**WGEPAD**

**20th Session**

**Responses to Civil Society Questions**

**April 5, 2017**

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1. What are the key human rights concerns of people of African descent in your country/region today and how do you work to address them?

Within the United States, people of African ancestry face specific challenges resulting from individual, cultural, and historical trauma. The transatlantic slave trade, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow Laws have adversely impacted the psychological wellbeing of this group. Further, policies of the current administration, racial profiling by police, economic inequality, and a failing criminal justice system results in significant psychological stressors for people of African ancestry. The issue is also exacerbated by a lack of access to quality mental health services to address these psychological stressors. Thus, people of African ancestry are forced to bear the psychological burden created by a system of racism and oppression that is institutional and unrelenting, without the appropriate mental health resources to recover.

The scholarly literature suggests that people of African ancestry experience mental health problems at the same rates as other individuals. However, conditions within the United States create significant barriers for this population to access quality healthcare. Thus, transgenerational trauma, racial stressors (also sexism and classism), in addition to the cultural values and world view of the client typically go ignored. Inadequate access to quality psychological services means that most people exist without this basic need being met. As such; in the United States, the basic human right to access quality healthcare is disrupted for people of African ancestry.

Considering these key human rights concerns, my current work includes combining my Western training as a psychologist with efforts towards identifying ways to preserve and utilize indigenous African healing practices to address the psychological needs of this population. To this end, I have presented internationally, published scholarly articles, written two books, served in professional organizations, and provided consultation in several countries on the topic.

My most recent project is as author of ***Sacred Healing Journey: Soul food for Survivors of Abuse***. This work combines Western psychology with healing practices from communities across the African continent. A workbook based on the title was also adopted by the *Clemency Project 2014*, an Obama Administration initiative granting clemency to individuals who were incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses. I have also worked on projects in Kenya, Panama, and Guyana to assist with efforts towards shaping policy, strengthening capacity, and providing culturally responsive training. In efforts to be of service within my profession, I have held several board positions is psychological associations and currently serve as the representative to Guyana for the *Association of Black Psychologists*.

1. How can the WGEPAD improve and enhance its engagement with civil society for greater impact on the ground?

WGEPAD could have a greater overall impact by first engaging in a marketing campaign that promotes this as the ***International*** ***Decade of People of African Descent***. When I speak with most people within the United States, they are unaware that the UN has made this distinction for the decade. Thus, engaging in a marketing campaign that extends beyond the usual human rights channels can produce a more broad reaching engagement and recognition of this important work group.

It would additionally be helpful for WGEPAD to include more voices from people of African ancestry. It is important that African descended people be made aware of this important work and be provided an opportunity to be an integral part of shaping its scope and direction.

Finally, WGEPAD should sponsor conferences specifically addressing the psychological impact of racism on African descended people and identify culturally responsive methods for treatment delivery. This should be done through entities that are specifically serving and shaped by people of African ancestry such as The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) and The Association of Black Social Workers (US based).

Finally, WGEPAD should examine research and clinical practices in psychology that promote evidence-based practices. Although these standards are promoted as scientifically rigorous, most ignore the historical and cultural history of a community. Thus, African descended clients, services providers, and researchers are being regulated to utilize methods that further promote European standards of inquiry and healing and therefore amount to psychological colonialism.

3. Which human rights concerns should the WGEPAD focus on in the next three years?

Over the next three years, WGEPAD would benefit from focusing on the psychological impact of racism and the intersections that African descended people experience (e.g. sexism, classism, etc.). Considering the historical and cultural trauma that this population experiences, the transgenerational consequences are yet to be fully understood. However, studies in the field of epigenetics suggest that the long terms consequences will be genetically encoded for future generations. Epigenetics refers to changes in how your genes are expressed as a result of experiences in the environment. These changes are then inherited by future generations. Researchers have studied mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD that are passed down by family members who experience a traumatic event. The studies have shown that these mental health conditions can be passed down to children born years later who never experienced the trauma. This suggests that the mental health of African descended people is impacted by their ancestors’ experiences. The enormity of such research is staggering and suggests the critical need to focus on the psychological wellbeing of African descended people.