

OLDER ADULTS: AN ASSET OR LIABILITY ON THE SOCIAL BALANCE SHEET?

For decades, the population of older adults has been increasing rapidly in the vast majority of countries.

According to the United Nations, in 1986 people of 60-years-old and over represented 8% of all men and women in the world; this rose to 8.9% in 2000, and 11.5% in 2016. If this trend continues, older adults will be almost 30% of all people by the end of the millennium. These numbers have convinced some of the need to pay closer attention to this population sector and to recognize that this demographic change has become an urgent social problem around the world.

These global demographic trends are repeated in Colombia. As in other developing countries, the dynamics of Colombia's population growth are undergoing significant changes. In 2016, people of 60-years-old and over made up 9.1% of the





total population, while 30 years ago they were just 5.1%. In addition, according to the country's national data agency (DANE), the number of newborns has diminished nearly 30% in recent decades, and life expectancy at the end of this decade is predicted to be about 79 years for women and 74 years for men.

This means that by the end of the decade, the percentage of people from 15-to-20 years-old will have fallen by 18% in the overall population spread, while those over 60 will have increased by 42.1%.

Despite this, few studies have analyzed aging or related concerns in Colombia from

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a psychological perspective. One such study, however, was carried out last year by professors Luisa Fernanda Ramírez and Ximena Palacios Espinosa at the Universidad del Rosario. Among other social elements, they studied positive and negative aging stereotypes. The former refer to wisdom, experience, memory, familiarity, and the composure that people associate with the elderly, while the latter cover perceptions that elderly people are grumpy, irritable, ailing, stubborn, and reclusive.

The researchers found that people who hold to negative stereotypes about aging expect to suffer from compromised mental health and have less social support in their own old age. According to the study, "good health care and sufficient good-quality social support can help older people to live and work

RELIGIOSITY CAN HAVE AN IMPORTANT INFLUENCE ON COLOMBIANS' PERCEPCIONES AND EXPECTATIONS REGARDING AGING

work longer, to feel appreciated and respected, and to feel that they give their families security.” On the other hand, “lack of social support, among other things, accentuates the problems of older people in carrying out their daily activities.”

Since family unity and warmth are particularly important to Latin Americans as mechanisms of social support, people’s confidence that they will have someone by their side accompanying them through the process relieves the anxiety associated with aging.

“In addition to the close dependency between older adults and their families, there is also an urgent need to prepare younger generations to care for their elders and support them in an environment of appreciation and respect, thus avoiding discrimination, exploitation, and other undesirable situations,” affirm Ramírez and Palacios Espinosa.

The researchers also warn that “despite efforts to include older adults and improve their living conditions, Colombia is not ready to confront the changes inherent in an aging society. The weakening of the social network (family, friends, and community) negatively affects the quality of life.” Viewed in this way, it is the responsibility of the State to strengthen strategies for looking after those affected.

RELIGIOSTY AND AGING

The study by the two Universidad del Rosario professors was one of the first to examine the associations between psychosocial concerns, perceptions, and expectations of aging in Colombia. However, due to the size of the sample and its limited age range, it left some questions about the interrelationships between these factors unanswered. For this reason, the researchers decided to conduct an additional research project called Support for Aging in Colombia, which has a larger sample allowing for more detailed analysis.



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Life expectancy forecasts for the end of the present decade are 79 for women and 74 for men.

The relevance of religiosity is a variable that has not been deeply studied, but it is critical in literature on aging, especially in Latin America. The two professors indicate that by promoting positive stereotypes, religiosity may act to mitigate anxiety about aging.

It should be remembered that Colombia is a very religious country. About 90% of its inhabitants identify as Christians, while only 4.7% identify as atheists or agnostics. Thus, it seems probable that religiosity can have an important role in influencing Colombians' perceptions and expectations regarding aging.

Ramírez and Palacios Espinosa stress the emphasis Christianity places on respect for the elderly, as well as the positive depiction of older people and of aging in the Old Testament.

In addition, older adults are often respected and valued in religious environments, suggesting that their religiosity would motivate them to support positive stereotypes of

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aging, particularly in countries like Colombia, where they run a greater risk of suffering from negative social phenomena such as poverty, disability, and abandonment, compared to other at-risk populations.

So religious organizations, like some others, can contribute to providing social and emotional support to people who are experiencing this later stage of life, and at the same time contribute to reducing uncertainty, thereby improving the expectations of older adults with regard to the future.

Awareness about these topics in Colombia is very new, as Ramírez and Palacios Espinosa point out: "More research is required to explore the relationship between stereotypes, anxiety about aging and social support, and their combined effect on the well-being of older people in the country. One does not need to delve too deeply to conclude, however, that older adults are a very important asset to society and merit our great respect and support, for they are the authors and protagonists of our past. ■"