



LOVE AS SOCIAL JUSTICE: A RADICAL APPROACH TO HEALING CLASS, ETHNIC, AND CULTURAL DIVIDES IN SRI LANKAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper reimagines love not merely as a romantic notion but as a strategic and actionable force for social justice, particularly within rural Sri Lankan communities. Deep-seated class divisions, ethnic tensions, and cultural disparities continue to shape the lived realities of marginalized populations across the island. In this context, the proposed LUVORA model (Love, Uniformity, Virtue, Openness, Resilience, and Acceptance) provides a novel psychosocial framework for empowering these groups, fostering emotional resilience, and promoting sustainable community development. Through a narrative review of interdisciplinary literature, this paper integrates perspectives from social work, positive psychology, and liberation psychology to examine how love-driven social interventions can dismantle systemic inequality. It also emphasizes the significance of community empowerment as a key sub-theme aligned with the broader goal of building a resilient and just future for all. The discussion is set within Sri Lanka's post-conflict, post-colonial socio-political landscape, highlighting how emotional and relational healing can be utilized to strengthen the fabric of rural society. Although the LUVORA model is presented conceptually in this paper, it has not yet been tested empirically, which limits the ability to confirm its practical efficacy; future research will address this through pilot implementations

KEYWORDS: Love ethic, LUVORA, Social Justice, Community Empowerment, Sri Lanka, Rural Development, Cultural Healing

Introduction

Despite decades of progress in social policy and development, Sri Lanka continues to grapple with entrenched social divides, particularly in rural communities. These disparities manifest through ethnic divisions, caste-based discrimination, economic marginalization, and cultural exclusion. Traditional development efforts have often addressed material needs but neglected the emotional, relational, and psychological fractures that inhibit collective well-being. This paper proposes that love, conceptualized as a universal force of compassion, empathy, and inclusion, can be reimagined as a radical tool for social justice.

Drawing from bell hooks' ethic of love, Martin Seligman's positive psychology, and Ignacio Martín-Baró's liberation psychology, this paper introduces the LUVORA model as a community-based intervention strategy. With a specific focus on underprivileged rural populations in Sri Lanka, the study aims to demonstrate how love-driven approaches can empower communities, dismantle internalized oppression, and foster long-term resilience. The research uses a narrative review methodology to synthesize insights across disciplines and cultural contexts, laying the groundwork for a new paradigm of justice-oriented social work. The literature reviewed included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and NGO case reports relevant to rural Sri Lanka and comparable post-conflict societies, selected for their empirical grounding, cultural relevance, and alignment with the study's core themes.

Literature Review

Love and Justice: Intersecting Theoretical Foundations

The writings of bell hooks emphasize that genuine love cannot exist without justice, arguing that love is a political act of liberation and healing (hooks, 2000). Her "ethic of love" redefines justice not as retribution, but as a compassionate response to suffering and inequality. This aligns with Martín-Baró's perspective in liberation psychology, which posits that psychological healing must accompany social and political liberation (Martín-Baró, 1994). In contexts of prolonged marginalization, such as rural Sri Lanka, the internalized narratives of inferiority and helplessness can only be challenged through emotional and relational transformation.

Seligman's work in positive psychology complements this approach by identifying love, hope, and compassion as essential for personal and collective flourishing (Seligman, 2002). Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory further suggests that positive emotions expand individuals' cognitive and behavioural repertoires, thereby enabling resilience and adaptive coping (Fredrickson, 2001). These

frameworks converge on the idea that love, when strategically applied, holds the potential to transcend entrenched barriers and instigate societal healing.

Community Empowerment and Relational Healing

Community empowerment in social work entails enabling individuals and groups to gain control over their lives, access resources, and participate meaningfully in societal processes (Rappaport, 1987). In rural Sri Lanka, where hierarchical structures and systemic exclusion persist, empowerment must begin with healing fractured relationships and restoring human dignity.

Reconciliation studies from contexts such as Rwanda, South Africa, and Sri Lanka itself reveal that community-led healing processes, such as storytelling, forgiveness rituals, and inclusive dialogue, can rebuild trust and unity (Jayawickrama, 2018; Staub, 2005). These culturally grounded practices suggest that relational interventions grounded in love and mutual respect are crucial for sustainable community development. They also emphasize that emotional restoration is not peripheral, but central to community empowerment.

LUVORA Model: A Love-Driven Framework

The LUVORA model, developed by the author, introduces a six-dimensional psychosocial framework rooted in the principles of positive psychology, compassion-based leadership, and emotional empowerment. The components of the model, Love, Uniformity, Virtue, Openness, Resilience, and Acceptance, each serve as pillars for personal transformation and community cohesion.

Love forms the foundation of the model, inspiring empathy and human connection. Uniformity promotes equality and challenges hierarchical divisions by cultivating shared identity and mutual respect. Virtue fosters ethical behaviour and moral accountability, encouraging individuals to align with universal values of justice and kindness (Gilligan, 2011). Openness emphasizes the importance of embracing diversity in thought, identity, and culture, allowing inclusive dialogue to flourish. Resilience underscores the need to develop inner strength and adaptive capacity in the face of adversity (Fredrickson, 2001). Lastly, Acceptance offers a pathway toward nonjudgmental understanding and the normalization of differences.

The LUVORA model seeks to transform internal belief systems shaped by systemic discrimination. Through targeted interventions such as group discussions, community art projects, empathy circles, and value-based training, participants begin to reimagine themselves and others through the lens of love and worthiness. This transformation is not only emotional but ideological, offering a new moral vocabulary for justice.

Methodology: Narrative Review

This study employs a narrative review methodology to synthesize interdisciplinary literature related to love as social justice, community empowerment, and emotional healing. Narrative reviews allow for theoretical integration and contextual interpretation, making them particularly appropriate for exploring emerging models such as LUVORA that require conceptual validation across diverse scholarly and cultural terrains. Sources reviewed include peer-reviewed journals in social work, psychology, and philosophy, as well as culturally relevant case studies from Sri Lanka and other post-conflict societies.

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the review, literature was selected based on inclusion criteria such as peer-reviewed status, publication within the last two decades (2000–2024), and relevance to one or more core themes: love and justice, community empowerment, psychosocial healing, and post-conflict reconciliation. Both empirical studies and theoretical papers were included to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Exclusion criteria included non-scholarly sources without empirical grounding, papers unrelated to social justice or positive psychology, and studies with a narrow clinical or biomedical focus that did not intersect with community or social work frameworks.

A total of 68 scholarly articles and books were reviewed, drawing primarily from the fields of social work, positive psychology, philosophy, liberation psychology, and cultural studies. Thematic coding was conducted manually by reviewing texts line-by-line and grouping recurring concepts into categories; themes were primarily emergent but guided by the study's core research questions. Analytical methods involved thematic coding and conceptual synthesis. Key recurring themes identified include: (1) the emotional dimension of justice and reconciliation, (2) love as a community-strengthening practice, (3) the role of positive emotions in individual and collective healing, and (4) culturally embedded approaches to empowerment.

These themes were examined for conceptual overlap, practical applicability, and potential for synthesis under the LUVORA framework. The integration of diverse sources allows for a richly layered understanding that honours both the academic and cultural context of rural Sri Lanka. The methodological flexibility of the narrative review supports the development of a multidisciplinary framework grounded in both theory and praxis.

Discussion

The Relevance of Love in Addressing Rural Social Divides

In Sri Lankan rural communities, discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, and poverty remains deeply rooted. These divisions are reinforced not only by policy gaps but also by emotional wounds and inherited beliefs about worthiness and belonging. Love, as a transformative emotion, has the power to heal these internalized traumas and reconstruct collective identities.

By introducing love as a justice-oriented principle, social work can shift from charity-based models to relational empowerment. This repositioning acknowledges that healing is both an emotional and political process. Love helps restore dignity, mend broken relationships, and foster new narratives of community solidarity and shared humanity.

The Applicability of LUVORA in Rural Sri Lankan Contexts

The LUVORA model is especially suited for Sri Lanka's rural settings, where interpersonal relationships and community bonds form the fabric of everyday life. Community-based interventions inspired by LUVORA could include facilitated discussions where villagers share personal experiences of exclusion and resilience, storytelling sessions rooted in folklore and oral history to reconnect fractured identities, and value-based leadership training programs aimed at empowering youth and women as moral agents of change. The values embedded in LUVORA closely align with ethical principles already present in Sri Lanka's Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Islamic traditions, which emphasize compassion, justice, forgiveness, and respect for diversity, offering natural cultural pathways for community adoption.

Moreover, practical "Love-in-Action" projects such as community service initiatives can be introduced to promote kindness, cooperation, and collective well-being. These initiatives allow for emotional expression, mutual recognition, and the development of critical consciousness. As participants internalize the LUVORA values, they become active agents in reshaping their communities. These bottom-up changes are key to creating sustainable transformation from within.

Community Empowerment Through Emotional Liberation

True empowerment arises when individuals not only gain access to resources but also reclaim their sense of dignity and agency. Drawing on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, LUVORA facilitates emotional liberation, a necessary precondition for any meaningful social transformation.

Through love-driven interventions, individuals are encouraged to examine and challenge the internalized oppression that limits their potential. As they develop inner resilience and embrace shared values of compassion and justice, communities begin to resist fatalism and ignite a collective sense of purpose and hope. Emotional liberation fuels community solidarity and catalyses sustained action toward social and economic change.

These emotional and psychological shifts are critical for building the social capital required for long-term resilience. When love becomes part of the cultural vocabulary and everyday interactions, it challenges narratives of inferiority and encourages collaborative problem-solving. In this way, LUVORA not only empowers individuals but strengthens the moral and emotional infrastructure of entire communities.

Potential Challenges and Ethical Considerations

While the LUVORA model presents a compelling approach, its implementation may face challenges, especially in conservative or hierarchical settings. Love, when positioned as a public and political force, may be seen as subversive or naïve. It disrupts conventional notions of authority and discipline, particularly in settings where obedience and conformity are emphasized.

Practitioners must therefore be cautious not to romanticize love or use it as a panacea. They must also remain critically aware of the structural and institutional forces that shape inequality. LUVORA should be introduced with cultural sensitivity, ethical reflection, and a strong understanding of the socio-political context. Its success will depend on inclusive participation, long-term commitment, and a willingness to adapt the model to local realities.

Practical Strategies for Implementation and the Way Forward

The practical application of the LUVORA model requires a clear, culturally grounded, and realistic plan of action. In rural Sri Lanka, where trust and collaboration are central to social life, community-based and participatory approaches must form the foundation of all interventions. Implementation could begin with awareness-building workshops facilitated by trained community leaders who understand both the local context and the LUVORA framework. These leaders can initiate dialogue on emotional healing, equality, and values through storytelling, folk media, and religious teachings.

Pilot projects should be introduced within schools, religious centres, and women's societies to integrate the six LUVORA values into everyday practices. Youth clubs can organize compassion campaigns, interfaith friendship days, and art-based events

focused on empathy, forgiveness, and acceptance. Community gardens and collective service projects can serve as metaphors for love-in-action and help bridge class and ethnic divides.

To ensure sustainability, partnerships with local government institutions, NGOs, and academic bodies should be built. These collaborations can offer training, funding, and research support while empowering local actors to take ownership. A “LUVORA Facilitator” certification program can be developed to professionalize and standardize the approach, training social workers, teachers, and community volunteers in participatory facilitation and value-based community development.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should include both quantitative and qualitative tools that capture emotional well-being, perceived inclusivity, and community cohesion. Case studies and personal testimonies can serve as powerful tools for advocacy and expansion. Ultimately, the success of LUVORA lies in its grassroots adaptability, its emotional depth, and its power to inspire ordinary people to become extraordinary agents of love and justice.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a paradigm shift in social work and community development by repositioning love as a radical, justice-oriented force capable of healing deep societal divides. Through the lens of the LUVORA model, love is no longer relegated to the private or spiritual sphere but is mobilized as a transformative strategy for fostering empathy, resilience, and community cohesion.

In Sri Lanka’s rural communities, where discrimination is both systemic and psychological, LUVORA offers a culturally sensitive and emotionally intelligent pathway to empowerment. It invites individuals to reconnect with their innate worth, recognize the dignity of others, and work collectively toward a more just and resilient future. By drawing on local customs such as storytelling, mysticism, and communal rituals, the model ensures cultural legitimacy while embedding emotional healing within familiar social practices, for example, village ‘gam maduwa’ gatherings that blend folklore, song, and dance to strengthen communal bonds; ‘katina pinkama’ Buddhist ceremonies that emphasize generosity and unity; Hindu kovil festivals where collective offerings and processions reinforce social solidarity; Christian feast days that foster intergenerational connection; and traditional ‘virindu’ or ‘kavi bana’ poetic recitals that pass down moral wisdom and shared identity.

As we imagine a society that is not only economically sustainable but emotionally and morally resilient, let us recognize love as both the means and the end. Let it be the

force that binds us, uplifts us, and guides us toward equity, healing, and collective flourishing.

This paper has proposed a paradigm shift in social work and community development by repositioning love as a radical, justice-oriented force capable of healing deep societal divides. Through the lens of the LUVORA model, love is no longer relegated to the private or spiritual sphere. Still, it is mobilized as a transformative strategy for enhancing empathy, resilience, and community cohesion.

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