appropriate services. Social work educators and practitioners who can incorporate these approaches into their practice can help to promote environmental sustainability and support efforts to address climate change. This aligns with Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which delineates the right to equality, and Article 27 on the right to participate in the community's cultural life. This human rights obligation overlaps with SDG target 4.7, which calls for an appreciation of cultural diversity and cultural contribution to sustainable development and encourages the implementation of community duties essential for free and full development. This human rights obligation overlaps with the SDG target 13 on climate action, which calls for sustainably managing forests, combating desertification, reversing land degradation, and halting biodiversity loss.

It was unanimous that integrating IKS is critical in social work interventions to respond to individual, group, and community challenges in Zimbabwe. The human rights approach calls for the inclusion of all people irrespective of race, class, and social status. This corroborates with empirical evidence from Uganda (Twikirize, 2019), Botswana (Rankopo, 2019; Osei-Hwedie & Boateng, 2018); Ghana (Naami & Mfoafo-M'Carthy, 2023), Nigeria (Onalu & Ingram, 2023) and South Africa (Ross, 2018) where these researchers call for indigenisation and decolonisation of social work. It is widely acknowledged amongst social work academics and practitioners in Africa that the origins of social work are Western, where theories, models, and interventions have dominated the training and curricula in postcolonial times, and reclaiming the value of African indigenous knowledge systems in addressing contemporary problems is necessary.

By embracing IKS, social work educators can work towards a more inclusive and equitable human rights discourse recognising indigenous people's dignity

and rights (IP). It is time to recognise the value of IKS in promoting human rights and to work towards a brighter future for all. Chikoko *et al.* (2024) observed that the concept of universal access and rights-based approach is heavily stressed through the social development approach, so there is a need to ensure that social safety nets are inclusive and sustainable for both asylum seekers and refugees.

The study showed that IKS material in the form of textbooks and research articles in libraries is unavailable to students during their social work education and training in Zimbabwe. Twikirize and Spitzer (2019) also acknowledge that in the East Africa region, using outdated material in social work makes it difficult for the discipline to respond to the needs of individuals, groups, and communities efficiently. Mubangizi and Kaya (2015) acknowledged the need to harness IKS in higher education and move towards a human rights perspective for education to be relevant to the South African context. A study by Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) in South Africa confirms the need to decolonise the social work curriculum as found in this current study.

The findings reiterate that social work educators and practitioners have limited exposure to minority cultures as they are mainly confined to urban areas where only a few are involved in rural social development. The urban-rural gap is highly felt in the social work discipline, with only a few relating to crisis interventions, such as Cyclone Idai. Social workers can be seen as aliens, especially when IKS interventions are vital in managing and mitigating natural disasters. It shows that the rights of these minority populations are infringed upon as they are not included in having timely and accurate information. Mwapaura (2024) observed that social workers should work collaboratively with village heads and other local leaders as they have a repertoire of indigenous knowledge.

Results from the study indicated that IKS also promotes environmental sustainability by conserving and preserving flora and fauna and interacting with people in different settings. Masoga and Sokane (2019) and Mukurazhizha et al. (2023) highlight how harnessing IKS can increase the

protection and avoid the extinction of valuable animals and vegetation, increasing positive bio-diversity. Nhapi (2023) posits that IKS is very effective in social work curricula to ensure that environmental social workers are correctly positioned to deal with environmental justice and ecological issues. Chigangaidze (2023) echoes the use of IKS in environmental social work, using Ubuntu philosophy as the only way to go in African societies.

Implications for social work practice

The human rights obligations overlap with the SDG targets. Human rights can be implemented in social work through IKS, such as culture-sensitive interventions. The issue of culturally sensitive and human rights-based interventions in social work has gained traction from African and non-African researchers, but much is still needed, especially in the practical feel and changes required for problem-solving. Suppose the advocacy on decolonisation and the use of IKS in social work curriculum and practice on paper continues. In that case, it will take decades, if not centuries, to make this cry practical. Hence, research, practice, and policy issues using IKS, if not correctly documented in African journals and even extending to the decolonisation of languages, remain a missing link. Social work students should be attached in rural settings so that they have an appreciation of IKS that are relevant to the social work curriculum based on their feedback. Collaboration and partnership between custodians of IKS are needed from different societies if proper research and documentation are to be achieved to add new knowledge in social work. There is a need to merge Western and African expertise rather than the polarisation of African knowledge, which communities and societies relied on long before the coming of the whites. IKS would promote sustainable development by further promoting developmental social work. There is a need for social workers in practice, researchers, stakeholders, and students to come up with robust, massive research and models on IKS to enrich the social work body of knowledge for future use by coming generations relevant to the African context.

Recommendations

This study makes some important recommendations as follows:

1. Policy: As a human rights principle, IKS should be promoted by the Government and other key stakeholders by encouraging social workers to be fully involved in the creation, documentation, and dissemination.

2. Educational initiatives: A mechanism for auditing and mapping research and teaching of IKS by social workers should be implemented. This would ensure that IKS and human rights gaps are included and embedded in teaching practice. A structured curriculum should be developed to hold lecturers to account for the delivery of content on IKS and human rights.

3. IKS awareness day should be established for minorities in universities. This can be done through seminars, public lectures, workshops, exhibitions, local talents, knowledge, and ingenuity demonstrations.

4. Community engagement: Lines of collaboration could be opened between social work researchers and rural communities to build a strong relationship with their rural communities and facilitate more research with minimum hindrances on IKS.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that it is essential to understand how IKS can influence social work theory and practice today. For example, IKS is critical in social work interventions to respond to individual, group, and community challenges peculiar to African countries such as Zimbabwe. Integrating human rights into the social work theory and practice can be challenging. For example, some social workers have limited exposure to certain minority cultures as they are mainly confined to urban areas where only a few are in rural social development. The study found numerous challenges facing IKS documentation. Collaboration and partnership between custodians of IKS are needed from different societies if proper research and documentation are to be achieved to add new knowledge in social work.

Consent to participate
Signed consent forms were obtained before the interviews.

Declaration of interest
No potential conflict of interest

References

Alston, M. (2020). *Research for social workers: An introduction to methods*. Routledge.

Banes, G. G., & Cruz, K. B. D. (2021). The integration of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in the tertiary level curriculum of Benguet State University La Trinidad Campus. *Mountain Journal of Science and Interdisciplinary Research (formerly Benguet State University Research Journal)*, 81(1), 19-36.

Buthelezi, S. C., Ocholla, D., & Dlamini, P. (2024). Strategies for documenting and disseminating indigenous knowledge at a South African university. *South African Journal of Information Management*, *26*(1), 1648.

Chigangaidze, R. K. (2023). Environmental social work through the African philosophy of Ubuntu: A conceptual analysis. *International Social Work*, *66*(6),1845-1856.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00208728211073382

Chikoko, W., Mhlanga, J., Matavire, P. C., & Mwapaura, K. (2024). Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Social Safety Nets: Opportunities and Challenges at Tongogara Refugee Camp, Chipinge, Zimbabwe. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-024-00308-0

Chikoko, W. & Mwapaura, K. (2024). Substance Abuse and Sexual Behaviour among Street Children concerning the Child Agency Theory: The Case of Harare Central Business District, Zimbabwe (Part II). In I. Mutelo (Ed.) *Human Rights in Southern Africa: Theory and Practice* (pp 129-138). Domuni-Press.

Chikoko, W., Mwapaura, K., Zvokuomba, K., Nyabeze, K., & Soko, S. (2022). Challenges and opportunities for indigenous social protection systems in Zimbabwe: A conceptual review. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(5), 249-256.

Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, 26(2), 120-123.

Hari, C. (2020). The Relevance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Local Governance toward Environmental Management for Sustainable Development: A Case of Bulawayo City Council, Zimbabwe. *Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 100-114. http://dx.doi.org/10.3126/qjmss.v2i1.29024

Ife, J. (2009). *Human rights from below: Achieving rights through community development*. Cambridge University Press.

Ife, J., Soldatić, K., & Briskman, L. (2022). *Human rights and social work*. Cambridge University Press.

International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work. (2014). Global Definition of Social Work. https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

Mahuntse, S. L. (2021). *A social work programme on the contribution of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to child protection: a Tsonga case study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria].

Mandiopera, W. D., Ndlovu, T., & Kai, G. (2023). Indigenous knowledge systems and drought preparedness in rural Umzingwane in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *99*, 104128.

Mapira, J., & Mazambara, P. (2013). Indigenous knowledge systems and their implications for sustainable development in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, *15*(5), 90-106.

Marlow, C. R. (2023). *Research methods for generalist social work*. Waveland Press.

Maunganidze, L. (2016). A moral compass that slipped: Indigenous knowledge systems and rural development in Zimbabwe. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *2*(1), 1266749.

Mathebane, M. S., & Sekudu, J. (2018). Decolonising the curriculum that underpins social work education in South Africa. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, *30*(1).

Mubangizi, J., & Kaya, H. (2015). African indigenous knowledge systems and human rights: implications for higher education, based on the South African experience. *International Journal of African renaissance studies-multi-, inter-and transdisciplinarity*, *10*(2), 125-142.

Mugumbate, R., & Naami, A. (2023). Ubuntu: The African Philosophy About Making People More Human. In *Handbook of Critical Whiteness: Deconstructing Dominant Discourses Across Disciplines* (pp. 1-12). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Muguti, T., & Zibengwa, T. (2022). Indigenous Knowledge and Poverty Alleviation in Contemporary Zimbabwe. In *African Perspectives on*

Poverty, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Innovation (pp. 67-84). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Mukurazhizha, R., Muridzo, N., & Simbine, S. (2023). The place of indigenous knowledge in environmental social work in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work*, *13*(2), 110-117

Muridzo, N., Mukurazhizha, R., & Simbine, S. (2022). Social work in Zimbabwe: From social control to social change. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, *19*(2), 227-243.

Mushunje, M.T. (2014). Interrogating the relevance of the extended family as a social safety net for vulnerable children in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work*. 4 (2), 78-110.

Mushunje, M.T. (2023). Decolonising the SRHR agenda for improved young women's access to SRHR services. *African Women's Journal* special edition on Maputo Protocol.

Muyambo, T. M., & Marashe, J. (2020). Indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable development: The case of Zunde Ramambo (isiphala senkosi) as food security in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, *19*(2), 232-244.

Muzingili, T., Muzondo, E., Mwapaura, K. & Muridzo, N.G. (2024). Ritual Killings: Desire for Prosperity, Cultural Falsity and Implications on Creeping Human Rights Laws in Southern Africa (Part IV). In I. Mutelo (Ed.) *Human Rights in Southern Africa: Theory and Practice* (pp. 319-332). France: Domuni-Press.

Mwapaura, K. (2024). Strategies That Can Be Adopted to Ensure Ethical Communication Before, During and After Crises and Disasters in Zimbabwe. In E. Jakaza, H. Mangeya, & I. Mhute (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Language and Crisis Communication in Sub-Saharan Africa.* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. pp 519-538. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-43059-6_29.

Mwapaura, K., Chikoko, W., Nyabeze, K., Kabonga, I., & Zvokuomba, K. (2022). Provision of Child Protection Services in Zimbabwe: Review of the Human Rights Perspective. *Cogent Social Sciences* (OASS). 8 (1), 2136606. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2136606

Naami, A., & Mfoafo-M'Carthy, M. (2023). Exploring African-centred social work education: the Ghanaian experience. *Social Work Education*, *42*(2), 238-248.

Nhapi, T. (2023). Reflections on integrating environmental social work methods of intervention in Zimbabwean social work curriculum. *African Journal of Social Work*, *13*(2), 118-126.

Osei-Hwedie, K., & Boateng, D. A. (2018). " Do not Worry Your Head": The Impossibility of Indigenising Social Work Education and Practice in Africa. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, *30*(3).

Ross, E. (2018). Reimagining the South African social work curriculum: Aligning African and Western cosmologies. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, *30*(1).

Shokane, A. L., & Masoga, M. A. (2018). African indigenous knowledge and social work practice: Towards an Afro-sensed perspective. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, *30*(1).

Simbine, S. L., & Le Roux, L. (2021). Indigenous mentoring and monitoring systems amongst Vatsonga are speaking to people child protection. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, *36*(2), 7-32.

Sithole, P. (2020). Use of indigenous knowledge systems in crop and livestock production and implication to social ecology: A case study of Chimanimani District of Zimbabwe. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*, *36*.

Spitzer, H., & Twikirize, J. M. (2019). Towards integrating indigenous knowledge and problem solving into contemporary social work in Africa. *Social work practice in Africa*, 245-256.

Twikirize, J. M., & Spitzer, H. (2019). Indigenous and innovative social work practice: Evidence from East Africa. *J. Twikirize, & H. Spiitzer, Social Work Practice in Africa Indigenous and Innovative Approaches*, 1-20.

Wronka, J. 2016. *Human rights and social justice: Social action and service for the helping and health professions*. Sage Publications.

Zvokuomba, K., Kabonga, I., Chikoko, W., & Mwapaura, K. (2024). The efficacy of devolved disaster risk governance in Zimbabwe: A review of the communication approaches (Chapter 13). In Jakaza, E., Mangeya, H. and Mhute, I. (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Language and Crisis Communication in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. pp. 241-258. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-43059-6_13.