

Reclaiming the History of Social Work Education in Africa: Initial Learnings From the Association for Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) Document Analysis Project

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Reclaiming the history of social work education in Africa: Initial learnings from the Association for Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) document analysis project

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In Ghana, there are symbols that draw clarity to a point of view or speech. These are Adinkra symbols, and each is accompanied by a proverb or moral statement. The Sankofa is a bird looking back and this symbolizes the importance of learning from the past. Our research group has put this symbol into action.



Three social welfare conferences held in the 1960s (Ghana, Zambia, and Egypt) concerning social work in West Africa and three expert group workshops of social work educators in the early 1970s, paved the way for the creation of The Association for Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) in 1973 with the support of the international community, African governments, and non-government organizations. Its purpose was to bring together academics and practitioners interested in African social work education to discuss the issue of social work education in Africa and to be a guiding light to make social work education and practice relevant to social issues in Africa. This included promoting the profession on the continent, supporting research and teaching, providing an avenue to exchange information and experience throughout Africa about the profession of social work, and to address the need to make social work education culturally relevant to the continent of Africa. With a history of colonialism, independence, and westernization, social work education in Africa needed to revolutionize its training and practice to address the needs of the continent.

During its existence, between 1973-1989, the organization engaged 34 African countries in these discussions and produced 21 documents highlighting conference presentations and workshops as well as two social work training directories and a selection of case studies from both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Presentation and workshop discussions included the indigenization of social work education, the role of supervision in training, family planning, techniques of teaching, working with young people, the role of social work in national development planning post-independence, rural issues, importance of social research, community development and community organizing, and gender issues. By 1990, through many factors, the organization dissolved.

In 2000, Dr. Linda Kreitzer learned of this organization and through in-depth internet searching, found all but three documents. She also realized that few African social work educators knew about these documents. For 10 years, she scanned and printed the documents, produced 15 sets (each set has six volumes) and distributed them to different social work education programs in Africa. CDs were part of the 15 sets and were distributed with the hard copy documents to African universities with social work



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programs. They were put online at Witwatersrand University in South Africa through their archives program (ASWEA, n.d.). A book (Kreitzer, 2012) and book chapter (Kreitzer, 2013) were also written about these documents.

Believing the best analysis of these documents should come from African social work educators, a research group was formed in 2019 to analyze these documents page by page (3,500 pages altogether). The researchers represent different parts of Africa and are prominent social work educators in Africa. Recently, three of the original members of ASWEA met with the team in Uganda for an important conversation about the formation and work of ASWEA, adding to their understanding of ASWEA. The outcome of the project is a book for African social work educators to use in the classroom to teach African social work history, emphasizing how the profession came and evolved on the continent.

Preliminary learnings from this analysis are striking. The issues that were discussed in the 1970s and 1980s are still being discussed today. There was an incredible engagement of both educators and practitioners as well as an effort to bring translators who facilitated the linguistic barriers between Anglophone and Francophone. There was amazing support from the international, government and non-government organizations in the first ten years and eventually this support diminished overtime. One of the emerging questions is: What is needed today to strengthen our social work associations nationally and on the continent? A lack of case studies was addressed by ASWEA through documenting case studies but there continues to be a lack of African social work case studies in today's classrooms. Making social work education more culturally relevant continues to be a theme for social work education today and what it means in the African context. How can the profession effectively engage in the national development processes in Africa through working with other disciplines and sectors to effect change? Terminology continues to be debated; are social workers, community workers, social development workers the same or are they separate concepts with commonalities? These are but a few important issues for analysis from these 17 years of ASWEA work around social work education in Africa.

As a research team, we are learning so much about how social work education evolved in Africa. We look forward to sharing our more comprehensive results in due course.

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