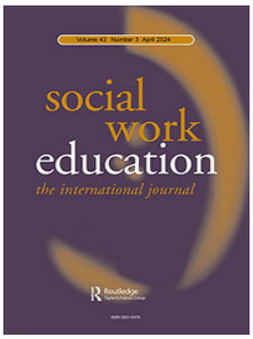

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# Positioning sexual justice within social work teaching on human rights: countering contemporary sexuality oppression

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**ABSTRACT**

Access to sexual health, sexuality information, sexual expression and sexual pleasure is a human right. Yet, the sexual health and wellness landscape has become a battlefield. Recently large-scale sex-negative campaigns preceded the US Supreme Court overturning Roe v. Wade in 2022. The use of the word 'gay' was restricted in public schools along with efforts to ban drag queen story time. Further reports of increased violence against people who identify as transgender have increased. Given social work's roots as an anti-oppressive, practice-based profession focused on social justice, social workers are ideally positioned to challenge this attack on sexual rights, sexual pleasure, and access to related services. Sexual justice pedagogy is a warranted first step. A review of the literature establishes the rationale behind sexuality being a human right, examining social work's missed opportunities for sexual justice. Next, the current sexuality assault landscape in the US is reviewed and sexual justice is defined within social justice. Activities are presented providing educators exemplars to introduce sexual justice content in human rights teaching. I conclude with recommendations to create a learning environment that will help facilitate the understanding and integration of sexual justice within the teaching of human rights to social work students.

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Sexuality inequity and problematizing sex marginalize communities and privilege sexuality for a few. Access to sexual health, sexuality information, sexual expression and sexual pleasure is a human right. Yet, it may be argued, perhaps more than ever, that sexuality is globally under attack. This is evidenced in the United States by massive sex-negative campaigns that led to the Supreme Court overturning Roe v. Wade (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022), as well as other political assaults to restrict the word 'gay' in public schools (Lamba Legal, 2022) and the banning of drag queen story time (GLAAD, 2022) and to increased violence toward transpeople (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). If a goal of social work is supporting people's access to, and ability to create, healthy lives, and if the sexual-relational wellness of service-users is seen as essential to human and community healthy lives, then students not capable of addressing sexual rights and sexual wellness are in jeopardy of not fulfilling this professional commitment. Social work

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education, which already includes teachings around power, privilege, and oppression must acknowledge the use of sexuality to control and subjugate groups and, more importantly, institutionalize actionable steps to address this persecution. Further, for social work programs to prepare students with global awareness of human rights, critical examination of sexuality and gender must be included in social work education and teaching.

Given social work's roots as an anti-oppressive, practice-based profession focused on social justice, social workers should be front-and-center in an international counter-defense against the attack on sexual rights, intimacy, sexual pleasure, and access to related services. A discourse on *sexual justice* is warranted, positioning *sexual justice* within social work teachings on human rights. This would enable social work educators to explore sexuality-informed practice in the nascent, yet emerging, consciousness of sexual wellness, sex positivity, pleasure-activism, and physical intimacy. I argue that sexually literate graduates are needed in a challenging political landscape that weaponizes sexuality, particularly in already-disenfranchised communities. This paper is a call to action for social work educators to explicitly center sexuality, specifically the instructive and positive aspects of *sexual justice*, within the teaching of human rights social work curricula. This call encourages social work educators to extend human rights classroom discussions to real-world exemplars of sexual inequity and oppression. It suggests that such teachings apply a human rights framework inclusive of sexuality to contemporary news events as a way of documenting the war on sex, thereby building students' critical thinking and equipping them with a nuanced understanding of the relationship between social work practice and sexual injustices.

## Literature review

Sexual health is crucial to overall health (Office of the Surgeon General US, 2001; World Health Organization, 2006), yet social work is far from the embodiment of sex positivity and the profession arguably lacks explicit commitment to sexual wellness. And, while the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics notes that social workers, 'seek to strengthen relationships' (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021) and highlights a cultural competency commitment whereby 'social workers should obtain education about and demonstrate understanding of' sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (NASW, 2021, section 1.04), there is no specific reference to sexual health and wellbeing. This may be a reflection of larger societal sex negativity, uncomfortableness and control. Dodd and Tolman (2017) have noted that 'sexuality is not an invisible dimension within social work,' (p. 227); however, students in both Bachelor and Masters social work programs have reported a sense of inadequacy on how to address service-user sexuality (Logie et al., 2015) and many social workers feel uncomfortable discussing this topic with service-users (Laverman & Skiba, 2012).

### *Rationale: sexuality is a human right*

A report issued by the Office of the United Nations (2008) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the World Health Organization (WHO) highlighted sexual and reproductive health as integral elements of basic human rights. Providing

further support for positioning *sexual justice* within social work teaching of human rights, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have explicitly recognized sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and reproductive rights as essential not only to health but also to gender equality and wider economic and social development (Desa, 2023). In alignment with WHO, it may be argued that sexual rights within human rights must first be respected and normalized within the social work academy for social workers to effectively work in sexual health and wellness spaces. Promoting sexuality within human rights-based social work teaching and practice is anchored in the core belief that all persons have the right to control and decide freely on matters related to their sexuality (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006, updated 2010). As noted by Sloane (2014), human rights abuses frequently transpire as sexuality invectives, exploitation, and misuse.

## Human rights: social works' missed opportunities

Despite social work's leadership around human rights, it can be argued that the profession has been slow to join the public campaign around sexual rights and risks being complicit in an historical legacy of sexuality oppression. For example, scholars have noted that social work's initial response to HIV/AIDS was characterized by 'ignorance and even discrimination' (Bowen, 2013, p. 265). Milano (2019) reported that although the USA 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' (DADT) military policy has been repealed, 'LGBTQ service members' distrust of military health care providers (MHCPs) remains' (p. 30). However, barriers to *sexual justice* literacy within social work are not without challenges. G. W. Turner (2020) observes that 'a deficit medical model still grips many social workers' views on sexuality' (p. 309). A *sexual justice* framework may be missing in part because social work programs lack any attention on sexual wellness core competencies within their curricula (Turner, Pelts, et al., 2023). This historical legacy of absent or tepid *sexual justice* responses must be rectified as 'sexuality can no longer be overlooked or ignored in work on health and human rights' (Miller & Vance, 2004, p. 5). While the achievements of social justice movements (Disability Rights, Black Lives Matter) have shed light on oppressive practices, a sexual rights movement is needed to highlight sexuality injustices and counter policy gaps and governments that exercise colonial roles of repression and violence in regulating sexual activity and expression.

## Current sexuality assault landscape

Sexuality has, historically, been a powder-keg political topic and the war on *sexual justice* has seen increased targeting of marginalized communities. The weaponizing of sexuality took a particularly insidious turn on 24 June 2022, with the US Supreme Court reversing Roe v. Wade with Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization declaring the constitutional right to an abortion no longer exits (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022). According to the Guttmacher Institute (2023), '29% of the total US population of women of reproductive age are living in states where abortion is either unavailable or severely restricted' (parra 2). Moreover, the Human Rights Campaign (2023) reported that, in 2022, there were at least 41 transgender and gender non-conforming people killed in the USA, the majority Black and Latino. Other attacks on sexual justice include Florida

Representative Anthony Sabatini's proposed legislation to charge parents with a felony and take custody of children for attending drag queen reading hours. Further, Florida's Governor DeSantis signed the 'Don't Say Gay or Trans' bill prohibiting instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity in grades K-3 and banning instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity in grades 4–12 (Lambad Legal, 2022).

GLAAD, a media advocacy organization focused on LGBTQ cultural change, noted that 2023 was on track to be a record-setting year for US legislation restricting LGBT adults and youth freedom of expression, targeting the safety of transgender students, and limiting access to health care for gender dysphoria (2023). The attack on *sexual justice* continued in 2023 with Tennessee lawmakers passing a law banning drag performers (Feeser, 2023). The national organization, Planned Parenthood (2023) argued that sex education for US youth was in the crossfire of a cultural war against sexual health. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sex education for youth in the United States has been tragically in the crosshairs of this cultural war against sexual health (Planned Parenthood, 2023).

## Framework for sexual justice

Sexuality education was examined by Miskinzod (2023) who advocated for disrupting colonial pedagogy by critiquing Eurocentric frameworks and traditional biomedical approaches focusing on sexual dysfunctions. Additionally, they encouraged the examination of the intersection of sexuality with economic, political, social, environmental, and historical factors. While a burgeoning social work discourse is taking root examining sexuality through a social justice lens (Bay-Cheng, 2010; Galarza & Anthony, 2015; Wong & Chubb, 2023), there is room for more explicit development of a *sexual justice* framework within social work curricula.

The argument that '*sexual justice* is social work' (Turner & Crane, 2016b, p. 45), is surprisingly underdeveloped and largely absent in contemporary social work literature. *Sexual justice* warrants space within human rights conversations in social work as sexual oppression is inextricably linked to other forms of colonial subjugation such as economic, racial, gender, (dis)ability oppression. Unfortunately, social work education, and specifically the teaching of human rights, often treats these issues as discrete, overlooking their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

Alzate (2009) states, 'the understanding and promotion of sexual and reproductive rights are essential in the social work profession, not only to improve the health status of affected populations but to advocate effectively for social justice and to respond to globalized realities' (p. 108). Further, Alzate situates sexual and reproductive rights within social work's philosophical foundation and practice arguing social workers engage service users in a variety of spaces, whereby a *sexual justice* framework strengthens their practice. Alzate's list was used as inspiration to explore *sexual justice* practice areas social workers experience (see Table 1).

## Defining sexual justice

For context, US social workers are primarily guided by two organizations—the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2022) around social justice issues. The World Health Organization (2006)

**Table 1.** Sexual justice opportunities within social work practice.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | School yard bullying/toxic masculinity |
| 2. | Forced gender roles |
| 3. | 'Slut shaming' |
| 4. | Consent |
| 5. | Transgender violence |
| 6. | Availability of inclusive, medically accurate, age-appropriate, comprehensive sex education |
| 7. | Access to contraception, abortion, and infertility services |
| 8. | Body image and commercial beauty standards |
| 9. | Access to prevention and treatment of sexuality transmitted infections (STI) including HIV/AIDS |
| 10. | Disclosure of sexual orientation and risks around homelessness, violence, economic fragility |
| 11. | Intimate partner violence (e.g. rape) and child sexual abuse |
| 12. | Sex workers rights |
| 13. | Female genital mutilation |
| 14. | Breastfeeding advocacy |
| 15. | Relational and sexuality support post cervical and breast cancer |
| 16. | Period poverty |
| 17. | Menopause |
| 18. | Colonial and sex negative research oversight by university ethics review boards |
| 19. | Lack of sexuality content in social work curricula |
| 20. | Lack of sexuality content in social work professional conferences, accreditation standards, and policies |

describes sexual rights as freedom from violence, discrimination, and coercion to realize sexual health; access to sexuality education; and bodily integrity and choice regarding sexual and reproductive practices. I introduced the term *sexual justice* (Turner et al., 2018) to bridge discussions of social justice within social work to sexual wellness discourse, highlighting its pedagogical importance in social work educational settings and serving as an expression of solidarity with reproductive justice approaches.

*Sexual justice* is an intentional process of identifying, challenging, and dismantling sexuality inequity within practices, policies, systems, and structures. A *sexual justice* practice lens requires critical awareness for countering sexism, sex negativity and erotophobia embedded within not only society, but within the social work academy as well. A *sexual justice* approach centers marginalized, disenfranchised and underserved voices in an effort to counter structural sexual violence in all its forms and promote sexuality equity. Turner and colleagues (2018) argue that *sexual justice* is the merging of sexuality education and social justice, located within an activist framework that examines power and privilege. Further, they connected the concept of *sexual justice* to five key principles of social justice: 1) human dignity, 2) community, participation, solidarity, 3) rights and responsibility, 4) priority for the poor and vulnerable and 5) promotion of peace.

## Social justice

Understandings of social justice within social work are heavily influenced by John Rawls' definition of social justice (Banerjee, 2011), Martha Nussbaum's and Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (2003) and the definition of social justice included in *The Social Work Dictionary* (Finn et al., 2022). Nussbaum (2003) contends that 10 capabilities must be present for 'all are part of a minimum account of social justice; a society that does not guarantee these to all its citizens, at some appropriate threshold level, falls short of being a fully just society, whatever its level of opulence' (p. 40). Nussbaum's capability approach, underpinned by social justice, includes 10 points to live life with dignity: 1) life; 2) bodily health; 3) bodily integrity; 4) senses, imagination, and thought; 5)

emotions; 6) practical reason; 7) affiliation; 8) other species; 9) play; and 10) control over one's environment. The *Social Work Dictionary* defines social justice as 'an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits. . . . A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities' (Barker, 2014, p. 398).

## Educational activities: sexual justice

My positionality, a 15-year history in private practice as an AASECT (American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists) certified sex therapist as well as being a university educator in social work (since 2012) and human sexuality (since 2007), uniquely situates me within this conversation. Four educational activities that have been utilized in my teaching over the years are discussed next. Classroom activities to stimulate student sexual justice conversations are introduced to bridge *sexual justice* and social work. The activities aim to normalize student conversations and enquiry around *sexual justice* and position social work academics as confident experiential learning facilitators scaffolding student learning about *sexual justice* and social work values. In order to ground the pending classroom discussions, it is recommended that educators assign students one or both of the following podcasts *Sex Therapy: Social Worker's Potential as Sexuality Experts* (Dodd, 2023) and *Sexual Justice as Social Justice* (Joseph, 2019). As part of preparation and for talking points and teaching take-aways, Instructors are recommended to read, *Lets Talk About Sexuality Podcasting in Social Work Education: A Deeply Personal Pedagogical Approach to Explore the Deeply Personal* (Turner & Joseph, 2023).

Other suggested readings for students include Nussbaum (2003); Banerjee (2011), Turner et al. (2018). Materials required for the activity: flipchart or whiteboard, markers, tape, 3 × 5 index cards and pencils. Prior to class activity, the instructor can use a flipchart sheet to display the following activity objectives: (a) connect social work values to provide a rationale of why *sexual justice* is social work, (b) define sexual rights guided by the World Association of Sexual Health (WAS) statement on sexual rights, (c) based on Table 1, identify contemporary *sexual justice* issues currently in the media, (d) create an assessment using social media (e.g. TikTok, Instagram) post that critically analyzes a *sexual justice* issue using a social justice principle.

### *Activity 1: why social work?*

After reading the objectives, the instructor may want to reference the suggested podcasts featuring an interview of Dr George Turner by Dr SJ Dodd (2023) (See https://silbermanscsg.com/podcasts/) or Dr Ben Joseph (2019) (See https://swdiscoveries.com/2019/05/08/episode-13-sexual-justice-as-social-justice-with-dr-george-turner/). Asking students to recap the main points can be used to initiate the discussion on *sexual justice*. Alternatively, instructors can assign a reflection to students on the podcast to advance this discussion and to gauge comprehension before moving forward.

To start the instructor should ask the large group to identify key social work values and/or frameworks that they associate with social work practice. Expected

responses might include: anti-oppressive practice, the strengths perspective, the biopsychosocial model, social justice, self -determination, person-in-environment, and marginalized communities. Next, ask students to connect these fundamental social work aspects to create a rationale on why sexuality should be discussed within social work practice, education, and research. Discussion might highlight social work's grounding in the strengths perspective (Weick et al., 1989), is ideally suited to supporting service-users when sexuality is viewed as an asset (Turner, 2020). Additionally, social workers engaging with individuals, families and communities around power, privilege and oppression must understand the (mis-)use of sexuality to control and subjugate groups. Instructors should highlight historical examples of sexuality as tool of oppression and control. Examples include sexual violence experienced by Black and First Nation peoples (Prather et al., 2018), the policing of Black people's hair (Nkimbeng et al., 2023), the sexualization of Asian women (Chang, 2021), the desexualization of Asian men (Salesses, 2020), the forced sterilization of disabled women (Roy et al., 2012), rescinding disability benefits upon marriage (Mahoney, 2022) and the blood donation ban from 1980–2015 for gay and bisexual men (Harmon, 2022). Social work's respect for diversity positions it to engage in the intersectionality of sexuality with ableism, racism, sizeism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

Our historical foundation in social justice lends itself to social work taking a lead on sexuality inequity. Continuing this line of thinking, students might offer that our biopsychosocial practice model is well-positioned to challenge medical/pathology focused sexual health discussions. Finally, social work professionals often use vulnerability- (Dore, 2020; Gatwiri & Ife, 2021) to create connection and build rapport, especially when exploring uncomfortable and challenging topics with service-users such as suicidality, unemployment, substance use, and divorce. Normalizing this reality for students can disarm the argument that sexuality is 'too embarrassing' or 'too private' for social workers to discuss with service-users.

### *Activity 2: WAS sexual rights*

After distributing one blank index card and pencil to each student, state that they should not write their names or any other identifying information on the card. Next ask them to write 'Definition' on one side of the card and 'Example' on the other side. Ask them to provide their own definition of the term 'sexual rights' and an example of a sexual right on the other side. Assure the participants that there are no right or wrong definitions and that their anonymity will be preserved. Give students 2 or 3 min to complete their definitions. Collect the cards, shuffle them, and read some or all of the students' definitions aloud. After they have been read, ask the students to share any themes the definitions revealed (It is typical that definitions coalesce around the broad topics of reproductive health access, freedom from sexual abuse/violence, support for gender expression and sexual orientation). Thank the participants for their contributions, then read the WAS definition of sexuality rights (2014). You may want to provide a reading (Kismödi et al., 2017) or a PowerPoint slide noting sexual rights by the World Association of Sexual Health (2017). Bring this activity to a close by directing students to the 16 points made on the WAS website

regarding sexual rights (https://worldsexualhealth.net/was-declaration-of-sexual-rights-2014).

### *Activity 3: sexual justice in the news*

Having introduced both a rationale for why social workers should be involved in a *sexual justice* discourse and a definition of sexual rights, ask students to consider several media sources evidencing diverse representation of sexuality injustices. Read to them the following headlines: a) SEXDOC vanity license plates denied in Missouri as 'obscene, profane, patently offensive' (Gershman, 2014), b) breastfeeding mom is shamed by judge (Burns, 2013), c) abortion dissertation blocked by state senator (Hayoun, 2015). Consider showing a PowerPoint slide highlighting the associated news articles and photos to the class. Distribute copies of the articles to student groups. Ask small groups to compare and contrast these examples within the *sexual justice*, social justice (e.g. Rawls, Nussbaum), sexuality rights frameworks (e.g. WAS) introduced so far and to designate a speaker who will summarize the group's recommendations/observations.

### *Activity 4: sexual justice social media advocacy*

Building on the student debate and discussion on *sexual justice* stories in the media, ask them to consider contemporary assaults on sexuality in the media. Make note that in 2022 and 2023, the US witnessed an onslaught of sex negativity and erotophobia as detailed above (Current Sexuality Assault Landscape). Assign student groups one of these news events or a topic using the list from Table 1. Student-driven topics can be included, as individual students may be passionate about other *sexual justice*. Prior to class provide students the readings by Nussbaum (2003) and Turner et al. (2018). Direct students to find the *sexual justice* news event, and identify how it relates to social justice outlined by either Naussbaum's human capability ten points (2003) or Turner et al. (2018) five social justice values. Finally, as part of an assessment, students are challenged to create a social media post (e.g. TicToc, Instagram, Facebook) in response from the selected *sexual justice* framework. If available, students could post these advocacy efforts to a class-specific social media portal or a program-sponsored public page such as Instagram to elevate this assignment in public-facing practical application.

## Discussion

This paper examines how social work educators can position the concept of *sexual justice* within social work teaching of human rights. Educational activities go further with actionable steps to expand instructors' skills in human rights teaching, particularly useful for those with minimum sexuality knowledge, skills or confidence. Contributing to the scholarship, the definition of *sexual justice* is expanded, and an argument made for it to be integrated within social work programs. In this emerging *sexual justice* social work approach, students will need a combination of values, tools and skills grounded in a sexual wellness framework to advance a shame-free, sex-positive and inclusive sexual health landscape where services users continue to

experience sexuality inequity and access issues. This paper argues for the explicit embodiment of *sexual justice* within social work human rights curricula and practice. In addition to providing a rational of sexuality as a human right, outlining the current assault on sexuality across the US, and defining *sexual justice* within social justice, this paper offers a significant addition to social work pedagogy around the teaching of human rights.

US social workers should consider Waxman's (1994) haunting call, 'its time to politicize our sexual oppression' (p. 82) given the current war on sexuality being waged in the United States. This call remains relevant for social work academics engaged in human rights education. Social work education must align pedagogical approaches to meet the contemporary violence waged against service-users sexuality. Teaching must not only prepare students to competently navigate this sex-negative landscape but also prepare sexually literate social workers who can both appreciate service-user sexual wellness and possess the skills, knowledge, and confidence to work competently in this area. Therefore, this paper is a call to action for social workers to center sexuality and more specifically *sexual justice* within the teaching of human rights social work curricula.

This is a call for social workers to situate sexual justice within our long-standing history of social justice, to embrace sexual sovereignty and erotic agency as a human right, to counter the populous sex negative and sexualized narrative, to confront a colonized ideology that our sexuality should be feared and controlled, to acknowledge social work's complicity in these systems of oppression and to take actionable steps to dismantle a legacy of sexuality harm as well as current sexuality assaults. This is a call for social workers to center reproductive choice, sexual wellness, sex positivity, access to sexual health services, comprehensive sexuality education, freedom of sexual expression, policies, and programs to address sexual violence, abuse and trauma, as well centering relational and sex therapy within mental health services. This is a call for social workers to refuse the colonized perspective that our sexuality is sinful, to recognize the role organized religion continues to play in perpetuating erotic colonization, and to oppose settler colonial ideologies that invoke mass sexual injustices on the disabled, LGBTQ and BIPOC communities, to acknowledge that this is a movement of trauma, where we mourn the loss of countless who have succumbed to the sexual ignorance, silencing, segregation, shaming, and violence of the settler state. This is a call for social workers to engage institutions, policies, communities, families, and individuals through sexual justice, to secure access to sexual wellness services, to normalize relational vulnerability and authenticity, to dismantle sexual shame and inequity, to foster sexual agency and self-love and to help us find collective sexual healing. In order to answer this call and position future *sexual justice* education within social work human rights teaching, ten recommendations are provided:

## *Sexual justice is social work*

Celebrate sexual justice as social work. As Turner (2020) notes, 'social workers have a long-standing tradition of being at the forefront of social justice campaigns; we fight for marginalized communities; we engage in anti-oppressive work; we strive to practice cultural humility' (p. 318). Grounding the message '*sexual justice* is social work' within

curricula provides the underpinning for student learning. I suggest that our code of ethics should adopt and explicitly state that sexual wellness, specifically *sexual justice*, is central to social work's ethical framework.

### Sexuality is a strength

Introduce sexuality as an asset. During a human rights lesson facilitate discussion whereby students are asked, 'Who gets to be sexual in our society?' or . . . 'What groups have their sexuality viewed as an asset?' A rich discussion will surface as students wrestle with the fact that society privileges sexuality, specifically white, male, Christian, well-endowed, young, commercially attractive, able-bodied, heterosexual and married. Society's failure to acknowledge the sexuality of many others is sexual inequity. Providing sexually-affirming social work is good social work, however, disenfranchised groups are often subjected to attempts to manage their sexuality by problematizing their sexuality (Turner, 2020). Social work educators should be prepared to lead students in making the connection between the strengths perspective and approaching a service-user's sexuality as an asset. During classroom discussions, social work instructors are encouraged to highlight how, despite social work's capacity-building foundation and an anti-medical model approach, social workers commonly pathologize service-users' sexuality.

### Sexual sovereignty

Support sexual sovereignty as a direct challenge to settler colonialism and heteronormative idealism. To paraphrase Lorde (1988), sexual sovereignty is self-care and it 'is not self-indulgent; it is preservation and that is an act of political warfare' (p. 130). A human rights class discussion should acknowledge that service-users have a right to identify with gender and sexual orientation fluidity and the physical acts of intimacy, pleasure, and sex as an extension of decolonization. I propose that the very act of owning your sexuality, being proud of your innate sexuality and releasing your sexual shame is a revolutionary act.

### Sex positivity

Normalize the rebellious and radical idea that sex is good. In a world steeped in a war on sexuality this simple statement is not only progressive it is cultural heresy. Dailey (1997) defined sex positivity as memorable, unburdened by guilt, free from fear of pregnancy and STIs, absence of coercion, and filled with an abundance of knowledge to avoid hurt and ensure maximum pleasure. While Ivanski and Kohut (2017) explored definitions of sex positivity, others have likened it as a judgment-free approach that celebrates the erotic, that encompasses more than non-procreation, penile-vaginal penetration activities, that honors self-determination and that venerates open communication (Donaghue, 2015; Glickman, 2000; Williams et al., 2015).

Social work researchers have noted, 'a sex-positive social worker recognizes that explicit sexual conversations and advocating for sexual pleasure does not cause

irresponsible sexual behavior or experimentation' (Turner, 2020, p. 316). I would further add that sex positivity is not permeated in pathologizing labels such as 'sex addiction' or overly focused on sexual performance goals such as orgasms. Nor does it adopt a deficit approach to 'fix' sexual dysfunction, especially if social workers themselves have a narrow view of 'sexual behaviors'. Sex positivity embraces consensual sexual behaviors that may be deemed non-typical or considered taboo.

### Beyond LGBTQ social work

Expand social work education and our professional understanding of sexuality beyond the LGBTQ discussions. This is not to imply that gay-affirming practice is not crucial in social work practice (Dunk-West & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011) but, rather, to challenge us to embrace a richer understanding and more dynamic sexuality-informed pedagogy. As articulated by Turner (2020) limiting our teaching to only issues of the LGBTQ community is reductive; reframing our educational scope beyond a one-dimensional view of sexuality—sexual orientation—prepares social work students for deeper, more responsive and meaningful practice. A step toward *sexual justice* social work is embedding into curricula a more holistic understanding of sexuality, such as Dailey's Circle of Sexuality model (1981), in an effort to situate the obligatory 'gay awareness' lecture while broadening social work students' sexuality understanding with a more expansive practice model. Thus, social workers working with the queer community should be both knowledgeable about queer history, community resources, and cultural struggles. This includes understanding the pride, disruptive, offensive, and political nature of the word 'queer' (Turner et al., 2018). However, they should also be versed in sexual wellness issues and their connection to human rights such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), chem sex, sex-on-premise spaces, circuit parties, body image pressures, negotiating kink or open-relationships, and navigation of sub-cultures such as the bear and leather communities. Further, social work students practicing from a *sexual justice* human rights framework might advocate in their practicum placement for commercial lubrication to be dispensed along with psychiatric medications known to cause vaginal dryness and for sexuality counseling with prescriptions that impact sexual functioning, for period products and bins to be placed within university male designated restrooms for transgender students, and for normalization of menopause during clinical conversation on aging. If social work teaching acknowledges service-users have a right to sexual health, the academy must prepare future practitioners beyond the current cursory gay affirming lecture. A new approach to sexuality is warranted within social work whereby student learning is grounded in a more comprehensive understanding of sexual wellness with *sexual justice* skills. I suggest we advance student learning from mere 'gay awareness' to using a sexually informed practice lens, more specifically mastering practical *sexual justice* skills to address a range of issues from accessible sexual health care to sexuality agency for marginalized and underserved communities.

### Sex smart

Integrate sexuality within the teaching of human rights social work. The goal is to prepare sex smart social workers, micro-focused clinical practitioners who have

a basic sexual wellness competency and are 'askable' as well as preparing macro-ready practitioners to engage in *sexual justice* activism. To this end, it is suggested that the academy embed human sexuality in generalist social work, thus legitimatizing human sexuality as falling within the scope of social work practice (Turner, 2020). One of the barriers to moving this conversation forward within our profession is a knee-jerk response that sexuality is a private or taboo topic for service-users. Yet, social workers routinely find themselves in complicated and personal conversations with service-users on subjects like substance misuse, racism, death, divorce, incarceration, and violence. Social workers engage with difficult topics; we do not avoid them.

### Pleasure activism

Actively push for the expansion of social work discourse into the potential seditious realm of pleasure activism. However, incorporating sexual pleasure within the social justice lens (Coleman et al., 2021) is a needed step and social workers are increasingly researching this area (Meyers, 2015; Turner & Crane, 2016a). According to Adrienne Maree Brown (2019), pleasure activism is rescuing ourselves from oppression; it is reinstating our aliveness, humility, and joy. To achieve this, decreasing shame and avoiding scarcity-thinking is needed. It may be argued, helping service-users find pleasure, it may be argued, is the ultimate exercise of the strengths approach. Alice Walker challenged us to 'reclaim sexuality as the force that it is … a natural, wonderful force that helps us' (Rose, 1998).

### Conferences, curricula and accreditation

Position human sexuality, specifically *sexual justice*, within social work conferences, curricula, and accreditation as a means to counter sexual silencing at structural and policy levels within our profession. Given that the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2022) notes, 'the purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being' (p. 14), *sexual justice* fits within teaching human rights to social work students especially as this is 'actualized through … the creation of conditions that facilitate … the enhancement of life for all people, locally and globally' (p. 14). However, the lack of sexual health/wellness discussion or its explicit importance within key social work curricula, conferences, and accreditation standards might lead to the conclusion that social work education at best does not adequately prepare future practitioners and, at worst, condones sexual illiteracy, sex negativity and erotophobia within the profession. The NASW Code of Ethics has no reference to *sexual justice* except to note that 'social workers should obtain education about and demonstrate understanding of' sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (NASW, 2021). This is also true for The International Federation of Social Workers which states 'social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing' (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2020). And while both the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the Society of Social Work Research (SSWR) offer LGBTQ themed tracks, a more generalized sexual wellness

track is glaringly missing. A move toward sexuality electives or integrating *sexual justice* content within social work teaching as an attempt to rectify this shortcoming would signal a move toward more sexuality-affirming social work.

### Sexual silence & shame

Speak sexuality social work. Legitimize sexual wellness through a sexuality discourse within social work curricula; it avoids the 'tyranny of silence [whereby]. . .myth, distortion and bias abound' (Dailey, 1981, p. 312). Borrowing from the activist group ActUp, a consciousness-raising group of gay men affected by AIDS, social workers should be reminded that 'Silence = Death' (Finkelstein, 1987). For many, their sexuality was (and continues to be) weaponized against them. The collective silence of society, including social workers, is complicit with the slaughter of a generation of gay men during the early HIV/AIDS pandemic. And yet another wave of silence hangs over the social work academy as sexuality is silenced from our teaching and research jeopardizing the capabilities and competencies of future practitioners (Turner, North, et al., 2023). *Sexual justice* mandates that we as social work educators must be more vocal. As noted by Turner (2020), our grounding within the strengths perspective 'provides a platform to challenge the predominant societal sex-negative narrative' (p. 311). As *sexual justice* social workers, we must reframe society's silencing for what it is—a tool of oppression. We must call-in student and colleague buy-in to the overused trope that 'service-users will be too embarrassed' as sexuality content silencing. A *sexual justice* human rights framework mandates that this oppressive healthism (Carter et al., 2011) is challenged. As noted by Turner (2020), 'social work should not be culpable in this sexual reticence; we tackle tough discussions and illuminate the shadows. Silencing sexuality within our professional discourse, training, and practice contributes to a culture of distorted sexuality, sexual shame, and sex-negativity' (p. 315).

### Sexuality scaffolding

Integrate *sexual justice* within human rights teaching to enrich student learning and challenge them around self-discovery and professional identity. Content must be meaningful and reflect current academic, advocate and activist thinking. A *sexual justice* human rights framework is constructed through a pedagogical process of layering sexuality content, specifically *sexual justice* examples in past and current events, supported by sexuality-rich lectures, classroom discussion, scholarship, and research throughout the social work curricula. As noted by Alice Walker, 'sexuality is one of the ways that we become enlightened, actually, because it leads us to self-knowledge' (O'Brien, 1998). As *sexual justice* scholars advance a movement to address sexuality inequities, it will be increasingly important for social work researchers to provide valuable insight into the multiple components that make up *sexual justice* such as pleasure activism (Brown, 2019). Social work researchers are encouraged to extend lines of inquiry that investigate *sexual justice* and a sexual-wellness informed practice lens.

The above recommendations are offered so that educators can curate a learning environment that enables future social work practitioners with skills to intervene more

effectively and intentionally from a *sexual justice* human rights framework. In particular, the proposed learning activities and recommendations might address Golden's (2023) findings that social work students lack the 'knowledge and skills necessary to engage in advocacy confidently' (p. 13). Further, the *sexual justice* focused educational activities and specifically the social media advocacy assessment address research that calls for development and practice of oral and written advocacy communication (Applewhite et al., 2018; Golden, 2023; Regehr et al., 2012). While BSW students ideally have exposure to social justice advocacy skill development, this is even more salient for graduate social work students as two-thirds of students enrolled in MSW programs did not graduate with an undergraduate social work degree (CSWE, 2019).

## Conclusions

University social work programs continue to lead in the area of human rights education; however, to remain relevant, *sexual justice* must be incorporated in curricula. And, for social workers to be responsive to contemporary local and global social 'problems/controversies', practitioners must increase their sexual literacy and incorporate sexual justice practice frameworks. Social work requires the development of a distinct *sexual justice*-based pedagogy to bolster human rights frameworks that are central in social work practice. This paper outlines the importance of *sexual justice* within the social work teaching of human rights, highlighting the ongoing assault against the sexuality of persons served. The aim of this paper is for the conceptualization and teaching activities proposed in this article to advance the discourse around *sexual justice*, positioning social workers as thought and action leaders at the intersection of sexuality and social justice. It is hoped that social workers can find through debate, dialogue, and engagement a collective *sexual justice* voice.

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