

Kendall Award 2020

Leila Patel

Biography



Leila Patel (b. 1952) grew up during the apartheid era in South Africa. This experience encouraged her to want to do something about poverty. In the 1980s she was involved in grassroots anti-apartheid social movements. She started her career as a social worker and a community organiser in informal settlements and urban neighbourhoods. She moved on from grassroots organisation to more policy-oriented work or macro social work practice. However, she has spent most of her career in academic roles, as an administrator, social work educator, and researcher in social development. Her dedication has been to practise, research and theorise social development as an approach in social work.

Internationally, she has been involved in transnational research on social development, and has been an invited speaker at universities and conferences across the world. She started her training at the University of Western Cape, South Africa, then gained a masters at West Michigan University, USA and a PhD at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She is currently a professor, occupying the South African Research Chair in Welfare and Social Development, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

When did you receive the award?

I was notified on 4 February 2020 by Professor Annamaria Campanini, President of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), that I had been selected by the Board of Directors of the IASSW to receive the Katherine Kendall Memorial Award. I was to receive the Award at the Social Work World Conference in Rimini, Italy in June 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic changed our lives irrevocably; the conference was postponed. As part of the Award, I delivered the closing address at the IASSW conference on 17th April 2021 on the topic of *Social work and social development responses to the covid-19 pandemic: Lessons from the Global South*.

I am deeply honoured. It is not something that I expected, and so it came as a great surprise to me – but, I can assure you, a very happy one. I thank the IASSW for this enormous recognition. I wish to accept this award in solidarity with the social workers of South Africa and around the world who work tirelessly, with limited resources, and who are faced with enormous social challenges, to make a difference in people's lives.

What was the basis on which you were given the award?

Professor Campanini stated in the award letter that the award is an 'acknowledgement of my significant contribution to the development of social work education at the international level', as a 'distinguished scholar and educator' and for my 'contribution to the social work profession'.

I am honoured to have been nominated by two new generation scholars in social work and in the social sciences, Shahana Rasool¹ and Lauren Graham². They were both my doctoral students some years ago, and the award means even more because of the care they took in putting together the [argument] for the nomination. This mainly centred on my ‘contribution to theorizing social development as an approach to social welfare which has influenced social work education internationally’.

What has been of major importance for the development of your professional career?

Over my long career, spanning four decades, I have been a social worker, a community organiser in informal settlements and urban neighbourhoods, an editor of a community-led newspaper called *Grassroots* and Director-General of Social Welfare in Nelson Mandela’s government (1994). In this capacity, I worked with a large team of government officials, non-governmental partners, practitioners, academics and the politicians responsible for this portfolio; together, we refashioned welfare policies to promote the reconstruction and development of our society after years of colonialism and apartheid. Mostly, I’ve spent my career in academia as an academic administrator, a social work educator, and as a research professor in social development. I moved from grassroots organisation to more policy-oriented work or macro social work practice. This was prompted largely by a search for alternative welfare and social work modalities that would be more suited to the needs and realities of developing countries, or what is today referred to as the Global South. My involvement in grassroots anti-apartheid social movements in the 1980s, as well as working with social work coalitions to advocate and shape welfare policy in a future democracy, was most influential and formative in my career as a social work educator and researcher. Growing up under apartheid, experiencing racial discrimination and the impact of apartheid on people’s everyday lives, showed me early on that government policies and ideologies are powerful causal factors in undermining human dignity, social well-being and societal stability.

My philosophical orientation is more institutionalist and rights-based. This view positions governments embedded in societies as the main drivers of social and inclusive economic development, along with civil society, private and other development actors. I consider that it is crucial in building responsive states to achieve wider participation of individuals, households and communities in promoting development and as key actors in this process. My earlier experience of living in a repressive apartheid state has taught me that vigilance is important, and that there is a need for civil society to hold political leaders and governments, including private entities, accountable. I describe this journey in a personal story published by the Centre for Social Development, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University at:

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1524&context=csd_research.

What does the award mean to you, and what do you think it will mean for your future career?

Although the Katherine Kendall Award is a personal achievement for me and connects with my personal story, I see it also as an acknowledgement of research and practice in growing the social development approach (SDA) as a field of social enquiry and of developmental social work, which is still under-developed and is evolving. This, of course, resonates with

the IASSW's approach to social work education adopted in 2014. Because of this shift in emphasis, I hope that the Award will benefit other researchers who are pursuing similar lines of enquiry in their universities, so that we may all call on greater research support from science councils and external development agencies. In this way, we will be able to grow a new generation of young scholars and researchers to strengthen the theory and practice of the social development approach around the world.

Since the late 1990s, many countries in Africa, Latin America and other regions, following significant political and constitutional changes, began to refashion their welfare systems to be more responsive to mass poverty, inequality and under-development, and to reduce the vulnerability of groups of people who are left behind. These social policies, especially social protection policies, are now renowned for their positive impacts on poverty and development. Many such policies are increasingly being emulated in Northern welfare states in response to the coronavirus pandemic. I think that social workers have much to contribute to deepen and widen understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of human well-being. Although material well-being is crucial, welfare services and family and community systems of supports are equally important in meeting people's needs holistically.

Against this background, I hope that the Katherine Kendall Award will draw attention to the important contribution of social welfare policies and institutions. It may also inform people about the role of the social work profession and its education in promoting human development and societies that are more just, equitable and participative. Ultimately this will contribute to a more stable world.

What activities do you think were of major importance for your professional development and how has it impacted social work and its education?

I have been involved in social policy and social development research, advocacy, academic teaching and service in South Africa for four decades. The first phase of my academic career commenced in the late apartheid era (1980s) and in the transition to democracy in the early 1990s. My focus was on what we might learn from progressive social movement organisations that were engaged with development issues and questions and what this might mean for social welfare in a post-apartheid and post-conflict society. Studying what these organisations were doing influenced the formulation of the social development approach to social welfare and social work in the South African context. This included how these organisations conceptualised human needs and the structural causes of social disadvantage, and what solutions they proposed.

The research was part of the work of the organisation *Concerned Social Workers*. It advocated more equitable, appropriate social welfare policies and a more developmentally-oriented social work practice compared with the country's earlier preference for remedial and clinical social work only. As well as this, there was an over-reliance on micro-level interventions and residential care. The research contributed to refashioning the country's welfare policy into an integral plank in wider social and economic development, which may be broadly described as a rights-based, redistributive and a democratic welfare regime.

I documented this change in approach in two books on *Restructuring social welfare: The options for South Africa* (Patel, 1992) and *Social welfare and social development* (Patel, 2015). These books set out the theory and practice of the approach with reference to South Africa. They document the evolution of social welfare and social work over close to three decades. I think of them as a resource for comparative cross-country research on social

welfare regimes and social work in development contexts. The second edition of *Social welfare and social development* continues to be prescribed in the social work curriculum in South Africa and in the Southern Africa region, with growing interest from countries in Asia such as China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. It was a resource for a course on developmental social work that I delivered at the University of Chicago, where I was the Helen Harris Perlman Visiting Professor of International Social Welfare in 2013.

Unanswered questions remain about how to move from the theory of social development to social work practice. South Africa was the first country to adopt formally a social development approach to social welfare following the United Nations World Summit for Social Development in 1995. In frequent invitations to explore such issues at schools of social work across the world, I draw on my research and first-hand knowledge and experience of the South African case, augmented with knowledge and literature from other countries in the South. For instance, in 2019, I was part of a teaching team at a summer school at Renmin University in Beijing to share lessons from different countries on social policy and development innovations in the Global South. The late Tessa Hochfeld and I, reported on the challenges of the nexus between policy and developmental social work practice (Patel & Hochfeld 2013), and with a small grant from the IASSW in the 2000s, we also explored curriculum issues in developmental social work in African universities.

Keynote addresses at Chinese universities in 2019 shared broader social policy lessons. In a lecture delivered in Indonesia, I also considered the much-contested idea that social and economic development are interconnected - and whether this indeed leads to better social and economic outcomes - drawing on the evidence from different countries.

Prompted by the above questions and issues and the search for global solutions and innovation in social development, my research programme after 2015 turned to validating the key ideas of the SDA empirically. For example, it was important to test the theoretical assumption that both social and economic interventions for particular populations at risk are likely to lead to better social outcomes. This included evaluating the social outcomes of key national policies for children and families, assessing impacts in reducing poverty, hunger, furthering women's empowerment and gender equality, child well-being, youth employment programmes, and minimum wage policies. Some of this research also resulted in comparative cross country research of social policies to assess the gender impact of social policies on women's empowerment in Brazil and South Africa (Hunter, Patel & Borges Sugiyama, 2020) and the integration of a gender lens in the study of welfare regimes. My interest is in social innovation, and recent research involved the design and testing of social development innovations for children in the foundation years of schooling based on the SDA and for youth who are not in employment, education and training (NEET). Another focus has been on deepening understanding of the connection between citizens and the state in a democratic and redistributive welfare regime (Patel & Ulriken, 2017); including the role of agency in development outcomes and how welfare constituencies shape electoral politics.

These projects describe lessons learned that inform the comparative study of developmental welfare regimes and social work in the Global South. They are also of interest to social work schools in the North, as I found when similar issues arose from lectures I delivered in several places in the USA. Collaboration with the UNRISD's team of researchers from Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa and Indonesia proved to be productive in making sense of these countries' new directions in social welfare policy.

My research at the University of Johannesburg is located at the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) which has close ties with the Department of Social Work and the Faculty of Humanities. I founded the CSDA in 2004 to grow social development research and am proud of its achievements and national and international standing.

Finally, to implement social development effectively, there is great need for well-trained professionals in this field and to meet the demand for developmentally oriented practitioners who are able to work across social sectors and in multi-disciplinary teams to find solutions to complex social questions. In order to contribute to high-level human resource capacity in the field, I designed an MPhil in Social Policy and Development, an interdisciplinary master's degree, which commenced in 2019. Our students come from public administration, social work, psychology, education, public health, sociology, political science, community development, journalism and economics, to mention a few. This interdisciplinary and research-led teaching programme is beginning to produce some encouraging results as the students learn to work together to find solutions to complex social problems.

In the field where you made the biggest contributions, with whom did you cooperate?

I think it is in the field of welfare policy and development and to social work in development contexts. I collaborate with researchers in social work but also in other social and behavioural sciences and my postgraduate students come from a range of disciplines. Sometimes I team up with a doctoral supervisor in the student's primary field of study, such as in development economics and development studies. In this way, we may be able to begin to break down barriers between knowledge systems and expose students to an expansive knowledge in different fields to answer some of the critical questions. I often say to our students: 'You do not have to be an economist, but you can ask the questions that need to be answered.'

What has social work and its education meant to you personally and professionally?

I wanted to be a social worker because I grew up in a small town with extremely high rates of poverty and racial divisions in the 1950s. It was hard and stark going to school with children who were hungry. My siblings and I asked our mother endless questions about why this was the case, and what might be done. This signalled an early political awareness of the impact of apartheid on our everyday lives. I chose to study social work largely because I wanted to do something about poverty. The daughter of a family friend was studying at the University of Lesotho, and she helped me to understand what social work was and its concern with social justice - and also with finding real-life solutions that could improve people's lives.

I was not a particularly good student at school, but once I started my training as a social worker at the University of the Western Cape, created during the apartheid era for people of mixed race, I never looked back. This was clearly what I wanted to be and do, and it earned me distinctions and a Fulbright Scholarship to do a masters in social work at West Michigan University in the US. I met Don Cooney³, who helped me to build a bridge between my own goals and to learn what I could from my MSW programme to take home. Looking back, that turned out to be a seminal period of both personal and professional growth. Later, after doctoral studies with Brian McKendrick⁴, a distinguished South African scholar, while also lecturing at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. I earned a PhD for my research on social welfare options for a post-apartheid society.

My social work education and training taught me much-valued personal development skills and self-knowledge, and when times are hard, I draw on these to apply in my personal life or to find solutions in the community where I live in Johannesburg, one of the fastest-growing

cities in Southern Africa. But what remains most valuable was my solid undergraduate training in social work, which was as a generalist practitioner, with a strong family and community orientation. I have had the benefit of having wonderful mentors in my career who played different roles at different times. I am incredibly grateful for this, and this experience continues to inspire me to work with young scholars and to grow a new generation of social workers and social development researchers and practitioners. In particular, I thank my professor of social work, Ina Snyman⁵, for her foresight and leadership as head of the School of Social Work. She was an early role model and motivated me to pursue further academic studies in the United States. And then, of course, my long collaboration with James Midgley⁶, has been invaluable in my career progression and in my research focus on social development. My collaboration with Francie Lund⁷ and other colleagues in the design and implementation of child support grants, one of South Africa's largest poverty reduction programmes, was a seminal experience.

What are the present challenges of social work and its education?

A month after I received notification of the Katherine Kendall Award, country after country went into national lockdowns to curtail the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. In my home country, this occurred at the end of March 2020 and our worlds changed dramatically. The global economic crisis of 2008 was, until then, the most recent global crisis to reverse many of the social and economic gains that countries had made. Despite social improvements, many countries - like South Africa - did not return to pre-crisis human development indicators. Poverty and inequality are long-standing social challenges that have now been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, overlaid with other social, economic and political crises, mass migration, racial injustice, the digital divide and climate change. How to respond to these challenges is the task before the social work profession and social work education for the future. I think that the way the profession, along with societies and their governments, respond to the current crisis could shape the direction of social welfare and development efforts for years to come.

What is the importance of international work in your career?

I began by asking questions about poverty and inequality in a particular country context and then built that out as I was exposed to social work in, firstly, the United States, and later through my engagement with colleagues in southern Africa and other parts of the world. Over time, this learning brought home three important issues for me. One was the impact of the legacy of colonialism on human development in many poor countries. Second was the dominance of Northern welfare models and uncritical application in the Global South and in social work education. Third was the potential of countries in the Global South to learn from the North, but also to refashion their welfare systems. Lastly, I think country conditions do matter, including a country's history, religious and cultural contexts, levels of economic development, the nature of its political system, and welfare institutions, among others. While there are similarities across countries in meeting common human needs and in the application of innovation across cultures, there is no one size that fits all systems; considerable variation exists. There is, therefore, a long way to go and fathoming this out through South-South and North-South knowledge partnership and knowledge exchange could be beneficial in growing social development theory and practice.

What were the major obstacles in your career as a social worker and educator?

I alluded to the dominance of Western models earlier and the importance of producing indigenous literature for social work education. Of course, this should be augmented with wider global literature so that students can make the connections between local and global factors that impede or facilitate human development.

Although the SDA is the guiding framework for social work education, translating theory into practice remains a big challenge. The ‘how to’ of developmental social work will be the real test for whether the SDA will take off in countries in the Global South. Careful and critical documentation of country and comparative case studies of innovative interventions could help to further our understanding of its application in different contexts. We also need to bear in mind that social workers also hold different ideological positions, and come from different practice orientations. All this makes the application of the SDA complicated and contested as well. It seems that there is some diffusion of SDA ideas and adaption of the approach where these are found to be useful in different country situations. Then there is the question of having appropriate opportunities for field practice in agencies for students to apply the SDA.

While working with our faculty members in transforming the social work curriculum, there was much resistance to the SDA, but many hours of dialogue and thinking together did yield substantial but also incremental changes in the curriculum. In South Africa, higher education and government regulations also aided curriculum transformation as well as in social work departments or schools where there were leaders who were drivers of curriculum transformation. Also, where the SDA guides country-level welfare policies, this can boost integrating developmentalist ideas into the curriculum. However, if there is no demand for social workers with such an orientation by governments, civil society and faith-based organisations, corporate social responsibility programmes, and international development agencies, this will also affect supply-side factors.

Budget cuts in public higher education institutions and a lack of recognition of the social work profession are other factors that impede the employment growth of developmental social workers as well as national social and welfare policies that support this. Finally, the global diffusion of neoliberal social policies around the world and fiscal austerity measures introduced by conservative governments have resulted in welfare programmes being underfunded. These developments also impacted on the decreased demand for social workers, all of which resulted in deepening social and economic disparities and the abrogation of state responsibility for welfare programmes for vulnerable groups.

How has social work and its education changed? What are your thoughts about the future?

Social work education has shifted from a narrow focus on remedial models towards an engagement with the role and place of the profession and education with a human rights agenda. It is increasingly about how to further issues of social and gender justice, democracy and sustainable development. In this sense, I think we are reconnecting with some of the early ideas of the social work pioneers and the demands of contemporary progressive social movements for wider social change, for more caring and peaceful societies. In doing so, we should pay attention also to what we may learn from the solutions that people themselves are finding to improve their lives. There is great pressure for the profession to impact at the

macro level. But finding the balance between meeting people's needs and addressing their challenges while working for wider systemic and structural change should remain central to our mission.

Finally, we know from the history of social welfare that great leaps forward are possible at particular moments in societies such as the depression years or following world wars or economic crises. We are currently facing such a moment: we are living through one of the deadliest pandemics since the Spanish flu in 1918. We do have the benefit of science today to aid our search for solutions to respond to the contemporary demands and challenges. Finding lasting and tested solutions is the task before us, as is ensuring that these are enacted in social policies, laws and implemented by responsive and ethical institutions that deliver real changes in people's lives. This remains a world worth striving for.

Selected publications

References

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Notes

- 1 Shahana Rasool, Professor in the Department of Social Work and Community Development, University of Johannesburg. Author of: Help-seeking after domestic violence: the critical role of children. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 31(9), 2016, 1661-86.
- 2 Lauren Graham; since 2019, Director of the Centre for Social Development in Africa, and Associate Professor, University of Johannesburg. Co-author of: Graham, L., Moodley, J., & Selipsky, L. (2013). The disability–poverty nexus and the case for a capabilities approach: evidence from Johannesburg, South Africa. *Disability & Society*, 28(3), 324-37.
- 3 Don Cooney, Associate professor, College of Health and Human Services, Western Michigan University since 1977, City Commissioner for Kalamazoo, MI, with a committed engagement in community practice, social justice and confronting institutional prejudice and inequality.

- 4 Brian McKendrick (1938-2016), late Professor and head of the social work discipline at the University of Witwatersrand.
- 5 Ina Snyman, Professor, former Head of the Department of Social Work, University of the Western Cape
- 6 James Midgley, Professor, Graduate School, University of California, Berkeley, USA, formerly Harry and Riva Specht Professor of Public Social Services and Dean Emeritus of the School of Social Welfare, author of *Social development: Theory and practice* (Sage, 2014) and *Social welfare for a global era: International perspectives on policy and practice* (Sage, 2017).
- 7 Francie Lund, Senior Research Associate, University of KwaZulu Natal, director of the Social Protection Programme of the global research and advocacy network, WIEGO – Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing; chair, Lund Committee on Child and Family Support, 1995; author of *Changing social policy: the child support grant in South Africa* (Human Science research Council Press, 2007).