

## The recognition of old age: critical perspectives from vocational training

By Haydee Chamorro García<sup>1</sup> and Natalí Marcela Sánchez Chauca<sup>2</sup>

*We can say that we are in an initial process of changing the paradigm of old age, which calls us to continue rethinking old age, thus, in plural, and to do so from critical perspectives that allow us to deconstruct negative stereotypes and prejudices of old age that persist and are reproduced in our daily practices, naturalizing the exclusion of older adults. Thinking about old age from critical perspectives implies, therefore, to problematize the various structural dynamics that restrict people's freedom, autonomy, functionality and social and political participation, reproducing the conception that certain bodies have more value than others because of their usefulness to the system*

196

In this we discuss a topic of great relevance for our societies: old age as a field of research and teaching in Social Work. The conversation presented here is nourished by the reflections arising from the academic training experience at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM) in Peru, developed by the teaching team formed by social workers Haydee Chamorro García and Natalí Sánchez Chauca during 2021. This conversation reflects some of their concerns regarding the way in which the population is aging in the context of deepening inequality gaps in Peru, which we also

<sup>1</sup> Haydee Chamorro is a Social Worker having graduated from the Universidad Nacional Mayor of San Marcos with a Diploma in Social Gerontology, Human Rights and Public Management. She is a member of the Social Policy Research Group of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Universidad Nacional Mayor of San Marcos, in the team of the research line on old age and aging. Member of the Latin American Network of Social Work teachers and professionals working in the field of Gerontology - RedGeTS. Director of Social Responsibility in senior connection social entrepreneurship. Consultant in management and technical assistance of public services for the elderly population. Researcher in the field of social gerontology, on issues related to social roles, social and political participation, and discrimination in old age, with emphasis on female old age. Contact: haydee.chamorro@unmsm.edu.pe

<sup>2</sup> NHaydee Chamorro is a Social Worker having graduated from the Universidad Nacional Mayor of San Marcos with a Diploma in Social Gerontology, Human Rights and Public Management. She is a member of the Social Policy Research Group of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Universidad Nacional Mayor of San Marcos, in the team of the research line on old age and aging. Member of the Latin American Network of Social Work teachers and professionals working in the field of Gerontology - RedGeTS. Director of Social Responsibility in senior connection social entrepreneurship. Consultant in management and technical assistance of public services for the elderly population. Researcher in the field of social gerontology, on issues related to social roles, social and political participation, and discrimination in old age, with emphasis on female old age. Contact: haydee.chamorro@unmsm.edu.pe



see transversally in Latin America. They also share with us their lessons learned and proposals for thinking, from these concerns, the inclusion of a critical gerontological perspective in the training of future generations of social workers. We thank Haydee and Natalí for sharing these discussions in our journal.

**Haydee:** As in other countries in the region, we know that the Peruvian population is aging by leaps and bounds. We are living longer and longer, but under what conditions are we doing so? There are still large inequality gaps and structural discrimination mechanisms that affect old age and are exacerbated by multiple hierarchies of oppression throughout the life course, such as the fact of being a woman and rural, among other identity categories that are configured in situations of social exclusion that affect the elderly.

Based on the most recent report of the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI, 2022), the number of older adults amounts to 13% of the total population of Peru, which represents approximately 5,018,485 people. It is important to note that, as is the case worldwide, one of the characteristics of the population aging process in Peru is its feminization: a greater proportion of older women as a result of their greater longevity. At the national level, households with at least one member aged 60 years or older amount to 38.9%, and this percentage will continue to increase, because even after the Covid-19 pandemic, the evidence shows that the process of population aging continues worldwide.

**Natalí:** It is important to contextualize aging in Peruvian society, because in recent times there have been significant regulatory advances for the recognition of the rights of older adults. For example, accession to the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons -hereinafter Convention-, came into force on March 31, 2021 and so far has meant a regulatory framework whose definitions, approaches and rights guide and strengthen the current national regulations. We now have the National Multisectoral Policy for Older Persons (PNMPAM), approved in June 2021, which recognizes structural discrimination against older persons as a public problem and contains a series of objectives and guidelines that, through differentiated services, establish responsibilities for the different levels of government and sectors of the State. It is also important to note that we have the Law on Older Adults, published on July 21, 2016, and its Regulations, published in 2018 and updated in July 2021, within the framework of the contents of the Convention.



Despite these significant advances that have allowed a first approach to the normative recognition of the rights of older adults, for the construction of processes that allow a paradigm shift regarding the understanding of old age and aging there are still great steps to be taken. The recognition of the rights of older adults also implies social recognition and, with it, changes in practices and narratives towards and with old age in everyday life and in institutions. A change of paradigm means, among other aspects, a change in the way of conceiving life, its course and the subjects that in the present continuum live old age.

**Haydee:** Exactly. With the regulations approved in 2021, Peru has made great strides. However, as we have mentioned above, we can say that we are still in an initial process of paradigm shift of old age, which calls us to continue rethinking old age, thus, in plural, and to do so from critical perspectives, which allow us to deconstruct stereotypes and negative prejudices of old age that persist and are reproduced in our daily practices, naturalizing the exclusion of older adults. Thinking about old age from critical perspectives implies problematizing the various structural dynamics that restrict people's freedom, autonomy, functionality and social and political participation, reproducing the conception that certain bodies have more value than others because of their usefulness to the system.

This conception is materialized in discriminatory and exclusionary practices that, in the case of older adults, place them in a position of subalternity with respect to hegemonic models linked to the body, age, gender and ethnic origin and identity that translate into, as Rita Segato (2007) states, a young, heterosexual, masculine and white male "one" that produces and reproduces in the system.

Under this logic of exclusion, the lives of older adults develop in adverse scenarios that limit their lives and the viability of being with others, in line with what Butler states about some human beings not being recognized as human at all and this leads them to another viable order of life (in Danel, 2019), an inferior one. In this sense, from critical perspectives we can also question the impact of oppressive systems in the daily lives of many people throughout their life course and that in old age is identified in social and economic gaps, which in Peru are represented in much higher proportions than in other age groups, and even more so if we are talking about women and diversities.

**Natalí:** This is related to what Carballada (2020) says, in the sense that Social Work has the ability to look at the singular (individuals, collectives in their daily lives) without losing sight of the structural and systematic, territorially located. It has the



capacity to analyze and make visible the micro and the macro-social from a situated and intersectional perspective. From critical positions this is particularly important, as it retakes the agency and autonomy of the subject within the social, being even more relevant in the Latin American territory, due to our socio-historical processes of colonial domination and emancipatory struggles. Therefore, betting on a critical social praxis with old age, from Social Work, makes emancipatory processes viable that take as a central element the lives of the subjects, their voices, interests, demands and proposals for change.

**Haydee:** This bet is even more crucial when we are on a path of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated old ageism and age discrimination in old age by appealing to protectionist discourses and practices, which limited the rights and freedoms of older adults in a context of socio-health emergency.

In short, given that Social Work is located at the intersection between the macro and the micro-social, it has the great power - and responsibility - to open paths of deconstruction of imaginaries, narratives and practices that are socio-culturally rooted and institutionally reproduced. From a critical stance, we can develop a different way of thinking and do something else with old age.

**Natalí:** In this sense, it is worth asking about the role that academia and schools of Social Work have in terms of proposing critical views to address old age as a field of intervention, contributing to meaningful social processes and public management. The development of thinking and doing with old age from critical perspectives generates significant impacts at the level of social processes, as it allows to dispute meanings in the individual and collective daily life, in order to build relational processes between the different generations that make up the social. That is, to open paths of respect and intergenerational sharing.

This has a significant impact on the design of public policies, and through them, on the implementation of programs and services for the elderly population. From a critical perspective, we are committed to designing public policies that recognize older adults as subjects of rights, thus acknowledging their diversity, their capacity for agency, as well as the structural inequalities that have caused many people to be left behind. Based on this recognition, the issue of the multiethnic and multilingual elderly that make up the cultural diversity of Peru, and which, in fact, is a characteristic present in our sister countries in Latin America, can be incorporated into the public agenda. In the same way, it makes visible the social issue of female old age and sexual diversity within the framework of a patriarchal and heteronormative system. Finally, it allows us to identify the capacitism present in the aging processes that limits the full interaction between the



subjects and their environment, thus generating greater isolation and dependence. What does it mean that the management of programs and services should recognize older adults as subjects of rights? It means that their planning, execution and evaluation should be carried out within the framework of the human rights of older adults, in order to guarantee a management free of stereotypes and negative prejudices about old age. The management should be carried out in the country's territories, since they are so diverse in their historical-social processes and cultural characteristics. Finally, and no less important, public management from critical perspectives of old age and aging assumes interdependence and co-responsibility in care -a topic that is very relevant in the social issue of old age-, for which the State is also responsible. This is a relevant issue to highlight, because in Peru, as in many Latin American countries, there is still no Public Care System.

On the other hand, through the experiences of sister countries in the region, we have been able to learn about the impact of critical perspectives on thinking and doing with old age within the academic environment, connecting academic-professional training with the social issue of aging and old age from perspectives other than the hegemonic ones that, in the Academy, are still materializing in narratives and practices that homogenize the aging process and reduce old age to pathological situations. Based on critical views, in countries such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, for example, the subject of old age and aging has been incorporated as a course within the curricula; likewise, new spaces for academic extension have been opened, such as areas of specialization and interdisciplinary scientific production in the field of gerontology, and research groups that seek to contribute to public policies in this area.

**Haydee:** Being the largest and oldest public university in Peru (founded in 1551, the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM), better known as San Marcos), we have been interested in investigating the proposals of the professional schools that have in their curricula a course related to old age and aging. Due to its trajectory and history -and also because we belong to this university-, it is important to highlight how San Marcos has been incorporating topics related to old age and aging in the academic-professional training of its students.

We found that in the wide diversity of professional schools of this house of studies, until 2018, only three incorporated within their curricular plan courses that referred to old age: Psychology, Medicine and Nursing. As a first reference we find the course of Intervention in Gerontology in the school of Psychology. The objective of this course



was to develop technical-procedural competencies for intervention in the problem of human aging. In this regard, it is striking that they spoke of “problem” and not of situation. It should be noted that this course is no longer included in the current curriculum. In the case of Medicine and Nursing, the aim is to train students to recognize pathologies associated with old age and the health care of the elderly. In sum, we can infer that in both schools, the biomedical approach associated with the implementation of these courses prevails. This characteristic is not gratuitous, since it obeys a paradigm of old age understood as a disease, i.e., prevalently associated with the deterioration and decline of the body.

**Natalí:** Let’s talk about the experience at the Professional School of Social Work at UNMSM. The School of Social Work is part of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. On November 18, 2020, it obtained national accreditation by the National System of Evaluation, Certification and Accreditation of Educational Quality (SINAEACE), being the first of six schools of the Faculty of Social Sciences to achieve this.

As part of this accreditation process, in 2018 its curricular plan was updated in order to strengthen the competencies of students, further connecting academic training with the complexity of social reality. It is in this process that the Social Gerontology course is incorporated as an elective subject for the seventh cycle. This course was implemented for the first time in 2021, still in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, so it was developed virtually.

The objective of this course was to analyze the approaches to old age, the aging process, international and national standards, as well as the development agendas of older adults; likewise, to analyze and discuss public policies, programs and public services for this age population, reviewing the actions of Social Work in them. It is worth mentioning that in this first cohort there was a large number of students, with more than 30 enrolled. What topics were included in the syllabus of this first cohort of the Social Gerontology course? First of all, the theories, approaches and concepts of old age and aging, as well as the national reality of older adults and the international and national regulations for their protection and promotion of rights in connection with public policies for protection, promotion and social inclusion. It also included a unit to learn about and analyze the institutions, programs and social services aimed at older adults in Peru. In addition, the topic of organization and social participation of older adults was developed. Finally, the professional actions of Social Work with this age group were addressed.



**Haydee:** Something very interesting was the methodology on which the course was based. An active teaching-learning method was used. Since it was developed virtually, we made use of synchronous and asynchronous collaborative work tools in order to make the exchange between all of us feasible. During the classes, expository and questioning techniques were used, as well as the exchange of points of view and group work. One of them consisted of conducting interviews with elderly people from social organizations, a very significant work, both for the students and for the elderly participants.

Seminars and thematic discussions were also organized for each unit, which were open to the community due to the interest that the School took in making the course and the topics covered in each one of them visible.

We noticed that there were many expectations on the part of the students, a lot of interest in knowing the regulatory framework oriented to older adults in Peru and, with this, to recognize their rights in society. We observed a marked interest in learning about the situation of the elderly in Peru, with emphasis on the gaps and discrimination; this under the premise that we were in a process of social upheaval as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic that affected, mainly, the elderly.

202

The participatory construction of social action routes, from Social Work, around the existing gaps in the older adult population, was also highly valued by the students.

Natalí: This process resulted in several lessons learned: first, the identification of negative stereotypes and prejudices towards old age among the students, who emphasize that the course has allowed them to initiate a process of deconstruction of narratives and practices that reproduce old age and are rooted in everyday life.

On the other hand, it was also important to learn about the situation of old age through the voice of its protagonists: organized older adults. This learning was strengthened through the seminars and discussions organized within the framework of the course, with the participation of representatives of various organizations, such as the National Association of Organizations of Older Adults of Peru - ANAMPER Network, the National Association of Older Adults - ANAM Peru, the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse - INPEA Peru, the Collective for the Rights of Older Adults - Reflection and Action, the Coordinator of Representatives of Organizations of Older Adults and People Committed to the Defense of their Rights of Lima and Callao - COORDEPAM, and the District Network of Older Adults of Callao.



Another valuable learning experience was the knowledge of the national regulations oriented to older adults and their link with binding international normative documents, such as the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons, to which Peru adhered just two months before the beginning of the course.

In addition, the students suggested the inclusion of topics related to old age from a gender perspective, continuing education as a right, care and social protection of the elderly population, as well as age discrimination in old age and old ageism, in order to continue deepening the field of social gerontology in subsequent cohorts of the course. Haydee: I had the pleasure of being called by the professor in charge of the Social Gerontology course at the Professional School of Social Work, Dr. Esther Vidal Córdova, to support the development of the course, focusing mainly on the organization of seminars and discussions in each of the units. This call was very relevant for me because the professor recognized my trajectory of specialization and militant commitment in the gerontological field. Likewise, this first cohort allowed me and Natalí to get to know each other, and it definitely meant a turning point for both of us, since it made it possible for us to meet and reaffirm that old age is a problematic field of professional intervention - hence the importance of having included this course within the curriculum of our school. However, it seems appropriate to rethink the definition of the course in terms of its incorporation in the curriculum as an elective. Due to the socio-demographic context we are going through at a national and Latin American level, and the increasingly accelerated process of population aging, why not consider this course as a mandatory one? And, since many pre-professional practice centers have elderly people as their user population, could it be even more convenient that this course be taken in the third year cycles (at the beginning of the specialty) and not in the fourth year? These are questions that we ask ourselves as a starting point in this long road that began with its implementation.

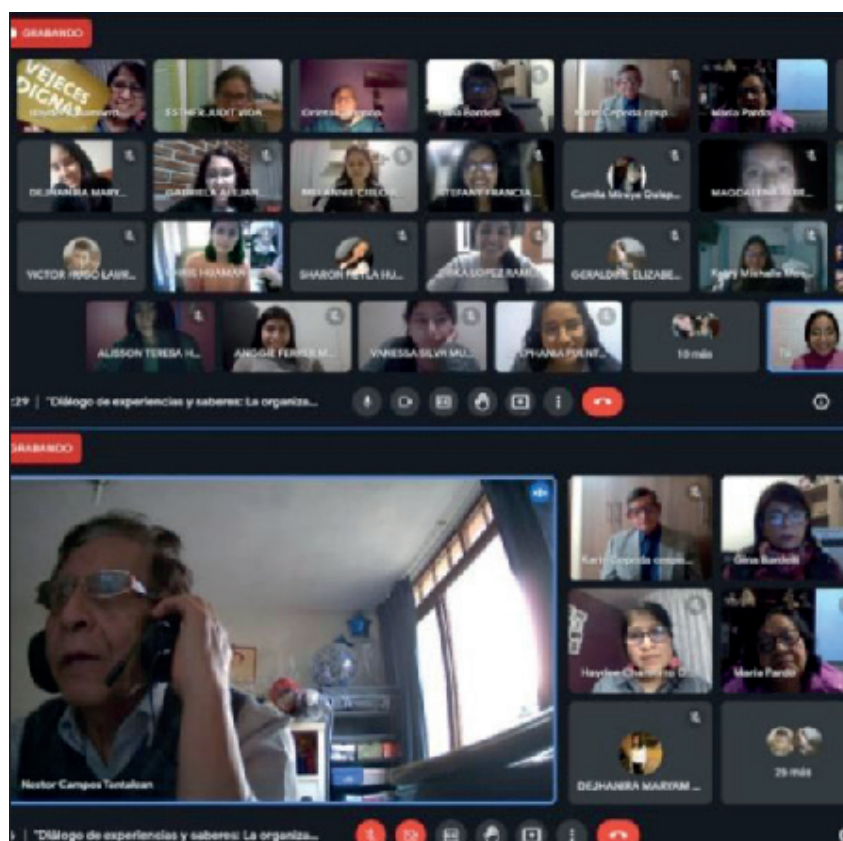
**Natalí:** In short, the course of Social Gerontology means a way for Social Work to problematize the social issue of old age, betting on reconfiguring the still hegemonic perspectives regarding older adults, as well as the methodologies implemented in the different devices of attention to this age group, in order not to continue reproducing old age narratives and practices, which unfortunately still persist in the institutions and in our daily life.

**Haydee:** We hope that this dialogue motivates reflection on how to make a critical turn in our understanding and problematization of old age and aging.

**Natalí:** Thank you very much.



## INTERVIEW



204

Photographs captured on screen on August 27, 2021 in the virtual event called “Dialogue of experiences and knowledge: the organization and participation of older adults in Peru”, with the outstanding participation of representatives of organizations of older adults in Peru. .

*“Nothing about older adults without older adults.”*

Source: Natalí Sánchez’s personal archives.

## Referencias bibliográficas

Carballeda, A. (2020). Apuntes sobre la intervención del Trabajo Social en tiempos de Pandemia de Covid-19. In A. Carballeda (comp.), *La intervención en lo Social en tiempos de Pandemia*, (pp. S/N). Margen. <https://bit.ly/3zn02sG>

Danel, P. (2019). Mujeres mayores en situación de dependencia: cruces interseccionales. In P. Danel & M. Navarro (comp.), *La gerontología será feminista*, (pp. 133-158). Fundación La Hendija.



Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática. (2022). Informe Técnico Situación de la Población Adulta Mayor. Trimestre: Octubre-Noviembre-Diciembre 2021, (1). <https://bit.ly/3bcNnAr>

Ley N°30490 Ley de la Persona Adulta Mayor. (2016). Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables. <https://bit.ly/2DuNdSo>

Organización de Estados Americanos. (2015). Convención Interamericana para la Protección de los Derechos Humanos de las Personas Mayores. <https://bit.ly/3xFNltb>  
Política Nacional Multisectorial para las Personas Adultas Mayores al 2030 – PNMPAM. (2021). Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables. <https://bit.ly/3vnpNHM>  
Segato, R. (2007). La nación y sus otros: raza, etnicidad y diversidad religiosa en tiempos de políticas de la identidad. Prometeo Libros.

#### **Learn more about Haydee and Natalí's work:**

¡Convención ya! La lucha de las personas adultas mayores por el reconocimiento de sus derechos en el Perú. <http://perio.unlp.edu.ar/ojs/index.php/actas>

¿Protección social como derecho o sobreprotección que anula derechos? La oportunidad de un cambio de paradigma de la vejez a partir del contexto de pandemia por el Covid-19. <https://revistas.unlp.edu.ar/escenarios/article/view/1084>

¡La sociedad también nos necesita! Un estudio del rol social de las personas mayores del Centro de Atención Residencial Geronto Geriátrico – CARGG Ignacia Rodulfo Vda. De Canevaro. <https://sociologia-alas.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Dosiere-GT-20-C.pdf>

Personas mayores en los medios digitales peruanos durante la pandemia por covid-19. <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/kairos/issue/view/2470> <https://revistas.pucsp.br/kairos>

Gerontologizar el Estado, un desafío para el bicentenario peruano. Blog República de Ciudadanos de La Mula.pe. 2021. <https://bit.ly/3mCwj91>

La fragilidad humana y la fragilidad del sistema, aprendizajes y desafíos a partir de la pandemia por el Covid-19. <https://bit.ly/2ZB2ei9>



INTERVIEW

Senior Connection, social entrepreneurship that provides consultancy and develops social projects in the gerontological field with the Central Government, local governments, private institutions, academia, and the community. <https://www.facebook.com/ConexionAdultoMayor>

