

Human rights violations in the practice of Ulwaluko: A social work perspective

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Abstract: This study explores the intersection of traditional male circumcision, or ulwaluko, among the amaXhosa in South Africa and human rights concerns. While ulwaluko is a deeply rooted cultural practice and a rite of passage into adulthood, it has also been associated with severe human rights violations, including physical harm, psychological distress, and inadequate medical oversight. This research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing thematic content analysis to examine data from academic literature, policies, and community perspectives. Anchored in Anti-Oppressive Practice, the study highlights systemic inequalities affecting initiates and the lack of social work interventions. The findings indicate a pressing need for policy reform, integration of social work practices, and increased oversight to protect the well-being of initiates. This research contributes to the discourse on balancing cultural traditions with human rights protections and provides recommendations for improving the safety and dignity of initiates within ulwaluko.

Keywords: *Human rights violations, Policy reform, Psychological distress, Social work interventions, Traditional male circumcision, Ulwaluko.*

1. Introduction

Ulwaluko (traditional male circumcision) is an ancient ritual practised by the amaXhosa in the Eastern Cape, South Africa [1]. According to Ntshiqha [2] ulwaluko is a highly secretive rite conducted in the mountains by traditionally trained male surgeons who often lack formal medical training, using indigenous instruments and techniques. Though the practice dates back to the 16th century, its primary purpose remains unchanged [1]. However, Mashabane and Henderson [3] argue that ulwaluko has undergone significant changes, altering its original form and application.

While ulwaluko remains a significant cultural rite of passage, it has been associated with severe human rights violations, including health risks, psychological distress, and physical abuse. Despite these concerns, social work interventions have not been fully integrated into the practice, leaving initiates vulnerable [4, 5].

Human rights are regarded as fundamental to social work, with Garrett [6] describing them as part of the profession's 'DNA.' Social workers worldwide have a long history of advocating for human rights, embedding principles such as human dignity, non-discrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability into their practice Payne [7]. Ife, et al. [8] assert that human rights principles are universally relevant across various aspects of life. Furthermore, Garrett [6] emphasises that social workers should integrate these principles into their core practice and daily interventions. However, in South Africa, social work has not been incorporated into ulwaluko, leaving initiates vulnerable to human rights violations Kasa [4] and Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [5]. Kasa [4] further argues that there is a lack of research on how social work professionals can intervene in traditional circumcision, highlighting the absence of evidence-based social work strategies to address the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of ulwaluko.

According to Gologram, et al. [9] human rights considerations are often absent from ulwaluko, as circumcision is performed outside medical settings without trained doctors. This claim is supported by studies highlighting the medical risks associated with ulwaluko, including urinary tract infections, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections [2, 5, 10].

Kasa [4] notes that ulwaluko is a significant rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and holds profound cultural importance, particularly among the amaXhosa. Mpateni and Kang'ethe [11] argue that the practice instils maturity, discipline, and good moral values. However, Kheswa, et al. [12] contends that despite its educational purpose, ulwaluko continues to expose initiates to violations of their rights and health. Human rights emphasise the need for individuals to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or race Abdullayeva [13] and Gittings, et al. [10]. Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [5] report that initiates frequently endure physical and emotional abuse due to societal pressures that force them to conform to traditional masculinity, often leading to low self-esteem and, in some cases, violence at the hands of amakhankatha (traditional caregivers).

Gqeba [14] argues that social workers must advocate for more significant opportunities for initiates to participate in decisions affecting their rights. Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [5] further assert that many initiates are coerced into undergoing ulwaluko by their parents, with the absence of father figures often leading to inadequate preparation before initiation [15]. Studies suggest that integrating social work values could help identify and address these human rights concerns [10, 11, 14, 16].

Ulwaluko is traditionally regarded as a means of preparing young men to uphold good behaviour and moral values in society [12]. However, some scholars argue that initiates face challenges such as exposure to alcohol and substance use, often introduced by amakhankatha, as well as discrimination in their perceptions of gender and sexuality [4]. Furthermore, research indicates that ulwaluko has resulted in fatalities and severe injuries, including penile amputations due to complications and negligence. Initiates often endure physical and emotional hardship at the hands of amakhankatha [17].

Kepe and Matera [17] also observe that young men who have previously undergone ulwaluko may intentionally inflict pain and suffering on new initiates. These findings highlight clear violations of human rights. Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [16] argue that such violations persist due to failures in the ulwaluko process. Although ulwaluko has been widely discussed in academic literature, scholars have not thoroughly examined its implications for social work. Thus, this study explores the human rights violations that initiates may be subjected to during ulwaluko. This study further aims to highlight human rights violations within ulwaluko, contribute to policy discussions, and advocate for the inclusion of social work interventions. It seeks to bridge the gap between tradition and human rights protections while ensuring the safety and well-being of initiates.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Anti-Oppressive Practice

This study is underpinned by Anti-Oppressive Practice, which views social issues as rooted in systemic inequalities rather than individual choices [18]. This framework prioritises marginalised voices and challenges power structures that perpetuate oppression [19]. In the context of ulwaluko, anti-oppressive theory advocates for social work interventions to protect initiates' rights while respecting cultural traditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Human Rights and Social Work in Ulwaluko

Human rights are foundational to social work, with scholars advocating for integration into traditional practices [6]. However, ulwaluko is mainly unregulated by social work, leading to violations of human rights [4, 5]. Several scholars have explored the evolving perspectives on the experiences of ulwaluko initiates. However, Okwandu [20] highlights ongoing debates regarding individual rights, consent, and autonomy in the ulwaluko process.

A substantial body of literature has examined ulwaluko from multiple perspectives, focusing on its impacts and consequences. As a cultural practice, ulwaluko contributes to social and cultural capital, as

those who undergo the rite gain respect and play significant roles in maintaining societal order and stability.

Mpateni and Kang'ethe [11] argue that the commercialisation of initiation schools has led to the emergence of unregulated institutions that exploit the Xhosa rite, subjecting initiates to harsh conditions without parental awareness. Conversely, Dlamini [1] notes that legitimate initiation schools are managed by qualified and respected traditional nurses under the supervision of cultural custodians. The lack of oversight in illegitimate schools has resulted in mistreatment, harassment, and abuse, leaving initiates psychologically and emotionally harmed in environments that do not encourage formal learning.

Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [5] highlight the role of traditional nurses, known as "amakhankatha," in rights infringements during ulwaluko. If the procedure is improperly conducted, initiates may suffer severe physical, psychological, and emotional consequences, reinforcing the need for proper oversight [4, 11].

Henda [21] emphasises the phases of ulwaluko, which include the separation of initiates from their families and communities. This isolation can be perceived as a form of social alienation. Mpateni and Kang'ethe [11] note that such experiences may lead to a decline in trust in cultural traditions, potentially undermining cultural pride. The health risks associated with ulwaluko, including infections, poor hygiene, and inadequate medical aftercare, further compound these concerns. Gittings, et al. [10] explore physical health risks such as penile mutilation and viral infections.

2.2. Health Risks and Violations of Initiates' Rights

Medical challenges associated with ulwaluko include infections, HIV transmission, and penile amputations [10]. The absence of medical oversight exacerbates these risks, necessitating policy interventions. Boateng, et al. [22] argue that while cultural practices should be respected, harmful traditions should not override international human rights.

This argument is often cited in discussions about practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and ulwaluko, which can cause harm. Scholars such as Ngubane [23] suggest that individual rights may be secondary to collective cultural norms in societies prioritising traditions and communal values.

While ulwaluko holds significant meaning for initiates and their families, it has been criticised for marginalising individuals who do not conform to its norms, particularly gay men [24]. Studies indicate that despite legislative advancements in Queer rights, some gay men are coerced into undergoing ulwaluko, which conflicts with their identities. This tension between cultural expectations and individual autonomy raises ethical concerns regarding the balance between cultural preservation and human rights. Ngubane [23] asserts that while community well-being should be prioritised, harmful practices must not be justified.

Gillard [25] warns of the risk of using cultural practices to justify fundamental human rights violations. It is crucial to distinguish between practices that reinforce cultural identity and those that cause harm. The primary concern remains protecting human rights without imposing external values on cultural traditions.

2.3. Social Work Interventions and Policy Implications

There is an urgent need for social work interventions to protect initiates' rights [10, 14]. Policies must be developed to regulate ulwaluko while integrating social work principles to safeguard initiates' physical and emotional well-being.

Social workers can advocate for proper medical practices and hygiene at the micro level by educating families and initiating the importance of using qualified medical practitioners, monitoring post-operative care, and ensuring healthcare accessibility. Without proper care, initiation can lead to severe health complications, including infection and emotional trauma [26].

The emotional impact of *ulwaluko* is significant, as the rite can be both physically and mentally challenging. Social workers can offer counselling services before, during, and after initiation, providing psychological support to help initiates manage stress, pain, and cultural pressures [27]. Some initiate struggle with mental health issues such as anxiety and trauma, mainly when complications arise or when cultural expectations of masculinity become burdensome. Social workers can mediate family discussions to ensure initiates receive emotional support, reducing long-term psychological distress.

Ulwaluko is deeply embedded in gender norms, shaping the societal understanding of masculinity. However, sexuality remains a critical aspect of human identity [28]. Scholars argue that sexuality programs often fail to achieve their objectives due to a lack of consideration for socio-cultural contexts [4]. Social workers must engage with broader social issues, including gender inequality, and challenge restrictive gender norms by fostering inclusive definitions of masculinity [29].

Social work interventions must be culturally sensitive, respecting the significance of *ulwaluko* within the Xhosa community. Rather than imposing external values, social workers should collaborate with families and community leaders to promote safer practices within traditional frameworks [30]. Advocacy for improved health practices, medical accessibility, and hygiene and post-operative care education can significantly mitigate risks [31].

Transparency and regulatory oversight are crucial for effectively implementing policies governing *ulwaluko* [4]. Existing laws must be reassessed, and community consultations should include various stakeholders to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness [5].

2.4. Legislative Framework

The South African government has enacted multiple laws and policies to regulate *ulwaluko*, including the [32]. The South African Government [33] provides guidelines for safe initiation practices [33] while the Eastern Cape Provincial Government [34] governs initiation schools.

Organisations such as the *Ulwaluko* Forum and CONTRALESA oversee the regulation of *ulwaluko* practices, ensuring compliance with health and safety standards [35]. The South African Medical Association [36] and the Department of Health [37] advocate for medical screenings before and after *ulwaluko* to prevent health complications.

Despite these policies, scholars argue that enforcement remains inconsistent, leaving initiates vulnerable [4, 11]. To ensure the safety and dignity of initiates, a non-discriminatory approach must be adopted, incorporating social workers in collaboration with cultural custodians to provide necessary support services.

3. Methodology

This study explores the cultural practice of *ulwaluko* in the Eastern Cape, focusing on its intersection with human rights principles. While *ulwaluko* serves as a rite of passage and a marker of cultural identity, reports of human rights violations, such as health complications, lack of informed consent, forced participation, and abuse, have raised significant concerns. Using a qualitative approach, the research captures the lived experiences of initiates and other stakeholders to understand these violations. The study aims to reconcile traditional practices with universal human rights frameworks, offering culturally sensitive solutions for reform. Through systematic data collection and thematic analysis, it seeks to provide an ethically sound understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding *ulwaluko* in a human rights context.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing an exploratory design to investigate human rights violations within *ulwaluko*. Data is gathered from academic sources, including Google Scholar, African Journals Online, and Sage Journals, focusing on studies from 2019 to 2024. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) ensures a comprehensive research synthesis. Thematic content analysis is applied to examine key issues related to culture, circumcision, and human rights. By identifying gaps in existing literature and social interventions, the

study aims to offer new insights into the evolving perceptions and practices of *ulwaluko*, balancing cultural heritage with ethical considerations.

4. Discussion of Findings

4.1. Physical, Psychological, and Sexual Experiences of Initiates

The findings from the selected studies, based on PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Meta-Analysis), highlight the significant challenges initiates face during the traditional practice of *ulwaluko* in the Eastern Cape. The research draws from various internet sources, ensuring validity and alignment with the study's objectives.

4.2. Physical Experiences

The studies reveal that initiates often endure severe physical trauma, including full or partial penile amputations, leading to prolonged hospitalisation and extended absences from school. In some cases, these physical complications result in death. The initiation process also includes physical reprimands from caretakers, such as beatings and forced physical labour. Furthermore, inadequate living conditions—such as poor housing, insufficient food, and lack of proper sanitation—exacerbate the suffering of initiates. These adverse experiences significantly impact both the short-term and long-term physical health of initiates, leaving some with permanent disabilities.

4.3. Psychological Experiences

Psychological distress is a recurring theme in the studies. Initiation schools create an environment where abuse and harassment are prevalent, leading to severe psychological trauma. Researchers such as Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [16] note that initiates frequently suffer from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a significant loss of confidence and self-esteem. These experiences highlight the psychological vulnerabilities that arise due to the harsh treatment encountered during the initiation process.

4.4. Sexuality Aspects

The studies also discuss the issue of forced sexuality, where the initiates' sexual autonomy is disregarded. Patriarchy and heterosexual norms dominate the initiation process, often leading to homophobia and discrimination against queer initiates. Forced sexual experiences and exploitation further exacerbate the psychological trauma endured during the initiation period.

4.5. The Lack of Policies Guiding *Ulwaluko*

The effectiveness of policies governing *ulwaluko* remains questionable. While policies exist, their implementation has not been sustainable, and there remains a notable shortage of regulations to guide the process effectively.

At the macro level, policies such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights provide frameworks for addressing the challenges within *ulwaluko*. However, Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe [5] argue that cultural traditions and societal values play a crucial role in maintaining order and cohesion, often leading to resistance against policy enforcement.

Similarly, the South African Constitution upholds cultural rights, specifically Articles 30 and 31. However, the emphasis on these rights varies from country to country, with some aspects receiving more recognition than others. Given these complexities, the study suggests a thorough examination of existing policies at both macro and micro levels to ensure a more effective and culturally sensitive approach to regulating *ulwaluko*.

The findings highlight severe physical, psychological, and sexual challenges faced by initiates during *ulwaluko*. Additionally, while policies exist, their effectiveness is limited due to inadequate

enforcement and cultural resistance. Addressing these challenges requires a balance between respecting cultural traditions and implementing policies that safeguard the well-being of initiates.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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