



## PRESS RELEASE

REPOA launches the book "Women-on-Women Violence in Tanzania: Current Realities and Future Directions"

The book portrays tensions between socio-cultural norms, that underscore harmful traditional practices, and human rights discourses and practices in Africa, and more particularly in the Tanzanian context.

**Dar es Salam, Tanzania, July 18, 2024** – REPOA launches book the "Women-on-Women Violence in Tanzania: Current Realities and Future Directions"

The book authored by Dr. Regina Opoku, a senior research fellow at REPOA, is a welcome addition to the body of literature on the African continent that deepens the much-needed decolonization agenda. She moves beyond critiques of Western, Eurocentric hegemony to demonstrate the agency that Africans do possess in challenging and countering colonial and neo-colonial influences. With much courage and candour, she deals with the complex tensions between socio-cultural norms, that underscore harmful traditional practices, and human rights discourses and practices in Africa, and more particularly in the Tanzanian context.

As an anti-colonial stance, individuals, groups, and communities that engage in harmful traditional practices often invoke the "it's in our culture" defense. Informed by critical, radical, and emancipatory theoretical orientations, it is this central idea that Dr. Opoku (popularly and fondly known as Sister Regina) hones into and challenges. She asks critical questions regarding what is deemed to be the primordial essence of African cultures, the changing and evolutionary nature of culture, and the role of an authentic reclaiming of Afrocentricity in countering human rights abuses on the African continent. She does this by tackling the unusual and, all too silenced, discourse on women-on-women violence through a thorough, ethnographic study - incorporating observations, in-depth interviews, group interviews and focus group discussions - with 122 participants of three traditional practices in the Mara and Mwanza regions of Tanzania.

These practices are female genital cutting (FGC); widow inheritance and widow cleansing rituals; and the **Nyumba Ntobhu** (woman-to-woman) marriage institution. She describes her research methodology with meticulous detail, paying particular attention to community entry strategies and her subject location as a woman, an African, a nun and a social worker. This was important as she entered the life worlds of people where the traditional practices investigated were constructed as sacrosanct, inviolate and core to social stability and cultural continuity. Yet, the empirical data reveal these to be violating women's dignity, their rights to inclusion and participation, and their rights to bodily integrity and to life. Drawing on her rich data, representing the voices of women who were victims of these practices and women

who were perpetrators; clan elders; traditional leaders; health workers and community activists, Sister Regina details the similarities and the differences across the practices.

Amid the myriad of specific themes that evolved from the data, the following are crystallized across the three practices: 1) Women are, undoubtedly, the torchbearers of these practices; 2) While women, usually older and more influential, are the torchbearers and engage in the direct practice of the rituals, they do this in the interests of perpetuating patriarchal beliefs, norms and practices; 3) Idealized notions of normalized dominant femininity and dominant masculinity; 4) Challenges to the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, as women are both victims and perpetrators; 5) The inter-relationship between socio-economic constraints and socio-cultural norms; 6) Whether directly or indirectly, bride price is implicated as women are:- considered worthy of higher bride price and marriage, as in the case of FGC; sold into **Nyumba Ntobhu** marriages, sometimes for as little as six cows and two goats in efforts to alleviate the dire poverty of their families; held in bondage within this marriage institution; and widows coerced into being inherited by other men and into unprotected sexual intercourse with strange men (who are poor and usually do it for money) as they fear dispossession and loss of inheritance; and 7) Deep seated superstition and instilling fears of bad omens and curses befalling them and/or their families are powerful mechanisms of socio-cultural control and compliance.

Dr. Opoku's focus on women-on-women violence is unique, as much of the literature and popular discourse focuses on violence perpetrated by men against women. This, and the undeniable disadvantages and violations that women experience, particularly in more patriarchal societies, are squarely dealt with in this text. However, Dr. Opoku goes beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions around gender. She critically engages with women's and men's complicities in perpetuating gender stereotypes and discrimination, and their complicities in the reproduction of harmful traditional practices. Perhaps, to the consternation of some who want to see men as villains and women as victims, she has included a chapter on *The Disadvantaged Male*, with a clear elucidation of how gender stereotypes and patriarchy negatively impact men as well. In truth, men are unlikely to give up their privileged positions and the normalized deference of women towards them, if they do not acknowledge the power of patriarchal constraints on them.

Both men and women are victims of patriarchy and its consequences. On the dynamics of the normalization of injustice, discrimination and oppression, Isabel Wilkerson (2020, 16)<sup>1</sup> says, "*The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over the generations, we learn that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be.*" Further on, she makes the following cogent observation: "*Perhaps it is the unthinking acquiescence, the blindness to one's imprisonment, that is the most effective way for human beings to remain captive. People who do not know they are captive will not resist their bondage*" (p. 33-34). The real danger, as the results of Dr. Opoku's study show, rests not only in not resisting, but in actively reproducing the unthinkable, the unacceptable and the incomprehensible.

We are born into political bodies, shaped by historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural norms, and we do, in turn, reproduce the worlds that we are born into. But, as Hägglund (2020, 12) asserts "*I am not merely causally determined by nature or norms.*" "*The authority*

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*. Penguin Random House.

of our norms", he argues, must be "called into question, contested, and revised ... we are responsible for the form of our shared life" (Hägglund, 2020, 16)<sup>2</sup>. Dr. Opoku makes numerous policy and practice recommendations in relation to the factors that contribute to the maintenance of these traditional practices and their pernicious consequences. Underlying these, is her call for an emancipatory praxis – the core of which is liberating ourselves from the constraints of our own and societal thinking, and politicization of the self. She adds a strong and much needed voice for fundamental socio-economic changes. Equally important, is that she makes an impassioned call for the normalized and naturalized socio-cultural norms - that drive FGC, the *Nyumba Ntobhu* marriage, and wife inheritance and sexual cleansing rituals - to be called into question, challenged, and changed. In doing so, we reclaim an authentic Afrocentricity, with *Ubuntu* at its root, to define our humanity and our human rights commitments, and to defy colonial and neo-colonial impositions on our fractured identities.

### Media Contacts

- Vincent Nalwendela, Senior Communications Officer, REPOA, [vincent@repa.or.tz](mailto:vincent@repa.or.tz), +255 22 270 0083

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<sup>2</sup> Hägglund, M (2020). *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York, Anchor Books.