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CRITICAL PROPOSALS IN SOCIAL WORK

PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

10

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EDITORIAL

One Hundred Years Travelled and What Remains Ahead: Dialogues on Social Work in a Past, Present and Future Key

Dra. Javiera Cubillos Almendra[1]
Editor-in-Chief
Critical Proposals in Social Work

The centenary of Social Work in Latin America (1925–2025) offers us the opportunity to celebrate, meet, and strengthen international dialogue in order to keep our discipline alive. In this context, this new issue of Critical Proposals in Social Work revisits what we initiated in April with Issue 9, insisting on the need to look critically towards the past in order to imagine a Social Work that does not lose sight of its commitment to social justice. Issue 10, in particular, reclaims the inescapable ethical–political dimension of the profession and of disciplinary reflection, recognising the constant challenge of rereading the past in order to denaturalise our forms of action and knowledge production.

This call gains renewed importance in a context where—under the pretext of safeguarding social order and security—neoliberal, colonial, and heteropatriarchal logics seem to be reinforced. It questions the reduction of the profession to a technical body of expertise, to "a complicit gaze" (Aquín, 2005, p. 76) aligned with common-sense notions that seek to secure social control while evading deep ethical reflection (Banks, 2012, 2014). Such logics naturalise social inequalities, strip people and communities of their agency, and foreclose any possibility of social transformation. It is this ethical reflection and critique of technification that this issue places at the centre of the debate, recognising the structural limitations we face but, above all, the alternatives that we can imagine and construct.

The practice of Social Work unavoidably confronts us with a moment of ethical argumentation regarding the decisions we make—a deeply conflictive moment (Aquín,

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2005; Banks, 2016). In this sense, the texts included in this issue address this uncomfortable terrain, resisting the reproduction of the common-sense logics of the colonial–neoliberal order, preventing the emancipatory ethos from dissolving into discourses of efficiency and modernisation, and urging the construction of a collective sense of purpose. They do so with a determination to drive our practices based on the commitments and responsibilities we hold regarding the understanding of contemporary social problems, and consequently, the construction of alternatives for their resolution.

While we celebrate one hundred years of Latin American Social Work, this issue also opens a space for dialogue beyond Our America, building "South–North" bridges from a critical perspective. These dialogues remain vigilant to long-standing colonial asymmetries, aiming to facilitate mutually enriching contributions and to renew and strengthen our commitments to social justice. This intention mobilises several of the contributions included here, in an effort to build bridges between critical perspectives—from both geopolitical spaces—that do not fear confronting their own ghosts and allow us to project reflective, situated practices committed to historically marginalised sectors.

This special issue begins with a greeting from the Rector of the University of Chile, Dr Rosa Devés Alessandri, who recognises the contributions of different social workers to the institution and values the reopening of the Social Work programme at the university—today marking ten years since its reopening, following its violent closure during the civil–military dictatorship. Next, in the "Translations" section, we share the lecture delivered by Vasilios Ioakimidis (Greece) on 29 April of this year, at the International Conference for the Centenary of Social Work, held at the University of Chile's Main Building. On that occasion, Ioakimidis invited us to critically revisit the political history of our profession, with the aim of understanding the contradictions that continue to mark our discipline.

Through three figures from Greek mythology—Nemesis, Sisyphus, and Prometheus—which he uses as analogies, Ioakimidis outlines some of the challenges and opportunities currently facing the discipline at a global level. Reflecting on key paradigmatic crossroads, he reviews the historical complicities of social services with coloniality, authoritarianism, precarisation, and marketisation, while also identifying persistent—and often silenced—emancipatory and resistant practices inscribed in the history and present of Social Work. In this context, the author encourages us to take the centenary commemoration as an opportunity for critical reflection, unravelling the dilemmas we face today as a collective and as a society.

Picking up on Ioakimidis's call, the section of research articles opens with "The Origin of Social Work in Latin America: The Case of Chile and Its Choice Between European

Influence and the United States Model (to 1925)," by Estefanía Palacios Pizarro (United States). The author conducts a historical and comparative analysis of the foundational models of Social Work in Chile and in the United States up to 1925, the key year marking the creation of the first Latin American Social Work school in Santiago de Chile. Palacios helps us understand the sociopolitical, cultural, and institutional factors that informed the decision to adopt the Belgian model of René Sand, despite the significant influence of the US model at the time. To do so, she reviews the main characteristics and contexts that shaped the emergence and development of the European and US models of Social Work in both regions, whose differences have shaped professional identity, disciplinary autonomy, and the emancipatory potential of Latin American Social Work.

These necessary rereadings of the profession's origins are reinforced by the article by Kimberly Seguel Villagrán and Hillary Hiner (Chile), titled "The Other Recabarren: The Political and Feminist Impact of Berta Recabarren on the Origins of Chilean Social Work." Through a historiographical study, the authors reveal a long-neglected version of Berta Recabarren Serrano, one of the first social visitors trained at the Alejandro del Río School. Known for being the sister of Luis Emilio Recabarren—intellectual, revolutionary, and founder of the Communist Party of Chile—Berta Recabarren nonetheless had her own protagonism. She not only practised the profession at the Lota Mining and Industrial Company, drawing on her technical and public health training, but also defended causes relevant to women of her time, showing a strong political commitment to working-class sectors. In doing so, Seguel and Hiner help us follow the traces of an untold history, positioning Berta Recabarren Serrano as a key figure in the articulation of feminism, politics, and popular worlds in the early twentieth century.

The article "Ethical and Political Reflections on Prison Social Work in Chile. A Look Back at the Profession's 100th Anniversary," written by Felipe Norambuena Conejeros and Rocío Sandoval Candia (Chile), examines the historical development of Social Work in carceral settings across its ninety-five years in Chile, with the aim of contributing to contemporary practice. As one of the most contested fields—both within professional practice and in contemporary public policy—Norambuena and Sandoval critically reflect on two institutional approaches currently shaping Prison Social Work: psychosocial intervention by the Chilean Prison Service and sociolegal defence work by the Public Defender's Office. Drawing on historical and situated insights, the article invites us to understand the prison institution as deeply contradictory, promoting a management model based on cost reduction and risk minimisation, in contrast to the principles of protection, repair, and justice upheld by the Public Defender's Office.

In the article "Educación Popular in the Netherlands: Politicisation of Community

Development as a Strategy Against Neoliberal Governance," written by Mellouki Cadat-Lampe and Lou Repetur (Netherlands), we find historical and contemporary bridges between Chile and the Netherlands through Paulo Freire's proposal of Popular Education. Although Freire was Brazilian rather than Chilean, it was Chilean activists and professionals exiled during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet who brought their political–pedagogical learning to the Netherlands. This shared and deeply politicised knowledge continues to take root "on the other side of the ocean" and, according to Cadat-Lampe and Repetur, provides new insights for addressing community development in contexts marked by intense polarisation and neoliberal logics and policies.

Projecting the present and future challenges of the discipline, this issue includes contributions by Lukas Standen—"Social Assistance for Dispossession: Contradictions and Challenges the Social Work in the Context of Socio-Environmental Conflicts and Extractivism" (Chile)—and by María Concepción Unanue Cuesta, Cristina Herrero Villoria, and Jezabel Amparo Lucas García—"Social Work and Virtual Spaces: New Scenarios for Critical Professional Practice" (Spain).

Standen's work, based on documentary analysis of nine emblematic cases of socio-environmental conflict in Chile and interviews with resisting communities, urges us to reflect on a topic that is not new yet increasingly urgent: the ecosocial crisis we face and the role of Social Work in forms of community mediation promoted by extractivist companies. The author invites an uncomfortable conversation, arguing that the ontological role of the discipline becomes blurred within this "mediating" role, which naturalises the social and environmental suffering that Social Work is vocationally committed to addressing. His call is to de-extractivise Social Work, a task that requires not only revisiting its theoretical foundations but also undertaking an historical review of professional practice and the colonial dynamics that continue to affect Our America.

Meanwhile, the article by Unanue, Herrero, and Lucas invites us to examine emerging virtual spaces in professional intervention, addressing some of the ethical, political, and methodological challenges posed by increasing digitalisation. While reviewing opportunities for emancipatory action and the reactivation of social dynamics, the authors caution us about the risks of digitalisation and how virtual spaces tend to reproduce structural inequalities. The main challenge facing social intervention, they argue, is to build virtual environments that promote digital justice, collective participation, and mutual care.

We close the "Articles" section with a contribution reminding us that reflective and collective disciplinary activity must lead to improvements in the training of new generations of social workers. In his article "Social Work and Human Rights Education: Critical, Situated,

Feminist, and Territorial Pedagogy" (Chile), Cory Duarte Hidalgo proposes deepening Human Rights–based education in Social Work programmes, moving toward a more integral approach from a critical perspective that challenges colonial and patriarchal logics limiting the construction of liveable worlds. Such Human Rights Education in Social Work seeks to foster transformative subjective processes, especially when working with historically harmed bodies and territories and their collective resistances.

In this issue, we inaugurate a new section: "Editorial Recoveries", in which we will republish editorial pieces from printed materials that have not yet been made available digitally. We begin the section with the re-edition of a chapter from 100 años del Trabajo Social latinoamericano: Memoria, críticas y utopías (100 Years of Latin American Social Work: Memory, Critiques, and Utopias)—published this year by Puka Ediciones in Argentina. The chapter, written by Paula Vidal, José Ancán, and María Angélica Rodríguez, is titled "Student Organisation of Social (Service) Work under the Chilean Dictatorship: From the University of Chile to the Professional Institute of Santiago. Notes for a History." With this publication, we aim to contribute to the dissemination of one of the strands of a largely untold history: the persistence of student organisation within the Social Service/Social Work programme at the University of Chile after the 1973 coup d'état and following the forced closure of the programme by the dictatorship. This narrative allows us to enrich the socio-historical analysis and illuminate the continuity between Social Work at the University of Chile and the Professional Institute of Santiago in one of the most tragic periods of the country's history.

As usual, we also include a review of a recent publication—in this case, the book Trabajo social: aportes a la historia reciente (Social Work: Contributions to Recent History), published by EDUNPAZ in 2023. This work aligns with the need to reread the past in order to understand Social Work in Argentina. The review, written by Lorena Pérez Roa, encourages us to delve into this collective volume—authored by Martín Hornes and others—which revisits key historical moments that have reorganised professional knowledge, practices, and identities.

We close this second issue dedicated to the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of Social Work with the second part of the unpublished interview conducted by Teresa López Vásquez (deceased in 2023) with Professor Teresa Quiroz Martín (deceased in 2019). In doing so, we bring to fruition the dialogue the two Teresas held in 2011, recovering invaluable knowledge from two women of great significance for Social Work in Chile.

We hope you enjoy the journey traced by this new issue of the journal, which reviews and projects some of the challenges we face at the beginning of a new century.

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GREETINGS

100 Years of Social Work in Chile and Latin America

Dra. Rosa Devés Alessandri
Rector
University of Chile

In 2025, social work commemorates a century since its creation as a discipline on our continent. The first school of social service was founded in Chile, in a context of reform and change that left a lasting mark on the way social issues were understood, in response to phenomena such as pauperism, precarious working conditions, migration, extreme inequalities, and problems relating to housing and public health.

The first school emerged under the influence of the hygienist movement and under the protection of the Junta de Beneficencia (charity board), which would later become the Servicio Nacional de Salud (national health service). The graduates of this unprecedented training programme in the country—initially known as "social visitors"—would later travel to establish other schools in Latin America and give Social Service a vocation for public service and excellence that we continue to recognise in its most contemporary exponents.

As Rector of the University of Chile, I would like to extend my warmest greetings on this centenary to all those who study and practise this long-standing discipline: social assistants and social workers who challenge established frameworks, innovate in their practice, and fight for social justice in Chile and around the world.

At the University of Chile, professionals in this discipline serve in many different spaces and at various levels: from units focused on promoting equity and inclusion, staff welfare units and student welfare offices, to innovation units at the central level and across

different faculties and institutes. In the classrooms of the Faculty of Social Sciences, we find undergraduate and postgraduate students alongside the academics who make up the Department of Social Work. To all of them we express our gratitude and acknowledge their essential role within the university.

During the years of military intervention, the dictatorship struck our institution harshly, including the training in Social Work. Its lecturers were persecuted or dismissed. Students were detained and some even disappeared. Many decades had to pass before the doors were reopened for the admission of Social Work students to the University of Chile. A little over 10 years ago, a group of academics succeeded in reopening the programme and, in March 2015, the first cohort of students was admitted. As a result, today the Faculty of Social Sciences trains new generations in Social Work, with an innovative focus, applied research, and a consolidated academic community.

For all these reasons, the University of Chile is proud to commemorate the centenary of Social Work and, at the same time, to celebrate the reopening of a programme that should never have been closed.

Warm regards,

Rosa Devés
Rectora
Universidad de Chile

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TRANSLATION

Reflections on the Political History of Social Work: Complicities and Resistances in Turbulent Times*

Reflexiones sobre la historia política del Trabajo Social: complicidades y resistencias en tiempos convulsos

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Abstract

This article presents a critical review of Social Work in the context of the centenary of its first school in Chile and Latin America, through three figures from Greek mythology: Nemesis, Sisyphus, and Prometheus, which serve as analogies for some of the challenges and opportunities currently faced by the discipline on a global scale. Drawing on a reflection on the political history of Social Work and focusing on some of the paradigmatic crossroads it has encountered, the article revisits the historical complicities of social services with oppression, colonisation,

Keywords:
social work; political history; social justice; oppression; resistance; transformation

* This contribution is based on a presentation by Vasilios Ioakimidis at the international conference "Cien años… y contando: historias, repertorios y contradicciones," on 29 April 2025, organised by the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile.

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authoritarianism, precarisation, as well as the marketisation of care. At the same time, it highlights the emancipatory and resistant practices that have been inscribed in the history and present of the discipline, calling for their projection and strengthening into the future, under a transformative commitment oriented toward social justice, class solidarity, and the inclusion of individuals and communities that capitalism and neoliberal states continue to marginalise.

Resumen

Palabras clave:
Trabajo Social; historia política; justicia social; opresión; resistencia; transformación

Este artículo presenta una revisión crítica del Trabajo Social en el marco de la conmemoración de los cien años de su primera escuela en Chile y Latinoamérica, a través de tres figuras de la mitología griega: Némesis, Sísifo y Prometeo, las que sirven como analogía de algunas de las problemáticas y oportunidades que enfrenta la disciplina a nivel global. A partir de una reflexión sobre la historia política del Trabajo Social, y deteniéndose en algunas de las encrucijadas paradigmáticas a las que se ha enfrentado, se repasan las complicidades históricas de los servicios sociales con la opresión, la colonización, el autoritarismo, la precarización, y la mercantilización de los cuidados. A la vez, se buscan reconocer las prácticas emancipadoras y de resistencia que se han inscrito en la historia y el presente de la disciplina, haciendo un llamado a proyectarlas y fortalecerlas hacia el futuro. Todo esto, bajo un compromiso transformador orientado a la justicia social, la solidaridad de clase, y la inclusión de las personas y las comunidades que el capitalismo y los Estados neoliberales mantienen al margen de la sociedad.

Introduction

Commemorating one hundred years of social work education in Chile and Latin America presents a valuable opportunity to reflect on and critically review our discipline: one hundred years of incredible scholarly advancements, but also disruptions; one hundred years of rich and great legacies, but also of pain and hurt; one hundred years that deserve celebration, but also reflection and self-examination.

This is especially true at a time of fluid certainties—a period characterised by very few political, intellectual, or other "constants" that could make younger social work scholars and practitioners feel confident about navigating the political dilemmas facing them.

Nevertheless, understanding our profession's complex political history is the safest approach to unpacking the dilemmas of today. And I argue so, not in a didactic manner. Nor do I agree with the academic elitism that is historicism in social science. Social work, a profession that has long suffered from its own insecurity and fear to deal with its past (a form of historical amnesia), should not make the mistake of engaging with a rigid or deterministic interpretation of history; an interpretation where historical events and processes are seen as following a fixed progression. Historicism would only rob us of the enormous opportunities of "connecting the dots," making sense of the profession's presence through a critical appraisal of social work's living legacies.

In this sense, how else might one understand the echoes of colonial legacies in contemporary child protection? The disproportionate representation of Black and ethnic minority families in the child protection system? Or the modern "workhouse" that is Fortress Europe and the refugee and asylum systems designed to demonise and brutalise people on the move?

What are the connections between social work's historical fixation on atomised practices—such as eugenics, casework, or pathologising clinical work—and its longstanding (overt or covert) attraction to positivism? How has the historical evolution of the debate around professional autonomy extended to the emancipation of the people we work with? And so on.

These are rather existential questions that our community cannot answer persuasively without appreciating the historical continuities. There is no shortcut here. The radical and critical social work movements of the 1970s, helpful and influential as they are, cannot provide all answers to the newly emerging dilemmas. The process of political conscientisation is not a one-off process. To paraphrase Frantz Fanon, the influential psychiatrist and anti-colonial thinker, each generation of social workers must discover its mission—fulfil it or betray it.

For the purposes of this article, reference will be made to three mythological figures drawn from Greek mythology. This is not done in a folkloric manner or out of a love for narrow classicism, but rather in a more Dickensian manner, recalling through these mythological figures the ghosts of the past, present, and future.

Nemesis: Hubris and Justice

Nemesis was a figure in ancient Greek mythology who personified retribution and justice. She was often seen as the goddess who enacted punishment against those who succumbed to hubris and those who committed moral wrongs, ensuring that no one could escape the consequences of their actions. One could say that social work's

complex histories can be seen as the nemesis of some of the current political limitations and narrow interpretations in our profession.

In our recent book *Social Work Histories of Complicity and Resistance* (2024), we used the subtitle "A Tale of Two Professions." Indeed, how else can we make sense of the fact that, on the one hand, we witnessed truly inspiring, empowering, and emancipatory practices that kept fuelling our desire to be part of a "profession worth fighting for," but on the other hand, we also witnessed the impact of oppressive and often alienating social work practices? As we uncovered in our book, whole communities and individuals suffered from state violence and injustice, directly or indirectly facilitated by social services and social workers.

So how are we to cherish the example of Polish social worker Irena Sendler, who confronted the Nazis and saved thousands of Jewish children in the notorious Warsaw Ghetto, if we do not simultaneously concede that the vast majority of German social workers at the time actively supported Nazism?

Again, we should feel proud of our anti-fascist colleagues who, in the 1930s, not only sided with the democratic forces during the Spanish Civil War (a prelude to the horrors of the Second World War), but also actively worked against the oppression, like Thyra Edwards— who developed enormously creative and inclusive projects for children and families in the liberated zones of the country—or those who joined the international brigades. Yet at the same time, we need to recognise that the post-war social work apparatus in Franco's Spain was complicit in the histories of abuse that led to the stealing of as many as 300,000 babies, taken from democratic and working-class families and given to nationalist and military families.

How can we celebrate the vast contributions of anti-racist social workers throughout the 20th century if we ignore the fact that mainstream social work, in several parts of the world, operated contentedly and obediently within systems of institutional racism and colonialism? How can we forget our profession's complicity with South Africa's apartheid—the fact that the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) accepted into its ranks a white-only-membership South African Association of Social Workers (SAASW), at a time when African National Congress (ANC) colleagues were imprisoned and tortured? How can we ignore that in the hands of social services in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Greenland, and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous and Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities, violently institutionalised, and abused in faith-based (Christian church) institutions? Only last year, New Zealand's Prime Minister expressed regret after a Royal Commission of Inquiry

report found some 200,000 children, young people, and vulnerable adults were abused in state and religious care over the last 70 years (ABC News, 2024). The majority of these children, unsurprisingly, were Maori.

Complicity, both historical and current, with crimes against humanity in Palestine, past military dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, and the US, has also been systematically recorded in recent years—the list goes on. Make no mistake—the legacy of this horrific history lives on, and the trauma remains unhealed. The political conditions that generated oppression and complicity are still present.

Reflecting on those histories helps us conclude that, contrary to what mainstream social work narratives may suggest, cases of oppression within social work are neither rare nor isolated, nor linked to a few "bad apples." These histories are endemic and directly linked to the very nature of social work as a state-based profession (a "creature of the statute", as the bizarre British common law term goes). Social work as a state profession has been institutionalised for far too long.

Histories of oppression act as a constant reminder of the social catastrophes that can occur should social workers stop defending and prioritising fundamental human rights.

Reckoning with Social Work's Past

Today, we face a pressing question: Should social work reckon with its troubled past—and if so, how? Looking to broader historical processes, we find three paths societies have taken: retributive justice, restorative justice, and strategic forgetting.

Retributive justice seeks accountability. Post-holocaust Nuremberg Trials and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) are prime examples. In our field, this has meant prosecuting social workers complicit in state violence, such as in Argentina's dictatorship and post–World War II Germany.

Restorative justice, rooted in Indigenous philosophies, focuses on healing and truth-telling. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) showed how social workers could engage in collective healing. In Canada and Australia, our profession has formally acknowledged complicity in cultural genocide, supporting reconciliation efforts.

By contrast, some states opt for forgetting. Spain's "Pact of Forgetting" after Franco, and Greece's muted post-junta reckoning, illustrate this. These approaches suppress uncomfortable truths in the name of stability but leave injustices unresolved.

Yet merely acknowledging the past isn't enough. Social work must embrace *transformative justice*—a forward-looking, political project of structural change. The liberal peace model, with its technocratic, marketised approach, has failed to address deep-rooted inequalities. To transform social work meaningfully, we need a radical paradigm shift and bold, collective action. It could start with a *formal global apology* from professional bodies, encouraging national reckonings.

But beyond words, we must create a Truth, Justice, and Transformation Commission—a space for dialogue and collective reparations that should be context-specific: restoring access to records, granting citizenship, or other concrete measures. Crucially, we must centre *survivor-led movements*, ensuring their voices guide our work. Transformation also means forging *alliances with unions and social movements* to resist the commodification of care, and *reimagining social work* as community-rooted, justice-driven, and inclusive. This is a call not for reform, but for radical reinvention.

Social Work Abolitionism?

Let's take a moment to consider the idea of "abolitionist social work." Thinkers like Chris Maylea have argued that the profession has failed so spectacularly to protect the oppressed that it should be dismantled or abolished (Mylea, 2020). While I respect their critiques and acknowledge the genuine failings they highlight—systemic injustices, entrenched hierarchies, and the replication of oppressive power structures—I must be clear: I believe this approach is fundamentally misguided.

Dismantling social work entirely would play directly into the hands of neoliberal and authoritarian forces. These are governments and institutions that would eagerly seize the opportunity to further weaken, marginalise, or erase the very services and support that so many vulnerable communities rely upon. Even as we speak, countless social workers around the world are facing persecution—not for failing to do their jobs, but for challenging oppression, promoting social justice, and standing up for human rights.

The way forward, in my humble opinion, is not to eliminate social work but to transform it radically. This transformation begins with rejecting top-down, bureaucratic models. Instead, we must root ourselves in communities, aligning our work with unions, grassroots movements, and the collective struggles of the people we serve.

A truly radical social work is not about preserving the status quo, nor is it about disappearing from the scene. It's about becoming a vibrant force for justice—one that amplifies marginalised voices, dismantles structural oppression, and builds a more equitable and compassionate world. This is what I believe we should aim for: not the

abolition of social work, but its reinvention. A transformed social work that serves as a catalyst for meaningful, lasting change.

Sisyphus: Alienation and the Primacy of Class

The idea that the political conditions that generated oppression and complicity are still present brings us to the second "ghost" or mythological figure: Sisyphus.

Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to an eternal task in the Underworld: he was forced to roll a massive rock up a hill, only for it to roll back down each time it neared the top. This endless and futile task became a symbol of pointless or unending labour, giving rise to the term "Sisyphean" to describe tasks that are both laborious and never-ending.

Over the years, through my own and others' research, we have heard countless stories about the modern equivalent of the Sisyphean tasks expected to be done by social workers. This, of course, is both historic and present. In our book, we identified how social workers, very often, were manipulated through the promise of professionalisation and status (Ioakimidis & Wyllie, 2024). Historically, many social work organisations have prioritised the profession's image and status over the needs of the individuals and communities they are meant to support. When the profession felt insecure about its knowledge base, it often retreated into rigid positivism (biomedical models) or even the pseudo-science of eugenics. When social work has attempted to present itself as a purely technical and politically neutral activity, it has often ignored the well-being and human rights of those it serves. This has been especially evident when faced with the false dilemma of choosing between human rights and national security.

Extending this reality into the present time, we could say that social workers are being exposed to working conditions that are systematically alienating and exploitative. "Overworked and underpaid" is the most common phrase social workers use in surveys and research studies attempting to record the working conditions of social workers.

Last year's "working conditions" survey, conducted by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in the United Kingdom, highlighted how 74.91% of social workers reported feeling unable to complete their work during their contracted hours (BASW, 2023). They also reported a loss of control over their work and a loss of their professional autonomy.

These observations match findings from other surveys in several countries, including

Greece, Spain, and the one conducted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Interestingly, the constant managerial or policy response to social workers' demands for change is limited within the irrational spectrum of "there is no such thing as a money tree" or, plainly, "get on with the job." Usually, both. But one should not make the mistake of separating the exploitative conditions social workers face from the conditions faced by the people and communities we work with: the working-class communities. As we know all too well, "social services for the poor" are "poor social services."

There is no denying that what we are describing here presents a picture of a crisis within and beyond the profession, the roots of which lie in the inability of neoliberalism to deal with deeply rooted structural problems within the global capitalist economy. As the experience of Greece in recent years suggests, the dominant political and ideological response to that crisis has been more of the same, in the form of the holy trinity of neoliberalism: increased privatisation, public sector cuts, and expanded marketisation. It is also clear that for some governments, the crisis has provided a golden political opportunity to shrink the welfare state to levels not seen for decades, not least in Britain, where the percentage of spending on welfare is now at its lowest level since the 1930s.

As many colleagues have demonstrated globally, the focus of the dominant narrative has been on "blaming the victim." The poor are poor because they are lazy; migrants are dangerous because they don't respect European values; refugees are preparing an invasion; young people, when they fight for their rights, are disobedient and criminal; Southern Europeans are corrupt; African states are "banana states"; Latin Americans are populists—the list of otherisation, stigmatisation, and demonisation is endless.

Again, this poses a real existential threat to social work—a profession that is, in the Western world at least, a child of the welfare state—a threat that needs to be understood and challenged. If the structural and existential nature of the social work crisis remains unchecked, misunderstood, and unchallenged, social workers will be faced with the broader Sisyphean task of sleepwalking into oppressive practice. A 21st-century repeat of the profession's horrible histories.

The mix between a technocratic "get on with the job" approach, the primacy of marketisation, discrimination, and the emergence of complex information technology and artificial intelligence systems as the answer to all social problems is indeed extremely dangerous and potentially catastrophic. And even if social work has made some progress in its political understanding of concurrent crises, it is still a profession falling for the lure of pseudoscience, in constant search of a credible and professional-looking methodological façade. This may no longer take the form of eugenics or positivistic psychometrics, but it

does reappear in the form of neuroscientific dogmas and, more recently, big data-based predictive analytics.

These two short stories are interrelated: last winter, Robert Williams, a 43-year-old African American, was aggressively arrested in front of his family, with no explanation for the charges, by Detroit Police (American Civil Liberties Union & ACLU of Michigan, 2024). After a night in a cold jail cell, he discovered he was falsely accused of stealing designer watches, based on a faulty facial recognition match. Despite video evidence clearing him, he still faced trial. This case highlights a broader issue: artificial intelligence and facial recognition technologies often exhibit racial bias and inaccuracies, as demonstrated by recent research.

Another case is the "Kids for Cash" scandal in the United States, where a judge, Mark Ciavarella, received money from private juvenile detention centres in exchange for sentencing a large number of children to their facilities. Many of these children were given harsh sentences for minor offences, often without legal representation or due process. Children, mostly of Latino and African American backgrounds, were sent to prison for offences like smoking on school grounds, trespassing, shouting, or drinking (Juvenile Law Center, n.d.). The scandal exposed the deep corruption of a privatised prison and safeguarding system where profit-making, rather than empowerment and support for young working-class kids, is the key objective.

Combining the elements of a) racial bias in artificial intelligence and big data, b) profiteering, and c) the urgency with which many social services in the world are asked to achieve economies of scale through the adoption of technological systems brings a glimpse of a dystopian reality. In Europe, we also experienced the sophisticated militarisation of refugee services, where Frontex spent billions of euros on complex artificial intelligence surveillance systems and drones to suppress and oppress refugees who lived in squalid conditions.

I most certainly don't want to sound like a technophobe or a neo-Luddite[2], and I truly believe that technology and artificial intelligence can be potentially transformative. But we should never forget that social biases, exploitation policies, priorities, and profit-driven methodologies are endemic in market economies and inseparable from capitalism. State social work has been and still is a key activity in ensuring that families, communities, and individuals abide by the prescribed roles dictated by capitalist economies. Any family or

[2] Neo-Luddites or New Luddism refers to those who criticise the excessive dependence on technology in modern societies, who recognise the negative effects of technology in different areas (mental and psycho-emotional health, interpersonal relationships, environmental impact, data privacy, etc.).

individual who deviates from the prescribed moral and social roles is seen as "deviant," "problematic," "underclass," or, in the most recent addition to the lexicon of repression, "troubled." And as the case study used before indicates, technology itself cannot address structural inequalities that are reproduced in unequal societies, class-based societies.

What has been the common denominator in all the stories and examples we have used here? Class. Social class. In most of the world, in market-based economies, social workers are not being asked to engage with universal service provisions. Instead, they are asked to use their fancy methodologies and vocabularies to work with the poor. Be it people with disabilities, migrants, young people, older people, people experiencing life transitions, LGBTQ communities, children and families at risk of harm, black and minority ethnic communities—the social work clientele consists exclusively of the poorest people in society.

The idea that the late Queen Elizabeth could have been referred to a social worker because one of her sons demonstrated predatory sexual behaviour or that George Bush would be referred to a social worker to assess his options for "independent living" is simply laughable. And perhaps this is the weak spot of much of the postmodern critiques of social work that, lost in the labyrinth of identity politics, forget the material primacy of social class in this political equation.

Prometheus: Rebellion, Resistance and Transformation

The centrality of social class in this debate brings us to the third mythological "ghost." This one is future-oriented. Prometheus was a rebellious figure in Greek mythology who defied the gods by stealing fire and giving it to humanity. His rebellious acts symbolised knowledge and defiance against authority. Karl Marx and other political philosophers used the concept of the "Promethean man" in contrast to the obedient "Pontifical man," who submits to divine will. Prometheus embodies resistance and the quest for human progress, enduring eternal punishment for his defiance.

In the history of social work, there is a long-standing and proud legacy of social workers who shouted, "I didn't get into social work for this," when they were asked to engage with oppressive practice. They developed powerful anti-racist and anti-fascist practices, took to the streets, joined social movements, proposed alternative ways of doing social work, and demonstrated the importance of class solidarity. As I mentioned before, for every single chapter in our profession's horrible histories, there has been a counter-chapter that demonstrated practices of resistance. And this indeed is the task ahead of us in the turbulent political conjuncture we are faced with—a political conjuncture characterised by multiple disruptions, or "a world out of joint," as the late sociologist Emmanuel

Wallerstein would say (2015).

Despite the violence and cruelty witnessed in the current conjuncture, there is still space and time—albeit incredibly limited—for our societies to reclaim our common humanity. Action towards reversing the looming Age of Catastrophe is not merely an ethical and political choice towards a better future. Urgent action for social transformation is now the only way forward for our societies.

This may be a demanding and, at times, painful process, as it requires an analysis and praxis that is both contextual (focusing on understanding the political context) and existential (focusing on understanding our own role) in this emancipatory process. Ahead of us is a mission to understand the conscious or unconscious incorporation of colonial legacies (calculated brutality, colonial attitudes). In fact, it is high time for social work to even "decolonise its own decolonisation process."

Sadly, the word decolonisation has been reduced, in too many cases, to another buzzword. Something that we should engage in a performative and symbolic way. Another tick-box exercise in our curricula or practice. Instead, decolonisation needs to be meaningful, radical, and aimed at addressing the ongoing impact of colonialism—such as long-lasting inequalities and suppression of marginalised voices.

We need to continue to be speaking truth to power. Because, indeed, social workers occupy a unique space, there are witnesses of the deeply rooted topology of class division and the politics of brutalisation. The impact of which needs to be documented and confronted.

In achieving this transformation, social work must reimagine itself as part of a broader commons—what I like to call a "social work commons." This means fostering a collective space where shared values, resources, and knowledge drive our practice, a united front for social justice and universal, democratic social welfare.

By embracing this idea of a commons, we commit to building a profession that is not just reactive but proactively transformative, grounded in solidarity and a deep understanding of our interconnected struggles. But the first step is to recognise the crossroads. To identify the roads not taken, to create more historical opportunities for change. As Wallerstein (2014) indicated through a lifetime committed to social justice and scholarship, "Are there still other possibilities? Of course, there are. What is important to recognise is that all (…) historical options are really there, and the choice will depend on our collective world behaviour" (p. 163).

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PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

CRITICAL PROPOSALS IN SOCIAL WORK

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ARTICLE

The Origin of Social Work in Latin America: The Case of Chile and its Choice between European Influence and the U.S. Model (to 1925)

El origen del Trabajo Social en América Latina: el caso de Chile y su elección entre la influencia europea y el modelo estadounidense (hasta 1925)

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a critical historical-comparative analysis of the foundational models of social work in Chile and the United States (US) up to 1925. This key year marks the creation of the first Latin American school of the discipline in Santiago, contrasting with the already diversified training network in the U.S. The central conceptual problem investigates the sociopolitical, cultural, and institutional factors explaining why Chile favoured a European influence (the Belgian health-oriented model of René Sand) over the consolidated US

Keywords:
social work; history of social work; professional models; Chile–United States; coloniality of knowledge

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models—Charity Organization Societies (COS) and Settlement Houses—despite the latter's relevance. Additionally, it explores the causes for the asynchronous institutionalisation and differing disciplinary development of social work between both regions by that date, considering contexts with comparable critical social issues.

The fundamental thesis posits that the Chilean choice responded to a complex constellation of contextual, ideological, and strategic factors. The argumentative development reconstructs U.S. professionalisation (detailing its COS branch, focused on casework, and Settlements, oriented toward community reform); analyses the inaugural Chilean model marked by its technical-sanitary orientation; and explores the determining factors for Chile's option, such as the state hygienist project, the influence of Europeanised elites, and the coloniality of knowledge that prioritised European knowledge.

It is concluded that these divergent foundational choices generated profoundly differentiated professional trajectories: a pluralistic one linked to social reform in the United States, versus a technical, state-led one oriented towards social control in Chile. These differences had lasting implications for the professional identity, disciplinary autonomy, and emancipatory potential of Latin American social work—legacies and tensions that continue to be subjects of critical debate and reflection within the regional discipline.

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza histórica y comparativamente los modelos fundacionales del Trabajo Social en Chile y Estados Unidos hasta 1925, año clave por la creación de la primera escuela latinoamericana de esta disciplina, en Santiago, frente a la ya diversificada red formativa estadounidense. El problema conceptual central plantea los factores sociopolíticos, culturales e institucionales que explican por qué Chile privilegió una influencia europea (el modelo belga-sanitario de René Sand) sobre los modelos estadounidenses –Charity Organization Societies (COS) y Settlement Houses–, pese a la relevancia de estos últimos. Adicionalmente, se exploran las causas de la institucionalización asincrónica y del diferente desarrollo disciplinar del Trabajo Social entre ambas regiones para esa fecha, considerando contextos sociales con problemáticas críticas equiparables.

Palabras clave: *Trabajo Social; historia del Trabajo Social; modelos profesionales; Chile-Estados Unidos; colonialidad del saber*

La tesis fundamental descansa en la premisa de que la elección chilena respondió a una compleja constelación de factores contextuales, ideológicos y estratégicos. El desarrollo argumentativo da cuenta de la profesionalización en Estados Unidos, detallando sus vertientes COS, enfocada en el *casework*, y *settlements*, orientada a la reforma comunitaria; analiza el modelo chileno inaugural marcado por su orientación técnico-sanitaria; y explora los factores determinantes para la opción chilena, como el proyecto higienista estatal, la influencia de élites europeizadas y la colonialidad del saber que priorizó el conocimiento europeo.

Se concluye que estas elecciones fundacionales divergentes generaron trayectorias profesionales profundamente diferenciadas: una plural y vinculada a la reforma social en Estados Unidos, versus otra técnica, estatalizada y orientada al control social en Chile. Estas diferencias tuvieron implicancias duraderas en la identidad profesional, la autonomía disciplinar y el potencial emancipador del Trabajo Social latinoamericano, legados y tensiones que continúan siendo objeto de debate crítico y reflexión en la disciplina regional.

Introduction

The history of social work as a profession is characterised by a remarkable diversity of origins, influences, and trajectories that vary according to national contexts. In Latin America, and particularly in Chile, the founding in 1925 of the first School of Social Service in Santiago marked the beginning of professional institutionalisation in the region and reflected an early influence of European models, especially the Belgian one (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015). By that same year, the United States had already consolidated a broad network of schools for professional training in social work, which had emerged since the late nineteenth century and were characterised by the diversity of their approaches and traditions (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

In view of this early and significant divergence, this paper seeks to address the following central questions: What were the sociopolitical, cultural, and institutional factors that determined Chile's orientation towards European models—specifically the Belgian one—to the detriment of the advances and plurality of approaches already present in the United States during the founding of the first School of social work in Latin America in 1925? And, complementarily, which contextual elements—economic, political, social, and academic—explain the marked difference in the degree of

institutionalisation and development of social work as a professional and academic discipline between the United States and Chile by that same year, as evidenced by the existence of multiple consolidated schools in North America, in contrast to the incipient and singular foundation within the Chilean and Latin American context?

Consequently, and in order to elucidate these questions, this article aims to compare these two foundational processes. To that end, it brings into dialogue the divergent paths taken by both experiences regarding their sources of legitimation, the pedagogical models adopted, and the intervention approaches prioritised, analysing how these early choices shaped differentiated trajectories in the professionalisation of social work in both contexts.

The Plural Birth of American Social Work

The birth of American social work was far more diverse than traditional histories tend to recognise. Parallel to the Charity Organization Societies (COS) and the Settlement Houses— and often as a response to their racial exclusion—there emerged a robust African American tradition of social welfare. As historian Iris Carlton-LaNey (1994) argues, the contribution of this strand has been historically rendered invisible and should not be regarded as secondary, but rather as a major movement with its own philosophy, grounded in mutual aid and collective resistance rather than the pathologisation of poverty.

Organisations such as the National Urban League (NUL), founded in 1910 to support African American migrants from the Great Migration in finding employment and housing and adapting to urban life in northern cities, functioned as social welfare agencies with an impact comparable to that of mainstream institutions. Likewise, the activism of pioneering figures such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931) against systemic injustice represents a form of macro-level social work that integrated the struggle for civil rights as an inseparable component of social assistance (Carlton-LaNey, 1994).

All these pioneering strands began to consolidate as a professional field in the late nineteenth century in the United States, in a process deeply intertwined with the structural transformations of industrial capitalism, accelerated urban growth, and the massive arrival of European migrants, especially between 1880 and 1920 (Carlton-LaNey, 2013). Between 1860 and 1920, the urban population of the United States grew almost ninefold, from five million to forty-five million inhabitants. New York, which had 515,547 residents in 1850, reached 5,620,048 in 1920, while Chicago reached 2,701,705 that same year (Gibson, 1998). Mass immigration drove this growth: of the ninety-two

million inhabitants in 1914, twenty-one million were immigrants who had arrived since 1880, and in the twelve largest cities, 60 per cent of the population and industrial workforce were first- or second-generation migrants (Jansson, 2019). This demographic scale and the concentration of urban problems —overcrowding, child labour, cholera epidemics, and school absenteeism—created a sustained demand for training institutions and specialised personnel, providing the ideal setting for the Progressive reformism that propelled housing and child labour laws (Jansson 2019, pp. 159, 188).

It was within this fertile context that two formative currents fundamental to social work emerged: the COS and the Settlement House movement (Addams, 1910). The former, founded in England in the mid-nineteenth century and later adopted in major cities such as New York and Baltimore, promoted a model of individual casework inspired by the Victorian ideal of "self-help". Their practice emphasised moral discipline, systematic social investigation, and administrative efficiency (Richmond, 1917; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Mary Richmond, one of their main exponents, published her influential *Social Diagnosis* in 1917, laying the foundations for the methodology of social diagnosis as the core of professional work with individuals and as the cornerstone of clinical social work (Richmond, 1917).

Institutional reports from the COS also reveal their broader reach, reflecting an orientation towards the structural transformation of living conditions. Emblematic examples include the Tenement House Committee, created in 1898, whose systematic research and legislative advocacy directly led to the approval of the 1901 Tenement House Act in New York—a milestone in improving housing conditions. Similarly, the Committee on the Prevention of Tuberculosis, founded in 1902, conceived of disease as a social phenomenon, integrating prevention, education, and care. In the economic field, the establishment of the Provident Loan Society stood out as a means to combat usury by offering fair loans. After twenty-five years, the organisation reaffirmed its policy of emphasising "the elimination or minimisation of the causes of poverty", consolidating its role as a key actor in the critical movements of the time (Brandt, 1907).

The Settlement movement, on the other hand—with figures such as Jane Addams and her Hull House in Chicago—introduced an alternative paradigm centred on community, shared living, and social justice (Addams, 1910). Instead of studying poverty from the outside, social workers lived within working-class neighbourhoods, facilitating community organisation, literacy, civic education, and the exposure of abusive labour conditions. This approach gradually incorporated a feminist, pacifist, and anti-racist outlook that was ahead of its time (Wright et al., 2021).

The consolidation of social work as a profession in the United States relied on several dynamics. On the one hand, the massive incorporation of middle-class women with university education (Reisch & Andrews, 2002) and a professionalising logic articulated by Charity Organisation Society leaders such as Mary Richmond sought to distinguish social work from amateur charity and ecclesiastical welfare (Richmond, 1917; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). On the other hand, the philanthropic funding of the Russell Sage Foundation—the main disciplinary patron, covering salaries, scholarships, and research centres in institutions such as Chicago, Columbia, and Simmons College—was crucial, while foundations such as Carnegie and Rockefeller complemented this support with postgraduate scholarships and studies on poverty (Popple, 2018).

Institutionally, a decisive step in consolidating a training network was the early self-organisation of the schools themselves. In 1919, existing institutions founded the Association for the Training of Social and Public Service Social Workers (ATSPSSW), aimed at raising teaching standards, defining national curricula, and distinguishing professional education from internal agency programmes. In 1927, the organisation adopted the name American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW) and established the postgraduate degree as the minimum requirement for member programmes, reinforcing the professionalisation and accreditation processes of the schools (Popple, 2018).

Schools of social work were affiliated with universities such as Columbia, Simmons College, the University of Chicago, Western Reserve, and the Catholic University of America (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Their pedagogical model combined theory, social research, ethical formation, and supervised practice, working in conjunction with charity agencies, hospitals, juvenile courts, and public health departments (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015). This evolution was marked by an ongoing debate between technical approaches—influenced by positivism and social medicine—and political or emancipatory perspectives linked to social movements (Richmond, 1917; Wright et al., 2021).

Chile's Choice of the European Model: Context, Ideology, and Strategy

Chile's adoption of the Belgian model was neither a fortuitous nor a merely technical decision; it was the result of structural, ideological, and geopolitical factors specific to the first third of the twentieth century (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; González Moya, 2017). Understanding this choice requires situating it within a network of power relations, the circulation of knowledge, and strategies for governing the social sphere that

characterised the interwar period (Pereyra, 2008; Salamé & Quiroz, 2015). Five key aspects can be identified.

First, during the 1920s, Europe's cultural diplomacy deployed a *soft power* strategy which, according to Nye (1990), involves the use of cultural and academic attraction to influence without coercion, centred on the creation of high-profile scientific spaces. For example, the Institut Franco-Brésilien de Haute Culture offered scholarships and advanced courses in Paris for Latin American professionals, while binational medical conferences brought together epidemiologists, hygienists, and public health authorities to share health protocols. By appealing to professional elites through the prestige of their programmes and the perceived quality of their methods, European nations not only disseminated models of public health and research organisation but also built networks of collaboration that consolidated the Old Continent's position as a scientific and educational reference point in Latin America (Romero Sá & Viana, 2010).

Thus, while Europe expanded its influential cultural diplomacy, the projection of the United States in the region remained comparatively weak and belated. It only became institutionalised at an inter-American level with the Good Neighbor Policy, and its first formal agency in this field, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, was established as late as 1940 (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.). This vacuum of North American influence left the way open for the Chilean elite—deeply Eurocentric—to look exclusively to the Old Continent as the source of legitimate knowledge.

This pronounced Eurocentrism reflected a deeper phenomenon: what Aníbal Quijano (2014) calls the "coloniality of power", a concept describing how, after the end of formal colonialism, a structure of domination persisted based on a racial and epistemic hierarchy that positioned European knowledge as the only valid and superior one. This epistemic coloniality not only repressed local forms of knowledge but also created the conditions for what Gianinna Muñoz Arce (2015) terms *professional imperialism*: the uncritical transfer and adoption of professional models from the "North" to the "South".

The adoption of the Belgian model, therefore, was not merely a cultural preference but a manifestation of how this colonial logic operated: the assumed superiority of European knowledge (epistemic coloniality) led to the importation of its professional "instruction manual" (professional imperialism). Fields such as pedagogy and medical sciences were structured around French (and some Belgian) manuals and treatises listed in the Institute's catalogues (Conejeros Maldonado, 1999), while North American experience and local knowledge were considered inferior or imitative (Muñoz Arce,

2015). This Eurocentric pattern was not unique to Chile. In Argentina, the first School of Social Service—opened in Buenos Aires in 1930—reflected the strong imprint of the French model in its disciplinary origins (Esquivel, 2013). Brazil inaugurated its first *Escola de Serviço Social* in 1936 at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, inspired by the Franco-Belgian and strongly Catholic tradition (Cabral, 2017).

Second, during the early decades of the twentieth century, Chile experienced intense political, economic, and social turmoil that deeply strained the country. The nitrate boom generated vast revenues, but much of this wealth was repatriated or remained concentrated in central power, without translating into substantial improvements in local health infrastructure (Bastías Saavedra, 2015). At the same time, mass migration from rural areas to the cities—fueled by industrialisation and mining expansion—overwhelmed sanitation systems: overcrowding in *conventillos*[2] and precarious neighbourhoods facilitated outbreaks of yellow fever, dysentery, and tuberculosis, raising infant mortality rates and triggering workers' protests in Santiago, Valparaíso, and Antofagasta (Parada-Ulloa et al., 2020). The parliamentary crisis of 1923, culminating in Arturo Alessandri's return to the presidency, prompted a more interventionist state in public health, with the creation of new health departments and the strengthening of the Junta de Beneficencia[3] to meet the growing demand for services (González Moya, 2017; Pereyra, 2008).

This context created the need to modernise health assistance; this shift combined epistemic Eurocentrism with a state-led hygienist project, within which social work was incorporated as the pedagogical and moralising arm of these policies, mediating between health authorities and the populations being intervened upon (González Moya, 2017). This disciplinary function aligned with a conservative vision of social order and the state's role in everyday life (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015).

Within this framework, a third key factor was that Chile lacked private foundations capable of supporting university schools for social assistants, unlike the North American landscape of secular philanthropies such as Russell Sage and Carnegie, which had driven the proliferation of social work schools (Popple, 2018). Funding in Chile fell to the Junta de Beneficencia—whose total budget by 1925 barely covered hospital expenses—and modest state subsidies (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; González Moya, 2017).

[2] Overcrowded collective housing units, common in Latin American cities from the late nineteenth century onward, typically inhabited by working-class families and characterised by shared courtyards and communal services.

[3] Refers to a charitable governing body historically responsible for the administration of welfare and health-related institutions, commonly translated as Board of Charity.

Furthermore, before the 1931 University Reform, Chile's higher education system was dominated by a few state universities, heavily focused on traditional professions and with limited autonomy to open new programmes and degrees (Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, n.d.).

Fourth, the influence of the Catholic Church in shaping the field of social work in Chile should not be underestimated. Unlike the United States, where the profession emerged in tension with religious organisations, in Chile the Church acted both as promoter and overseer of the first initiatives in modern social assistance (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; González Moya, 2017). The moralising orientation of the Belgian model—which viewed poverty as a medical and educational issue—harmonised with Catholic social doctrine, facilitating alliances between the state and religious actors in implementing these hygienist policies (González Moya, 2017; Parada-Ulloa et al., 2020).

Fifth, the Belgian model offered an operational and replicable institutional solution: to train social auxiliaries in schools attached to hospitals or health services, with an intensive and hierarchical curriculum (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015). At the time, the Chilean state was expanding its health and welfare responsibilities—creating health departments, sending inspectors to "insalubrious areas", and expanding public prevention programmes—but it still lacked the university infrastructure and permanent professional bodies needed to train social workers at degree level (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015). The resulting programme was concise, normative, and supervised, allowing hygienist policies to be extended rapidly into the homes of those in need while simultaneously enabling greater ideological control over trainees, aligning them with the political regime's values and the moral mandates of gender, class, and nation (González Moya, 2017).

Because it was not conceived as a "field of political struggle", early Chilean social work operated within a narrow margin for questioning the power structures that produced the very problems it sought to address, focusing on adapting individuals to the system rather than transforming the system itself. As a direct result of this configuration, its articulation with social, labour, and feminist movements was hindered, reinforcing a practice centred on targeted assistance (Muñoz Arce, 2015; González Moya, 2017).

By contrast, in the United States, alongside the casework approach, reformist and community-based traditions—such as the aforementioned Settlement Houses and Mutual Aid Societies—coexisted with more radical expressions (for instance, Florence Kelley and the Rank-and-File movement), which explored early connections

with labour, neighbourhood, and racial justice struggles in urban and multicultural contexts (Carlton-LaNey, 2013). These traditions found expression in the work of figures such as Jane Addams, who, from Hull House in Chicago, advanced a social praxis committed to labour rights, gender equity, and racial justice—long before these themes were institutionally recognised. Likewise, organisations such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) established links with African American social workers who challenged the discriminatory practices of the welfare system (Wright et al., 2021).

In sum, the adoption of the Belgian model responded to a convergence of contextual, political, economic, and cultural factors. It was not a mere transfer of knowledge but a strategic operation through which the Chilean state sought to modernise its welfare apparatus without altering the prevailing social order (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; Pereyra, 2008). This adoption of a technical and subordinated model had lasting consequences for the disciplinary identity and emancipatory potential of Chilean social work. The professional identity forged through "institutional obedience" and a pedagogical–moral function not only reflected subordination to medical and state authority but actively hindered the development of critical awareness regarding the profession's own role in reproducing social inequalities (González Moya, 2017).

The Belgian Model and the Founding of Social Work in Chile

Social work in Belgium between 1920 and 1922 was a field in full effervescence, marked by ideological fragmentation. During that period, at least five schools with diverse origins were founded: the École Centrale de Service Social, promoted by the state with a technical focus; the École Sociale Catholique Féminine; the École de Service Social d'Anvers (Antwerp), of liberal inspiration; the École Supérieure Ouvrière de Uccle–Bruxelles, created by the Parti Ouvrier Belge (POB) (Belgian Workers' Party) as a space for political and trade union education; and the École Supérieure Centrale pour Ouvriers Chrétiens of Heverlee–Louvain, linked to Christian Democracy. This rapid diversification reflected the pillars of post-war Belgian society, where Catholic orientation was predominant, accounting for 52% of professionals at the time (Zélis, 2004).

Faced with this diverse panorama, the Chilean mission led by Dr Alejandro del Río opted for the state and technical–sanitary strand, deciding to import the model of the École Centrale de Service Social of Brussels. This decision materialised on 4 May 1925 with the founding of the Escuela de Servicio Social de la Beneficencia Pública, promoted by del Río himself. The school's director, René Sand, proposed a

comprehensive vision of welfare linking health and socioeconomic conditions, which was considered innovative for the time (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; Parada-Ulloa et al., 2020).

The founding document, titled "La futura Escuela de Servicio Social de la Junta de Beneficencia de Santiago" (The future School of Social Work of the Santiago Board of Charity), already detailed the budget, the two-year duration of studies, and the appointment of Belgian nurse Jenny Bernier as its first director (Revista de Beneficencia Pública, 1924, in Salamé & Quiroz, 2015, p. 406). Later, the *Reglamento del Servicio Social en los Hospitales de Santiago* (Regulations on Social Work in the Hospitals of Santiago) incorporated "social surveys" as a regulatory obligation (Revista Servicio Social, 1927, in González Moya, 2017, p. 350), and the *Reglamento Interno de la Escuela Dr. Alejandro del Río* (Internal Regulations of the Dr Alejandro del Río School) elevated these principles to university level (Consejo de Salud, 1957, in González Moya, 2017, p. 352). Taken together, these sources confirm that the sanitary imprint and medical tutelage were not collateral effects but part of an institutional design "to train visitors capable of ensuring the continuity of medical treatment in the home" (Congreso de Beneficencia Pública, 1922, in González Moya, 2017, pp. 347–348).

The drive to "technify charity" predated the 1925 school's opening: as early as 1921, Dr Alejandro del Río had proposed, in his draft regulations for the hospitals of the Junta de Beneficencia, the creation of a General Department of Social Action composed of "a woman of special character and intelligence" to "follow the patient beyond the hospital premises" (Junta de Beneficencia, 1921, in Salamé & Quiroz, 2015, p. 403).

Unlike the pragmatic pluralism of the American schools, the Belgian model relied on a technical and hierarchical training system that positioned professionals as intermediaries of expert (medical, hygienist) knowledge in relation to service users—particularly women, children, and vulnerable communities (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; González Moya, 2017). Although this approach may have limited spaces for horizontal dialogue, it provided the *visitadoras* (social visitors) with clear tools for preventive education aligned with the medical standards of the time. Within this framework, professionals received a solid grounding in hygiene norms, family values, and work-discipline practices, enabling them to intervene authoritatively in contexts of acute need—albeit at the cost of pronounced asymmetry in their relationships with those they served (González Moya, 2017).

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view this role as merely passive or reproductive. Within the rigid hygienist institutional framework, important reflective spaces emerged:

a significant number of *visitadoras sociales* used their positions to document extreme living conditions and report epidemic outbreaks in *conventillos*, presenting reports to health committees that informed neighbourhood demands for housing improvements (Parada-Ulloa et al., 2020; González Moya, 2017). Furthermore, the simultaneous circulation of Mary Richmond's casework manuals and training missions inspired by that model reveal an early interest in more person-centred and less normative approaches (Richmond, 1917; Carlton-LaNey, 2013). It was, therefore, not a stage of critical passivity but a process marked by tension, in which state hygienist discipline coexisted with early aspirations for social transformation and the influence of other professional models.

Foundational Models in Contrast: Chile and the United States

The rapid rural exodus, driven by industrialisation in the United States and by nitrate exploitation in Chile, led to chaotic urban growth and the collapse of sanitation systems. In the United States, the expansion of coal mining and manufacturing during the 1920s attracted millions of workers to cities such as Pittsburgh and Chicago, where overcrowding, cholera, and tuberculosis spread easily (Jansson, 2019; Popple, 2018). Similarly, in Chile, the nitrate boom concentrated workers in ports and surrounding areas, generating outbreaks of yellow fever and dysentery in Valparaíso and Antofagasta due to insufficient sanitary infrastructure (Parada-Ulloa et al., 2020). In both countries, these extreme conditions stimulated the demand for professionals dedicated to prevention and the support of vulnerable families.

The wealth derived from coal in the United States and from nitrate in Chile had opposite impacts on the development of the profession. Under President Calvin Coolidge (1923–1929), the federal state favoured a *laissez-faire* model that delegated much of social assistance to local agencies and philanthropic entities, thereby fostering a more autonomous form of social work. The economic power of foundations such as Russell Sage and Carnegie—fuelled by surpluses from mining and industry—provided strong philanthropic support for schools of social work in the United States, consolidating the academic infrastructure of professional education (Popple, 2018). The Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work (1919), renamed AASSW in 1927, consolidated eighteen founding schools and, by 1928, Walker identified thirty-five institutions across the United States and Canada (Brown, 1942; Walker, 1928, in Brown, 1942). The professionalisation of social work was based on a plural model that combined the individual diagnosis of the Charity Organization Societies with the

community action of the Settlement Houses, resulting in a dynamic field of intervention open to labour, feminist, and racial justice movements (Carlton-LaNey, 2013; Wright et al., 2021).

In contrast, although the nitrate boom generated enormous revenues for British companies and the Chilean state, almost all of those resources were repatriated or centrally managed, leaving the Escuela de Servicio Social dependent on public funding and the Junta de Beneficencia, with no real space for local secular patronage (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015). The parliamentary crisis of 1923 and Arturo Alessandri's return to power consolidated an interventionist state, which made the emerging field of social work dependent on the public health policies of the time, subordinating social knowledge to state and religious agendas (González Moya, 2017; Pereyra, 2008). The first—and only—school, founded in 1925, remained tied to the Junta de Beneficencia until it became a university programme after the 1931 Reform, without achieving the widespread proliferation of programmes that characterised the North (Salamé & Quiroz, 2015; González Moya, 2017).

The adoption of the Belgian model reflected the global hierarchies of knowledge in which European expertise was perceived by elites as more legitimate, thereby subordinating both North American experiences and local knowledge during the foundational process of the profession. Nevertheless, this initial dichotomy does not tell the whole story. The concept of cultural hybridity helps explain that, as social work in Latin America became established, it evolved far beyond a mere transplantation of foreign models and instead came to be characterised as a process of selective appropriation and re-signification of external influences (García Canclini, 1990).

From the early decades of the twentieth century, elements of European tradition intertwined with North American contributions. However, these were reworked within contexts shaped by colonial dependencies, consolidating states, and distinctive community traditions (Iamamoto, 1998; Netto, 2011). In later decades, the Cold War and authoritarian regimes further conditioned professional practice, giving it a political–ideological dimension that transcended the simple transfer of techniques.

Consequently, Latin American social work took shape as a hybrid and distinctive field, in tension with metropolitan centres and oriented towards an autonomous political–professional project. To this day, these legacies continue to provoke debate over the profession's practice and identity.

Conclusions

The comparative trajectory of social work in Chile and the United States up to 1925 reveals that the origins of this profession do not correspond to a single universal model but are deeply contextual. These structural differences were reflected in training models, relationships with other disciplines, the roles assigned to social workers, and the degree to which they could—or could not—exercise a transformative function within society. Thus, the predominantly technical–sanitary and social-control framework that shaped Chile's foundations laid the basis for a professional path in which explicit political commitment faced greater resistance to becoming hegemonic, in contrast to certain traditions more closely tied to social reform and political advocacy which, despite their contradictions, found an earlier foothold in the diversified North American landscape. Yet both models shared a common response to the new social challenges of the twentieth century: the need to institutionalise practices of aid and assistance that were scientifically grounded, ethically informed, and adapted to the demands of modernity.

Understanding these historical differences is key to denaturalising our own forms of intervention and critically revisiting our formative legacies. In their study, Drake & Hodge (2022, p. 363) locate the profession of social work at a "turning point" between two major epistemological traditions. On one side, the *empirical highway* upholds a positivist approach based on the production of measurable evidence and the scientific evaluation of interventions; on the other, the *postmodern/critical off-ramp* promotes critical theories, reflexivity, and the questioning of power structures.

This comparative exploration invites the hypothesis that the pragmatic–scientific roots of Anglo-Saxon training may explain its affinity with the *empirical highway*, while the Latin American decolonial experience, emerging after the reconceptualisation phase, nourishes the *postmodern/critical off-ramp* (Drake & Hodge, 2022). Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that both currents coexist and interact within each context—varying only in emphasis and influence—and that, as Saavedra (2010), Mignolo (2011), and Hermida & Meschini (2020) show, the fundamental challenge lies in the ability to integrate empirical rigour with an inescapable emancipatory commitment. Acknowledging these differentiated genealogies, with their respective strengths and tensions, not only strengthens a more symmetrical and mutually enriching North–South dialogue but is also essential for building a global social work that is truly reflexive, situated, and ethical–political.

As we mark one hundred years of social work in Latin America and over one hundred and twenty in the United States, a historic opportunity arises to build bridges between our professional traditions, recognising that the social work of the Americas (South–North) is distinct yet deeply interconnected. In this shared centenary, the call is not merely to look back and understand ourselves through the past, but also to seize the possibility of collectively constructing a fairer future, grounded in a critical theory of social work unafraid to question power or the very institutions that have shaped us. As underscored by critiques of professional imperialism (Muñoz Arce, 2015) and by Latin American decolonial perspectives (Hermida & Meschini, 2020), the future of the profession demands a conscious, situated, and politically committed practice alongside historically excluded sectors—and for this, unity and active collaboration are indispensable.

This will only be possible if our schools of social work assume an active role as spaces of ethical formation, critical research, and articulation with social movements. Likewise, professional associations bear the responsibility of promoting transnational dialogue that transcends fragmentation, fosters the circulation of contextualised knowledge, and strengthens South–South and North–South networks of collaboration and learning. After a century of institutional history in our region, the moment has come to affirm that social work cannot confine itself to managing the symptoms of inequality: it must contribute to dismantling its causes. And this challenge, given its magnitude and complexity, cannot be met in isolation. From our schools, from our professional organisations, and through a deep collective commitment, it is time to envision—together—a continental and global social work.

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ARTICLE

The Other Recabarren: The Political and Feminist Impact of Berta Recabarren on the Origins of Chilean Social Work

La otra Recabarren: la incidencia política y feminista de Berta Recabarren en los orígenes del Trabajo Social chileno

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Abstract

This article analyses the trajectory of Berta Recabarren Serrano (1878–1932), a pioneer of Social Work in Chile and a key figure in the articulation between feminism, politics, and popular sectors in the early decades of the twentieth century. Drawing on historical and biographical sources, it examines her work as a *visitadora social* (early term in Chile for social worker) at the Compañía Minera e Industrial de Lota, where her work transcended the assistentialism characteristic

Keywords:
social work; feminism; women's political rights

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of industrial paternalism, becoming a space of political and cultural mediation with working-class communities.

The text also addresses her activism in the Partido Cívico Femenino (1922) and her participation in the Asamblea Constituyente de Asalariados e Intelectuales (1925), where she firmly defended women's suffrage in the face of a deeply patriarchal system. Far from being overshadowed by her connection to her brother, Luis Emilio Recabarren, her trajectory reveals a political and feminist commitment that positioned her as a protagonist of the social struggles of her time.

In this sense, the article challenges readings that have minimised her agency, showing how her experience invites a rethinking of the origins of Social Work in Chile while, at the same time, enriching the country's political and feminist history.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la trayectoria de Berta Recabarren Serrano (1878-1932), pionera del Trabajo Social en Chile y figura clave en la articulación entre feminismo, política y mundo popular en las primeras décadas del siglo XX. A partir del análisis de fuentes históricas y biográficas, se examina su labor como visitadora social en la Compañía Minera e Industrial de Lota, donde su práctica trascendió el asistencialismo propio del paternalismo industrial, configurándose como un espacio de mediación política y cultural con el mundo popular.

El texto aborda también su militancia en el Partido Cívico Femenino (1922) y su participación en la Asamblea Constituyente de Asalariados e Intelectuales de 1925, donde defendió con firmeza el derecho al voto femenino frente a un sistema profundamente patriarcal. Su trayectoria, lejos de quedar opacada por el vínculo con su hermano, Luis Emilio Recabarren, evidencia un compromiso político y feminista que la posiciona como protagonista de las luchas sociales de su tiempo.

En este sentido, el artículo tensiona las lecturas que han minimizado su agencia, mostrando cómo su experiencia permite repensar los orígenes del Trabajo Social en Chile y, al mismo tiempo, enriquecer la historia política y feminista del país.

Palabras clave:
Trabajo Social; feminismo; derechos políticos femeninos

Introduction

As a result of the solid and progressive growth of research that highlights women's political participation and their significance in the country's social processes, it is now possible to delve deeper into historical trajectories that have long remained at the margins of hegemonic narratives. Such is the case of María Berta Recabarren Serrano (1878–1932), referred to in the title of this article as "the other Recabarren." The reference is not only a nod to her kinship with her brother, Luis Emilio Recabarren, but also a counterpoint: alongside the traditional image of a revolutionary, Berta was unique in her own way—through social work—crossing thresholds and breaking moulds in a context where such actions were rarely recognised as political. We argue that her trajectory reveals a "B-side" that distances her from the image of an assistentialist social worker: she was a professional and activist who, even while operating within paternalistic structures, developed practices and discourses that challenged dominant narratives about women and social work in Chile.

Although she has occasionally been mentioned for her pioneering role as one of Chile's first social workers, her figure has not been explored in all its complexity. A key precedent for this study is María Angélica Illanes's analysis in *El cuerpo y la sangre de la política* (2007), which recovers Recabarren's experience as a *visitadora social* at the Compañía Minera e Industrial de Lota. Illanes highlights that her practice went beyond assistentialism, positioning itself within a project of political and cultural mediation with the working class. It is striking that only in historiographical studies about women, or those grounded in gender theory—particularly in History and Social Work—has the agency and rebellious, even revolutionary, character of the first social workers, in Chile and beyond, been clearly recognised.

This article seeks to extend that line of research by incorporating new dimensions and critical perspectives on the life and thought of Berta Recabarren, one of Chile's first social workers. Our aim is to challenge the narrative—often promoted by History, and especially Social History—that proposes that early social work was a neutral or apolitical practice, or worse, one strongly assistentialist and aligned with the country's paternalistic interests. The case of Berta Recabarren is crucial to revealing this anticipation, for she embodied, from early on, a form of social work deeply interwoven with workers' struggles and gender demands, questioning the notion that the politicisation of the profession began only in the 1960s.

While the history of social work often recognises practitioners as agents of change only from the 1960s onwards—linked to the so-called "Reconceptualisation" of

Social Work, with its emphasis on social justice, popular education, and sociopolitical transformation—the reality is that long before that, there were social workers deeply committed to their practice through forward-thinking sociopolitical frameworks. This reconceptualisation drew upon diverse social movements: workers', community, feminist, and those of racialised and disabled people, among others.

Given the historical feminisation of social work and its focus on the everyday needs of the most vulnerable sectors, it becomes essential to question how gender and class prejudices—together with a certain intellectual paternalism that deems feminised fields of knowledge as minor or of low impact—have influenced the way this profession has been historicised. These biases have not only limited our understanding of Berta Recabarren's trajectory but have also distorted and impoverished Chile's social and political history. Recovering her figure thus allows us to dismantle those prejudices and demonstrate that social workers were not merely executors of welfare policies but also political actors capable of contesting meanings within the field of social justice.

Drawing on the analysis of press sources, institutional documents, and biographies of Luis Emilio Recabarren—read *against the grain*—this article reinterprets the trajectory of Berta Recabarren, positioning her as an active figure in the political debates and processes of her time. We argue that her work in social work was neither neutral nor merely technical but rather part of a broader political project, articulated through her activism, transformative ideals, and participation in spaces such as the Partido Cívico Femenino and the Asamblea de Asalariados e Intelectuales during the 1925 constitutional process.

In light of this, the article is organised into six sections: first, it examines Berta Recabarren's family and social environment; then, her early political militancy and participation in the Partido Cívico Femenino (Women's Civic Party) and the 1925 Constituent Assembly; next, her contribution to the early development of social work in Chile; followed by her work as the first *visitadora social* in Lota, where she promoted community activism aimed at improving living conditions and fostering social organisation. Throughout this exploration, we encounter a woman who, while acknowledging the constraints of her time, championed education, participation, and the organisation of working-class women—convinced that through these paths, they could aspire to a more dignified life and a different future for themselves and their children.

Berta Recabarren's Private Life

Even less is known about Berta Recabarren's early years than about those of her renowned brother, Luis Emilio. She was born in 1878 in the city of Valparaíso, the daughter of Juana Rosa Serrano and José Agustín Recabarren, and was the second of four children—after Luis Emilio and before her sisters Mercedes and Clara. According to researcher Fanny Simon (2024), her parents belonged to a "lower middle class" of merchants, described as "decent people" and "good Catholics," who aspired to educate their children in religious schools so that they would later form families according to traditional standards (p. 77).

Although no direct sources exist regarding Berta's primary or secondary education, it is reasonable to assume that she studied at an establishment similar to her brother's, who attended the Santo Tomás de Aquino School (Jobet et al., 1971). This background, together with the entry requirement for the School of Social Service—which demanded completion of at least the third year of secondary education[2]—suggests that she received a sufficient schooling to pursue professional studies.

Historian Julio Pinto (2013), drawing on data provided by Simon (2024, p. 94), notes that although the family did not live in extreme poverty, their financial situation deteriorated after their father abandoned them. As a result, Luis Emilio entered the labour market at an early age, working as a printer's apprentice from the age of eleven.

[2] Maricela González describes these pioneers as a "very small elite of educated women" (2022, p. 187). According to the 1930 census, only ninety-nine social visitors held a professional degree, among them Berta Recabarren. The journal *Servicio Social* specifies that, in the admission form for the first cohort, applicants were required to have completed at least the third year of secondary studies, demonstrate knowledge of foreign languages, and provide the names of "known and respectable" persons who could "certify their Vita e Mores."

IMAGE 1: Berta Recabarren (to the right in the photo) with Luis Emilio Recabarren and their sisters Mercedes and Clara.

Source: Memoria Chilena, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile (1920).

Our research has established that Berta Recabarren married Domingo Abadie Lamon on 24 October 1915, when she was approximately thirty-seven years old—an uncommon age for marriage at the time. Abadie, of French origin and son of Antonio Abadie and Margarita Lamon, had been widowed since 1904 and had a son, Alberto, born in 1896. At the time of their marriage—held in Berta's home—he was ten years her senior. The witnesses were Hilario Ben Azul, Abadie's brother-in-law from his first marriage, and José Joaquín del Canto, Berta's brother-in-law, married to her sister Mercedes. Del Canto was also linked to Luis Emilio Recabarren through his previous marriage to Guadalupe del Canto, the mother of the leader's two children.[3] Unfortunately, no further information exists about Berta and her husband's married life, except that they had no children.

[3] Luis Recabarren del Canto (1896–1964) was born on 13 May 1896 in Santiago, two months after the marriage of Luis Emilio Recabarren and Guadalupe del Canto. In 1897, his brother Raúl was born but died in 1899. Luis Emilio and Guadalupe remained married until around 1908, the year he was imprisoned. In 1909, he began his relationship with Teresa Flores, a prominent activist and organiser of workers and women in the mining region, co-founder of the Socialist Workers' Party in Iquique (1912), the Centro Belén de Sárraga (1913), and leader of the Chilean Workers' Federation (FOCH).

There is no detailed information about Berta Recabarren's academic trajectory or her activities between her birth in 1878 and her participation in the founding of the Partido Cívico Femenino in 1922, apart from the record of her marriage in 1915. It is unknown where she attended school or whether she studied in Valparaíso or Santiago. However, according to historian María Angélica Illanes, Berta was part of the first generation of professional social assistants to graduate from the Escuela de Servicio Social de la Beneficencia, founded in 1925 by Dr Alejandro del Río (2007, p. 352). This indicates that she began her studies in the field at the age of forty-seven, already married and less than a year after the suicide of her brother in December 1924. That same year, she also took part in the Constituent Assembly of March 1925. She completed her studies in 1927, at around forty-nine years of age, and then moved with her husband to Lota, where she began working as a social worker—an experience discussed in later sections.

IMAGE 2: New tomb of Luis Emilio Recabarren and Luis Víctor Cruz (left); old tomb of Luis E. Recabarren with his sisters Berta, Clara, and Mercedes, his brother-in-law José Joaquín del Canto, his great-grandfather José Miguel Serrano, and Luis V. Cruz (right).

Source: Photographs by the authors, 25 May 2025, Cementerio General, Santiago.

Although the details of her life remain fragmentary, they allow us to glimpse a trajectory marked by her family background, economic hardship, and personal choices that were uncommon for her time. This life experience helps explain the foundations from which Berta Recabarren carved out her path in the professional and political

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spheres. She died on 5 September 1932, in Santiago, at the age of fifty-four, due to a cerebral haemorrhage. She was buried in a collective grave at the Cementerio General, together with her sisters Clara and Mercedes, her great-grandfather José Miguel Serrano, her brother-in-law Joaquín del Canto, her brother Luis Emilio Recabarren, and Luis Víctor Cruz.[4]

Berta Recabarren and Political Life

Berta Recabarren Serrano's political commitment became publicly visible several years before her professional involvement in social work, and it is an essential element for understanding her overall trajectory. Addressing this earlier stage not only allows us to situate her within the networks and debates that shaped her era but also to recognise how her political vision permeated her later professional practice. To do so, it is necessary to return to 1922, a key year in Chilean political history marked by the emergence of parties formed by historically excluded sectors. Just a few months after the founding of the Communist Party of Chile (January 1922), the Partido Cívico Femenino (PCF) was established—a feminist organisation operating within a legal framework profoundly unequal in comparison with male-led groups. It was within this space that Berta began her public political activity, joining a platform that sought to make women's demands visible and to defend their rights.

The creation of the PCF was a bold act, especially in a context where women still lacked the right to vote. Within this space of resistance, Berta Recabarren began her public political engagement, joining a platform that aimed to project women's demands into the political sphere. Although there are no precise records of her early participation in the PCF, it is known that she became a member of its executive board. In 1924, she was elected president of the party, reflecting the recognition and trust she had earned among its members. This early experience of organisation and rights advocacy not only established her as a leader but also helps reveal how her militancy may have shaped her understanding of social work as a form of political action and social transformation.

The Partido Cívico Femenino became the first exclusively female political organisation in Chile. Founded by prominent women such as Estela La Rivera de Sanhueza, Elvira de

[4] Luis Víctor Cruz Steghmanns was a journalist and close collaborator of Luis Emilio Recabarren for decades. Both entered Congress as the first communist deputies in 1921 and carried out numerous tours across the country. Cruz is the only "non-family" member buried in this collective tomb. In 2022, when the Communist Party transferred Recabarren's remains to a new gravestone, Cruz's remains were also moved—an act that reflects the closeness and significance of their political and personal relationship. Little has been written about this relationship, and it surely deserves much more research in the future.

Vergara, Graciela Mandujano, and Berta Recabarren herself, it declared itself secular and independent of religious or partisan influences. Its cross-class structure was inspired by similar experiences in Spain, Uruguay, and Argentina, marking a milestone in women's political participation in the country (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional, 2010).

In its programme, the PCF defended women's political and civil rights, the protection of childhood, and support for motherhood (Montero, 2015). In education, it promoted coeducation and women's access to professional training, also advocating for their economic independence. Julieta Kirkwood (1986) emphasised that by articulating legal and political demands with those specific to women—such as the denunciation of sexual violence, double standards, and the feminisation of precarious labour—the PCF paved the way for contemporary feminism, though without fully breaking from a bourgeois and moralistic ideal of the home.

At the international level, the party established ties with the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and the Pan-American Association for the Advancement of Women, strengthening its suffragist discourse through dialogue with global movements (Montero et al., 2023). It also maintained a close relationship with Gabriela Mistral, participating in joint activities during her visits to Chile (Castillo, 2014).

IMAGE 3: Berta Recabarren (second from the left in the back row) with members of the Partido Cívico Femenino.

Source: Memoria Chilena, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile (n.d.).

As part of its propaganda strategy, the PCF founded the *Revista Femenina*, a key publication for disseminating its egalitarian and suffragist ideals (Agliatti and Montero, 2002). Edited by educated women from the elite and middle classes, it remained active until the Ibáñez dictatorship in 1927 (Kirkwood, 1986; Montero, 2013). In the 1930s,

the publication was revived under the title *Acción Femenina*, with a stronger focus on women's social action and their active role in public life (Guerín de Elgueta, 1928; Montero, 2015).

Finally, Alejandra Castillo highlights that the PCF positioned itself not only as a feminist political actor but also as a party that held a clear stance on national politics. This characteristic explains its connection to the Alessandri movement, evident in its press and in events held in his honour (Castillo, 2006; 2014). This relationship is significant when considering the political context of 1924 and 1925—marked by the coup d'état and Arturo Alessandri's departure from the presidency—two events that reshaped the landscape in which the party sought to advance its agenda.

Berta Recabarren, the Partido Cívico Femenino and the Constituent Assembly of Workers and Intellectuals

The period from 1924 to 1925 marked a turning point in Berta Recabarren's life. Within a few months, she faced a political crisis caused by the military coup of September, the painful loss of her brother Luis Emilio in December (Simon, 2024, p. 213), and, almost immediately afterwards, the challenge of returning to the public sphere. In March she took part in the Constituent Assembly of Workers and Intellectuals, where she defended women's suffrage against strong opposition. At the same time, she began her training as a *visitadora social*. From the outset, activism and study intertwined, shaping her perspective as a social worker committed to justice and equality.

IMAGE 4: Berta Recabarren (left), Clara Recabarren (right) and nieces of Luis Emilio Recabarren in front of the railway workers' headquarters on Bascuñán Street, moments before the start of the funeral procession, 21 December 1924.

Source: *Los funerales de Recabarren*, Carlos Pellegrín (1924).

Despite the adverse political climate, activism continued. In early 1925, left-wing and progressive sectors promoted the creation of the Constituent Assembly of Workers and Intellectuals, a self-convened space seeking a democratic solution to the crisis. Ignacio Ayala (2020) notes that the Assembly, inaugurated on 8 March at the Municipal Theatre of Santiago, was conceived as an attempt to establish principles of justice and social equality in the face of elite power, and was distinctive for bringing together workers, employees, and students in an event "unique in the history of our country" (p. 2).

For members of the Partido Cívico Femenino, the Assembly was a crucial platform for making their demands visible at a time when institutional routes remained closed to women. During the sessions, Berta Recabarren de Abadie stood out for her persistent defence of women's suffrage, consolidating herself as a leading voice in the struggle for political and civil rights. Among the other participants were Amanda Labarca, Bertina Pérez, Eduvigis del Villar, Elena Caffarena, Emilia Fuhrman, Ernestina Pérez, Graciela Mandujano, Humilde Figueroa, María Isabel Díaz, Laura Jorquera, María Rojas, María Teresa Urbina, Susana Baeza, Humbertina Garretón, Ester Amigo, Rebeca Vicuña, Hortensia Diez, and Flora Heredia.

On 10 March, during a heated debate on women's suffrage, Berta Recabarren, Ernestina Pérez, and María Isabel Díaz confronted those who denied women's political capacity. *Las Últimas Noticias* (10 March 1925) highlighted Recabarren's intervention, noting that she maintained a firm stance despite the opposition of congressmen such as Víctor Arauco, who rejected "considering women as having equal political and civil capacity to men" (p. 7). These tensions did not prevent the suffragists from advancing their demands. The following morning, the newspaper *La Nación* (11 March 1925) reinforced this image by describing Recabarren and the other women as persistent figures in articulating suffragist demands (p. 4). Thanks to this determination, the Assembly approved the proposal recognising political and civil rights for women.

Berta was also appointed to the Reporting Committee, composed of Amanda Labarca, Ernestina Pérez, and Graciela Mandujano, along with other congress members. *Justicia* (10 March 1925) reported that this committee played a key role in systematising the proposals (front page). However, as Sergio Grez (2016) observes, the official constituent process led by Arturo Alessandri ultimately nullified the impact of this popular assembly, postponing—though only temporarily—the aspirations to secure women's civil and political rights.

Nevertheless, various women's organisations decided to continue the struggle. On 29 March, at a large meeting held at the Teatro Esmeralda, Berta Recabarren opened

the session calling for "opinions and wills to join the campaign just begun" and to "secure all women's rights, so strongly opposed by politicians, especially those who call themselves progressive" (*Justicia*, 31 March 1925, p. 6). She concluded by urging women to remain united to "make their rights respected and victorious," in what the newspaper described as "one of the most remarkable feminist gatherings in recent times."

That meeting led to the creation of the Frente Único Femenino, promoted by the Partido Cívico Femenino but open to women from other progressive organisations. Its goal was to "secure equality of rights between the sexes" (*Justicia*, 11 April 1925, p. 4). It was chaired by Berta Recabarren, Isabel Díaz, Francisca Robles, Lidia M. de Escobar, and María R. de Hidalgo. Although the initiative kept feminist demands alive, they were not incorporated into the new Constitution. The arrival of Carlos Ibáñez del Campo's dictatorship in 1927 curtailed political activity and again stifled feminist momentum. In this context of repression, some of Berta's peers, such as Isabel Díaz, were exiled by the regime (Lagos, 2020). Berta, meanwhile, left Santiago and moved to Lota—a shift that can be understood as a way to continue working for women and the working class in a setting where she felt more protected. Her involvement in these organisations nonetheless reveals the ideas that shaped her outlook: the conviction that women should have political rights, that education and professionalisation could be tools for social change, and that solidarity among women was a path toward achieving social justice.

The Early Development of Social Work in Chile and the Role of Women

Before continuing with the trajectory of Berta Recabarren, it is necessary to situate the emergence of social work in Chile and the factors that shaped its beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s. This process was closely tied to the so-called *Social Question*, characterised by rising urban poverty, rural-to-urban migration, and the strengthening of labour movements. The state's response took the form of hygienist policies and the creation of welfare institutions, among them the School of Social Service, founded in 1925 by the public-health physician Alejandro del Río (Castañeda and Salamé, 2015, p. 403). Conceived as a training centre for *visitadoras sociales*, its mission was to act as a bridge between the state and the working classes, especially in public hospitals and health matters. As González and Zárate (2018) note, paraphrasing Lucía Catlin (1919), it was about forming a "social worker" who diagnosed patients' living conditions and coordinated hospital care—reflecting the technical and disciplinary nature intended for this emerging profession (p. 377).

The School of Social Service, inaugurated on 4 May 1925, operated under the supervision of the Junta Nacional de Beneficencia (national welfare board) with the goal of training professionals able to intervene in health, poverty, and social assistance, following the European hygienist model. The curriculum included courses on prophylaxis and hygiene, law, political economy, child protection, nutrition and dietetics, care of the sick and injured, welfare legislation, and forensic medicine (Castañeda and Salamé, 2015). This structure not only consolidated a space for technical professionalisation but also reproduced the logic of positivism and hygienism, which linked poverty control with social order (González, 2023; Cortés, 2020). Following the success of the Santiago branch, new schools were established in Valparaíso, Concepción, La Serena, and Temuco. The Valparaíso school stood out for its strategic location and its response to issues of migration and urban poverty. Its graduates promoted the creation of further schools in Chile and across Latin America, contributing to the internationalisation of Chilean social work (Rubilar, 2025).

From its inception, social work in Chile was consolidated as a deeply feminised field in which *visitadoras sociales* were represented as altruistic, moralising figures linked to the ideals of charity and social assistance (González, 2017). This perception limited their professional recognition and reinforced a maternalist profile that downplayed their analytical and technical contributions, perpetuating gender stereotypes that associated them with traditional care roles (Álvarez, 2025). Instead of acknowledging their preparation to address complex social issues, they were interpreted as moral guardians, upholding a discourse of female domesticity and self-sacrifice (Rozas and Véliz, 2025).

It was within this context and at this school that Berta Recabarren Serrano trained. Three years after enrolling, she accepted a position at the Compañía Minera e Industrial de Lota. Although her precise motivations are unknown, her commitment to working-class sectors is evident: she was a co-founder of the Partido Cívico Femenino and a participant in a self-organised constitutional process, as well as the sister of Luis Emilio Recabarren. In many records her work in Lota appears signed as "Berta R. de Abadie" or "Berta Abadie," which has made it difficult to recognise her as the same person. This article seeks to correct that omission, highlighting how her work in Lota offers a broader understanding of the role she played in the early development of social work in Chile.

Berta R. de Abadie, the First *Visitadora* of Lota

In 2001, María Angélica Illanes published the article "Ella en Lota-Coronel: poder y domesticación. El primer servicio social industrial de América Latina" (She in Lota–

Coronel: Power and Domestication. The First Industrial Social Work Service in Latin America) in the journal *Mapocho*, analysing in detail the work of the *visitadora* Berta R. de Abadie in Lota. Her arrival there was not coincidental; it responded to a long history of strikes and workers' organisations in the coal-mining zone. As Consuelo Figueroa (2009) describes, two equally harsh worlds for human survival coexisted there: *la subterra*, referring to underground mining work, with its risks and hardships; and *la subsole*, life above ground, marked by precarious settlements and subsistence networks largely organised by women to sustain working-class families during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

> The lack of hygiene among the population was related, in part, to the lack of education of its inhabitants and, more significantly, to the absence of urban infrastructure that would allow them to maintain a cleaner environment, often forcing them to use public spaces. It should be noted that most workers' dwellings lacked sanitation facilities, leaving no alternative but to use shared spaces in the city. It was common to see many housewives, especially at night, empty buckets and basins of wastewater onto the streets (…) Dirt was part of everyday life. The black dust of coal was accentuated by the excrement and rubbish piles that filled every corner of the towns, aggravating epidemic diseases and the unsanitary conditions of families. (Figueroa, 2009, p. 62)

These appalling conditions led to the *Huelga Larga* ("Long Strike") of 1920, a landmark in Chile's labour history. For the first time, a large-scale strike did not end in massacre but was called off at the workers' request so that the State could mediate between their demands and the intransigence of the Compañía Minera e Industrial de Chile (Valenzuela, 2013). According to Figueroa (2009), this episode forced "companies to enter into extensive negotiations between workers, employers, and the government represented by the Intendancy of Concepción" (p. 58).

Subsequently, in 1921, the regional branch of the Federación Obrera de Chile (FOCH) in Biobío established its first Women's Council, composed of domestic workers, private employees, and women working in the coalfields. Illanes (2001) interprets this initiative as

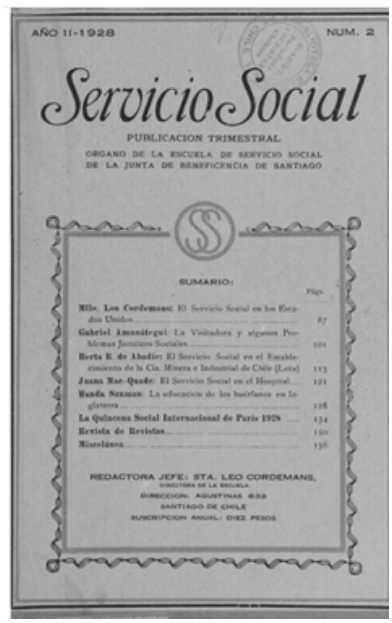
> another expression of the efforts that the male labour movement had been making for decades to incorporate women workers into their organisations or to encourage women's associations modelled on male ones… a "gender policy" across all spheres of social activity in the country. (p. 143)

In this context of workers' gains—such as the eight-hour working day, wage increases, labour accident legislation, and the enforcement of prohibition laws in the region—the Company adopted what has been termed "industrial paternalism" (Argo and Brito, 2021; Venegas and Morales, 2015). With the *Huelga Larga* as precedent, in 1922 it created the Welfare Department, which oversaw areas such as worker recruitment, housing and services, social work, provisioning, medical and hospital services, education, publications, libraries, social life, sports, social insurance, and occupational safety (Argo and Brito, 2021, p. 249).

However, in 1927 a national strike took place, lasting one day, organised from the coal-mining region (Illanes, 2001, p. 143). This event rekindled employers' fear of a prolonged strike like that of 1920. It was in this context that the Company hired Berta R. de Abadie as its first *visitadora* at the end of 1927.

We know quite a lot about her work in Lota (always signed as "Berta R. de Abadie," never as "Berta Recabarren" or "Berta Recabarren de Abadie"), thanks to the journal *Servicio Social*—a quarterly publication of the School of Social Service that featured reports by recent graduates—and to *La Opinión*, the Company's own periodical, distributed free of charge, which frequently covered the *visitadora's* public activities through reports and photographs.

IMAGE 5: Publication by Berta R. de Abadie, "El Servicio Social en el Establecimiento de la Cía. Minera e Industrial de Chile (Lota)."


AÑO II-1928 NUM. 2

Servicio Social

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ORGANO DE LA ESCUELA DE SERVICIO SOCIAL DE LA JUNTA DE BENEFICENCIA DE SANTIAGO

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Source: *Revista de Servicio Social*, Year II–1928. *Memoria Chilena.*

In *Servicio Social*, Berta published an academic and reflective text on the challenges she encountered upon arriving in Lota at the Company's invitation, written in clear and systematic language. She praised the new hospital facilities and their social service department (Recabarren, 1928) and described the Company's incentive policies to promote health, social hygiene, and the ideal of the "good worker" and "good provider." Recabarren identified four main areas of action for *visitadoras sociales*: schools, the Child Centre (*Centro del Niño*), the Gota de Leche, and the hospital (Recabarren, 1928, p. 113).

She prioritised work with children, stating: "By educating the child—the future citizen, the future mother—future evils are prevented, and a better generation is prepared" (Recabarren, 1928, p. 114). In this framework, she founded the Liga de Madrecitas (League of Young Mothers) at the Isidora Cousiño School. She also presented case studies—a father struggling with alcoholism, an overcrowded family, and so on—and the measures taken to address them, mediating between families and the company. She concluded her text with the following reflection:

> This is how the *visitadora social* intervenes: as a messenger of peace, progress, and hope, in both the great and the small affairs of the working families of Lota. She works hard but feels rewarded by the sympathy, the understanding of the industrial managers, and the gratitude of the working population: that is the most lasting satisfaction, and the one that best contributes to happiness—so she understands it! (Recabarren, 1928, p. 120)

IMAGE 6: Berta Recabarren with the professional team and members-students of the Liga de Madrecitas at the Isidora Cousiño School, Lota.

Source: *Diario La Opinión*, 15 May 1928, p. 3. *Memoria Chilena*.

Berta Recabarren's Activism in Lota

Once settled in Lota, Berta Recabarren not only assumed her duties as *visitadora* for the mining company but also soon became involved in the Centro Femenino Patria y Hogar (Patria and Home Women's Centre). Founded in 1925 by the Department of Social Welfare, it brought together miners' wives and daughters. Some historians have interpreted it as a paternalistic strategy to align corporate interests with community spaces (Venegas & Morales, 2015). However, as Illanes (2001) points out, Recabarren's actions show that this framework did not fully constrain her: her educational and welfare activities sought to improve the daily lives of women and their families, opening spaces for agency and collective organisation.

In her first days at the company, she was introduced in the newspaper *La Opinión*—the firm's official publication—as "Berta de Abadie, social visitor of the Company," in two articles dated 15 December 1927. In one of them, "Sociedad Liga de Madrecitas," she appears alongside other community leaders such as Octavio Astorquiza, head of the Department of Welfare; the "Reverend Father Pinto"; Carlos Pablaza, from the Matías Cousiño School (boys' lyceum); and the director of the Isidora Cousiño School (girls' lyceum), who gathered on 29 November 1927 to found the Liga de Madrecitas (Young Mothers' League). It is likely that the audience included pupils from the girls' school, as Berta addressed them as "future little mothers," urging them to

> contribute in the best possible way to prevent disease in their homes and neighbourhoods and, above all, to avoid so many sad cases in which children die merely from neglect or the ignorance of their mothers. (*La Opinión*, 15 December 1927, p. 3)

That same day, in the letters-to-the-editor section, "Sara M. de E." wrote that after Berta Recabarren's visit to her home, she followed her disinfection advice to prevent illness—with such good results that her three small children did not contract whooping cough (*La Opinión*, 15 December 1927, p. 3).

By 1928, Recabarren had gained increasing confidence—both in her work and in her public speaking—during the campaigns she organised. For instance, during Children's Week in June 1928, "Mrs Berta de Abadie" delivered an extended speech to the schoolchildren of Lota at the Company Theatre, closing with the following words under the heading "The Constitution of the Family":

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> The constitution of the family consists, first, in ensuring that marriage is sheltered and protected by the Law of God and the Law of man, which is the Civil Registry, and by mutual respect. Secondly, that it be a true family. Family means the home of the parents, united in moments of joy and loving one another in times of sorrow. Then comes the cooperation of children towards their parents and siblings. You, dear children who listen to me, and if you remember what I have said, will later understand it better. But do not forget—pay close attention. Having the will to be good, you will be happy. Being loved in your bodies and your homes, keeping good habits, staying strong against vice, and always fulfilling your duties and obligations, you will feel the joy that comes from peace of soul—you will feel the joy of living, as every human being should. That is what I wish for you, dear children. (*La Opinión*, 10 June 1928, p. 3)

Beyond the normative tone of her message about marriage, family, and children's conduct, it is hard not to connect this notion of "cooperation of children towards parents and siblings" to her own childhood—marked by poverty and paternal abandonment—and to the close bond she shared with her siblings Luis Emilio, Clara, and Mercedes. Perhaps, in that "you will understand it better later," she was not only addressing the children in the audience but also speaking across time to us—those who can now associate her words with her family's sacrifices and resilience, a family that "loved one another in times of sorrow." These were words spoken less than four years after her brother's suicide. We cannot know for certain, but they open a space for questions that could not previously be asked.

On 1 May 1929—a date of special significance for Luis Emilio Recabarren—*La Opinión* featured on its front page a lecture by "Mrs Berta Abadie, Social Visitor," once again held at the Company Theatre during Children's Week, entitled "Childcare" (*Puericultura*; see image 7). On this occasion, she addressed primarily the girls in the audience, teaching them the importance of properly caring for their younger siblings—especially babies—to prevent ailments such as rickets or other conditions caused by harmful practices like tying their limbs, exposing them to cold, or feeding them inadequately.

IMAGE 7: Front-page article "Puericultura," transcribed from the lecture given by Berta Recabarren.

LA OPINION

BATALLA DE TACNA

PUERICULTURA

Source: *Diario La Opinión*, 1 May 1929. *Memoria Chilena.*

Throughout 1928 and 1929, *La Opinión* reported numerous lectures, meetings, and community activities led by *visitadora* Berta R. de Abadie with the women and children of Lota, through the Junior Red Cross, the *Liga de Madrecitas*, and the *Centro Femenino Patria y Hogar*. In March 1929, the latter published its annual report for 1928, when it had 377 members. It listed activities such as establishing a night school (with the purchase of blackboards and primers), creating a relief fund for ill members and a funeral fund (financed through Sunday matinées), building a Social Mausoleum (also funded through film screenings and theatre events), and even subscribing to the journal *Servicio Social*—perhaps drawn by Berta's own article about them and life in Lota, published there in 1928. At the end of the report, the secretary of the Centre, Dolores A. de Sepúlveda, stated:

> I conclude, dear companions, by extending our gratitude to the Head of the Welfare Department, the administrators, and the social visitor for the great work carried out for the benefit of our society, and to all collaborators in our cause of women's culture. (*La Opinión*, 1 May 1929, p. 5)

Such expressions of gratitude were part of the formal institutional language of the time, yet their use did not diminish the women's agency or the communal significance of their actions. On the contrary, these gestures reveal how women negotiated with corporate structures while strengthening their own collective initiatives. For those familiar with the history of mutual aid societies, workers' associations, and women's centres promoted by Luis Emilio Recabarren and Teresa Flores in northern Chile—particularly in Antofagasta, Iquique, and the nitrate offices in the early twentieth century—this landscape will seem familiar. The *Centros Femeninos* Belén de Sárraga, promoted by Teresa Flores after the Spanish freethinker's visit to the pampas (1913–1915) (Carrasco, 2014), had been key spaces of socialisation, education, and community care. Nearly fifteen years later, and following her brother's death in 1924, Berta revived and adapted that experience in Lota.

However, by 1929, Berta's direct involvement in these initiatives began to wane. In September 1929, *La Opinión* mentioned her as "Honorary President" (15 September, p. 10), and in November 1930 as "Honorary Vice-President" (15 November, p. 3). Shortly after, in the newspaper's "Patients" section, it was reported: "Somewhat better, Mrs Berta de Abadie, social visitor of the establishment" (1 December 1930, p. 4). In March 1931, the same paper noted that she was seeking "to recover her health" and would be moving to Santiago (15 March 1931, p. 4).

Before her departure, one hundred women from the Centre saw her off at the railway station, telling the press: "The absence of the social visitor, Mrs Abadie, has been unanimously felt in Lota, and everyone hopes for her recovery" (*La Opinión*, 15 March 1931, p. 4). Shortly before, probably in February, the Centre had held its annual outing to the El Pinar estate, near Playa Blanca, as shown below.

IMAGE 8: Women of the Centro Femenino Patria y Hogar.

Grupo de socias del Centro Femenino «Patria y Hogar» durante un paseo efectuado últimamente al fundo «El Pinar».

El Centro Femenino «Patria y Hogar» acompañó hasta la estación de los ferrocarriles a la señora Berta de Abadie, visitadera social del Establecimiento

Como un centenar de socias de esta institución femenina se dió cita en días pasados en la estación de los ferrocarriles para despedir a la señora Berta de Abadie, visitadora social del Establecimiento de Lota, que se dirigía a Santiago a fin de atender al restablecimiento de su salud.

El directorio de esta entidad acordó ir a despedirla en masa a fin de demostrar a la señora Abadie la inmensa gratitud que dicha Sociedad guarda por las numerosas ideas expuestas y diferentes trabajos desarrollados en bien del Centro "Patria y Hogar" por la señora visitadora social, cuyo retiro ha sido sumamente lamentado.

La ausencia de la visitadora social, señora Abadie, ha sido unánimemente sentida en Lota y todos hacen votos por su restablecimiento.

No hace mucho esta sociedad efectuó el paseo anual al fundo "El Pinar", que se encuentra en las inmediaciones de Playa Blanca, sitio de hermosos parajes y que se presta admirablemente para paseos campestres.

Alrededor de 200 socias, con su estandarte social, se dieron cita al fundo mencionado donde pasaron un espléndido día al aire libre, regresando a las 19.30 horas.

EDUCACION

La Escuela "Matías Cousiño" y el ahorro escolar. — Cursos complementarios de enseñanza primaria que posee este establecimiento particular y contribución a la campaña de alfabetización en que está empeñado el Supremo Gobierno.

El ahorro escolar en los años 29 y 30, es como sigue:

Imposiciones hechas el año 29	$ 1,679.85
Imposiciones del primer semestre del año 30	1,288.—
Imposiciones del segundo semestre	1,027.80
Las imposiciones en Diciembre eran en total	$ 3,995.65

El año 1930 habían ahorrando

Source: *Diario La Opinión*, 15 March 1931, p. 4. *Memoria Chilena.*

On 15 September 1932—ten days after her death at the age of fifty-four from a cerebral haemorrhage—*La Opinión* announced "the passing of this diligent worker," highlighting her contribution to the community. As a sign of mourning, the Women's Centre closed its doors for one day (15 September 1932, p. 4). One year later, the organisation held a memorial service in her honour (1 October 1933, p. 3).

In Illanes's (2001) words, Berta Recabarren was

> the good, harmless spider, patiently and silently weaving a silken web that incorporated and connected bodies along the pathways traced by that same web—building an order of productive, regulated flows, most of which led to greater efficiency in the mine shafts. Yet, given the fragility of its fabric, this web also allowed the spider, Berta, to open small emancipatory fissures for her own desire. (p. 144)

More than a literary metaphor, this image allows us to read Berta Recabarren as a complex subject—embedded in the logic of the company, yet able to carve out spaces of female autonomy. Claudia Maldonado (2022) observes that, unlike other industrial complexes in the region, the Lota coalfields acknowledged women's labour capacities, though under persistent warnings about household stability. This duality illustrates

the tensions between industrial paternalism and women's agency: while the Company sought to legitimise its philanthropic image, women like Recabarren transformed those same spaces into platforms for education, organisation, and leadership.

Within this context, she saw women's education as a strategic tool to foster organisation and leadership from within the Centro Femenino Patria y Hogar. It is no minor detail that she had been president of the Partido Cívico Femenino and a delegate to the "Little Constituent Assembly." Thus, her work at the Women's Centre was not isolated but part of a broader political project—shared also with her brother—in which education was conceived as a path toward building networks of conscious and organised women.

In 2012, when the Gota de Leche building in Lota was declared a National Monument, her contribution was acknowledged:

> The property known as Gota de Leche is located in Lota Alto and corresponds to a building constructed in 1928 as an annex to the hospital grounds. It was the first privately founded Gota de Leche, since those existing in the country were managed by the Patronato de la Infancia. It was here that the social worker Mrs Berta Recabarren de Abadie worked, having joined the Compañía Minera e Industrial de Lota, as one of the pioneers of industrial social service in South America. (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional, 2012)[5]

[5] Decree No. 250, "Declares the properties known as *Gota de Leche* and *Desayuno Escolar*, both located in the commune of Lota, Province of Concepción, Biobío Region, as National Monuments in the category of Historical Monuments." Ministry of Education, National Congress Library (2012).

IMAGE 9: Berta de Abadie, social visitor, at the Gota de Leche Isidora Cousiño, Lota, with the professional team, mothers, children, and members of women's organisations.

Source: Diario La Opinión, 1 May 1928, p. 5. Memoria Chilena.

Her work in Lota, far from serving merely to reinforce the Company's benevolent image, translated into direct engagement with women, children, and community organisations, aimed at alleviating hardship and fostering grassroots initiatives. From this perspective, Berta Recabarren's work was guided by a horizon of social commitment rather than industrial paternalism—a nuance that, though not overtly subversive, opened spaces of action capable of sowing lasting change.

Final Reflections

Berta Recabarren de Abadie died in 1932, at the age of fifty-four; her older brother, Luis Emilio Recabarren, in 1924, at forty-eight. Only one of them has become part of the historical canon, and it is not Berta. What remains of her are just a few traces: a photograph beside her brother—sometimes edited to erase her—a shared grave, and fragmentary documents in which her surname is diluted into "de Abadie." Yet her story matters greatly: she was part of the first graduating cohort in social service in Lota, Chile, and Latin America, and she played a key role at a moment when social assistance and women's political action intersected in decisive ways.

Her activism as president of one of the country's first women's parties was not a sphere separate from her work in Lota, but rather a guiding thread that oriented her towards critically aware intervention in a territory deeply marked by industrial paternalism. The experience she gained in political organisation was reflected in the way she practised social work, stretching its scope beyond mere assistance to incorporate collective demands, community networks, and discourses around women's civil and political rights. In this intersection, Berta Recabarren embodied a form of everyday rebellion: she operated within hierarchical, masculinised structures without mechanically reproducing them, seeking instead to open spaces in which women workers and their families could have their own voice.

To recognise her today is not only an act of historical justice but also an invitation to rethink the role of social work and of women in contexts of power, welfare, and community organisation. Her life and work show that even within systems designed to control and subordinate, it is possible to generate resistance and alternatives. In this sense, Berta offers crucial insights for understanding the link between political commitment and professional practice, reminding us that for her these were both part of a single emancipatory project.

As she herself once said: "You who listen to me, and if you remember what I have said, will later understand it better."

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PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

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ARTICLE

Ethical and Political Reflections on Prison Social Work in Chile. A Look Back at the Profession's 100th Anniversary

Reflexiones ético-políticas del Trabajo Social Penitenciario en Chile. Una mirada desde los cien años de la profesión

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Abstract

Within the framework of 100 years of social work in Chile and Latin America, this article offers a critical reflection on the practice of prison social work, a field that has been exercised professionally for 95 years and continues to be one of the most strained arenas of contemporary public policy.

First, the article provides a brief historical overview of the profession in relation to the prison context, aiming to identify historical milestones

Keywords:
prison social work; neoliberalism; prison; human rights; anti-oppressive approach

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that help understand its practice and current challenges. Second, it identifies two current institutional approaches: the psychosocial intervention carried out by Gendarmería de Chile (Chilean Prison Service), and the socio-legal defence work provided to convicted individuals by the Defensoría Penal Pública (Public Criminal Defender's office).

Finally, the current landscape is analysed from a critical and anti-oppressive perspective (Dominelli, 2017). In this regard, the prison is problematised as a contradictory institution that reproduces inequalities within the framework of neoliberal penal policy (Wacquant, 2010), and it is within this context that the profession is embedded. From this standpoint, the authors argue that social work must embrace a situated, critical, and transformative praxis—one that challenges punitive logics and promotes dignity and human rights, particularly in inherently violent settings.

Resumen

Palabras clave: *Trabajo Social Penitenciario; neoliberalismo; cárcel; derechos humanos; enfoque antiopresivo*

En el marco de los cien años del Trabajo Social en Chile y Latinoamérica, este artículo reflexiona críticamente sobre el quehacer del Trabajo Social Penitenciario, labor que cumple noventa y cinco años de ejercicio profesional y sigue siendo uno de los escenarios más tensionados de la política pública contemporánea.

Primero, se realiza un breve recorrido histórico de la profesión vinculado al contexto carcelario, para identificar claves históricas que permitan comprender el quehacer y sus desafíos. En segundo lugar, se identifican dos perspectivas institucionales actuales: la intervención psicosocial realizada desde Gendarmería de Chile y la labor de defensa sociojurídica para personas condenadas ejecutada desde la Defensoría Penal Pública.

Finalmente, se analiza el escenario actual desde una perspectiva crítica y antiopresiva (Dominelli, 2017). En ese sentido, se problematiza la cárcel como una institución contradictoria que reproduce desigualdades en el marco de una penalidad neoliberal (Wacquant, 2010). Es en este lugar donde está inserta la profesión y desde el que se debe asumir una praxis situada, crítica y transformadora, que cuestione las lógicas del castigo, promueva la dignidad y los derechos humanos, especialmente en contextos violentos.

Brief Historical Background of Prisons and Prison Social Work in Chile

In the context of the commemoration of 100 years of social work in Chile and Latin America, it is necessary to critically examine and challenge the work carried out in one of the most complex and contradictory areas of public policy: prisons. To do so, it is necessary to contextualise their emergence.

The modern prison originated in 18th-century Europe. Its emergence was influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of the time, which conceived it as a civilising tool and a rational and democratic form of punishment for crime (Foucault, 1976; Melossi & Pavarini, 1977; Rusche & Kirchheimer, 1939). However, far from being neutral, its material and institutional structure operates as a mechanism for disciplining and reproducing inequalities, under the discourse of resocialisation (Garland, 2005; Foucault, 1976). As Ferrajoli (2016) has warned, prison constitutes an 'institutional contradiction', where formal legality coexists with practices that systematically violate fundamental human rights.

The Chilean prison system cannot be understood without considering the social, political and cultural transformations that have accompanied the process of nation-state building since the 19th century. In the early years of the Republic, punitive practices inherited from the colonial order focused on public punishment, mutilation or dismemberment, and the death penalty, with travelling prisons being one of the most commonly used methods of punishment for men (Lizama, 2012).

As the 19th century progressed, in a context of social unrest and growing urbanisation, the Chilean state began to outline a more structured and modern prison system. As Lizama (2012) argues, four factors inspired the new system: the insecurity of urban unrest, the elite's concern for preserving peace, the poor conditions of the old prisons, and the need to incorporate models observed in the United States and Europe.

These elements motivated the modernisation of the prison infrastructure, especially in Santiago, under the impetus of then-Minister Manuel Montt in 1843, who promoted the reconstruction of the capital's penitentiary, inspired by the American models of Auburn and Philadelphia[2] (Lizama, 2012). This transformation marks the transition from colonial remnants to a more 'rational' conception of punishment, framed within the discourse of criminal rehabilitation (Correa, 2005).

[2] The Philadelphia model consisted of absolute solitary confinement to encourage penance and reform, while the Auburnian model combined a form of solitary confinement with a few hours of work per day that allowed for brief periods of socialisation.

For their part, forms of female imprisonment in Chile evolved under a religious correctional logic. From the Casa de Recogidas (1735) to the later Casas de Corrección (1823),[3] women considered to be transgressors of the moral order (unfaithful wives, libertine women or women in the process of divorce) were subjected to confinement and spiritual 're-education' through prayer and silence (Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, n.d.), consolidating a model based on religious education, motherhood, and control of the female body, which was deeply paternalistic and functional to the expectations of the conservative elite (Correa, 2005; Zarate, 1995). This accounts for the early existence of differentiated devices of confinement, based on criteria of gender, morality, and social control.

The Beginnings of Social Service and Social Visitors in Prisons

Chile founded the first school of social work in Latin America in 1925, called Dr. Alejandro del Río, with a scientific character. Then, in 1929, the Elvira Matte school opened. Both were linked to the social, cultural and political challenges of the time (Vidal, 2015; 2019). In the 1930s, two social service professionals were formally incorporated into the prisons of Santiago and Valparaíso, following the implementation of the Dirección General de Prisiones (General Directorate of Prisons), predecessor of the Gendarmería de Chile (Chilean Prison Service). In other words, the professional role of social work had been established in Chilean prisons since their earliest generations. This decision was made because they were considered the best-trained professionals to provide moral assistance to prisoners and their families, as well as to determine whether a convicted person met the requirements for parole (Bascuñán, 1946, cited in Palafox, 2023).

The duties assigned to these first social visitors included talking to inmates, both men and women, and identifying their needs; following up with them once they returned to the community, helping them find work, contact their families if they were far away, and providing financial support; organising homes for the children of inmates and referring children and adolescents to protective institutions: all of these tasks were primarily assistance-related (Bascuñán, 1946, cited in Palafox, 2023). However, their work was severely limited by the structural conditions of the prison system: a small number of professionals, a lack of resources, poor specialised training, and inadequate basic education and training workshops (Correa, 2005).

In 1935, two other social visitors were incorporated into the Instituto Nacional de Clasificación y Criminología (National Institute of Classification and Criminology),

[3] Both *Casa de Recogidas* and *Casas de Corrección* were institutions for the confinement and "moral correction" of women.

located in the Penitenciaría de Santiago (one of the public prisons of the city and the first of the country). The aim of this institute was to understand the origin of crime as a social phenomenon. The professionals worked in interdisciplinary research teams, producing a "social prognosis" report, which consisted of a comprehensive and individualised study of prisoners. This document contained complete information on the prisoner in question, including personal and family background, criminal history and psychopathy, and information provided by family members and/or close friends. It also included data on the economic conditions of the household. Another central focus of the report was information relating to the sentence (time served and time remaining) and the behaviour of the person involved, such as personal hygiene, punishments, and the work and training activities they carried out (Bascuñán, 1946, cited in Palafox, 2023).

> (...) Its value in determining the overall conclusions was the same as that of the analyses and assessments made by their fellow doctors or lawyers, with whom the visitors had to act in a coordinated manner. Only after considering all the impressions gathered and following a fair debate among the various members of the council could the final results be obtained regarding the offender's personality, the rules for their individualised prison treatment, their options for subsequent release and their chances of rehabilitation. (Drapkin, 1943, cited in Palafox, 2023)

Around 1940, the government of Pedro Aguirre Cerda issued a Supreme Decree that allowed for the creation of social service schools in Santiago, Concepción, and Temuco. In 1945, the University of Chile founded the School of Social Service in the cities of Valparaíso, Antofagasta, Osorno, and Arica, which were incorporated into the university system. By 1971, all of them were part of the University of Chile, so their influence was secular and public. It is worth mentioning that, in their origins and until 1960, in all schools, the professionals were mainly women and their training emphasised positivist sociology and practical medicine (Vidal, 2019).

In 1943, the General Directorate of Prisons created the National Prisoners' Board,[4] incorporating a chief social visitor in each prison where there was a prisoners' board (Decree 542 of 1943). In this way, the profession began to expand within prisons.

Around 1950, social visitor Inés Acuña warned of the lack of pedagogical training among the staff in charge of the social rehabilitation of inmates, as well as the

[4] According to Decree 542 of 1943, one of the functions of the Board was: art. 1 a) To provide material and moral protection to persons who are detained, deprived of liberty or on parole, released, offended, and their families, providing them with means of work and procuring social, educational, physical, medical and cultural care for them. This decree was repealed in 2014.

precariousness of educational spaces, the lack of continuous medical services, and the inadequate separation by age or legal status (Correa, 2005). This situation shows that even then there was a critical awareness of the limitations of the penal system and the professional role within it.

Critical voices within the profession in Chile gained strength with the reconceptualisation of social work that began in 1968, when methodologies and methods from other countries that were not suited to the local reality were called into question. This criticism affected the entire ideology, theory and methodology of the profession, giving impetus to a form of social work focused on social transformation (Vidal, 2015). For their part, Castañeda & Salamé (2014) point out that the pre-dictatorship period, between 1960 and 1973, was positive for the development of social work as a discipline, due to the questioning of the professional role of welfare and functionalism.

Social Work under Dictatorship

The most painful recent historical event in the country was the civil-military coup d'état of 1973 and the subsequent dictatorship, which lasted seventeen years. As a result, several professional social service schools were closed, and students, professionals, and teachers faced censorship, expulsion, and political repression. They were the first to suffer the devastating effects of political repression, with people detained, disappeared, executed for political reasons, and victims of political imprisonment and torture (Aceituno, 2024; Castañeda & Salamé, 2014; Morales & Aceituno, 2020). In this scenario, support was provided to affected families and prison visits were made to political prisoners, with the reappearance of individual welfare strategies, which had been heavily questioned during the Reconceptualisation. This was followed by specialised work based on social diagnosis, the recording of complaints, education and promotion of human rights, and the encouragement of social participation (Taibo, 1987, cited in Castañeda & Salamé, 2019). An important link was also forged with legal assistance, which was key for various solidarity organisations such as the Vicaría de la Solidaridad[5] and the Fundación de Ayuda Social de las Iglesias Cristianas (FASIC).[6]

The experience gained in human rights work redefined the ethical dimension of social

[5] The Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity) was a human rights institution of the Catholic Church in Chile, created in 1976 under the Archdiocese of Santiago. It provided legal, social, and humanitarian assistance to victims of political persecution during the military dictatorship (1973–1990) and became one of the most significant organisations documenting human rights violations in that period.

[6] The Fundación de Ayuda Social de las Iglesias Cristianas (FASIC) is an ecumenical human rights organisation founded in Chile in 1975 to support victims of political repression during the dictatorship.

work, broadening its frame of reference and consolidating a more comprehensive approach to the profession. Today, this legacy is reflected both in undergraduate training and in professional practice, where human rights occupy a prominent place, understood as a guarantor of rights in the context of public policy. In this way, the legacy built in times of repression and political violence lives on in the profession's ongoing commitment to the defence of human dignity (Castañeda & Salamé, 2019). All this learning was transferred as the basis for the social policies that contributed to the democratic transition that began in 1990.

End of the 20th Century and Beginning of the 21st Century

In the 1990s in Chile, with the return to democracy, the neoliberal economic model that had been forcibly imposed by the dictatorship was consolidated. In 1996, after 136 years of religious administration, correctional facilities finally came under the control of the Chilean Prison Service, equalising—at least formally and institutionally—the male and female prison structures.

During the first decade of the 2000s, two significant milestones occurred in the Chilean justice system: the first was the Reforma Procesal Penal (Criminal Procedure Reform), which moved from an inquisitorial system to an adversarial accusatory system and integrated other actors and public institutions, such as the Public Defender's Office and the Ministerio Público (Public Prosecutor's Office) (Duce, 2004). The other milestone was the incorporation of public-private participation in prison management in 2000, with the first prison opening in 2005. Sanhueza & Pérez (2017) report that this event was intended to respond to overcrowding and other problems at the time by developing a public-private model of mixed participation. By 2025, there were nine concessioned prisons. Norambuena-Conejeros (2024) analyses the concession model and reports significant shortcomings in its implementation, such as difficulties in accessing intervention programmes, problems with the execution of the intervention model and rigidity in tendering processes. Wacquant (2010) has described how, within the framework of neoliberalism, the state tends to dismantle its traditional social protection functions while strengthening its penal and control apparatus. From this perspective, the author argues that there is a systematic criminalisation of marginality, transforming prisons into devices of social containment that absorb impoverished and excluded sectors.

The above overview allows us to suggest that the modern prison in Chile responded to social, economic and political transformations, and how, from its inception, social services entered prisons, both male and female correctional facilities. This work

gradually expanded to different roles and areas of the country, with social service professionals being the first to notice the difficulties and conditions of the inmates.

Two Approaches to Prison Social Work

Ninety-five years have passed since social work was introduced in prisons, and despite its early implementation, little has been written about the work carried out in these contexts in 21st-century Chile (Pérez-Ramírez & Osornio, 2021; Valdivia et al., 2024; Norambuena-Conejeros & Contreras-Sáez, 2023).

As social work in Chile celebrates its centenary, two perspectives on professional practice in the prison context can be observed from an institutional standpoint. The first, which has been in place for ninety-five years, is psychosocial intervention with convicted persons, which operates in a structured, clear manner with specific activities, under the Risk, Need and Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews & Bonta, 1990) and under the auspices of the Chilean Prison Service. This model was adopted in 2007 and gradually incorporated into a closed subsystem in 2013 (Gendarmería de Chile, 2025). The second and most recent, dating from 2009 and now in its sixteenth year, is the socio-legal representation and defence of convicted persons, under the auspices of the Public Defender's Office. Below, some of the activities carried out within the framework of both perspectives will be described in greater detail.

Prison Social Work as a Psychosocial Intervention Profession

As noted, professional work in prisons was focused on control and moralisation rather than on guaranteeing rights or social transformation. However, this also constitutes a fundamental background for understanding how prison social work has historically woven a praxis tensioned between institutional demands and its ethical-political vocation for social transformation.

Currently, direct intervention prison social work is incorporated into the technical areas of prison units, where social workers, together with other social science professionals, are responsible for interventions aimed at social reintegration, especially since the implementation of the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews & Bonta, 1990), which has been used in closed prisons since 2013 and throughout the country since 2015, guiding intervention processes from a technified and evidence-based logic.

This model establishes, first, that the principle of risk implies focusing interventions on those who are most likely to reoffend. Second, the principle of need guides actions towards specific criminogenic factors that influence recidivism. Finally, the principle

of responsivity requires strategies to be tailored to the abilities, learning style and motivation of each individual.

Broadly speaking, the work of prison social work, under this Canadian model, seeks to promote social reintegration. It uses a tool known as the Case Management/ Intervention Inventory (IGI), which is designed to identify the risk of recidivism and subsequent classification. The results are used to establish an Individual Intervention Plan, which is then developed/implemented and, finally, discharged (Gendarmería de Chile, 2025).

It should be noted that, prior to this RNR model, diagnostic processes were carried out by social workers based on their professional opinion, actuarial instruments and a psychosocial file, which meant that the work depended on the experience, knowledge and judgement of each professional, lacking manuals or procedures structured on the basis of scientific evidence (Espinoza et al., 2016, cited in Zuloaga, 2024).

One of the criticisms of the RNR model is that it focuses intervention on psychosocial risk indicators (risk management) and overlooks each person's protective factors or resources. This situation has led to the emergence of the Good Lives Model (GLM), which is based on human rights and the recognition of individuality, but which has not been developed or used in the Chilean context (Prescott & Willis, 2022), a situation that puts pressure on professional work, particularly in the search for a balance between risk management and the promotion of more humanising and emancipatory intervention processes.

Prison Social Work from a Socio-Legal Defence Perspective

On the other hand, prison social work from a socio-legal defence perspective serves the incarcerated population, known as "prison defence," establishing a line of work in socio-legal pairs with prison defenders (Norambuena-Conejeros & Contreras-Sáez, 2023).

Unlike the previous model, the professional role of social work is not autonomous, as this approach is implemented in tandem with a legal professional, known as a prison defender or lawyer, who is part of the Public Criminal Defence Office and whose work focuses solely on people convicted of a crime.

The functions performed by social workers include the following: interviewing prisoners and their families; monitoring the situation of imprisonment; conducting home visits; investigating personal, family, work, socio-economic and psychosocial

aspects that may be relevant to the prison defence; compiling documents (personal, health, education, family); preparing social reports to provide relevant background information for obtaining prison benefits or parole; working with the inmate's support network for their reintegration process; incorporating the social perspective into the design of prison defence strategies; preparing social reports to prove social and family ties, and socio-economic reports for the exemption of fines associated with convictions. However, according to Carvacho et al. (2021), it should be noted that in prison defence, the role of social work tends to be invisible, as the primacy of the legal perspective relegates to the background the social needs linked to the context of imprisonment and the relationship with families and other social ties.

As can be seen, both professional activities developed at different times, in different contexts and in response to different historical needs of the Chilean prison system. The progressive incorporation of social work into this space has shaped a field marked by profound inequalities, disciplinary logic and tensions between care, control and exclusion. Understanding these trajectories and the development of the profession not only allows us to situate the presence of the profession in prisons historically, but also to recognise a new figure within prisons and the challenges that, even today, affect its practice in contexts of deprivation of liberty.

The work of prison social work intervention, as well as the role of socio-legal defence, is strained by institutional mandates of control and reintegration, in the case of the prison service, and of unrestricted respect for human rights, in the field of prison defence. This paradox forces us to rethink our work not only in terms of its methodological tools, but also from an ethical-political perspective that allows us to identify the real limits and possibilities of professional practice in spaces affected by structural violence.

Social Work in Violent Spaces and the Paradox of Deprivation of Liberty

The Organic Law of the Chilean Prison Service (Decree Law No. 2,859) declares social reintegration to be one of the central aims of the prison system. Likewise, since 2017, the country has had a Social Reintegration Policy, based in the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, which understands reintegration as "the process aimed at the full integration into society of a person who has been convicted of a criminal offence" (Social Reintegration Policy, 2017, p. 16). This framework promotes, at least in theory, what is known as "special positive prevention" (Anitua, 2015), that is, the idea that imprisonment should allow for the rehabilitation, re-education and reintegration of the convicted person in order to prevent recidivism. However, this normative formulation

coexists with a prison reality marked by overcrowding, structural precariousness, institutional violence and persistent human rights violations, as national bodies have warned (Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2013; 2017; 2018; 2020; 2021).

In this context, it is urgent to consider the role of prison social work, from intervention to socio-legal defence, and its contemporary challenges. Although this framework has positively introduced technical standards to prison work, mainly with the aforementioned inclusion of the RNR model, it has not incorporated a complementary model to remedy its shortcomings, nor has it resolved the fundamental ethical dilemma that permeates all work in contexts of confinement: the isolation that prison generates in relation to the individual and the uprooting it causes in society, when reintegration is supposed to do precisely the opposite. This paradox, as Baratta (1993) has pointed out, makes prison a structural obstacle to social integration, as the conditions of precariousness, violence and stigmatisation that prevail there hinder any real process of subjective transformation.

Far from operating as neutral spaces, prisons act as devices of contested forces, exclusion and symbolic punishment that reinforce social inequalities (Goodman et al., 2017). The relationships that are formed within them (between inmates, officials and technical teams) are permeated by multiple forms of violence: physical, institutional, economic, emotional and epistemic. This observation requires prison social work professionals to adopt a critical stance towards their work, resisting the logic of power reproduction that sustains the penal system as an apparently legitimate social solution.

In light of this, the anti-oppressive approach proposed by Lena Dominelli (2017) is particularly relevant. Prison social work cannot be limited to the implementation of institutional programmes; it must make a political commitment to transforming the structures that reproduce inequality. Critical awareness, as Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) argue, becomes a fundamental tool for professionals to recognise the power dynamics in which they are immersed, question their own practices and generate approaches that promote the emancipation of the subjects. From this perspective, social work is not neutral but can either sustain or alter the logic of control and exclusion that permeates privative systems.

Applied to everyday prison practice, the anti-oppressive approach offers concrete challenges that involve incorporating the voice and experience of persons deprived of liberty in psychosocial intervention and socio-legal defence processes, as well as recognising their life trajectories as the product of contexts of structural exclusion, actively resisting the pathologisation of their behaviour, and challenging technocratic models focused exclusively on risk management rather than on guaranteeing rights.

From this perspective, the anti-oppressive approach does not propose a closed "intervention model," but rather an ethic of professional practice that is committed to transforming the conditions that perpetuate inequality, the criminalisation of poverty, and institutional violence. To this end, we must look beyond the deprivation of liberty of an individual to the places where these individuals come from (Davis, 2018). This means challenging prison as a legitimised institution of exclusion and building practices that, even within its limits, can open up cracks towards emancipation. As Verde (2021) reminds us, drawing on the legacy of Jane Addams, social work emerged as a response to social injustice, and therefore its practice in prison contexts must maintain an ethical and political dimension that prioritises human rights over purely instrumental logic.

In short, the professional work of prison social work in Chile is at a crossroads: on the one hand, between the need to respond to institutional, political and economic system mandates aimed at public safety and, on the other, the urgency of exercising a critical praxis committed to social justice and human rights. This paradox cannot be resolved at the technical level; it needs to be addressed as an ethical and epistemological dispute about the very meaning of punishment and the place of social work in the struggle for social justice as a mobiliser of change.

In neoliberal contexts, moreover, professional work in concessioned prisons—managed by private entities and under the supervision of the Chilean Prison Service—has introduced new tensions, both in its psychosocial intervention dimension and in its socio-legal expression. Norambuena-Conejeros (2024) argues that in concessioned facilities, the legally granted principle of resocialisation is subordinated to a neoliberal logic that prioritises compliance with contractual standards, generating a technified, rigid intervention model oriented towards the management of indicators rather than the recognition of life trajectories or contexts of exclusion. Likewise, socio-legal defence is hampered by a three-year tendering system. This contractual logic hinders the continuity of processes and limits the possibilities for specialisation which, combined with low incomes, affects the retention of these professionals in the medium and long term.

Muñoz et al. (2022) highlight that the neoliberal-inspired management model, embodied in the subsidiary state and outsourced social policy schemes, generates resistance, but not because of the precariousness of operating conditions, but because working conditions are accompanied by subtle and individual professional resistance that may be mainly related to the fear associated with job loss or the consequences and/or institutional reprisals that these actions may entail.

Garland (2005) argues that this phenomenon can be interpreted as an expression of "new forms of criminal governance," which seek to manage crime not only through the rehabilitation of offenders, but also through the efficient and technified management of risk, outsourcing prison functions to private operators who subordinate the logic of social reintegration to criteria of profitability and efficiency.

This situation translates into a paradox that directly affects the work of prison social work. From this perspective, professional practice in contexts of deprivation of liberty becomes a tense exercise between two conflicting social projects: on the one hand, the idea of a welfare state that—although largely utopian for the Chilean reality—proposes principles of protection, reparation and social justice; and, on the other, the neoliberal state, which tends to dissociate social policy from the guarantee of rights, promoting instead a management model based on efficiency, cost reduction and risk minimisation.

These tensions profoundly challenge prison social work, as it has historically been situated at the intersection of social policy and institutional management. In prison contexts, these tensions are expressed in the dual function of accompanying vulnerable individuals while simultaneously working within structures that reproduce that same vulnerability, turning intervention into a field riddled with ethical and epistemological contradictions.

Understanding these tensions allows social work to avoid being a purely technical-administrative exercise and, instead, to position itself as a critical actor, capable of denouncing the structural limitations of the system and constructing alternatives for intervention that recognise the agency of persons deprived of liberty, resisting the naturalisation of prison as a social solution.

Final Reflections

Since its origins, prison has been conceived as a space of dispute, where control and reintegration are two forces in constant motion and tension. Prison social work has had to develop in a contradictory space, which highlights the tensions of being caught between institutional demands and an ethical-political vocation committed to social transformation. This situation has been present since the introduction of prison social work in the early decades of the 20th century—marked by welfare and moralising roles—until its current consolidation in two distinct areas: psychosocial intervention in social reintegration processes and socio-legal defence.

Both perspectives, with their specificities, share the same structural scenario: a prison that, far from being neutral, reproduces social, economic, gender and ethnic

inequalities, further deepened by the incorporation of privatising logics, such as concession prisons. In this context, a professional practice that is limited to technical execution or passive adaptation of imported and validated models is not possible. Prison social work, in any of its forms, must be capable of reading the context in which it intervenes, identifying the structures that reproduce exclusion and resisting "simply reproducing" discourses and interventions that serve punishment.

From this critical perspective, seven challenges for the future development of the profession in this field are identified. First, to make the role of social work visible in the face of the predominance of the legal view of reality, especially in the field of socio-legal defence, where it is often invisible. Second, to move towards specialised training, with intersectional approaches that consider the situation of women, older people, gender dissidents, migrants and people with disabilities, among other groups historically marginalised within the criminal justice system.

Third, to promote the production of situated knowledge that reflects the real conditions of incarceration in Chile, questions the assumptions of the resocialisation model, and provides a basis for interventions that not only accompany but also resist and transform. Fourth, to develop practices that recognise people's differences and capacity for change and transformation, based on their own resources and particularities.

Fifth, to establish professional networks for prison social work both in Chile and with other countries. Sixth, consolidating this professional field can only be achieved through the active voice of social workers who face the stresses of incarceration on a daily basis, generating situated and supportive knowledge. And seventh, a concrete expression of this recognition would be the mandatory inclusion of prison (and criminal) social work in university-level social work degree programmes.

To address the challenges mentioned above, it is necessary to denaturalise the use of prison as a social response to crime. In this regard, it is urgent to strengthen alternatives such as alternative sentences, established in Law No. 18,216 (where social work also plays an important role), reserving deprivation of liberty exclusively for those cases where the use of this measure is strictly necessary. This position not only seeks to reduce the impact of prison punishment, but also to open up spaces for restorative, inclusive and humanising models of justice.

On the other hand, the practice of prison social work must be recognised as a transformative act, which has not only maintained a presence in the prison system

for almost a hundred years, but has also built up anti-oppressive practices, a body of knowledge, strategies and reflections on its work at different times, such as the reconceptualisation in the 1960s and during the dictatorship.

One hundred years after the first school of social work in Chile and Latin America, and ninety-five years after the discipline entered the prison system, professional practice continues to be one of the clearest expressions of the tensions between professional ethics and institutional logic. In the face of this, the challenges are not insignificant: to maintain a critical praxis, conscious of its history and its transformative potential, capable of creating cracks in the walls of punishment and opening paths towards a truly social justice.

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ARTICLE

Educación Popular in the Netherlands: Politicisation of Community Development as a Strategy Against Neoliberal Governance

La Educación Popular en los Países Bajos: la politización del desarrollo comunitario como estrategia frente a la gobernanza neoliberal

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary challenges facing social work in the Netherlands, in a context where the neoliberal discourse of "self-reliance"—which individualises collective problems and depoliticises professional practice—prevails. At the same time, the Dutch community development perspective, inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy and marking its centenary in 2025, offers new responses aimed at fostering a politicised social work that connects personal problems with public issues. It is no longer about activating vulnerable citizens but about mobilising the collective power of citizens in vulnerable situations.

Keywords: *community development; Educación Popular; politicizing social work; Freirean pedagogy; collective resilience*

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The re-evaluation of the lessons learned by the Netherlands from Chile in the 1970s, in social work and popular education, plays a significant role. In this regard, the article outlines the historical and transnational journey of social work ideas between Chile and the Netherlands. The *Educación Popular,* developed by Paulo Freire in Chile in the context of the agrarian reform, was brought to the Netherlands as "exemplary learning". His critical pedagogy of the "oppressed" has had a lasting impact on Dutch social work. The social basis is not a preventive safety net but an arena for awareness, collective organisation, and redistribution of resources. Community building is a strategic route to collective resilience, in which resident participation is central to breaking through inequality.

Resumen

Este artículo examina los desafíos contemporáneos que enfrenta el Trabajo Social en los Países Bajos, en un contexto donde prevalece el discurso neoliberal de la «autosuficiencia», que individualiza los problemas colectivos y despolitiza el ejercicio de la profesión. Esto, al mismo tiempo en que la perspectiva del desarrollo comunitario neerlandés –inspirado en la pedagogía de Paulo Freire, y que cumple un siglo en 2025– ofrece nuevas respuestas para promover un Trabajo Social que conecte problemas personales con asuntos públicos. En esta línea, ya no se trata de habilitar ciudadanos vulnerables, sino de movilizar el poder colectivo de quienes se encuentran en situaciones de vulnerabilidad.

La reevaluación de las lecciones aprendidas por los Países Bajos, a partir de la experiencia chilena en torno al Trabajo Social y la Educación Popular, juega un papel importante. Por ello, el artículo analiza el recorrido histórico y transnacional de las ideas del Trabajo Social entre Chile y los Países Bajos. La Educación Popular, desarrollada por Paulo Freire en Chile en el contexto de la reforma agraria, se introdujo en los Países Bajos como un «aprendizaje ejemplar». Su pedagogía crítica de los «oprimidos» ha tenido un impacto duradero en el Trabajo Social neerlandés. El enfoque social no se limita a una red de seguridad preventiva, sino que constituye un espacio para la concientización, la organización colectiva y la redistribución de recursos. El desarrollo comunitario, entonces, se construye como una vía estratégica para el empoderamiento colectivo, donde la participación es fundamental para superar las desigualdades.

Palabras clave: *desarrollo comunitario; Educación Popular; politización del Trabajo Social; pedagogía freireana; resiliencia colectiva*

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Introduction

In 2025, both Chile and the Netherlands commemorate important milestones: a hundred years of social work in Chile and a century of community development in the Netherlands. At the same time, the year marks 200 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries—a long-standing relationship that was recently reaffirmed in a meeting between Chilean Minister of Foreign Affairs Alberto van Klaveren and his Dutch counterpart, Minister Caspar Veldkamp. Van Klaveren, who was born in the Netherlands, joined Veldkamp in emphasising the shared commitment to human rights, democracy, and international cooperation. This historic constellation offers more than mere symbolism. It provides a meaningful framework for reflecting on current tensions and directions in social work in the Netherlands.

Social work in the Netherlands finds itself at a crossroads, at a time when the consequences of structural poverty and increasing social inequality clash head-on with the legacy of decades of neoliberal policy. Since the 1980s, successive Dutch governments, regardless of their political orientation, have implemented a consistent paradigm of market forces, privatisation, and austerity in the social domain. This policy is based on a meritocratic discourse of "personal responsibility" and aims to downsize the collective sector and erode the foundations of the post-war welfare state.

As a result, the practice of social work has come under immense pressure. Social professionals experience a "split loyalty": a moral emergency in which they balance the demands of a controlling and austerity-driven policy system with their ethical duty to support citizens who are marginalised by that same system.

Within this complex and conflictual constellation of persistent neoliberal governance, we defend the thesis that politicising community development in the Netherlands is repositioning itself as a practice for tackling social inequality and countering polarisation and exclusion (Engbersen et al., 2021; Duyvendak & Uitermark, 2005). For decades, around the turn of the century, the practice of social and community workers was a depoliticised practice. Social workers focused on providing individual support to people, and community workers—insofar as they had not been cut back—on promoting liveability in neighbourhoods and districts; they no longer fulfilled their role of identifying problems and mobilising people.

In recent years, community development has increasingly been used again as a strategic and politicising methodology. This renewed approach, which resonates

latently with emancipatory traditions such as liberation pedagogy, focuses not merely on treating symptoms but on addressing structural causes and organising collective power.

This article unfolds in five stages. First, it describes the historical journey of *Educación Popular* from Latin America—especially Chile—to Europe. Then, it situates the social context of community development, focusing on socioeconomic inequality, polarisation, and the professional field. Next, it presents the challenges of empowerment and exclusion faced by community development at the grassroots level and examines how, over a century of implementation, it has shaped four related methodologies: Participatory Action Research, Asset-Based Community Development, Community Wealth Building, and neighbourhood empowerment. We then show how the "exemplary learning" of Paulo Freire (Recife, Brazil, 1921 – São Paulo, Brazil, 1997) is embedded in the Netherlands, as reflected in the contemporary revival of politicising working methods—including Theater of the Oppressed—that connect pedagogy with institutional change. Finally, we conclude with implications for Dutch community development.

The journey of an idea: *Educación Popular* from Chile to the Netherlands

It is remarkable that echoes of Paulo Freire's pedagogical methods continue to live on in social work in the Netherlands to this day. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)—with its Dutch edition published in 1972—is part of a shared, transnational repertoire in which emancipatory practices exchange knowledge across borders and converge in a joint resistance against social injustice. Although Freire was not Chilean, it was intellectuals and activists from Chile—as we will see later—who shared his legacy to the Netherlands.

At one time, the exchange between Latin American and European social work was virtually one-way, with ideas and models primarily originating from Europe. However, with epistemological criticism from within the region itself, and with the influence of thinkers such as Freire, this relationship has gradually shifted in recent decades: Latin American perspectives now also feed into European social work. In the 1920s and 1930s, Chilean training programs learned a lot from the European model, on the initiative of Alejandro del Río, who travelled to Europe, including Belgium, where he gained a great deal of knowledge. European curricula and administrative models were imported on his initiative, with the Belgians Leo Cordemans and Jenny Bernier as the driving forces behind Chile's first school of social work (Cordemans, 1927; Álvarez Osses,

2025). This enabled the transfer of knowledge but also exposed a colonial relationship in terms of knowledge and standards: concepts mainly travelled from north to south.

Historically, there is a parallel in that the Netherlands was the first country in the world to develop an academic infrastructure for social work (Corella, 2012), while Chile was the first country outside Europe and the United States to establish professional training in the discipline in 1925. Since then, over the past hundred years, social work in Latin America has undergone a radical transformation, evolving from "social services"—often linked to charity and European models—to "social work", a recognised social science with its own critical and Latin American professional identity.

The tide has turned. Current academic production in social work—including the contributions to the journal *Critical Proposals*—documents the struggle for epistemic autonomy: the critical rejection of uncritical adoption of Western and North American theories and practices. Authors argue that this is a form of neocolonialism or professional imperialism. There is a strong call for decolonisation and "indigenization" (Midgley, 2025) of social work, which means developing knowledge and methodologies that are culturally rooted and aligned with the specific social, political, and economic realities of Latin America.

In this scenario, the conceptual revision or "Reconceptualisation movement" of the 1960s and 1970s was a turning point, marking a radical break with traditional, often palliative social work, and a shift towards critical theories—such as Marxism, dependency theory, and liberating pedagogy—to analyse and transform oppressive social structures. However, this Reconceptualisation legacy should not be idealised, as the process was heterogeneous and faced significant historical setbacks.

In Chile, for instance, the military dictatorship (1973–1990) significantly undermined the achievements of the Reconceptualisation movement. Schools were closed, critical professionals were persecuted, and community organisation was severely restricted. Even after the return to democracy, neoliberal reforms imposed a market logic that co-opted or neutralised part of critical social work (Vivero Arriagada, 2017). Consequently, Freirean pedagogy coexists with conservative and technocratic currents within Chilean social work, ranging from charitable welfare approaches to targeted managerial modalities. This coexistence demonstrates the tensions and challenges inherent in implementing emancipatory approaches in adverse sociopolitical contexts. Despite these limitations, Freire's critical legacy endures and remains relevant within sectors of Chilean and Latin American social work committed to social justice, renewing their methodologies in response to new forms of inequality.

From the 1960s and 1970s onward, Latin America began to feed back into Europe, which learned "from practice and countervailing power" in Latin America, creating a circle of mutual influence, with Paulo Freire as the hinge between the two directions. His work also found broad resonance in the Netherlands. After fleeing the coup in Brazil, Freire settled in Chile in November 1964, where he remained until April 1969. There he worked in government programs on dialogic literacy for *campesinos*—farmers in the Chilean countryside—as part of the Agrarian Reform. This period was crucial for the development of his pedagogical ideas, particularly the concepts of *conscientização* (consciousness-raising) and *Educación Popular* (popular education). During this time, he completed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in Spanish in 1968, in English in 1970, and in Dutch in 1972.

The coup d'état of 1973 brought an abrupt end to the institutional implementation of his work. Many Chilean intellectuals and activists fled to Europe, carrying with them *Educación Popular*—"learning in the language of the people." They introduced a politicised perspective on social relations. Two of these committed Chileans were Ernesto Repetur and Mariluz Castro de Repetur (Repetur, 2018a; Cadat-Lampe & Repetur, 2017). Ernesto worked as an agricultural engineer with Paulo Freire on the literacy and organisation of exploited farmers, including at the Instituto de Desarrollo Agropecuario (INDAP). Mariluz was a social worker affiliated with hospitals and orphanages. After the coup, Ernesto was detained for a long time in Tejas Verdes, a military camp for detention, torture, and disappearance. Mariluz managed to secure her husband's release, and in 1974 the family fled to the Netherlands.

Ernesto's first job in the Netherlands—on the assembly line at the Gouda pipe factory—made the contrasts with Chile clear to him (Repetur, 2018a). The entire workday was spent listening to *Arbeidsvitaminen* ("Work Vitamins"),[2] a radio program with fun songs that were mainly about love and relationships. There were regular breaks for relaxation and occasional outings for the entire company. Once a year, employees could go on vacation to a sunny destination. Some people had a caravan at a campsite where they could escape from their flats on weekends, when they weren't playing soccer. In Ernesto and Mariluz's eyes, Dutch workers were satisfied, with families, housewives, happy children with hobbies, homes, and cars. They felt that everything was geared more toward maintaining the status quo than creating political awareness. What also struck them was the lack of working women. In Chile, women commonly worked full-time, but in the Netherlands, it seemed to be a right for women not to have to—or not wish to—

[2] *Arbeidsvitaminen* is a popular music radio program produced by the broadcasting association AVROTROS for NPO Radio 5 in the Netherlands since 1946, making it the longest-running radio program in the country and one of the longest-running in the world.

work. Mariluz wanted to work; however, her diploma was not recognised because there could only be one breadwinner, and that was the man. Her job was to take care of her husband, children, house, and dog—in that order.

Two Worlds, One Didactic Cross-Pollination

The encounter with the Netherlands resulted in friction and insight (Repetur, 2018a). In the 1970s, this exchange led to cross-pollination in social and cultural work. What was called *Educación Popular* in Chile was translated in the Netherlands as "exemplary learning": education based on political formation that begins from learners' concrete experiences, rather than from abstract subject matter (Lans, 2009, 2021). The didactics are simple and sharp: do not start from abstract subject matter, but from concrete experience; codify that experience (story, photo, drawing); engage in a collective, critical dialogue about it; translate the outcomes into a perspective for action—from small-scale actions to institutional proposals (Freire, 1970, 1972). This creates a cycle of dialogue, analysis, and praxis, which aims to redistribute power. In the Netherlands, the focus among social professionals shifted from knowledge transfer to the co-production of meaning and power. The goal was to democratise knowledge, language for conflict and decision-making, and increase the say of residents and target groups. This interpretation was in line with social work practices in neighbourhoods, community centres, and later vocational training programs (Lans, 2009, 2021; Repetur, 2018a). The Freire-inspired core—dialogue, codification, and praxis—remained intact, but its application took on a different meaning in the Dutch welfare state than in the revolutionary Chilean context of the early 1970s. Whereas in Chile literacy and organisation were directly linked to land reform and political mobilisation, in the Netherlands, the focus shifted to institutional reform, policy influence, and co-production. This is evident in training programs, neighbourhood work, and practical experiences surrounding the migration and labour of families, such as those of Ernesto and Mariluz (Repetur, 2018b; Lans, 2009, 2021; Freire, 1970, 1972).

The institutional embedding of *Educación Popular* in the Netherlands is documented in the Dutch Canon Samenlevingsopbouw[3] (a knowledge source of the history of the social domain) (Lans, 2009, 2021). Exemplary learning is explicitly mentioned in Dutch didactic literature. As a result, Latin American pedagogy has become anchored as a methodological repertoire in Dutch politicising social work.

[3] "Community development"

The Dutch Context: Working Against the Tide

Socioeconomic Inequality

Compared to Chile, socioeconomic inequality is less visible in the Netherlands. For example, we do not see cardboard houses along the Amstel River in our capital city of Amsterdam, as is visible along the Mapocho River in Santiago. Nevertheless, in the Netherlands we are dealing with empirically observable and persistent consequences of the neoliberal policy paradigm. There is increasing homelessness, including among mothers with children and minors: approximately 18% of homeless people are minors (Hogeschool Utrecht, 2024; CBS, 2024). Although the absolute number of people living below the poverty line has recently fallen, this figure masks a deeper, more disturbing reality. According to a new measurement method,[4] although *only* 540,000 people (3.1% of the population) were living in poverty in 2023, the *severity* of poverty for this group increased (Brakel et al., 2024). In the Netherlands, 1.2 million people are in a precarious position, just above the poverty line.

Polarisation and Housing Crisis

Decades of market forces, privatisation, and budget cuts have eroded public services and shifted responsibilities onto individuals. Demographic and political developments are complicating these socioeconomic fault lines, while debates on migration and asylum are polarising the field. The Netherlands has become a structurally super-diverse society (Crul et al., 2019; Vertovec, 2007), where 26% of the population has a migration background (Butter, 2023). One aspect of this, the influx of refugees and labour migrants, is framed in public and political debate as a "pressure" on the already eroded welfare state. In 2024, the housing shortage amounted to approximately 401,000 homes (4.9% of the total stock) (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2025). At the same time, municipalities have a legal obligation to house status holders; the national government sets a target for this every six months (Rijksoverheid; COA). In neighbourhoods, scarcity in the housing market can lead to competition between low-income households and newcomers. This fuels polarisation and stigmatisation. The tensions that arise from this fall on social and community workers. This calls for approaches that mobilise shared interests and cross-solidarity instead of pitting groups against each other.

[4] Jointly developed by Statistics Netherlands (CBS), the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), and the National Institute for Budget Information (Nibud).

Professional Space

Ten years after a series of major decentralisations (Social Support Act 2015, Youth Act, Participation Act), the results are mixed. Evaluations show that core ambitions—customisation, integration, and efficiency—have only been partially realised; in several areas, outcomes fell short of expectations (Kromhout et al., 2020; de Klerk et al., 2022). These tensions are clearly visible in everyday work. Social workers and community workers spend an average of 37% of their working time on administration and rules; around 30% are considering changing jobs for this reason, and more than three-quarters experience stress due to regulatory pressure (Pronk et al., 2023). Short-term contracts and staggered procurement lead to additional accountability and transfer moments, with risks for the continuity of support and cooperation between providers (Jeugdautoriteit, 2023). As a result, social workers have less time for relational engagement, collective development, and local coalition building.

Contemporary Challenges: Between Empowerment and Exclusion

The Social Foundation as an Arena for Empowerment

In this article, we use the following working definition of "social foundation": "the totality of informal social connections (neighbourhoods, groups, associations, networks, families) supplemented and supported by local government, organisations, services, and facilities, which enables residents to participate in social relationships in a way that improves their well-being, capacities, and individual potential" (Scherpenzeel & Knegt, 2023; van Pelt & Repetur, 2018). This definition aligns with recent policy frameworks in which the social foundation is given a prominent place, such as the Healthy and Active Life Agreement/GALA (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 2023) and municipal policy visions (Movisie, 2024, January 4).

The current Dutch and broader European social and political context emphasises the relevance of this approach. Trust in political institutions fluctuates and is low in certain periods (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2025; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2025). Under conditions of uncertainty and polarisation, there is an increased risk of *scapegoating* mechanisms—the attribution of broad social problems to outgroups—in which distrust of the government and perceived adversity are associated with exclusionary attitudes (Kudrnáč et al., 2024; Korol et al., 2023; Hameleers et al., 2023; Ziller & Spörlein, 2020). Within such a context, the social base serves as a platform for knowledge sharing, the development of counter-narratives, and the articulation of collective interests.

For community development practice, this means a shift from instrumental to systemic questions. The question "How do we recruit more volunteers?" is no longer the primary concern, but rather "What interests structure the availability of places and facilities, who decides on this, and how can we increase the say of those involved?" This makes community development not only preventive or care-relieving, but explicitly politicising and emancipatory from the perspective of the living environment—a counterweight to an exclusively technocratic or austerity-driven approach (Britt et al., 2024; Spolander, Engelbrecht & Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2015).

Exclusion

While the social foundation represents a space for empowerment and collective agency, it also operates within contexts marked by persistent exclusionary dynamics. Essed (2020, 2008) shows how everyday interactions—even without explicit hostility—can result in structural inequality; these micro-mechanisms reproduce exclusion in teams, organisations, and services. The analysis of "white innocence" (Wekker, 2016) points to the tension in Dutch society between, on the one hand, a self-image of egalitarianism/colour blindness and, on the other hand, the continuing impact of colonial legacies and racial hierarchies. Social organisations, companies, and governments announce their intentions, take positions, develop diversity monitoring or intentions, but leave decision-making rules and work processes that generate unequal outcomes untouched. In 2020, for example, approximately 29% of employees at the municipality of Amsterdam had a migration background that was classified by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) at the time as non-Western, compared to 16% in management positions—an indication of unequal advancement that requires structural measures in selection, assessment, and career paths (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2021; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2025).

In recent years, policy blindness has had catastrophic national consequences in the so-called benefits scandal. Between 2004 and 2019, more than 150,000 parents and children—particularly those with a migrant background—found themselves in trouble due to the unjustly harsh approach of the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration. An investigation by the Dutch Data Protection Authority into the processing of nationality in government benefits (Autoriteit Persoonsgegevens, 2020) revealed discriminatory practices that were classified as institutional racism (Felten & Asante, 2022). Ethnic profiling emerged in policy implementation through criteria established in data entry—that is, discriminatory registration of variables and categories such as nationality and household composition. Parents, even those without benefits, faced unjustified claims for money from the tax authorities, mainly because of their foreign names. This led

to enormous tragedies, not only in terms of the poverty and debt created, but also in terms of personal tragedies caused by the removal of children from their parents by youth care services. This national benefits scandal did not come to light thanks to social workers or community workers. It was not social professionals, but the press and two observant politicians (House of Representatives, 2020) who brought the injustice done to these families to the public's attention.

In this scenario, it is worth questioning the training processes of future social workers and the approaches promoted to address discrimination and racism. Studies in this field show that social work training programs at universities of applied sciences still display significant shortcomings: the integration of these issues into curricula remains heterogeneous; they are often treated as isolated projects or depend on the initiative of individual lecturers, which generates gaps and fragmentation (Cadat-Lampe, 2025 October; Felten, 2025). This confirms that competencies for detecting and preventing discrimination and racism should not be optional modules, but core elements of professional competence and quality policy.

Empirical findings from recent Dutch practical research confirm that the dynamics of exclusion are at the heart of social work. Surveys among social professionals show that 49% report personal experiences with discrimination and/or microaggressions; 71% report discrimination among others, most often between clients/residents (73%); followed by 42% client–professional, 30% professional–client, and 25% between colleagues. These patterns indicate that exclusion manifests between residents, within teams, and in interactions between professionals and clients. Furthermore, overview studies point to a reluctance to act: the space, knowledge, and procedures to report and take action are lacking or not very visible; professionals doubt the usefulness of reporting or do not know how to proceed (Movisie, 2025).

(Re)politicising Community Development in Practice: Innovation from the Bottom Up

Community development in the Netherlands, which marks its centenary in 2025, has a history of continuous adaptation to social and political contexts. It began in 1925 in Drenthe, at the time one of the poorest provinces: the *Vereeniging voor den Opbouw van Drenthe* (Association for the Development of Drenthe) was founded to improve living conditions through education, care, and economic incentives, and quickly became a laboratory for broader social innovation. After 1945, community development gained a national foothold with structural funding and the translation of "community organisation" (Vereniging Canon Sociaal werk, 2019) to the Dutch context. In the

1970s, the profession became visibly politicised—community developers often sided with residents in urban renewal and organised coalitions around participation and quality of life. In the 1980s and 1990s, budget cuts and institutionalisation tempered this politicisation, although the profession remained relevant locally, where it moved with demographic and economic shifts. After 2010, interest grew again, partly due to institutional fragmentation, the energy and care transitions, and the need for local infrastructures that support collective resilience.

Integrated Education, Persistent Differentiation (2020–2025)

In the Netherlands, today, social workers and community developers are not trained in separate professional tracks. From 2015 to 2022, Dutch universities of applied sciences merged three distinct bachelor programs —including *Culturele en Maatschappelijke Vorming* ("Community and Social Development")— into a single four-year Social Work degree. All students now receive the same foundational education in years 1-2, with community development becoming one of three specialisation profiles ("*Welzijn & Samenleving*") in years 3-4, rather than a separate degree. Professionally, *maatschappelijke werkers* (social workers) and *opbouwwerkers* (community developers) are classified as "variants" within one unified profession under a single competency framework (Beroepsvereniging van Professionals in Sociaal Werk, 2023) and shared labour agreements. However, educational integration masks practical differentiation: community developers work primarily at collective/structural levels using community-organising methodology, while social workers focus on individual casework. With only one specialised Master Community Development program nationally (Hogeschool Utrecht, n.d.) and declining numbers of dedicated community developers (from over 1,100 to 500–600), the integration raises concerns about whether generalist education adequately prepares practitioners for complex community development work—concerns intensified by the 2026 fiscal crisis threatening preventive and community-oriented services.

Freire: Contemporary Revival and Implicit Practice

Over the past decade, there has been a renewed, explicit interest in the work of Paulo Freire in the Netherlands, linked to the moral imperatives in social work: professionals and educators are looking for language, ethics, and methodology to counter instrumentalisation and make power relations explicit. In this sense, a Freirean perspective sharpens the analysis, as the focus is not on the purely instrumental, preventive function of social work, but rather on its power-forming potential: the social base is an arena for *conscientização*, where residents engage in dialogue, exchange

experiences, recognise patterns, and organise themselves around control and the distribution of resources (Repetur, 2028a; Cadat-Lampe & Repetur, 2027, November 23). In this lecture, the emphasis shifts from "provision" to infrastructure for collective action: places and networks that increase the possibility of joint action (Klinenberg, 2020). In the current discourse, empowerment is again linked to Freirean "reflection & action": knowledge grows through dialogue, limit-situations[5] become visible, and learning gains meaning when reflection leads to collective action (Boumans, 2015a; Boumans, 2015b; Van Regenmortel, 2008). This line of thinking resonated strongly in Femke Kaulingfreks' Movisie Participation Lecture 2023, which called for "radical engagement" and space for young people's voices—"not participation, but space for their own wisdom"—as a counterweight to tokenism and adultism. This shifts the focus from participation on other people's terms to alliance, control, and institutional change. Kaulingfreks emphasises that "time, relationship, and authenticity" are prerequisites for meaningful influence by young people, not merely techniques or formats.

This reorientation aligns with recent Dutch literature on identity formation. In *Speelruimte voor identiteit* (Playing Space for Identity), Sieckelinck and Kaulingfreks (2022) investigate how young people develop their own voice and perspective for action in a context of polarisation and alienation—an agenda that is Freirean in its emphasis on dialogue, imagination, and co-ownership of the learning process. The book documents practices in which pedagogy and social work converge around the creation of "safe and courageous" space, with attention to power differences and the appropriation of language.

The revival of Freirean pedagogy has been reinforced by the existence in the Netherlands of a distinct practical component in the form of Augusto Boal's method, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which has been used since the late 1990s to address collective issues. *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1974) is directly inspired by Freire's critical *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). Boal translated Freire's core ideas, such as dialogic learning, problematising education, codification of experiences, and praxis (reflection and action), into theatrical forms such as image theatre, forum theatre, and legislative theatre (Boal, 1998; Freire, 2001; Freire, 1970). Boal links awareness and collective action to Freire's emancipatory pedagogy, which understands education as social praxis (Sieckelinck & Kaulingfreks, 2022).

[5] Freire uses the concept of "limit-situations" *(situações-limite)* to refer to historical barriers that constrain human action and are experienced as lived and impossible to transcend until they become objects of critical awareness (Freire, 2000, pp. 99–116).

In Rotterdam, "Joker" Luc Opdebeeck, together with the Formaat foundation, has adapted Theatre of the Oppressed to the Dutch context as a "workshop for participatory drama". The applications of participatory drama have been extensively documented. Formaat has developed reference material with the method books: *De mens in de hoofdrol*[6] (Opdebeeck & Matthijssen, 2013) and *Een scène schoppen*[7] (Opdebeeck and Bevers, 2014). The intervention is described as *Participatief Drama* ("Participatory Drama") in Movisie's "Effective Interventions" database (Formaat, 2014, July). Agenda Delfshaven 2020[8] (Gurp & Matthijssen, 2020) describes how a team of five facilitators called "jokers",[9] under the artistic and methodological guidance of Opdebeeck, worked with more than 300 young people on forum and legislative theatre, with a presentation to the district council and concrete policy proposals. This practice illustrates exactly what Freire and Boal aim to achieve: from spectator to "*doeschouwer*" (active participant), from individually experienced injustice to collective, dialogically prepared alternatives for action (Sieckelinck et al., 2024; Sieckelinck & Kaulingfreks, 2022; Boal, 1998, 2008; Freire, 1970).

Considering the above, we observe how experiential knowledge can be systematically embedded in policy and neighbourhood development. Guidelines and case studies link *Educación Popular* and exemplary learning to concrete steps for training, co-creation, and policy dialogue in super-diverse neighbourhoods (Cadat-Lampe & Avriç; Cadat-Lampe, 2020). These materials operationalise Freirean working in the Dutch context: from language and framing to decision-making routes and accountability.

This contemporary revival of Freire's thought in Dutch social work—both explicitly invoked and implicitly woven into practice—provides the normative and causal groundwork for the critical community-building methodologies that follow. In this sense, emancipatory pedagogy is translated into concrete strategies for collective empowerment. The next section, therefore, introduces a palette of methodologies that, by 2025, have become practical embodiments of these Freirean principles: Participatory Action Research (PAR), Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), Community Wealth Building (CWB), and deliberative democracy. Each concretely implements

[6] "People in the spotlight".

[7] "Kicking a scene".

[8] *Agenda Delfshaven 2020* is a participatory community plan developed in the Delfshaven district of Rotterdam, in collaboration with residents and young people, using Theatre of the Oppressed as a methodology to translate lived experiences of injustice into concrete local policy proposals.

[9] E. N.: According to Augusto Boal, the role of the "joker" is crucial in Theatre of the Oppressed. The joker is a facilitator who mediates between the audience and the scene, asking the key questions and guiding the group.

Freire's triad of dialogue, codification, and praxis as on-the-ground strategies for empowerment and structural change, albeit not per se with conscious reference to Freire.

Community Building, a Palette of Critical Methodologies

Community development in the Netherlands is now positioning itself more emphatically as an alternative to a managerial welfare model. Whereas policy has long characterised citizens as "clients" or "consumers" and sought to maximise their "self-reliance," community development is rediscovering citizens as actors with knowledge, talents, and capacity to act. The focus is shifting from individual deficits to collective capacities and from adapting to the system to changing the conditions that produce inequality.

In practice, this is achieved through a range of critical methodologies that give concrete form to dialogue, ownership, and redistribution: Participatory Action Research (PAR) links knowledge production to collective decision-making; Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) utilises existing resources and associations; Community Wealth Building (CWB) directs local resources toward public goals; deliberative democracy through neighbourhood participation (*Zeggenschap in de wijk)* gives residents a voice in local decision-making. These approaches work best in combination and across multiple spheres simultaneously (personal, communal, institutional), bringing awareness and practice together in concrete institutional changes in which local infrastructures—community centres, cooperatives, anchor institutions—serve as the social basis for power sharing and redistribution.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), known locally as *Participatief Actieonderzoek* (PAO), breaks down the classic division between researcher and "object" of study: instead, neighbours become co-researchers of their own reality. The community defines the questions, collects data on their living conditions, and analyses the results, generating "counter-data" that supports collective action and policy advocacy (Lucko, 2024). This is a form of codification of experience: the data and narratives produced by the people themselves reveal extreme situations (injustices, unmet needs) that previously remained opaque, while also serving as input for proposing changes.

A PAR's verifiable example is the *Gelukkig en Gezond* neighbourhood project in Moerwijkin, The Hague, where residents of a disadvantaged neighbourhood collaborated with professionals to measure health problems and design community interventions; this process showed how PAR strengthens both local knowledge

and shared decision-making (Van Der Vlegel-Brouwer et al., 2023). By legitimising experiential knowledge as valid evidence and bringing it closer to professional and scientific expertise, PAR embodies Freire's vision that everyone educates everyone else, and that research can—and should—be at the service of liberating praxis. In terms of results, the PAR reduces the distance between the community and the authorities, empowering the former to base their demands on their own data and refuting incomplete official narratives. This exemplifies Freire's ideal of conscientising dialogue: by investigating their reality, people become aware of the structural causes of their problems and act to transform them.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) in the Netherlands (Brörmann, 2010) starts from what residents already have and can do, yet it operates within a Dutch governance ecology. In the Anglo-American strand, ABCD is framed as "inside-out" and citizen-led, with professionals and the state stepping back: that tradition values distance from government to protect community autonomy (Kretzmann, 1993). In the Netherlands, communities typically work with municipalities (local government) that co-resource space, facilitation, and learning; Dutch practice therefore blends citizen leadership with public-sector support and political strategy for local democracy (Huygen & Fortuin, 2021). Practice infrastructure of ABCD is distributed among actors of civil society.

The national association Landelijk Samenwerkingsverband Actieve (LSA) bewoners (national association of active residents) positions ABCD as a practical pathway for resident voice and neighbourhood power. Its 2025 "Toolbox ABCD" gathers background, Dutch history, and tools for everyday community building. The network WijzijnABCD ("we are ABCD") functions as a platform for ABCD community builders, curating cases, a guide, and learning events, and connecting practitioners across cities and villages. Krachtproef ("Strength Test") is a knowledge platform for *opbouwwerkers* (community development workers) that hosts stories, activities, and peer discussions. Rode Wouw ("Red Kite") offers training in ABCD community building and supports participatory design with municipalities and residents. Plan en Aanpak ("Plan and Approach") states plainly that ABCD is not a stepwise method but a way of working that grows with each community and offers work principles as anchors. Together, these intermediaries keep practice grounded in resident assets while navigating policy, funding, and institutional partners.

A frequent critique in Dutch debates warns that an uncritical focus on "*eigen kracht*" ("self-reliance"[10]) can shift responsibility onto residents and let institutions retreat. Dutch ABCD responses build an explicit power lens into practice: who holds decision-making power, whose assets are overlooked, and how to secure resources for those with less access. This is visible in training offers, framing around democratic renewal, and guidance that ties asset-work to advocacy and institutional change.

The link to Paulo Freire's *Educación Popular* is direct. First, co-inquiry: residents analyse lived reality together with facilitators ("learning together"), turning everyday experience into shared knowledge. Second, codification: asset maps, stories, and neighbourhood "work sheets" transform tacit competence into visible "counter-data" that can travel into meetings with officials and funders. Third, problem-posing pedagogy: activities are designed to surface contradictions in the neighbourhood and to deliberate on alternatives rather than deliver prefabricated solutions. Fourth, praxis: cycles of action and reflection ("do it together" and "stand still together") keep learning tied to tangible change and to claims for voice, space, and budget. In short, Dutch ABCD keeps the Freirean triad of reality reading, codification, and action intact, while adapting it to a welfare state setting where municipalities are partners rather than distant regulators.

Community Wealth Building (CWB) democratises local economies by anchoring ownership, purchasing, and finance in communities (CLS, 2019). Since 2023, Amsterdam New West has adopted CWB within the *Nationaal Programma Samen Nieuw-West* ("New West Together"), reframing the neighbourhood as a partner in its own economic renewal (Baqueriza-Jackson, 2024; Samen Nieuw-West, 2024, October 18). Concrete strategies are underway to keep wealth local. Anchor institutions—schools, hospitals, housing corporations, the municipality—redirect procurement toward neighbourhood firms and cooperatives. Contracts privilege local value chains, so each euro circulates and multiplies in Nieuw-West. Incubation helps residents launch workers and neighbourhood co-ops in food, care, maintenance, and home-energy retrofits. A "Koop Lokaal" ("Buy Local") marketplace connects small businesses with consumers and large buyers, making it easier to buy local and build supply networks. Early adopters demonstrate the model by hiring nearby, sourcing locally, and reinvesting surpluses in community facilities.

For social work, CWB broadens practice from individual support to structural change.

[10] E. N.: The literal translation is "one's own strength." In Dutch social policy it is used to justify self-reliance as a precondition for institutional support and has been widely criticised for individualising structural problems.

Practitioners act as community facilitators and intermediaries, organising residents, brokering ties with anchors, and building capabilities needed to govern enterprises and contracts. This advances core social values—empowerment, equity, and dignity—by expanding people's power over assets, jobs, and services.

CWB is also participatory democracy in economic form. Residents co-design priorities, influence how public money is spent, and co-own enterprises that deliver public value. Decision-making shifts from consultation to shared authority, rebuilding trust as benefits appear in everyday life.

This approach aligns directly with Paulo Freire's *Educación Popular*. Freire called for critical consciousness (*conscientização*) through dialogue and action—praxis that links learning to transformation. CWB operationalises this pedagogy economically: through assemblies, workshops, and cooperative training, neighbours analyse how wealth leaves the area, design alternatives, and act together to change those flows. Like popular education, CWB turns marginalised people into authors of their development, joining democratic learning with democratic ownership to build local prosperity and civic power. The result is inclusive development that strengthens cohesion.

Zeggenschap in de Wijk (say in the neighbourhood): Deliberative Democracy in Practice

The Dutch Council for Public Administration (Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, 2017) argues that democracy must extend beyond formal politics to the neighbourhood level. It calls for active citizen participation and local co-determination. This deliberative vision moves community development beyond token "liveability" projects toward bottom-up institutional innovation, refocusing efforts from individual behaviour management to collective resilience and structural redistribution. This local democratisation *ethos* aligns with Paulo Freire's and Augusto Boal's Legislative Theatre. Freire's popular education model stresses dialogue, critical consciousness, and linking grassroots knowledge with collective action. Boal, inspired by Freire, translated these principles into participatory theatre forms that turn passive spectators into empowered "spect-actors" who tackle community issues. Dutch social work draws on these traditions: practitioners (notably Luc Opdebeeck's Formaat group) have adapted Boal's methods to engage marginalised communities in policy dialogue.

In this spirit, *Zeggenschap in de wijk* ("Say in the neighbourhood") has emerged as a model of citizen deliberation. It convenes for instance randomly selected residents in neighbourhood assemblies and participatory budgeting to decide local priorities

(Nelissen, 2023). The outcomes of *Zeggenschap in de wijk* and similar initiatives reveal both transformative potential and institutional constraints. They embody Freirean and Boalian ideals by turning clients into co-creators of policy. As mentioned earlier, in Rotterdam's Delfshaven, the Agenda Delfshaven 2020 project engaged over 300 youths in a legislative theatre process that presented a "youth agenda" of policy proposals to the district council (Formaat, 2010). The Circus Pa Meijer project similarly enabled people with intellectual disabilities to perform their experiences and demands to care providers, yielding concrete changes such as improved transport services and thus institutionalising their political agency (Formaat, 2009). However, citizen power remains limited: participatory budgets cover only a minor share of public spending and operate under tight official constraints, and citizen proposals still rely on authorities for implementation. Thus, *Zeggenschap in de wijk* offers significant emancipatory potential, but its long-term impact hinges on overcoming institutional barriers so that bottom-up deliberation truly shapes structural policy outcomes.

The emergence of a politicised community development movement in the Netherlands does not stand alone but is embedded in a transnational history of critical social work. A key source is Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy. His methodological elaboration, *Educación Popular,* has deep roots in Chile and feeds Dutch practices in which dialogue, awareness (*conscientização)* and praxis are linked to institutional change and redistribution. This reveals that the struggle against inequality is a shared, global project.

Conclusion and Perspective: Towards a Politicising Community Development

In 2025, Dutch social work operates in a field of tension marked by increasing inequality, a decades-old neoliberal governance model, and the rise of far-right populist politics. Decentralisation, accompanied by budget cuts, has contributed to financial pressure, administrative overload, erosion of professional space, and declining social trust. Within this constellation, a purely individual-oriented, depoliticising practice is neither sustainable nor normatively convincing. However, efforts to advance a politicising approach face persistent challenges in this environment. Many social professionals are weighed down by bureaucratic accountability requirements and managerial burdens that leave little room for the deep community engagement such work demands. Institutional cultures often favour technocratic metrics and risk-averse routines, reinforcing the depoliticisation of practice by implicitly discouraging overtly political engagement in day-to-day work. Moreover, the ascendance of far-right narratives in public discourse has fuelled polarisation and scapegoating, making

it harder to build broad support for inclusive, justice-oriented interventions. Despite these headwinds, our analysis affirms that politicising community building remains a necessary and feasible alternative. Theoretically, this approach is grounded in critical pedagogy and deepened with intersectional and anti-racist insights; practically, the focus shifts from isolated "cases" to collective processes that address structural causes and make power relations explicit.

This leads to three interrelated implications. First, depathologise poverty and exclusion by treating them primarily as social and political issues, not as individual deficits. Second, restore collective scope for action by making residents co-owners of knowledge, resources, and decision-making—so that co-production and participation become constitutive rather than merely instrumental. Third, break through managerial logic by validating alternative forms of evidence and outcomes—for example, dialogically generated "counter-data"—beyond narrow performance indicators and short-term management.

The Dutch approach does not stand alone. The affinity with Latin American *Educación Popular* reveals how methods of dialogue, codification, and praxis are being reinterpreted in the Netherlands as institutional innovation from below. What took shape in Chile as liberation pedagogy is emerging in the Netherlands as democratic renewal at the grassroots level: from "provision" to infrastructure for collective action. This reciprocal exchange—not a one-way street, but a circulation of practical knowledge—underlines that politicisation is not opposed to professionalism but forms its foundation. In this regard, Latin America's historical engagement with extreme inequality offers more than methodological inspiration for Europe—it offers a mirror and a roadmap. European societies that once prided themselves on egalitarian welfare states are now grappling with widening disparities and social exclusion reminiscent of Latin American realities.

Thus, Latin America's hard-won experiences of grassroots mobilisation, community resilience, resistance to technocracy, and politicised popular education become profoundly relevant to Europe's current search for democratic renewal. Crucially, this transnational dialogue is not merely symbolic or technical; it is a mutual learning process grounded in shared struggles, one that helps practitioners on both sides of the globe navigate analogous tensions and pursue institutional innovation from below within a shared repertoire of critical social work practices.

In conclusion, community building can develop into strategic infrastructure for collective resilience and democratic renewal. This requires consistency in language

and design choices that link frontline implementation to public accountability. It also requires ongoing dialogue and methodical exchange between contexts such as Chile and the Netherlands, so that experiences, concepts, and working methods continue to sharpen each other within a shared transnational repertoire of critical social work practices.

Finally, present political developments underscore the urgency of these efforts. The Netherlands is headed for a general election on October 29, 2025, in which issues of inequality and social provision have gained prominence amid a close contest involving a far-right party vying for power. Chile, likewise, faces a presidential election on November 16, 2025, where a leading conservative candidacy signals a possible shift away from recent progressive reforms.

These electoral crossroads are likely to sharpen both the tensions and the opportunities for politicising social work in each country. On the one hand, a further turn toward exclusionary or technocratic governance could narrow the space for community-led initiatives and critical practice. On the other hand, heightened public awareness and mobilisation around these elections may create opportunities for social workers and communities to push for democratic renewal and social justice. In this context of uncertainty and possibility, the Freirean *ethos* of dialogue, critical consciousness, and collective action remains a vital compass. By sustaining a politicising community development approach, social workers in both countries can help build the collective resilience needed to defend equality and inclusion—whatever the electoral outcomes.

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PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

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ARTICLE

Social Assistance for Dispossession: Contradictions and Challenges of Social Work in the Context of Socio-Environmental Conflicts and Extractivism

Asistencia social del despojo: contradicciones y desafíos del Trabajo Social en contexto de conflictos

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Abstract

Social work celebrates its one hundredth anniversary in Chile and Latin America, in a context marked by an ecosocial crisis and the expansion of socio-environmental conflicts inherent to extractivism, which entails both professional contradictions and challenges. Social work must address the disciplinary debate on its role within extractive companies operating in contexts of dispossession, as well as the associated ethical-political and theoretical-methodological dilemmas. Within this framework, the article analyses the role of social work practiced in companies that generate socio-environmental conflicts

Keywords:
social assistance for dispossession; socio-environmental conflicts; extractivism; green somnambulism; social work

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in Chile, identifying clientelist practices and their ethical-professional implications. From this perspective, it proposes the category of "social assistance of dispossession" as a critical and original contribution to describe the type of professional action co-opted by extractivism to legitimise processes of accumulation by dispossession within the framework of green somnambulism.

Along with characterisations and reflections, cases of malpractice and contradictions with professional codes of ethics are identified through a review of Latin American literature, document analysis, and the systematisation of participatory action research processes developed together with communities in resistance and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sustentarse. Nine cases of socio-environmental conflicts that occurred in Chile over the past two decades are examined. Likewise, the study demonstrated that the professional role—in its ontological, deontological, and methodological dimensions—aligns with the de-extractivisation of social work and the defence of territories and rights, fostering the collective construction of ecological, emancipatory, and postextractivist horizons. Finally, the article offers ethical-political reflections and inflections that encourage the reconciliation of the relationship between communities in resistance and social work.

Resumen

El Trabajo Social conmemora cien años en Chile y América Latina en un escenario marcado por la crisis ecosocial y la expansión de conflictos socioambientales propios del extractivismo, lo que plantea diversas contradicciones y desafíos profesionales. En este contexto, el Trabajo Social debe asumir un debate disciplinar en torno a su rol al interior de las empresas extractivistas en contextos de despojo, así como los dilemas ético-políticos y teórico-metodológicos asociados. En este marco, el artículo analiza el rol de la disciplina en empresas que provocan conflictos socioambientales en Chile, identificando prácticas clientelares y sus implicancias ético-profesionales. Desde esta perspectiva, se propone establecer la categoría de «Asistencia Social del Despojo» como un aporte original crítico para describir el tipo de acción profesional cooptada por el extractivismo para legitimar procesos de acumulación por desposesión en el marco del sonambulismo verde.

Palabras clave:
Asistencia Social del Despojo; conflictos socioambientales; extractivismo; sonambulismo verde; Trabajo Social

Junto con caracterizaciones y cuestionamientos, se identifican casos de malas praxis y contradicciones con los códigos de ética profesionales, mediante la revisión de literatura latinoamericana, análisis documental y la sistematización de procesos de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP) realizados con comunidades en resistencia y desarrollados junto a la organización no gubernamental (ONG) Sustentarse. Se estudian nueve episodios de conflictos socioambientales ocurridos en Chile en las últimas dos décadas. Asimismo, se demuestra que el rol profesional, en sus dimensiones ontológica, deontológica y metodológica, se alinea con la desextractivización del Trabajo Social y la defensa de territorios y derechos, apostando por la construcción colectiva de horizontes ecológicos, emancipatorios y postextractivistas. Finalmente, se plantean reflexiones e inflexiones ético-políticas que impulsan la reconciliación del vínculo entre comunidades en resistencia y el Trabajo Social.

Introduction

Social work celebrates 100 years of history in Chile and Latin America, in a context marked by the eco-social crisis and the expansion of socio-environmental conflicts arising from extractivism. Although the discussion on the relationship between socio-environmental conflicts and social work has intensified in the last decade (Jerez, 2015; Marro, 2022; Panez & Mendoza, 2023), the specific discussion on the professional role within extractivist companies in contexts of socio-environmental conflict and the ethical-political and theoretical-methodological dilemmas that this entails still lacks depth.

In the context of this article, it is important to begin addressing this lack of development by considering two elements: on the one hand, the existence of a naturalisation of the professional practice of social work in processes of dispossession, described by Panez and Mendoza (2023), and, on the other hand, the growing professional devaluation in contexts of territorial resistance, as reflected in professional research experiences developed with the non-governmental organisation.[2]

This raises an unavoidable question: what is the ontological, methodological and deontological role of social work in the face of ethical and professional contradictions

[2] The NGO Sustentarse advocates for human rights, sustainable development, and good socio-environmental governance at the local level. It also supports communities, especially the most vulnerable groups—such as women and indigenous peoples—in defending their rights, their territories, and the environment. For more information, visit: https://www.sustentarse.cl/

and scenarios of eco-social crisis and socio-environmental conflicts? This article aims to critically analyse the role of social work in interventions carried out by extractive companies in contexts of socio-environmental conflict in Chile. The analysis focuses on clientelistic practices and their professional and eco-social consequences.

To this end, the proposed methodology, which is critical and qualitative in nature, draws on a review of Latin American literature on political ecology, extractivism, eco-territorial conflicts and social work, and a documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources, prioritising those that provide concrete evidence on the participation and characteristics of the discipline in corporate clientelism strategies. The material used includes information generated by the Sistema de Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental (SEIA)[3] (Environmental Impact Assessment System), such as Estudio de Impacto Ambiental (EIA) (Environmental Impact Studies) and technical annexes, including minutes of citizen participation and meetings, statements of consent and baseline documentation; public transparency documents from companies linked to the conflicts, such as framework agreements, collaboration regulations, institutional reports, and information on calls for socio-economic benefits; academic production, consisting of undergraduate and postgraduate theses, research, articles, and books on socio-environmental conflicts and social work; and, finally, publications by NGOs, communities in resistance, and socio-environmental organisations, including books, studies, opinion columns, public complaints, and reports.

Based on this review, nine episodes of socio-environmental conflict that have occurred in Chile in the last two decades are studied, selected for their public notoriety and social and ecological impact. In five of these cases, the presence of social work professionals was previously confirmed through fieldwork in the context of Participatory Action Research (PAR) processes with communities in resistance, developed in conjunction with the NGO Sustentarse. Based on this, the category of "Social Assistance for Dispossession" is proposed as an original critical contribution to describe the type of professional action of social work co-opted by extractive companies that legitimise processes of accumulation by dispossession within the framework of green somnambulism (Bonelli & Pavez, 2025).

[3] This is a preventive environmental management tool, regulated by Law No. 19,300 on General Environmental Principles, and defined in its regulations as a procedure carried out by the Environmental Assessment Service, which, based on an Environmental Impact Study or Declaration, determines whether the environmental impact of an activity or project complies with current regulations. It has been in force in Chile since 3 April 1997. Currently, the procedure is processed electronically through the e-SEIA.

Finally, ethical-political reflections and inflections are proposed that promote the de-extractivisation of professional action in the context of socio-environmental conflict and the reconciliation of the link between communities in resistance and social work.

Debates and Conceptualisations Around Extractivism and Socio-environmental Conflicts in Latin America

The main conceptualisations of extractivism on the continent come from Eduardo Gudynas (2013), who defines it as the misappropriation of natural resources (hereinafter, natural common goods) in accordance with two pillars: the first consists of high volume and intensity, and the second, that more than 50% of what is extracted is destined for export. It also incorporates a variety of activities, including not only mining and oil, but also other hydrocarbons, monoculture, aquaculture and livestock farming. This process entails a high cost in terms of ecosystem degradation and impact on local communities (Gudynas, 2013).

This pattern of extractive exploitation stems from a global context based on two axes. On the one hand, there is the so-called Global North, made up of countries characterised as "developed" because they are centres of capital accumulation with high levels of consumption; on the other hand, there is the Global South, characterised as "underdeveloped" due to the plundering of its raw materials and the concentration of socio-environmental impacts (Escobar, 2010). This reflects an unequal global economic and ecological exchange, which has intensified and been reinvented since the 1970s through the neoliberal model. Harvey (2004) explains this as accumulation by dispossession, a cycle of expropriation and commodification that handed over public and collective natural assets to large transnational corporations for exploitation and export to the Global North. This form does not generate wealth through production but rather dispossesses a colonised Latin America and its rural and/or indigenous communities of resources, ecological wealth and rights in order to supply the needs of the Global North (Machado, 2013). This new imperialism is strengthened by three components: the value of neoliberalised local states; the expansion of financial capital for the appropriation of rents and assets (natural common goods) through credit mechanisms, debt and speculation; and the manipulation of crises—whether real or induced—by taking advantage of asset devaluation to consolidate processes of dispossession, forging capital accumulation and profitability through precariousness and sacrifice (Machado, 2013).

In this context, progressive governments in Latin America in recent decades have given rise to a form of neo-extractivism that reconverts the logic of accumulation, deepening

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the neoliberal model through components of state administration of exploitation revenues. This extractivist model is legitimised by narratives of national sovereignty and technological advancement that are sustained by a context of traditional industrial change, involving the rise of mega-mining, fracking and hydroelectric megaprojects, in which, however, intensive commodification and the associated socio-environmental impacts persist (Gudynas, 2013; Svampa & Viale, 2014).

In response to these processes of dispossession, eco-territorial resistance movements have emerged, conceptualised as socio-environmental conflicts, which in Chile are defined by the National Institute of Human Rights (Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos [INDH], 2018) as disputes between actors over the use of resources and the environmental impacts of economic activities. However, there are other definitions that consider other aspects that enrich the conceptual discussion. Escobar (2014) defines them as struggles against the dominant model that imposes capitalist ways of life on local communities, specifying that not only territories are defended, but also relational ontologies. In the same vein, Svampa and Viale (2014) add that these disputes undermine the very scope of democracy when extractivism is imposed on territories without their consent, generating resistance, repression and community division. Considering these in-depth concepts, registers compiled by civil society organisations emerge that reveal a broader and more critical reality regarding socio-environmental conflicts in Chile. In contrast to the limited record of the INDH (2018), which documents only twenty-one cases in the Valparaíso region, the Aconcagua Observatory of Chile (2024) reports a total of two hundred and fifty in the same region.

Meanwhile, the maximisation of these dispossessions is spatially expressed in what Svampa and Viale (2014) conceptualise as sacrifice zones. These are spaces that concentrate the environmental damage caused by extractivism, which affects the health of the population and their quality of life as a result of pollution, under a logic of efficient occupation of territories that are considered expendable. This process also tramples on other local rationalities and ways of life.

In recent years, Chile has undergone a new wave of extractivism, this time cloaked in "green" and "sustainable" rhetoric and legitimised by global narratives of decarbonisation and energy transition. This phenomenon is manifested in the rise of industries such as green hydrogen (H2V), lithium, mega-mining and desalination (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024; Lueje & Standen, 2024). This reformulation of the same logic of accumulation by dispossession has been conceptualised as green extractivism, which also reproduces and deepens the so-called sacrifice zones, renamed "green" (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024). These dynamics are sustained by a collective automatism,

explained through the concept of "green somnambulism", coined by Bonelli & Pavez (2025) to refer to sustainability rhetoric that constructs misleading narratives, imposing the adoption of these new industries as indispensable responses to the eco-social crisis, while obscuring possibilities for thinking about post-extractivist development alternatives.

In this scenario, it is necessary to specify that, for the purposes of this paper, extractivism is understood as the intensive appropriation and dispossession of natural common goods in dynamics of accumulation by dispossession, characteristic of globalised neoliberalism. This dispossession affects not only common goods, but also ancestral knowledge, cultural, subsistence and epistemic elements that express the symbiosis between ecosystem flows and local ways of life, a relationship that is also compromised (Escobar, 2016). In this context, there is growing socio-environmental conflict, understood as resistance by communities to the dispossession of their territories, bodies and ways of life by extractivism (Svampa & Viale, 2014).

Thus, in order to overcome this resistance, extractivism deploys mechanisms that co-opt territories, deny conflicts and demobilise resistance (Panez & Mendoza, 2023). Machado (2012) proposes biopolitical expropriation to define elements of this extractivist *modus operandi*. Not only are territorial elements that enable certain material living conditions stripped away, but community fabrics and territorial roots themselves are broken down in order to dismantle resistance, encourage habituation and legitimise dispossession. In this context, authors warn that social work, captured by neoliberal companies, contributes to normalising extractivist violence, demobilisation and even counterinsurgency (Marro, 2018; Panez & Mendoza, 2023).

Social Work and Socio-environmental Conflicts in Chile: History, Relevance and Contemporary Relevance

Social work in Chile has an important historical tradition related to the environment. Although in its infancy, the discipline focused on promoting improvements in hygiene and health conditions, as well as, later, on promoting health infrastructure. However, its boom did not materialise until the 1960s, in the context of the Agrarian Reform, where it played a driving role in peasant unionism, community expropriation and the collective management of land and natural common goods. Nevertheless, with the coup d'état in 1973 and the subsequent forced imposition of the neoliberal model, the profession had to adapt in order to survive in a repressive context, leading to a setback in territorial intervention processes. From this point on, this historical ontology of social work, linked to socio-environmental work, faded away amid corporate co-optation (Castañeda-Meneses, 2024).

In the context of the centenary of the profession in Chile and Latin America, marked by the eco-social crisis described above, the discussion on the relationship between socio-environmental conflicts and social work has intensified, both in the field of academic production (Jerez, 2015; Marro, 2022; Panez & Mendoza, 2023) and, for example, in Chile, with the incorporation of the subject "Environment, Territory and Social Work" into the professional training curriculum of the University of Valparaíso (2020). However, the specific discussion on the professional role within companies linked to this type of conflict, amid the ethical-political and theoretical-methodological dilemmas that this entails, has not been explored in depth.

Given this conceptual gap, it is essential to identify two fundamental reasons for its relevance. Firstly, it is necessary to recognise that socio-environmental conflicts are intrinsic to professional practice for three main reasons: i) the rise and expansion of eco-territorial conflict derived from new forms of extractivism, such as green extractivism (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024; Gudynas, 2024); ii) extractivist domination exacerbates the problems and gaps of the contemporary eco-social issue (Marro, 2022); and iii) the triple planetary crisis—climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution— intensifies the generation of social problems, socio-environmental conflicts and socio-natural disasters (Organización de las Naciones Unidas [ONU], 2024).

Secondly, it is essential to demystify the idea that these phenomena and impacts are restricted exclusively to rural areas and marginalised regions. Although most conflicts occur in rural areas, the impact of extractivism is not limited to the extraction site but also affects the entire export chain and even beyond (Gudynas, 2013).

Thus, socio-environmental conflicts and the effects of extractivism are relevant to any area of social work intervention; moreover, they will profoundly impact and condition any case of professional action.

Corporate Clientelism: Extractivism Strategies to Demobilise Communities and Neutralise Resistance

In the context of socio-environmental conflicts, one of the most effective—and at the same time most perverse—strategies of extractivism has been the use of corporate clientelism as a method of social control. When a community is promised high numbers of jobs, economic prosperity and social development projects, but the true socio-environmental costs are omitted, according to Garibay (2010), it becomes trapped in terms of organisation and collective resistance.

According to Tetreault (2013), these processes generate division and polarisation within the community, which falls within what Arriagada (2013) conceptualises as "corporate clientelism", a deeply asymmetrical relationship between the company—with high capital, which provides resources—and the community, with limited access to them, which receives them in exchange for acceptance and loyalty. This practice constitutes a form of extractivist domination, based on the logic of feudalism and contemporary slavery, where the social urgencies of the community are instrumentalised as a way of legitimising extractivist violence.

"The classic clientelist practice to reduce local resistance, to buy leadership and to legitimise their projects. And they do this all over Chile, they go, they set up a headquarters for you, they buy shirts for sports clubs" (Social leader from Limache, 44 years old, quoted in Riveros & Vargas, 2018, p.77).

Socio-environmental Conflicts in Chile: Social Work in the Extractivist *Modus Operandi*

The *modus operandi* of extractivism is clearly evident in nine of the most significant socio-environmental conflicts of the last two decades in Chile. In all of them, social work professionals were found to be engaging in clientelist practices.

This is the case of HidroAysén (2007–2014), a socio-environmental conflict located in the Andean Patagonia. Jerez (2015) documents how the company deployed various clientelistic tools. These included the constant harassment of social professionals in the municipalities in order to gain their trust and obtain social approval through social benefit programmes, offering prizes for bingo games and financing popular festivals, while at the same time minimising the environmental impact on national parks and Mapuche communities.

For its part, the Alto Maipo hydroelectric project (2007–present), located in the Santiago mountain range, uses clientelistic strategies, including the AES Gener Competitive Fund, scholarships, community agreements, and the creation of viewpoints; actions that have been carried out by various social work professionals over almost two decades, according to their own information (AES Gener, 2010; 2014; Zaccarelli, 2016). These practices seek to generate social legitimacy, while at the same time concealing complaints about the destruction of Andean forests and glaciers and water hoarding (Servicio de Evaluación Ambiental, 2019). In an interview conducted by the author with Marcela Mella, the former spokesperson for the No Alto Maipo Coordination Committee (September 2025, in the context of territorial

accompaniment developed by the NGO Sustentarse) recounts the strong stigmatisation exercised against those who resist clientelistic practices, leading to family breakdowns, neighbourhood confrontations, divisions within neighbourhood associations, the municipality and social and resistance organisations, job dismissals and even physical conflicts. This dynamic coincides with that documented by Campos (2016).

The Central de Bombeo Paposo (CBP) (2022–2024) and the Integrated Energy Infrastructure Project (INNA) (2021–present), both energy generation initiatives, are located in the Atacama Desert, specifically in the municipality of Taltal. The companies promoted clientelistic relationship strategies with the communities of the Chango people and coastal localities. Through framework agreements and greenwashing tactics, they advertise the creation of viewpoints and electrical infrastructure, the allocation of jobs and gifts, as well as the supposed sustainability of the H2V and desalination industry (Illanes y Asociados & Colbún, 2024; Gisoc Consultora & AES Andes, 2024). However, these strategies hide the impacts on the archaeological and astronomical areas, as well as on marine-coastal ecosystems and livelihoods (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024; Lueje & Standen, 2024).

As a result, most of the changa communities rejected these agreements and broke off relations with the companies (Illanes y Asociados & Colbún, 2024; Gisoc Consultora & AES Andes, 2024). Similarly, in interviews conducted by the author with members of the Almendrales del Gaucho community in Paposo (17 October 2024, in the context of an IAP developed with Sustentarse), a collective narrative of discontent was expressed towards two communities that accepted agreements with the companies. In particular, they criticise the payments received for signing the project baseline, pointing out that this caused divisions and disputes between communities. As one member pointed out: "They already have electricity, they already have money, we still don't."

The sacrifice zones of Tocopilla (1915-present), Mejillones (1995-present) and Quintero-Puchuncaví (1964-present) are located on the coast of the Atacama Desert and on the coast of central Chile, respectively. These saturated territories share the presence of the same transnational companies. Energy corporations develop community outreach programmes through competitive funding, food box deliveries, visits to industrial facilities, and sporting activities such as the "AES Gener Cup," aimed at promoting the health and recreation of children and adolescents (AES Gener, 2010; 2014; Engie, 2020). However, these legitimisation actions conceal the socio-environmental impacts of extractive companies: air pollution, chronic exposure to heavy metals and mass poisoning. One of the most emblematic cases is the poisoning of La Greda school in Puchuncaví, where serious health effects on children and adolescents linked to industrial emissions were documented (Viviani et al., 2021).

Dominga (2013-present) is located on the coast of north-central Chile. The mining-port project is supported by a framework agreement, through which food boxes are delivered, festivities are financed, free internet points are installed, and even direct payments are made to the parties participating in the agreement (Illanes, J. y asociados & Andes Iron. 2013; Andes Iron, 2016; Fuentes & Ergas, 2021). These patronage practices conceal the impacts on the Humboldt Archipelago and the indigenous biocultural heritage of the coast of the La Higuera-Los Choros sector (Greenpeace, 2025). As a result, the communities receiving financial payments have tended to support the project, leading to a fractured community, major internal divisions and conflicts between those who defend the marine environment and those who are subordinate to the company, resulting in symbolic and territorial violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Fuentes & Ergas, 2021).

Finally, Pascua Lama (2000–2018), located in the Atacama Desert mountain range, is a mining project that has given rise to one of Chile's most emblematic cases of environmental conflict. Challenges to the industrial operation due to its responsibility for the destruction of Andean glaciers and its impact on the communities of the Huasco Valley led to sanctions and, ultimately, the cancellation of the project due to repeated breaches (Lobos, 2022). The company implemented clientelistic community relations strategies, but after a short time, agreements began to fall apart and social consensus was lost. The Diaguita indigenous community of Perales denounced the high payments made for attending meetings and signing consent agreements, without informing them of the consequences of the project and even falsifying an attendance list that included signatures of people outside the communities to legitimise decisions (Chile Desarrollo Sustentable, 2019). This led to polarisation, disputes and social divisions between those who denounced the breaches and impacts and those who received payments.

Taken together, the systematisation of these nine cases reveals a national pattern that shows how basic needs are transformed into a tool to divide communities and seek legitimacy. This process turns some community members into accomplices in their own dispossession, while social assistance is instrumentalised as a mechanism for validating extractive dispossession.

Green Somnambulism and the Conceptualisation of Social Assistance for Dispossession

In this context, it is proposed that part of the social work carried out in extractive companies in Chile, by normalising this *modus operandi* laden with socio-

environmental impacts, is linked to the green somnambulism proposed by Bonelli & Pavez (2025). Within this biased perspective, it is assumed that there are no other alternatives for development, so it is thought that the best possible is being done and anthropogenic omissions, such as environmental damage and the fracturing of the social fabric, are accepted. This naturalisation leads social work to demobilise conflicts and manage the consequences of dispossession as an inevitable component of progress, given that its causes are not questioned and trust is placed in green, technological and local development discourses. Thus, the belief is maintained that the profits from extractivism will benefit the territory through a supposed spillover effect (Gudynas, 2013). As a result, social work becomes trapped in a technocratic practice that obstructs the imagination of transformative eco-political horizons. Its ontological, deontological and methodological role in social transformation becomes blurred and, paradoxically, it becomes the oppressor that seeks to assist the oppressed, acting as a neutraliser of the social and environmental suffering that it vocationally seeks to remedy. Given this conceptual analytical void, the term Social Assistance of Dispossession is proposed to describe these clientelistic practices based on green somnambulism.

Based on this conceptual proposal, a series of analytical characteristics are presented below to deepen our understanding. A first criterion of Social Assistance for Dispossession is that it operates as a facilitator of the legitimisation and acceptance of the installation of extractivism in the territories, acting in favour of its interests as a tool of dispossession, in an action forged by the logic of accumulation by dispossession. Accordingly, its methodology is based on welfare and clientelist practices, using social benefits such as competitive funds, scholarships, food parcels, gifts and cash handouts, through framework agreements and accords in contexts of power asymmetry, coercion and commercial dynamics.

In addition, it exercises epistemic violence, as it denies and subordinates ancestral, territorial and local knowledge, imposing external solutions and visions of development, excluding struggles, worldviews and alternative ways of life through technical terminology and interventions disconnected from structural problems and those brought about by the company's operations. All of this is framed within green somnambulism.

This exercise has territorial consequences, including: division and demobilisation of communities; co-optation of territorial actors; stigmatisation and violence; breakdown of networks and families; dismemberment of the social fabric; and depoliticisation of community resistance. It also neutralises suffering by appealing to meritocracy and compensation.

Among its ethical and professional consequences, Social Assistance for Dispossession devalues social work and limits its ontological transformative potential, encourages inequalities and social and environmental injustices, and replicates colonial and racist logics about the Global South, rural and indigenous communities, and natural commons.

These characterisations allow us to problematise and delineate what Social Work in extractivist contexts can constitute. It is a type of practice that perpetuates extractivist violence, instrumentalises social rights through clientelism, and hides its causes behind a façade of social intervention and corporate responsibility.

The formulation of the concept of Social Assistance for Dispossession, and each of its components, is a critical proposition for naming extractivist clientelist practices. The specific use of each term is described and justified below.

The component of "assistance" does not refer to solidarity aid, but to the practice of welfare, historically associated with charitable and vertical dynamics, typical of the beginnings of social work, especially in the Global North, as well as corporate clientelism. The categories of "intervention", "accompaniment" or "social work of dispossession" are rejected because "assistance" accurately highlights the welfare and compensatory nature of this practice.

The adjective "social" represents uncritical neutrality, as it is not positioned as humanitarian, collective or community-based, but rather limited to being social, reflecting the dynamics of appropriation of beliefs and rhetoric of social benefits, instrumentalised for corporate legitimisation.

Finally, the proposed concept differs from necessary and classic social assistance in its central component, "dispossession," understood as the consequences of extractivism in the territories. Social assistance becomes Social Assistance of Dispossession when, in contexts of socio-environmental conflict, instead of promoting social justice, it is captured by companies to use clientelist mechanisms that allow them to demobilise resistance and legitimise dispossession.

Social Assistance of Dispossession: Ethical-professional Contradictions and Malpractice

In this way, Social Assistance of Dispossession generates contradictions with the foundations and ethical standards of social work. The International Association of

Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Work (IASSW/IFSW, 2018, art. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9) establish fundamental pillars such as recognising the inherent dignity of humanity; promoting and defending human rights; promoting social justice; promoting the right to self-determination; encouraging the right to participation; and maintaining professional integrity.

Meanwhile, the Chilean College of Social Work (2014, arts. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 20 and 23) reaffirms ethical duties such as promoting social justice; respect for the right to autonomy and self-determination of communities; promoting universality; guaranteeing civil, social and political rights; maintaining a commitment to environmental sustainability; respecting legislation and guaranteeing quality services to reduce poverty and vulnerability gaps; as well as not establishing economic relationships with subjects of intervention.

In this regard, Social Assistance for Dispossession denies the principle of dignity inherent to humanity and the universality of rights, considering that it facilitates the dispossession and segregation of communities. Based on the cases analysed, it is evident that these communities are treated as if they had less value and dignity than companies and social groups in the Global North, which benefit from extractive activities on the other side of the globe. In this context, their right to participation, consultation and self-determination is restricted, reducing them to objects of welfare intervention, without recognition of their own knowledge. They are dehumanised and treated as obstacles to be persuaded and managed, subordinating their human value and dignity to the interests of extractivism that dispossesses them.

The commitment to social justice and human rights is blurred by normalising projects that amplify inequalities and deprive communities of their rights (Gudynas, 2013). Guarantees related to indigenous consultation, participation, self-determination, a pollution-free environment and life itself are affected in most of the cases analysed (ONU, 2024). Likewise, consent is violated in the INNA and CBP cases (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024).

Most of the companies involved in the cases analysed have caused widely proven and even sanctioned ecological damage, in breach of the Ley Indígena (Indigenous Law), the Ley de Bases Ambientales (Environmental Framework Law) and the laws on access to environmental and public information, as well as the Escazú Agreement and other international treaties (UN, 2024). In this context, Social Assistance for Dispossession violates respect for legislation, sustainability, and access to quality services. Similarly, according to the analysis, companies offered financial incentives for the acceptance of projects such as Dominga and Pascua Lama.

On the other hand, the proposed notion is also based on the criteria of bad practices in social work, developed by Sheafor et al. (1988). In this regard, the authors point out among their demonstrable causes of professional action that "it omits or restricts the generation of any offence, harm or damage" and that "its conduct causes some type of offence, harm or damage". These causes are fully applicable to the damage and minimisation of socio-environmental impacts on ecosystems, ways of life, community resistance and territories.

In the same vein, causes Nos. 20, 21 and 31 establish "using a radical, unconventional or improvised procedure or technique in social work," "providing false or inaccurate information or guidance," and "carrying out social intervention actions that run counter to the established legal order".

The first cause manifests itself in the adoption of clientelistic and welfare-oriented methods that lack scientific and transformative validity and are widely questioned in the specialised literature (Acevedo, 2024). The second is evident in the provision of partial and technical information about the project, emphasising social and economic benefits while concealing socio-environmental consequences (Fuentes & Ergas, 2021). This includes prohibiting access to opposition leaders and communities in resistance, as occurred with the Peralitos group in Pascua Lama (Chile Desarrollo Sustentable, 2014). This limits access to environmental information, which is protected in our country by Law No. 19,300 (amended by No. 20,417) and Law No. 20,285 on access to public information.

Ethical-political Reflections and Inflections for the De-extractivisation of Social Work

This journey has verified and mapped how social work, in contexts of extractivist co-optation, has been instrumentalised as a means of legitimising dispossession through clientelist practices that blur its foundations and distance it from its historical vocation of social transformation. Social Assistance for Dispossession reproduces a fiction of development that, in order to sustain itself, requires constant destruction and dispossession, deepening its attempt to address the crises it creates. This dynamic fosters social problems such as poverty and inequality, precisely those that social work has historically sought to overcome. Therefore, these ontological contradictions call for the urgent need to repoliticise the professional practice.

The de-extractivisation of social work requires profound changes on three fundamental levels. On the one hand, the ontological level. As described above, social work stems

from a historical vocational ontology of territorial intervention, linked to socio-political processes of Latin American emancipation. Recognising that these practices are carried out in spaces that have been subjected to more than five centuries of colonial dispossession and commodification of natural common goods, abandoning uncritical neutrality means returning to the liberating horizon of the profession, forged in the 1960s from the popular, peasant and indigenous struggles of Latin America. Recognising that Latin American social work has been built in territories of the South, which have been turned into sacrifice zones to sustain an unsustainable global economic system, implies taking an ethical-political stance against processes of dispossession.

Secondly, the methodological level. Faced with these contradictions, a critical reappropriation of critical/radical, network and ecological intervention models is required, which strengthen community organisation and enable us to confront forms of extractivist clientelism. Added to these are the perspectives of *Green Social Work*, Popular Education, Latin American Political Ecology and Southern epistemologies, which contribute to understanding how the methodological role of social work in contexts of dispossession should be oriented towards facilitating collective processes of emancipation, the recovery of collective memories, the revaluation of biocultural heritage, and inter-epistemological construction between traditional Latin American science and ancestral, ecological, territorial, local, and socio-popular knowledge. Only through participatory and decolonial methodologies is it possible to confront professional co-optation and counteract community fracture, making memories and impacts visible in order to build alternatives for development and a concrete good life.

And finally, the ethical dimension. The role of social work in Social Assistance for Dispossession contradicts professional codes of ethics and constitutes malpractice. Recognising corporate co-optation and clientelism as such does not seek to discredit or defame the profession, but rather to denounce and demand that it be practised in accordance with its historical principles and values, its legal standards and respect for human rights. In this way, tangible consequences such as devaluation and loss of social trust due to complicity in dispossession processes will be inhibited. For all these reasons, it is important to promote disciplinary discussion and eco-political training on issues such as socio-environmental ethics, indigenous consultation and climate justice.

Consequently, these shifts require social work to abandon green somnambulism, which legitimises an unrealistic sustainable or green extractivism, and to take a position that not only denounces but also builds viable new approaches within the profession itself, allowing for the construction of ways of conceiving and reconciling the relationship

between social work and communities in resistance. This can be achieved through the articulation of research and professional intervention with local experiences and knowledge that facilitate the construction of social transformation and situated well-being.

In summary, this article has justified that the ontological, methodological, and deontological role of social work in contexts of dispossession must be aligned with the de-extractivisation of the profession and the defence of territories and rights, committing to the collective construction of ecological, emancipatory, and post-extractivist horizons.

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ARTICLE

Social Work and Virtual Spaces: New Scenarios for Critical and Professional Intervention

Trabajo Social y espacios virtuales: nuevos escenarios para la intervención profesional crítica

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Abstract

This article presents a review of the role of digital environments as emerging contexts for professional intervention in social work, from a critical perspective, situated in the Spanish context. It proposes and analyses some of the ethical, political, and methodological challenges that arise with the growing digitalisation of the social field, while reflecting on the opportunities that these spaces offer for emancipatory action and the reconfiguration of social ties and dynamics. Based on theoretical development and a review of existing practices and

Keywords: *digital social work; critical professional intervention; virtual environments; digital justice*

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proposals for virtual social intervention, strategies for critical, inclusive, and transformative professional practice are suggested, and underline the urgency and importance of incorporating the digital dimension as a fundamental element in the defence and dissemination of social rights. Thus, social work in the coming decades must position itself ethically in the face of the risks of digitalisation, promoting digital justice, collective participation, and interventions that, far from dehumanising, strengthen interpersonal relationships and mutual care in the new virtual scenarios. In this sense, the manuscript makes an original contribution through the systematisation of digital intervention experiences, the proposal of ethical and political principles for professional practice, and the formulation of a situated conceptual framework for social work in digital environments. It seeks to contribute to the debate through a theoretical and practical proposal for digital intervention.

Resumen

El presente artículo plantea una revisión del papel de los entornos digitales como contextos emergentes para la intervención profesional en Trabajo Social, desde una perspectiva crítica y situada en el contexto español. Se proponen y analizan algunos de los desafíos éticos, políticos y metodológicos que surgen con la creciente digitalización del campo social, a la vez que se reflexiona sobre las oportunidades que estos espacios ofrecen para la acción emancipadora y la reconfiguración de los vínculos y las dinámicas sociales. A través de un desarrollo teórico y una revisión de prácticas y propuestas de intervención social virtual existentes, el artículo presenta estrategias para una práctica profesional crítica, inclusiva y transformadora, y subraya la urgencia de incorporar la dimensión digital como un elemento fundamental en la defensa y difusión de los derechos sociales. En este sentido, el Trabajo Social de las próximas décadas debe posicionarse éticamente frente a los riesgos de la digitalización, promoviendo la justicia digital, la participación colectiva y una intervención que, lejos de deshumanizar, fortalezca las relaciones interpersonales y el cuidado mutuo en los nuevos escenarios virtuales. Asimismo, el manuscrito ofrece una contribución original mediante la sistematización de experiencias de intervención digital, la propuesta de principios ético-políticos para la práctica profesional y la formulación de un marco conceptual situado para el Trabajo Social en entornos digitales, aportando al debate a través de una propuesta teórico-práctica de intervención digital.

Palabras clave: *Trabajo Social digital; intervención profesional crítica; entornos virtuales; justicia digital*

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Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has changed all aspects of social life, including forms of relationship, communication and community organisation. In this context, social work is faced with new methodological, ethical and epistemological challenges. It is not just a matter of incorporating digital tools into professional practice, but of critically reflecting on how digitalisation affects the people we work with, especially those in vulnerable situations. As Ríos (2022) warns, digitalisation imposes forms of technical domination that must be resisted through decolonial and technopolitical approaches.

According to Castells (2006), the network society imposes new forms of social structuring, where digital exclusion becomes yet another form of structural inequality. In Spain, the National Strategy for Social Inclusion[2] (2021–2027) explicitly recognises the need to integrate the digital dimension into social policies (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2021). This transformation is neither neutral nor merely instrumental: it shapes new forms of subjectivation, surveillance and control and, at the same time, new possibilities for agency and resistance (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

There is no doubt that digitalisation permeates all spheres of social life, profoundly affecting forms of relationship, production, subjectivity and community organisation. This transformation has generated new modes of interaction, but it has also widened existing gaps, highlighting structural inequalities in access to rights, resources and representation. In this scenario, social work faces the challenge of rethinking its practice and positioning, incorporating digital environments as legitimate and necessary fields of intervention (Castillo, 2017; Organización de las Naciones Unidas [ONU], 2022).

Over the last decade, and with particular intensity following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a clear need to update the profession's reference frameworks, including critical digital skills, ethical reflection and appropriate methodologies for technology-mediated intervention. As Morozov (2011) and Zuboff (2019) have pointed out, the design and governance of digital environments are far from neutral: they respond to economic, ideological and power logics that shape citizen participation, knowledge production and the reproduction of social inequalities.

Likewise, researchers such as Han (2012) warn that the digitisation of everyday

[2] "Estrategia Nacional de Inclusión Social"

experience implies an intensification of processes of self-exploitation, surveillance and social pressure, especially among young people, who are exposed to a constant demand for visibility and performance. These dynamics have a direct impact on emotional well-being, identity construction and agency. Therefore, social work must incorporate analytical and practical tools that enable it to intervene effectively, respectfully and transformatively in these contexts.

In this sense, it is essential that social work not only accompanies these processes but also actively positions itself in their transformation. Professional intervention must include analysing the impacts of the digital environment on people's lives, especially those who are vulnerable, and generating responses based on a logic of care, equity and digital justice (Pérez, 2020; Subirats, 2011). The construction of a critical and participatory digital citizenship requires a conscious, situated and politically committed professional praxis, capable of dialoguing with the new forms of relationship, subjectivation and conflict that emerge in the virtual world. From a Latin American perspective, authors such as López Peláez et al. (2018), Tibaná Ríos (2022) and Lamas (2023) have provided important insights into how digital inequalities are configured and the need for contextualised intervention.

The recognition of digital space as a constitutive dimension of social life requires us to move beyond instrumental approaches that reduce it to a mere communication tool. Digital environments must be understood as structural contexts in which identities, power relations, symbolic structures and new modes of intervention are configured. From this perspective, social work faces the challenge of incorporating this comprehensive view in dialogue with critical theory, epistemologies of the South, and social movements that have been pointing out the dangers of uncritical technification of the social sphere for years (De Sousa Santos, 2018). In this article, the central theoretical framework is based mainly on critical theory and the ethics of care, integrating elements of technopolitics and Southern epistemologies as complementary frameworks that enrich the understanding of digital social intervention.

The proposal put forward is that social work cannot be limited to adapting its practices to digital environments but must be rethought from a technopolitical perspective capable of questioning the regulatory and technical frameworks that condition network intervention.

Theoretical Basis: Digitalisation and Social Subjectivity

Digitalisation has altered the technical infrastructures of the social environment, but also the ways in which people think, relate and act. If we consider Han's (2014)

contributions on subjectivity, digital subjectivity is characterised by constant self-exposure, quantification of the self and dependence on algorithmic recognition. This transformation directly affects the populations with which social work intervenes, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities or even generating new ones.

Authors such as Zuboff (2019) have denounced the emergence of "surveillance capitalism" in which personal data is used as a basis for predicting and modelling behaviour. From this perspective, traditionally excluded groups (migrants, unemployed young people, women survivors of violence, among others) become targets of technologies that produce and reproduce biases and discrimination (Eubanks, 2018).

Furthermore, the impact of digitalisation on social structures has stirred up debate in the social sciences and, in particular, in social work. Many approaches reduce technology to a tool, without considering its structural implications or its effects on subjectivity and justice. Far from being a technical phenomenon, digitisation represents a complex process of structural transformation that affects ways of life, the configuration of subjectivities and institutional intervention frameworks. Added to this is a theoretical deficit in social work with regard to digitisation as a legitimate field of intervention. In this vein, this article proposes to overcome the existing gap through a critical and interdisciplinary reading. It is therefore necessary to articulate a theoretical foundation that allows social work to critically understand the social, cultural, and political implications of the contemporary digital ecosystem.

Social work, as a discipline committed to social justice, must take a critical stance towards this new relational and power configuration. It is not enough to be present in the digital realm; it is necessary to know and understand how technology produces exclusions, categorises bodies, automates decisions and dilutes bonds. As Haraway (1988) points out, it is therefore necessary to construct situated knowledge that takes into account the material and cultural conditions in which technology operates.

From a critical perspective, authors such as Morozov (2011) and Van Dijck (2013) have emphasised the political nature of digital technologies, understood as infrastructures that shape social relations under an extractive, neoliberal and controlling logic. These technologies not only affect and condition communication, but also structure patterns of visibility, hierarchies of knowledge and dynamics of exclusion. It is therefore essential for social work to adopt a perspective that questions the supposed neutrality of technology and explores its effects in terms of power and inequality (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

At the theoretical level, digitalisation is linked to broader processes of individualisation, depoliticisation of social conflict and fragmentation of community ties. In this context, Byung-Chul Han (2012) warns that contemporary hyperconnectivity gives rise to forms of self-exploitation, social fatigue and emotional isolation, which must be understood as new forms of social suffering. Social work, committed to the dignity and well-being of people, must be able to recognise these manifestations and address them through interventions that integrate the emotional, relational and structural aspects.

Theories of digital justice provide a relevant framework for guiding professional practice in virtual environments. Works such as Taylor's (2017) propose an intersectional approach that highlights how inequalities of gender, race, class and ability are reconfigured in the digital realm, demanding social intervention that not only promotes access, but also agency and equitable participation in the construction of the digital environment. This also implies understanding the ways in which algorithms and platforms affect opportunities for inclusion and the reproduction of social stigmas.

In this scenario, it is proposed that the theoretical foundation of social work in the digital sphere should draw on the contributions of critical theory, feminist epistemologies and decolonial proposals, articulating a situated perspective that recognises the multiple dimensions of the digital: technical, symbolic, economic and political. Only from this approach is it possible to construct a professional intervention that does not reproduce the hegemonic logics of digital power but rather contributes to its transformation from a perspective of social justice.

Social Work and Digital Environments: a Critical Approach

Virtual spaces (social networks, forums, platforms, online environments) have established themselves as venues for socialisation and, therefore, also as possible contexts for professional intervention in social work. These spaces are not mere reflections of the offline world, but produce and respond to their own dynamics, with specific rules, risks and potentialities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated and almost imposed this change, forcing many social services to move their activity to the digital environment. According to recent studies (Parker, 2022), this digitalisation had ambivalent effects: it allowed contact with users to be maintained, but it also highlighted technological gaps, training limitations and ethical conflicts.

For social work, intervening in virtual spaces requires new professional skills: critical digital literacy, knowledge of digital communication environments, remote emotional support skills and the ability to create meaningful online communities. It is, therefore,

a new professional field that requires specific training and renewed ethical reflection (Vega & Ayala, 2020).

The recognition of digital environments as spaces for social intervention requires a profound review of the epistemological and methodological frameworks that have historically guided the practice of social work. In contrast to the traditional conception, centred on face-to-face intervention and the materiality of physical territories, there is a need to expand the concept of "territory" to include those virtual spheres in which subjectivities are now constructed, identities are configured, and both exclusion and social organisation and resistance are reproduced.

In this context, social work needs to abandon any instrumentalist or technophile vision that reduces the digital to a mere channel of communication and adopt a critical perspective that allows virtual environments to be understood as complex relational structures, conditioned by power asymmetries, algorithmic logics and dynamics of social segmentation (Pérez, 2022). In this sense, digital platforms are not neutral, un y spaces: they constitute fields of symbolic dispute, in which values, legitimacies and rights are constantly negotiated.

The challenge for social work is twofold. On the one hand, it is about ensuring equitable access to digital environments for all citizens, combating the technological divide and promoting critical digital literacy processes. On the other hand, it is necessary to intervene in the content, relationships and practices that emerge in these spaces, especially those that reproduce hate speech, symbolic violence or marginalisation of historically oppressed groups, but also the creation of new groups that are excluded or targeted by virtual violence. Far from being homogeneous, digitalisation is experienced in an unequal and stratified manner, affecting people differently according to gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or social class (García-Gutiérrez & Ruiz-Corbella, 2020).

Social work is called upon to play an active role in mediating conflicts in virtual environments and promoting community support networks developed in the digital sphere. Social networks, mutual aid forums, instant messaging groups, and virtual training spaces can be useful tools for professional intervention, provided they are based on principles of respect, ethical care, and personal autonomy (Pérez, 2022).

Therefore, digital environments must be conceived by social work as territories in which rights are exercised, bonds are formed, and social inclusion is contested. Addressing them critically involves rethinking the fundamental categories of the profession—such as need, vulnerability, community, and participation—in light of the new scenarios of contemporary connectivity.

Ethical and Political Challenges in Digital Intervention from a Social Work Perspective

The digitisation of social work practice involves highly complex ethical and political risks. As already mentioned, far from being neutral, technologies shape power relations, generate exclusions and redefine professional responsibilities. One of the main challenges is the management of privacy and confidentiality in a context marked by hyperconnectivity, data traceability and the extractivist logic of many digital platforms (Eubanks, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

From a political perspective, works such as those by Morozov (2011) and Noble (2018) warn against the "technological solution" as a hegemonic discourse: technical responses that obscure the social roots of inequality are imposed on structural problems, warning that the use of algorithms in social decision-making can perpetuate structural biases and reinforce existing inequalities, particularly in access to benefits, resources, or basic services. Therefore, social work must remain alert to the temptation to delegate its functions to technological systems without critical evaluation and democratic safeguards. Furthermore, the use of automated systems in social services can reinforce institutional biases and reduce intervention to a series of dehumanised procedures (Eubanks, 2018).

In Spain, the Code of Ethics for Social Work[3] (Consejo General del Trabajo Social, 2020) requires respect for the privacy, dignity and self-determination of users. In virtual contexts, these principles must be reinterpreted in the face of new tensions: how can we guarantee confidentiality in video calls? What happens if the platforms used store or process data in third countries? Who is responsible if an algorithm mistakenly assigns or denies a benefit? These questions have no easy answers, but they require clear positions. As Subirats (2011) proposes, the challenge is not to adapt to digital technology, but to actively participate in its construction, defending regulatory and technical frameworks that prioritise care, equity and mutual recognition. Social work must recover its technopolitical dimension, assuming a critical role in relation to the models of society that underpin the technologies it uses.

The digitisation of social relations presents new opportunities for social intervention, but it has also generated highly complex ethical and political dilemmas. In this scenario, the profession must critically reflect on the implications of its practice in digital environments, where commercial interests, algorithmic logic and surveillance systems

[3] "Código Deontológico del Trabajo Social."

converge, challenging the fundamental principles of the profession, such as self-determination, privacy, equity and social justice (Tibaná, 2022).

Informed consent, for example, takes on a new dimension in the digital environment: can users fully understand what happens to their information when they use social applications or are served by remote means? According to Taylor (2017), digital justice is not limited to the availability of technology, but involves ensuring equitable conditions of access, critical use and understanding of the implications of the digital environment. Data collection, session recording, participation in remote intervention platforms, and navigation in applications must be transparent, understandable processes that are adapted to the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity of users. Ethical professionalism requires not only compliance with legal regulations, but also the exercise of a pedagogical and critical role in the face of the opacity of the digital world.

Furthermore, it is vital to address the impact of artificial intelligence and machine learning on the professional autonomy of social work. Predictive systems used in the field of social services, such as those described by Gillingham (2019), can determine risk profiles without adequate human mediation, distorting the ethical and relational judgement inherent to the discipline. Algorithmic opacity thus becomes a threat to ethical deliberation and participatory decision-making.

Finally, social work is called upon to adopt a critical and committed stance towards the digitisation processes that affect the social field. This position involves actively participating in the design of inclusive technological tools, promoting free and community software, denouncing mass surveillance practices and defending intervention models based on care, dialogue and relationality as fundamental ethical and methodological principles. According to Subirats (2011), the challenge is not only to adapt to digital technology, but also to build a more just, pluralistic and democratic digital society. In this sense, it is essential to recover an ethic of technopolitical care that incorporates the agency of users as subjects of rights in the digital environment (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Review of Social Practices of Virtual Intervention

There are many examples that show how social work can be carried out effectively in digital environments without compromising its fundamental principles. Below are some examples of these practices. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that during the pandemic, the Official College of Social Work of Madrid[4] (2021) launched an online social

[4] "Colegio Oficial de Trabajo Social de Madrid"

intervention platform to provide care for people in isolation, the elderly and vulnerable families. Video calls, secure chats and remote monitoring were used for urgent cases. This practice demonstrated how social work can adapt to the digital context without losing its ethical link or personalised support. On the other hand, the "Conecta Joven" programme, run by the Esplai Foundation, has enabled young people to digitally train isolated elderly people, creating intergenerational links and mutual empowerment. This practice promotes digital inclusion and also strengthens the community by creating spaces for shared recognition (Tomczyk et al., 2023).

The "Red Social Cuidando" (caring social network), an online initiative for non-professional carers, offers emotional support, social counselling and digital training. This experience demonstrates how it is possible to create safe, horizontal and emotionally sustainable environments in cyberspace by integrating the logic of care into digital architecture. For its part, the "TeAcompaño" project (ANAR Foundation and Red Cross Youth) developed closed groups on Facebook and Telegram for adolescents with mental health problems or family violence issues. Social workers moderated and guided the conversations, ensuring professional intervention and anonymity. The results show an improvement in the early detection of risk situations, as well as an increase in the participation of young people who were previously disconnected from face-to-face services. We also identified the #SinOdioEnRed (no hate online) project, coordinated by youth associations, social workers and educators in Catalonia, which used the social networks TikTok, Instagram and YouTube to counter hate speech and racial and gender discrimination. Likewise, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, in neighbourhoods such as Vallecas (Madrid) and El Raval (Barcelona), neighbourhood groups and social work professionals promoted self-managed groups on WhatsApp, Telegram and other platforms, without direct institutional intervention, to coordinate food distribution, emotional support and virtual accompaniment for the elderly, among other initiatives.

Collectives such as Feminismos Madrid and Pikara Lab have created collaborative digital environments to rethink social intervention from a feminist and anti-racist perspective. Through platforms such as Padlet, Jitsi and Etherpad, they organised spaces for the co-creation of non-normative accompaniment methodologies that are critical of institutionalism, colonialism and ableism. Other initiatives include Mapeo de Cuidados de Zaragoza (Care Mapping of Zaragoza) and Cartografía Crítica de la Desigualdad en Sevilla (Critical Cartography of Inequality in Seville), promoted by grassroots collectives with the support of social workers, who use collaborative digital mapping tools (such as Umap and Google MyMaps) to locate community resources, areas without social coverage, spaces of urban conflict and practices of resistance.

Finally, the PantallasAmigas (friendly screens) collective, together with social and educational intervention teams, developed a virtual support line for adolescents who are victims of sextortion, *grooming*[5] or *doxing*.[6] This support involved emotional support and legal guidance, working from a restorative and critical perspective, as opposed to a punitive approach.

In addition to the examples mentioned above, the development of virtual support groups for mental health or gender violence has proven effective in creating networks of emotional support and accompaniment, especially in contexts of isolation (Ornelas, 2022). In all these cases, the key is that technologies do not replace the human dimension but rather amplify it under coherent ethical frameworks.

However, these experiences must be critically evaluated: What platforms do they use? What governance model do they propose? Who owns the information generated? How are conflicts managed? These questions allow us to differentiate between digitally instrumental practices and those that build digital citizenship and collective power.

Structural Criticism from Social Work

While it is true that some of these spaces emerged to fill gaps in the public system, showing how digital technology can be a tool for empowerment, they can also reveal and generate informal privatisation of care. In addition, they faced the exclusion of people without access to smartphones or the internet. These experiences show the subversive potential of digital technology, but they also denounce how commercial platforms impose extractive logic, hinder anonymity, and reproduce gender and racial biases (Noble, 2018).

Although some are powerful participatory tools, these projects face the ethical dilemma of geolocating vulnerable populations, in response to which they must guarantee anonymity, data protection and non-instrumentalisation by institutions or companies. In some cases, the report addresses how legal and technical frameworks tend to blame victims (especially women and transgender people) rather than questioning the neoliberal digital ecosystem that promotes overexposure and the violent consumption of intimacy.

[5] *Grooming*, from the verb *to groom*, translates into Spanish as "engaño pederasta" (paedophile deception) and refers to harassing behaviour in which an adult contacts a child or adolescent with the aim of establishing an emotional connection in order to later sexually abuse them and/or involve them in sexual activity.

[6] *Doxing*, or doxeo in Spanish, comes from the English *word dox* (a colloquial way of referring to "documents") and refers to the act of searching for and publishing private information about a particular person on the internet, usually with malicious intent.

Although these are important advances, it is noted that many tools are not designed from a universal design approach, and that technology often imposes barriers to autonomy rather than removing them, especially when developed without the direct participation of the people affected.

Based on the elements analysed, some guidelines are proposed to promote a praxis of social work in digital environments from an ethical, inclusive and critical approach. First, a critical institutionalisation of digital intervention is needed, recognising virtuality as a space for intervention that must be accompanied by the development of regulatory frameworks, ethical protocols and technical resources to ensure the quality, equity and sustainability of professional practice. Next, we propose the promotion of digital justice, as the profession must actively incorporate the principle of digital justice into its interventions, promoting public policies that reduce the digital divide, guarantee universal access to connectivity and respect people's digital rights. Likewise, there must be an ethical, technological and participatory orientation. Spaces for reflection must be created where users, professionals and technologists can co-design digital tools focused on care, inclusion and autonomy.

We also consider critical training in digital skills to be essential. Professional training in social work should include content on digital rights, digital citizenship, the ethical risks of artificial intelligence, decolonial thinking applied to technology, and virtual intervention methodologies. Finally, it is important to promote Participatory Virtual Accompaniment Communities[7] (CAVP). As an innovative proposal, we suggest the design of virtual peer support environments, facilitated by social workers, to create safe, inclusive and reflective spaces within university campuses and other communities. These communities can contribute to the prevention of psychosocial distress, symbolic violence and digital discrimination, and enable the creation of sustainable support networks (Bárcena & Larrea, 2022).

Conclusions

Considering the approaches reviewed above, virtual environments should not be seen as alien or secondary spaces, but as an integral part of the contemporary social world. As such, they require an active, reflective and rigorous presence of social work professionals. From the protection of rights to the creation of virtual support communities, through the fight against hate speech and the promotion of digital justice, the field of action is expanding and becoming more complex.

[7] Comunidades de Acompañamiento Virtual Participativo.

In this context, our profession needs to reclaim its commitment to a critical ethic that is not limited to deontology or technical rules but takes a position on technologies and their implications for human life. Thus, virtual professional intervention cannot be separated from the notion of expanded responsibility, where care, justice, and equity are thought of from a relational ethic rather than from a framework of procedural neutrality.

Thus, a first fundamental conclusion is that social work cannot reduce its digital intervention to an instrumental or technocratic dimension. On the contrary, it must assume the virtual environment as a relational, symbolic and political field, where new forms of vulnerability are configured—such as digital violence, algorithmic exclusion, precarious access or non-consensual overexposure—but also as a space for resistance, community organisation and the production of critical subjectivities (Fraser, 2008; hooks, 2000).

From a critical perspective, the digital must be approached in its dual dimension. On the one hand, as an extension of the systems of control and surveillance that have historically affected the most precarious sectors; and, on the other, as a space with emancipatory potential if appropriated through collective, participatory and counter-hegemonic practices. Social work is called upon to adopt an ethical stance in defence of digital justice, understood as equitable and secure access to technologies, the right to informational self-determination and the creation of virtual communities based on mutual care (Haraway, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

From this perspective, a profound revision of the epistemology of social work is required. The incorporation of technologies into intervention cannot be uncritical or neutral. It is essential to generate theoretical and methodological frameworks capable of questioning the structures of digital domination, incorporating notions such as technological justice, relational ethics and data sovereignty. As Miller et al. (2016) argue, technology not only mediates intervention, but also shapes the very possibilities of the professional-user relationship, which requires constant critical vigilance from the normative and ethical frameworks of the profession.

Another conclusion leads us to the need for professional reflexivity in the face of emerging ethical dilemmas. In this regard, the ethical dimension of social work in digital spaces requires a complex approach. Confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent must be rethought in the face of systemic surveillance, data extraction, and technological opacity (Zuboff, 2019). As Eubanks (2018) argues, the use of technologies for social management can reinforce structures of inequality, automate stigma and exclude those who do not fit the dominant algorithmic parameters.

In this sense, it is necessary to cultivate a situated and critical ethic that is not limited to complying with legal frameworks but seeks to anticipate and counteract the exclusionary effects of digital devices. Ethical professionalism cannot be separated from political awareness, as any intervention in the virtual realm has material consequences for the people we work with (Morozov, 2011).

Therefore, from this critical perspective, the ethics of social work must cease to be conceived as mere regulatory compliance and evolve towards an ethics of relationship, recognition and deliberation. Authors such as Pérez (2022) insist on the importance of a participatory ethics that incorporates the voice of users in technological processes. This approach calls for the active inclusion of those affected in decisions about the design, use and evaluation of digital tools, as Pérez (2022) also emphasises.

Ethical reflexivity also involves questioning the temporal dimension of the intervention. Virtual spaces introduce new temporalities (immediacy, asynchrony, hyperconnectivity) that affect the way in which bonds are formed, care is provided and trust is established. In this context, social work must reconfigure its criteria for professional presence, addressing not only the "where" but also the "how" and "why" of digital intervention (Teruel-Cárceles et al., 2021).

The transformation in professional intervention emerges as another relevant finding of this analysis. Far from merely transposing face-to-face practices to the digital realm, social work must generate innovative intervention formats designed specifically for virtual environments. Examples of this are the Participatory Virtual Accompaniment Communities (CAVP), online listening and care platforms, counter-narrative laboratories, and strategies for preventing hate speech on social media. These initiatives not only allow professional practice to be adapted to the current technological reality but also revalue the role of social work as a proactive agent in the promotion and defence of rights and in the transformation of the social sphere in the digital ecosystem. The practices described demonstrate how social work can influence digital transformation from a critical praxis, generating new formats of intervention based on accompaniment, mutual recognition and social justice.

However, in order for these innovations not to generate overload or dilute the professional role, it is necessary to create institutional and political conditions that support them. This implies that regulatory frameworks and social protection systems recognise and finance virtual social work as a legitimate, strategic and structural dimension of intervention. It also requires an ethical and political commitment to transparency in the technologies used, guaranteed confidentiality and respect for informed consent in every digital interaction (Consejo General del Trabajo Social, 2012).

The profession cannot ignore the fact that digitalisation has deepened pre-existing social divides. Accessing the internet or using an application does not guarantee the exercise of rights—since the second and third generation digital divide includes inequalities in skills—nor does it guarantee the critical appropriation of technologies or their effective use for citizen participation (Selwyn, 2004; Van Dijk, 2020).

From an intersectional perspective, it is important to recognise how ableism, digital racism, heteronormativity and poverty shape an unequal digital landscape. Interventions must go beyond access, ensuring that people feel safe, represented, and empowered in these environments (Noble, 2018). At this point, digital justice becomes relevant as an ethical and political horizon for social work in the digital age (Taylor, 2017).

One of the great challenges of social work is to address how technology can amplify forms of exclusion and inequality, since the digital divide is not limited to access to devices or connectivity, but involves cultural, symbolic, and relational aspects that shape the way people appropriate technologies (Selwyn, 2004). In this sense, digital justice becomes a guiding principle for critical intervention. It involves recognising that algorithms are not neutral, that artificial intelligence systems can reproduce racial, gender or class biases, and that the automation of social services can render the human experience behind the data invisible (Noble, 2018). Social work committed to equity must analyse the structures of domination hidden in digital infrastructures and develop strategies to democratise access, use and governance of technology.

Given this reality, it is essential to reclaim the agency of users in digital environments. Far from conceiving them as mere recipients of automated services, processes of digital empowerment, critical literacy and active participation must be promoted, understanding virtuality as a space for the construction of support networks, self-organisation and the visibility of social struggles. Achieving this requires situated intervention that is sensitive to cultural dynamics and has a clear emancipatory orientation (Taylor, 2017).

A final reflection refers to the pedagogical and transformative dimension of social work in virtual environments. Faced with a digital culture marked by individualism, the logic of performance and the fragmentation of the community fabric, the profession must foster resilient, affective and horizontal digital communities, focused on collective well-being, active listening and the creation of meaningful bonds (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2000). This means recognising the power of the virtual not only as a tool, but also as a space where new forms of citizenship, solidarity and collective action are taking shape.

There is no return to "pre-digital" intervention. The expansion of technologies has reconfigured our relationships and understanding of vulnerability. In this new scenario, social work must position itself as a key player in the fight for a more just, pluralistic and secure internet. This implies recognising that all professional practice in the virtual realm is political: the type of technology we use, the data we request, the platforms we choose, the voices we amplify or silence. This vision underscores the necessary redefinition of the professional role in these new scenarios. Intervention in virtual environments requires not only technical skills, but also critical and pedagogical ones. It is not enough to manage digital platforms or carry out remote interventions. It is necessary to understand how hate speech, algorithmic racism, forms of cyberbullying, and stigmatisation on social media operate and how they impact people, especially when they belong to historically discriminated groups (Carrillo & De-Juanas, 2020; Noble, 2018).

Consequently, digital skills in social work must be accompanied by epistemological frameworks that enable the reading of symbolic violence in online interactions, as well as methodological tools for articulating interventions that go beyond the welfare or reactive model. Critical digital training is therefore required, combining technological literacy, data analysis from a rights perspective, and relational approaches to virtual support (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Subirats, 2011).

For all these reasons, it is urgent to reconfigure the professional subjectivity of social work as a situated, reflective figure committed to digital rights and mutual care. Only then will it be possible to inhabit the virtual world without reproducing its oppressive logic and transform it into a space of solidarity, creativity and emancipation. As Subirats (2011) points out, the challenge is not only to digitise the social, but to humanise the digital. In this vein, social work must actively position itself in debates on technological governance, data policies, institutional surveillance and algorithmic democracy. We must not forget that virtual intervention is, above all, a political practice.

The notion of relational ethics, proposed by authors such as Unanue-Cuesta (2024), allows us to think of technology not as a tool external to the person, but as a constitutive part of bonds, decisions and processes of subjectivation. This ethics implies sensitivity, listening, dialogue, respect for differences and a commitment to social transformation. This perspective highlights the importance of participatory and contextualised ethics that promote autonomy and social justice.

The article has shown that, although some practices exist in virtual social work, it is necessary to move towards more participatory, inclusive, ethical and democratic

models. This implies an ethical and political commitment to be present where new forms of exclusion and vulnerability arise, but also where the possibilities for transformative action emerge. This suggests not only rethinking methodologies, devices and institutional alliances, but also reconfiguring our professional outlook: seeing the digital world not as an obstacle, but as a territory for the struggle for social rights, justice and care.

There is an urgent need to consolidate an epistemology of virtual and digital social work that is not limited to the instrumental incorporation of technologies but critically questions the social models that underpin them. In short, virtual social work is not a simple extension of face-to-face practice, but a field of action with its own specificities and challenges. This transformation requires a situated professionalism, a critical ethic and an epistemology of care that recognises the digital realm as a space for intervention and a place of dispute over the very meaning of the social. The profession is called upon to inhabit virtuality not as a trench, but as a space for care, resistance and collective construction. Only in this way will it be possible to build a profession that is equal to the challenges of the 21st century.

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ARTICLE

Social Work and Human Rights Education: Critical, Situated, Feminist, and Territorial Pedagogy

Trabajo Social y Educación en Derechos Humanos: pedagogía crítica, situada, feminista y territorial

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Abstract

In the current Latin American context—marked by structural inequalities, democratic crises, and disputes over memory—Human Rights Education (HRE) emerges as an ethical-political imperative for public universities, particularly within social work education. This article critically analyzes the challenges of mainstreaming HRE in social work training, proposing a critical, situated, feminist, and territorial perspective that links critical pedagogies with local struggles and memories of resistance.

Keywords:
Human Rights Education; social work; critical pedagogy; situated learning

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Drawing on recent literature and international normative frameworks, the article identifies the tensions between the institutional mandate to promote a human rights culture and the actual barriers within educational processes: fragmented curricula, dogmatic pedagogical approaches, a disconnection from social issues, and cultural or institutional resistance. In this context, social work is presented as a privileged field to interrogate such tensions, due to its historical commitment to social justice, its territorial engagement, and its potential to form ethically engaged subjectivities capable of resistance and transformation.

The article argues that HRE can only fulfill its transformative potential when embraced as an embodied, ethical, and affective praxis. From this standpoint, it calls for rethinking social work education not as a technical process, but as a political, ethical, and territorial construction committed to the defense of human rights and the imagining of more just futures.

Resumen

Palabras clave:
Educación en Derechos Humanos; Trabajo Social; pedagogía crítica; formación situada

En un contexto latinoamericano atravesado por crisis democráticas, violencias estructurales y disputas por la memoria, este artículo analiza los desafíos que enfrenta la transversalización de la Educación en Derechos Humanos (EDH) en la formación en Trabajo Social. Desde una perspectiva crítica, situada, feminista y territorial se examinan los límites institucionales, las tensiones pedagógicas y los vacíos curriculares que obstaculizan su incorporación efectiva en las universidades públicas. A partir de una revisión de literatura especializada y marcos normativos internacionales, se sostiene que la EDH no puede reducirse a la enseñanza de contenidos jurídicos o a competencias técnicas, sino que debe asumirse como una praxis encarnada, ética y transformadora.

El artículo argumenta que el Trabajo Social ofrece un espacio privilegiado para disputar los sentidos de la EDH, dada su tradición en la defensa de los derechos fundamentales, su vínculo con territorios atravesados por el daño y su capacidad para generar prácticas pedagógicas comprometidas con la justicia social. Se destacan propuestas que integran memorias, cuerpos y luchas colectivas, y se insiste en que solo una pedagogía anclada en lo situado puede responder críticamente a los desafíos contemporáneos. En suma, se

propone una EDH orientada a formar subjetividades críticas, éticamente comprometidas con los dolores del presente y con la posibilidad de imaginar otros futuros posibles desde el Trabajo Social.

Introduction

In a present marked by persistent exclusion, entrenched denialism and deepening inequalities, human rights education (HRE) is not only relevant but urgent. In the Latin American context, where the traces of dictatorships, state violence and disputes over memory continue to mark the present, HRE is configured as a situated pedagogical practice, ethically involved with the territories and with those lives that have been historically denied or stripped of value.

This work develops a theoretical reflection on HRE from a critical, situated, feminist and territorial perspective, based on a narrative review of specialised literature, with a focus on its incorporation into social work training processes. Although it engages with international regulatory frameworks, the reflection is mainly situated within Latin American coordinates, with an emphasis on the Chilean case. It is recognised that debates on HRE, particularly in the field of social work, are marked by historical trajectories of institutional violence, territorial exclusion and struggles for justice and memory. Far from aspiring to exhaustive systematisation, the work seeks to offer a critical perspective that strengthens pedagogies capable of weaving links between memory, dignity and ethical commitment.

In this scenario, it is proposed that social work offers a privileged place to interrogate the conditions and meanings of HRE. Our discipline has historically been identified with social justice and human rights, but it has also operated in devices of social control and under institutional logics that reproduce domination. Recognising this ambivalence allows us to complicate its pedagogical and political potential. Situated between the institutional and the subaltern, social work has the capacity to put pressure on both power structures and mechanisms of resistance. From its practice in territories marked by damage, and in dialogue with bodily experiences marked by historical exclusion, it can enable a pedagogy that transcends the curriculum and calls for the formation of ethically engaged subjectivities capable of sustaining memory, care, and transformation. In this vein, the article proposes an approach that challenges the neoliberal technocratic logic of higher education, advocating for professional training committed to the bodies, territories, and memories that resist.

It should be noted that this manuscript is written from a theoretical-political essayistic perspective. The reflection is based on a critical narrative review of specialised literature, normative documents and contributions from research in the field of human rights and social work. The selection of sources was based on criteria of conceptual density, thematic relevance and contextual relevance to the Latin American context, with an emphasis on the Chilean case. Databases (Scopus, SciELO, Redalyc, and Google Scholar) were consulted, prioritising texts published between 2000 and 2024.

The article is structured in three main sections. The first section defines the key concepts on which the proposal is based. The second section develops its pedagogical implications, with an emphasis on the link between body, territory, memory, and teaching practice. The third section addresses the institutional challenges for mainstreaming human rights education in the university setting, considering curricular tensions, regulatory frameworks, and structural obstacles. Finally, a concluding reflection is offered that summarises the transformative potential of an embodied HRE that is situated and committed to the territories and lives that resist.

Human Rights Education as Critical and Situated Praxis

In recent decades, HRE has been recognised as a fundamental component in the construction of a democratic culture and respect for human dignity. This process has been accompanied by progressive institutionalisation at the international level, expressed in documents such as the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), and the Plans of Action of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2006; 2012). These frameworks define human rights education as a process aimed at promoting universal respect for fundamental rights, but also as a preventive tool against human rights violations and as a means of fostering active and inclusive citizenship (Ugarte, 2005).

HRE seeks to generate a culture of rights through knowledge, skills and values that promote their exercise and defence (Naciones Unidas, 2006; 2011; 2012). It involves education about, through and for human rights (Vogelfanger y Ledzwa, 2023), dimensions that articulate the cognitive, ethical and transformative aspects of learning, based on a democratic and situated pedagogy (Cubillos-Vega & Llanán, 2018; Cubillos-Vega, 2019).

Human rights education must be part of an ethical-political project capable of questioning structures of domination and promoting transformative subjects (Duarte,

2014). This requirement particularly challenges the legal and social disciplines, which are often characterised by normative and decontextualised approaches, prompting critical and situated pedagogical proposals in response to their role in reproducing social control (Catalani & Médici, 2019; Gómez, 2015). In turn, the limited cross-cutting nature of human rights content in universities limits the possibility of building a professional culture committed to guaranteeing rights from the outset of training (Catalani, 2019; Catalani & Médici, 2019). However, educational experiences rooted in territories marked by harm and exclusion have shown that it is possible to strengthen the link between memory, justice and critical professional practice, opening up pedagogical spaces for a transformative ethic (Duarte et al., 2025).

From this perspective, HRE is not limited to normative content, but aims to train critical individuals capable of interpreting, questioning and transforming their realities from an ethics centred on human rights. More than a transmission of knowledge, it is an educational practice that also shapes being and doing (Cubillos-Vega, 2019), a true "education for freedom" (Ugarte, 2005, p. 121), aimed at enabling people to recognise themselves as rights holders and collective agents of transformation. In this sense, HRE offers analytical tools to denaturalise power relations in educational processes. This allows social work to be positioned as a field of resistance against institutionalised forms of domination (Hernández, 2018). It also makes it possible to highlight mechanisms of inequality reproduction present in higher education, challenging the logics of power that permeate the curriculum, teaching practices and institutionally legitimised knowledge (Campana et al., 2021).

This is in line with Latin American emancipatory pedagogies, particularly those inspired by Paulo Freire, which understand education as a political, dialogical and situated act (Magendzo, 2002). In Latin America, human rights education has been linked to processes of democratic recovery and transitional justice, especially in countries marked by dictatorships and crimes against humanity (Magendzo & Pavéz, 2015; Cubillos-Vega & Llanán, 2018). In this context, the pedagogy of memory has been key as a horizon of non-repetition and commitment to "never again" (Cubillos-Vega & Llanán, 2018).

Human rights education, understood as critical praxis, involves building knowledge in dialogue with territories, memories and specific conditions of inequality. Its horizon is not the development of individual skills, but the formation of subjectivities capable of transforming the systems that sustain exclusion and imagining new forms of community, citizenship and justice (Guimarães & Vilar, 2013; Duarte et al., 2025).

Following this same logic, the ethical and political responsibility of universities in relation to human rights extends to their participation in processes of justice, memory and reparation. In contexts such as Chile, marked by state violence, its institutional aftermath and the rise of denialism, universities have a duty to make a real commitment to historical memory and symbolic and institutional reparation. This mandate is required by law in state universities under Law No. 21,094 (2018), which assigns them the purpose of contributing to the strengthening of democracy. Added to this is Law No. 21,091 (2018) on Higher Education, which incorporates respect for and promotion of human rights among its principles, positioning universities as strategic spaces for the formation of ethical, supportive citizens committed to social and environmental justice. These guidelines are articulated with the "Plan Nacional de Derechos Humanos" (National Human Rights Plan) (Law No. 20,885) (2015), which identifies universities as key agents in the consolidation of a culture of rights, memory and reparation. Assuming this commitment is not only a legal requirement but also an ethical condition for the construction of truly democratic universities. This responsibility has also been reaffirmed in the Declaration of the Third Regional Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 2018), which calls on higher education institutions to actively commit to the defence of human rights and the construction of more just and egalitarian societies.

Human Rights Education and Social Work

Recent debates have deepened the recognition of the intrinsic link between social work and the defence of human rights, not only as an ethical-normative framework, but also as an organising principle of professional practice (Cubillos-Vega, 2019). In this vein, various international instruments, such as the Global Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] & International Council on Social Welfare [ICSW], 2014), the Global Standards for Social Work Education (IFSW, 2020) & the Global Agenda for Social Work (2020) explicitly recognise human rights as a structural professional and disciplinary dimension. This perspective is reinforced by the idea that social work is a "bridging" profession, articulating the defence of rights and the institutional actions of the state (Cubillos-Vega, 2019). Indeed, human rights are central to the ethical and political foundation of the profession (Duarte, 2014; Duarte et al., 2025a), as they guide interventions towards dignity, equity and social transformation. Hence, social work is also conceived as a "human rights profession" (Healy, 2008; Steen et al., 2016), in which taking a stand against inequalities requires not only technical tools, but also a deeply rooted political and ethical commitment (Cubillos-Vega et al., 2018). In this vein, HRE has also been understood as a critical tool for challenging the dominant logics of knowledge production and affirming a relational, situated and epistemically just perspective (Rubilar et al., 2025).

However, despite its declared centrality, the theoretical, empirical and applied development of the human rights approach in professional intervention has been insufficient (Cubillos-Vega, 2017). In terms of training, research shows a low presence of human rights-related content in social work curricula, as well as difficulties in its effective integration into practical situations (Healy & Wairire, 2014; Duarte, 2014; Mercado et al., 2016; Rodríguez & Cubillos-Vega, 2023). In Spain, although two-thirds of universities offering a degree in social work include subjects related to human rights, these are usually optional and have little cross-curricular integration (Mercado-García et al., 2016). In Mexico, although 73.68% of public universities include specific subjects on human rights, there is still a lack of a comprehensive approach (Rodríguez & Cubillos-Vega, 2023). In Chile, less than a third of social work programmes consider human rights to be a core part of their graduate profiles, and only 7.6% include specific training in the subject (Reyes-Pérez et al., 2020).

These figures reveal a significant educational gap, especially considering that human rights education is not limited to curricular content but also encompasses cognitive, attitudinal and transformative pedagogy (Rodríguez & Cubillos-Vega, 2023). The lack of integration of these dimensions deepens the structural tensions in social work: between control and autonomy (Muñoz, 2020), between the defence of rights and institutional adaptation (Healy, 2008; Muñoz, 2016), and between professional precariousness and ethical commitment (Ioakimidis, 2021).

In this sense, and in the year of our first centenary in Latin America, social work, as a human rights profession, must assume its own contradictions. For it has not only been a driving force in the defence and promotion of human rights (Steen et al., 2016; Rubilar, 2018; Castañeda & Salamé, 2019) but has also operated in some contexts as a legitimiser of social control practices and even as an accomplice to devices of oppression (Ioakimidis, 2021; Alfaro, 2022). Recognising this ambivalence does not imply delegitimising the profession, but rather critically assuming its position in historical disputes over dignity, memory, care and justice. Thus, it is projected as part of an ethical-political project with an emancipatory focus, in dialogue with undisciplined proposals that question the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial social order (Martínez, 2020; Duarte, 2022). From this perspective, it is not enough to teach rights: it is about inhabiting HRE as a way of thinking/doing/feeling social work from the perspective of memory, conflict and commitment to transformation.

To add further elements, recent research has provided evidence of the relevance of HRE in the practical training of students. Studies show that social work students highly value human rights training for the development of their practical skills and

professional prospects (Arcentales Macas, 2024), strengthening their ethical awareness and equipping them with skills for social justice (Aravena & Valencia, 2023). At the same time, studies show that the human rights approach, when incorporated from a logic of collective responsibility, strengthens the sense of community and belonging in professional training (Gutiérrez & Naranjo, 2023). These types of approaches, which integrate ethical, pedagogical and political aspects, constitute significant advances for a situated HRE. However, other studies warn of the risk of symbolic institutionalisation, where HRE is presented as institutional discourse without concrete effects on the educational experience (Leiva & Céspedes, 2023). This reinforces the need to develop pedagogical devices that articulate the rights approach with teaching practices and everyday relationships within the classroom.

Memory and historical recognition are fundamental to the teaching of human rights, especially in contexts marked by systematic violations. Incorporating a pedagogy of memory into social work training allows us to understand the logic of harm, enable processes of ethical subjectivation, and sustain reparative narratives anchored in justice (Cubillos-Vega & López, 2024; Álvarez & Robles, 2023; Alfaro, 2022; Hau, 2023).

Another central aspect for strengthening HRE in social work is the link between memory, territory, and corporeality. Various pedagogical experiences have shown that embodied and situated HRE can foster transformative processes of subjectivation, especially when linked to living memories, damaged territories, and collective resistance (Cubillos-Vega & Llanán, 2018; Duarte et al., 2022b, 2025b). At the same time, political and social contexts condition the ways in which students understand, value and critically appropriate human rights, giving rise to tensions between institutional discourses, educational practices and student realities (Duarte et al., 2025a). These tensions reinforce the urgency of a situated, active HRE that is articulated with justice processes. Within this framework, social work can position itself as an ethical-political field of intervention that, through human rights education, contributes to challenging normative academic structures and enabling forms of professional resistance to epistemic authoritarianism (Campana et al., 2021).

Recent research in Latin America and other regions also shows that HRE plays a central role in strengthening ethical, political and professional skills, particularly when it relates to community practices, intergenerational justice and intersectional links between class, gender and ethnicity (Rubilar, 2018; Santos, 2023; Martínez, 2020). In regions such as Africa, for example, the Ubuntu approach has been proposed as a cultural and epistemic contribution to social work training, contributing to the decolonisation of the curriculum, promoting more inclusive pedagogical practices, and placing community,

reciprocity and care as central values of professional training (Mugumbate et al., 2023). This approach dialogues with Latin American territorial experiences that highlight eco-territorial struggles articulated from popular feminisms and ancestral knowledge (Svampa, 2021; Duarte et al., 2022a; Duarte et al., 2025b).

Critical, Situated, Feminist and Territorial Perspective: Theoretical and Pedagogical Foundations for EDH in Social Work

Based on the reflection proposed here, we argue for the relevance of a critical, situated, feminist and territorial perspective for HRE in social work. Adopting a *critical perspective* implies shifting away from the idea of HRE as the mere transmission of norms, to conceive of it as a pedagogical and political tool aimed at questioning the structural conditions that make the exercise of rights possible (or impossible). Human rights education that does not problematise the frameworks that sustain inequality runs the risk of becoming a normative discourse without critical force, disconnected from the conflicts and disputes that permeate our realities (Cubillos-Vega, 2021). In the field of social work, this critique challenges the technocratic logics that have contributed to the depoliticisation of professional training, distancing it from its emancipatory vocation. The hegemony of a technical-administrative rationality has emptied professional practice of its ethical and political density, obscuring the structures that perpetuate inequality (Muñoz Arce, 2019). This depoliticisation weakens the transformative potential of HRE, reducing it to a functionalist approach, disconnected from the territories, memories and bodies that sustain the struggles for justice (Cubillos-Vega, 2021; Duarte et al., 2025).

Although social work has historically been identified with the defence of human rights and social justice, it has also been challenged for its role in social control mechanisms, its subordination to welfare-based approaches and its participation in forms of institutional colonialism. These tensions should not be ignored, as they are a structural part of the history of the profession. The relationship between social work and human rights is neither unambiguous nor natural, but rather the result of theoretical, ethical, and historical disputes that cut across the professional field. Recognising this complexity allows us to understand that the link between human rights and social work is an ethical and political commitment that must be critically sustained in each context (Muñoz Arce, 2019; Duarte et al., 2025a).

The *situated dimension* refers to an epistemology that recognises the location of knowledge, embodied partiality and political responsibility in the production of knowledge (Haraway, 1991; Duarte et al., 2022a). A situated education is not simply

contextualised, but woven between the intersections of ancestral knowledge, community experiences and local resistance. This perspective shifts its normative conception, prioritising a relational and territorial educational practice, sustained by memories of harm and transformative action (Cubillos-Vega & Llanán, 2018).

From a *feminist perspective*, HRE is conceived as embodied pedagogy that challenges patriarchal modes of knowledge production and recognises the intersections between gender, class, race and territory (Butler, 2020; Duarte et al., 2022a). In territories under sacrifice, women have articulated forms of political action through collective care, reframing resistance as a daily defence of life (Duarte et al., 2022a; 2025). Considering this, teaching from the margins implies inhabiting dissent, embracing conflict and building trenches of dignity (hooks, 1994).

The *territorial dimension*, for its part, allows us to shift human rights education from abstract frameworks to the concrete geographies where both violence and struggles for justice occur. Territory here is not merely a physical support, but a socio-historical, affective, and political construction, woven by power relations, embodied memories, and ways of life. Talking about territorial pedagogies implies tensioning the scales of knowledge and intervention, decentring the gaze from the institutional towards the forms of knowledge that emerge in conflicts, communities, and bodies that resist (Cortés, 2025). This conception dialogues with the contributions of Latin American social work, which has been re-signifying territory as a critical category for training and intervention (Sánchez & Villarroel, 2025; Duarte et al., 2025b).

These keys allow us to explore the pedagogical implications of a situated HRE. It is not only about content but also about transforming teaching methods, classroom relationships and the ethical horizons of training. Classrooms can be spaces where situated knowledge is constructed that recognises experiences of exclusion and opens up possibilities for desire, memory and transformation (hooks, 1994).

From this perspective, classrooms can become pedagogical spaces of resistance, where embodied and situated knowledge is constructed from collective experiences of exclusion, struggle, and dignity. As bell hooks (1994) points out, teaching can be an act of freedom when it is based on shared power, the recognition of diverse voices, and the practice of compassion as part of the liberating process. Thus, the classroom becomes a place of possibility for new subjectivities and forms of resistance.

In Latin American contexts marked by state violence and extractivism, the territory

is not a backdrop, but a pedagogical actor. Teaching from the territories implies questioning which lives are considered liveable and which memories are authorised (Butler, 2020; 2023). This pedagogical capacity of HRE to re-inscribe dignity in silenced territories strengthens its role in the co-construction of knowledge that challenges colonial logics, expanding the work done in recognising territory as a central educational actor.

Taking this into account, HRE has a strong link to recent history and the memories of the struggle for rights in each country. Meaningful learning in human rights occurs when past experiences are approached from an ethic of memory, a pedagogy of non-repetition, and a commitment to truth and justice (Ugarte, 2005). Thus, in Latin American contexts, HRE must recognise historical resistance to authoritarianism, integrate the perspective of social movements, and adopt a critical approach to the neoliberal development model that has deepened inequalities and violated fundamental rights (Magendzo & Pavéz, 2015). Likewise, HRE can be part of intergenerational processes of transmitting memories, lessons learned, and practices of resistance (Rubilar & Cooke, 2024), moving towards a permanent pedagogy that is situated and articulated with ethical principles.

As a dialogical political practice, HRE seeks to generate emancipatory processes that break with the technocratic and hierarchical teaching still present in many universities (Guimarães & Vilar, 2013). Its power is unleashed when knowledge is co-constructed from historically excluded voices. From a critical feminist pedagogy, knowledge born of vulnerability and desire is recognised (hooks, 1994). Educating in rights means resisting the destruction of the habitable, generating bonds of care and contributing to the construction of liveable worlds where all life is recognised as dignified (Butler, 2022).

Following Butler (2020; 2023), a life that can disappear without consequences is a life that was never fully recognised as liveable. Territorialised human rights education must start from this ethical and pedagogical recognition, re-inscribing historically excluded bodies and territories into the horizon of what can be taught and defended. Educating in rights also means resisting the destruction of the habitable, through bonds of care, memory and reciprocity that challenge colonial and patriarchal logics. If living becomes unliveable, as Butler (2023) warns, then critical pedagogy must contribute to the construction of liveable worlds, where dignity is an everyday experience. This also requires questioning the forms of academic knowledge that have historically discredited other ways of knowing, narrating and resisting.

Institutional Challenges for Mainstreaming Human Rights Education in Public Universities

Despite the regulatory and pedagogical advances that have consolidated HRE as a key component of university education, its effective implementation in universities continues to face a series of structural, pedagogical and cultural tensions. These tensions are particularly visible in disciplines such as social work, which, by definition, lies at the intersection of ethics, politics and transformative action. From this perspective, human rights education cannot be conceived as a curricular add-on, but rather as an educational horizon that challenges the entirety of university work.

One of the main obstacles to HRE is its curricular fragmentation, as it is relegated to optional or isolated subjects, which weakens its transformative potential and reproduces a technocratic logic that prevents a comprehensive and critical view of rights (Catalani & Médici, 2019). In social work, this deepens the tension between institutional standardisation frameworks and the commitment to train critical individuals capable of intervening ethically in social conflicts (Duarte, 2014).

Furthermore, there is a persistent gap between institutional discourses that declare a commitment to human rights and concrete pedagogical practices. Research shows that, although there is a generalised appreciation of human rights among students, this is not matched by training that integrates them in a coherent, profound and situated manner (Duarte et al., 2025a; Cubillos-Vega, 2020). This gap between discourse and experience creates a perception that the declared principles are being undermined. In the case of social work, these tensions are also expressed in the difficulty of articulating a commitment to social justice with the logic of institutional control, accountability and meritocracy.

A third critical element is the weak articulation between HRE and the territories in which universities are located. Training programmes are often constructed from an abstract universality that ignores local contexts, collective memories and the specific forms of exclusion that affect communities. This disconnection weakens the ethical and political meaning of HRE, transforming it into a discourse that is detached from reality. On the contrary, as the territorial approach to HRE suggests, it is in its connection with social conflicts, community struggles and practices of resistance that HRE can take on a truly transformative meaning (Guimarães & Vilar, 2013; Cubillos-Vega & Llanán, 2018).

Added to these problems is a persistent cultural and pedagogical resistance to the mainstreaming of human rights, expressed in the fear of politicising the classroom, in vertical teaching practices and in mistrust of critical or intersectional approaches. This resistance keeps teaching anchored in a dogmatic matrix, where legal knowledge is transmitted as neutral content, stripped of its ethical, historical and political density (Ronconi, 2017). In contrast, decolonial and feminist pedagogy demands the denaturalisation of epistemic hierarchies, the recognition of the marks of violence on bodies and territories, and the legitimisation of situated knowledge that emerges from exclusion (hooks, 1994; Guimarães & Vilar, 2013).

Finally, the limited development of teacher training programmes in human rights education constitutes a critical barrier to its mainstreaming. Institutional will is not enough; epistemological, pedagogical, and methodological tools are needed to enable teachers to approach human rights as a situated and transformative practice, rather than as ancillary content. In this sense, social work faces a dual task: resisting the technocratisation of teaching and promoting spaces for continuous training, collective reflection, and the construction of pedagogical communities committed to social justice. This responsibility also involves challenging traditional forms of knowledge transmission and enabling training processes where the classroom is recognised as a political and ethical space (hooks, 1994; 2022; Cubillos-Vega, 2020; Duarte, 2014).

In scenarios marked by the commodification of knowledge, HRE positions itself as a space for contesting the neoliberalisation of knowledge, questioning the logic of standardisation, productivity and competition that dominate contemporary universities (Martínez, 2020). EDH can become a pedagogical practice that values connection, care and the collective construction of meaning, reaffirming the political nature of knowledge (hooks, 1994; Santos, 2023). The collaborative and disobedient experiences promoted by social work during the pandemic show that it is possible to resist the demands of the hegemonic university model and open spaces for a critical, situated and affective pedagogy (Campana et al., 2021). In this framework, HRE activates processes of relational and committed training, with the capacity to produce socially relevant and ethically involved knowledge.

In short, mainstreaming HRE in public universities requires a review of curricular structures, teaching practices and institutional cultures. It is not just a question of content, but of transforming the very meaning of higher education. This implies resisting the logic of standardisation and control imposed by neoliberal academia, opting instead for pedagogies that recognise the affect, reciprocity and political nature of knowledge (Campana et al., 2021). Educating in rights also means affirming habitable

conditions for dignified lives, sustaining bonds and projecting more just futures (Butler, 2023). In the case of social work, this transformation is linked to its ethical-political project and the need to train professionals who embody rights in their practices, their affections and their commitment to the memories and struggles of the territories (Guimarães & Vilar, 2013; Campana et al., 2021; Duarte, 2014).

Conclusions

When HRE is thought of from a critical, situated, feminist and territorial perspective, it ceases to be just another part of the curriculum. It becomes an embodied practice that recognises bodies, memories and territories as the true settings for learning. As bell hooks (2022) reminds us, educating as a practice of freedom does not fragment or distance, but rather brings together and broadens our forms of community. In the field of social work, this commitment has a particular density, as it is not enough to transmit normative frameworks; it is about accompanying formative processes marked by pain, inequality and dispossession, but also by hope, struggle and dignity.

In Latin America, educating in human rights means not forgetting. It means accepting the marks of authoritarianism, colonialism, extractivism and patriarchy, and walking with them without romanticising them, but without denying them. As Butler (2023) warns, a life that can disappear without consequences was never considered fully liveable. HRE must be on the side of those lives that have not been counted, those erased bodies, those damaged territories. This is where social work finds one of its most urgent tasks: to sustain what resists, to dignify what still hurts.

In the face of the neoliberal university, which rewards technical obedience and punishes ethical involvement, social work has a responsibility to contest meaning. Teaching is a political act, and that means embracing conflict, dissent, discomfort. It means, as hooks (2022) says, leaving behind established ways of thinking and making way for pedagogies of care and hope. Hope that is neither evasive nor naive, but woven with memory, anger and tenderness. A hope that refuses to accept devastation as destiny, that insists on educating for the liveable even when the world seems to be becoming uninhabitable.

Mainstreaming human rights education in vocational training cannot be reduced to normative statements. Real transformations are needed in curricula, teaching practices, the way we assess, and how we inhabit classrooms. Human rights education must permeate the different stages of the training process, weaving together connections, territories, and collective memories. This requires rethinking teaching, recognising

situated knowledge as legitimate, and training teachers in ethical, intersectional and critical approaches. It also involves changing the way we understand learning, valuing not only the conceptual, but also ethical dispositions, collaborative work and the ability to intervene with commitment. Only in this way can HRE assert itself as a transformative practice, one that is not born out of a vacuum, but out of conflicts, struggles and experiences of resistance.

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EDITORIAL RECOVERY

Student Organisation of Social (Service) Work under the Chilean Dictatorship: From the University of Chile to the Professional Institute of Santiago. Notes for a History*

Organización estudiantil del Servicio (Trabajo) Social en la dictadura chilena: desde la Universidad de Chile al Instituto Profesional de Santiago. Apuntes para una historia

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Abstract

This article examines the forms of student organisation that emerged within the Social Service degree at the University of Chile during its transfer to the Instituto Profesional de Santiago (Professional Institute of Santiago) (IPS) following the 1973 civil–military coup. It argues that, despite the repressive context of the dictatorship, Social Service/Social Work students succeeded in maintaining their student organisation,

Keywords:
Social Service degree; student organization; dictatorship; University of Chile; Instituto Profesional de Santiago (IPS)

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and after 1981, within the IPS, they built a new collective whose identity remained closely connected to the University of Chile. Methodologically, the study is based on in-depth individual and group interviews with former student leaders of the programme and of the FECH during the period, complemented by a bibliographic review and documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources. This approach made it possible to identify continuities and ruptures in organisational forms, student demands, and strategies of resistance against the neoliberal policies and the University Reform imposed by the dictatorship.

Contributing to the historiography of social work in Chile, within the framework of its centenary, this article highlights the legacy of student movements and organisations of the period, helping to reconstruct a collective memory that illuminates the tensions and transformations shaping professional education in times of dictatorship.

Resumen

El presente artículo dilucida las formas que asumió la organización estudiantil de la carrera de Servicio Social de la Universidad de Chile en su traspaso al Instituto Profesional de Santiago (IPS), después del golpe civil militar de 1973. Se defiende la tesis de que, en plena dictadura, los y las estudiantes de Servicio Social/Trabajo Social lograron mantener una organización estudiantil en la Universidad de Chile y que, a partir de 1981, con el traspaso de la carrera al Instituto Profesional de Santiago, conformaron una organización cuya identidad seguía siendo parte de la Universidad de Chile. Metodológicamente, el estudio se sustenta en entrevistas en profundidad —individuales y grupales— a exdirigentes estudiantiles de la carrera y de la FECH del período, complementadas con una revisión bibliográfica y el análisis documental de fuentes primarias y secundarias. Esto permitió identificar continuidades y rupturas en los modos de organización, las demandas estudiantiles y las estrategias de resistencia frente a las políticas neoliberales y la Reforma Universitaria, impuestas por la dictadura.

Aportando a la historiografía del Trabajo Social en Chile, en el marco de su centenario, este artículo invita a reconocer el legado de los movimientos y organizaciones estudiantiles de la carrera en tiempos de dictadura, contribuyendo a la reconstrucción de una memoria colectiva que permite comprender las tensiones y transformaciones de su formación profesional.

Palabras clave: *Carrera de Servicio Social; organisación estudiantil; dictadura; Universidad de Chile; Instituto Profesional de Santiago (IPS)*

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Introduction

As noted in other studies, Chilean social work[2] originated in 1925 at the Dr Alejandro del Río school, of the Servicio Nacional de Salud (National Health Service), and later, with the Supreme Decree of 14 May 1940, promulgated during the government of Pedro Aguirre Cerda. This decree allowed for the organisation of the Dr Lucio Córdova School of Social Work in Santiago, the School of Social Work in Concepción, and later the School of Social Work in Temuco, all of which were under the jurisdiction of the Ministerio de Educación Pública, before being incorporated into the University of Chile in 1948. At the end of the 1960s, as the "Reconceptualisation" process of social work was underway, together with the popular mobilisation that brought Salvador Allende to power in 1970, the Dr Alejandro del Río school was transferred to the University of Chile, joining the Dr Lucio Córdova school (Vidal, 2016).

From the second half of the 1960s onwards, student and popular mobilisation grew, reflected in the participation of social work students in the formation of university student centres, especially at the University of Chile, whose presence and influence also marked the development of professional training and practice. In this sense, the reconceptualisation process at the University of Chile did not arise in isolation from the student movement and organisation, but was intertwined with the politicisation and questioning raised by students and society from the working classes; this was also the case during the Popular Unity period, when student centres were also the subject of dispute by the political forces in which the students were active (Vidal, 2016; Ruz, 2016).

After the civil-military coup, the student organisation and movement, along with the entire popular movement and left-wing political parties, were affected by repression and human rights violations. How was the student organisation of Social Work at the University of Chile affected after the coup? What actions and demands did they raise? How did they organise themselves to have representation in the university when the dictatorship intervened? How did social work students experience the separation of the degree programme from the University of Chile and its installation at the Instituto Profesional de Santiago (Professional Institute of Santiago) (IPS)? Were there student centres for the Social Work programme at the University of Chile after 1973 and at the IPS? Is it possible to identify points of agreement and disagreement in the transition of the Social Work programme from the University of Chile to the IPS? These questions have not been addressed in the disciplinary literature, and it is important to delve deeper into the events that occurred and the testimonies of the protagonists of the

[2] Throughout this article, we will use the terms social work, social services, and social worker interchangeably, as their usage reflects historical moments in the profession's development, but they all refer to a profession requiring university training.

time in order to contribute to the history of Chilean social work as it approaches its centenary.

Considering that, starting in 1981, with the Ley General de Universidades (General Law of Universities), the University of Chile began the process of closing its campuses nationwide and transferring some degree programmes—such as Social Work, Cartography, and Library Science, among others—to the nascent Professional Institute of Santiago, we defend the thesis that, after the coup, in the midst of the dictatorship, social work students managed to maintain a student organisation at the University of Chile, while after 1981—with the creation and transfer of the degree programme to the IPS—they formed a student organisation whose identity and professional significance remained part of the University of Chile. This reflects not only the existence of a social service student organisation during a period of fragmentation and disarticulation at the University of Chile, but also the subjectivity of social service/social work students who confronted the dictatorship's neoliberal-refoundational university policies, which complicates the socio-historical process studied and enriches its analysis. In general, Chilean social work historiography has devoted little attention to the study of militancy in the profession-discipline over the last hundred years of history, and even less to student organisations during a tragic period in Chilean history, the civil-military dictatorship and its impact on professional training at the University of Chile. Thus, this article fills a gap in this field.

Methodologically, this article is based on qualitative research, with in-depth individual and group interviews with actors from the period, as well as the tracking and analysis of primary and secondary sources. The analysis technique used for the interviews was content analysis. Overall, it is hoped that the findings will shed light on a period marked by death, censorship and human rights violations, but also by student organisation and struggles, which enriches social work in Chilean history.

The Student Movement and the University of Chile: Historical and Political Background

The University of Chile, founded in 1842, with a modern stamp characteristic of the influence of Andrés Bello, had a student movement that played a leading role in the country's history from the beginning of the 20th century. According to studies by Moraga (2012), the first student centre in Chile was established in 1904 at the Faculty of Medicine, followed by the founding of the Federación de Estudiantes de Chile (Student Federation of Chile) on 21 October, 1906, which was the direct predecessor of the Federación de la Universidad de Chile (University of Chile Student Federation) (FECH). Unlike the latter, the former incorporated students from this university along with those

from the Institute of Commerce and the School of Arts and Crafts, as well as secondary school students from across the country. University students, through the Federation, initiated a struggle within the university and for the country, especially in favour of the most impoverished sectors.

Within the framework of this student organisation, they developed their own publication in 1907: Piton. In 1911, they worked on their own literary and avant-garde magazine, called *Juventud*, and in 1920 the first issue of the magazine *Claridad*[3] was published, influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution and pacifism. The First Congress of Students of the University of Chile was held in 1918, and two years later, at the First Student Convention, its Declaration of Principles was issued.

After the end of the First World War and with the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918, the student movement became more radical, giving rise to an eclecticism within the university in which anarchists, Radical Party militants, future hygienist doctors, lawyers, poets and writers, among others, participated. Among them were José Domingo Gómez Rojas, a poet, anarchist and Christian, a member of the Radical Party and workers' organisations, who was arrested and tortured by the government of Juan Luis Sanfuentes and later died in the Casa de Orates.[4]

In the early 1930s, the Federation split into the FECH and the Federation of the University of Concepción (created in 1919). The FECH had greater influence on political activism, which "channelled the social and ideological concerns of young people" (Moraga, 2012, p.30), linked to the left and the Church. However, it was the post-war period and the Cuban Revolution that marked the radicalisation of the university student world in the 1960s. Although the need for social and educational transformation first appeared at the Catholic University of Valparaíso and the University of Santiago, with criticism of the university authorities and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, from 1968 onwards, the politicisation of the student movement focused on the need for transformation at the University of Chile, where the 1918 reform was taken up again (Moraga, 2012), along with the democratisation and participation of students in co-government and in the election of authorities. All this was part of the university reform that sought to break with the old hierarchies and exclusions generated by the structure of the University of Chile.

[3] Several of these publications can be viewed at:
https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-547182.html

[4] First establishment created in 1852, predecessor of what is now known as a psychiatric hospital.

Between 1957 and 1970, the FECH was led by the Christian Democratic Party.[5] In 1965, it pointed out that this Federation had historically three periods

> that speak to its maturation as a group of conscience and pressure in the country. In its early days, it emphasised critical denunciation of the prevailing socio-economic structures, exposing their vices and contradictions. In a second stage, it complemented that action with the formulation of some guidelines for social change. In a third period, we have enriched this task by participating in efforts to bring about a new way of life for the people of Chile. (FECH, 1965, p.7)

This shows a connection between the Federation and the country's problems, but also its support for the 1968 University Reform process. By 1970, the FECH had positioned itself in favour of the Popular Unity and, through its magazine *Claridad,* showed its internationalist commitment to anti-imperialist struggles and solidarity with Cuba and Vietnam (FECH, 1970). Likewise, the FECH was of central importance to the Popular Unity government, as expressed on the day of victory, when President Salvador Allende asked Alejandro Rojas (then president of the FECH) to deliver his victory speech from the balcony of the student organisation's office on 4 September 1970 (Ramírez, 2016).

The atmosphere of the 1960s also carried over into the social work programme at the University of Chile, which coincided with the beginning, in 1968, of the process known as "reconceptualisation", the merger of the Dr Alejandro del Río and Dr Lucio Córdoba schools, student participation in the programme and university bodies, and in the political activism of students. This happened especially after the victory of the Popular Unity and the new training experiences, together with the production of knowledge (theses) that problematised traditional-classical social work or social service from a perspective that took authors from the Marxist tradition (Vidal, 2016), among others, as references.

Dictatorship and Higher Education: Neoliberal Transformations

Restructuring of the higher education system during the dictatorship

The foundational core of the Chilean higher education system was established over approximately a century, from the creation of the University of Chile in 1842 to the emergence of the Catholic University of the North in 1956 (Brunner, 2008). During these 114 years, the system consisted of eight universities: two state-run and six private. The two state universities were the University of Chile (founded in 1842) and the Technical

[5] "Democracia Cristiana" was a Chilean centrist political party founded in 1957, inspired by Christian humanism and social reform principles.

University of the State (founded in 1947), which changed its name to the University of Santiago in 1980. Of the private universities, three originated under the influence of the Catholic Church (the Catholic University of Chile in 1888, the Catholic University of Valparaíso in 1928, and the Catholic University of the North in 1956), while the remaining three were founded with a secular orientation (the University of Concepción in 1919, Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, in 1926; and Universidad Austral de Chile, in 1954).

According to Fernández & Fernández (2005), these institutions, to varying degrees, received state funding and offered virtually free education, conceiving higher education as a public obligation or responsibility of the state. Over time, state universities significantly expanded their coverage, spreading throughout Chile by opening regional campuses and diversifying their academic offerings with new faculties, degree programmes, and research centres. These universities were able to absorb student demand without difficulty. The university enrolment rate grew slowly, from 1.4% of the 20–24 age group in 1935 to 2% in 1946 and 3.5% in 1957 (Brunner, 2008). By 1955, between three and four young people out of every hundred were attending university, which allowed them to be characterised as universities of elites and for elites, regardless of the social background of the student body (Brunner, 2008). Economic dependence on the state, which provided resources without much oversight, led Chilean universities in the mid-20th century to innovate and modernise internally, without competitive pressure and in a highly protected environment (Brunner, 2008).

The university reform of the 1960s represented a radical change for the Chilean higher education system. Its results were evident in the rapid expansion of university enrolment, which grew from 55,000 (before 1967) to 145,000 in the following seven years (1967–1973). This growth was accompanied by a significant increase in the gross enrolment rate, which jumped from 7.1% to 16.8% in the same period, marking the transition from an elitist system to mass education (Brunner, 2008).

The 1973 civil-military coup in Chile marked the end of the democratic process and a rapid takeover of social institutions by the military, including universities. Less than a month after the coup, the eight existing universities were taken over by the Military Junta, with military delegates appointed as rectors with full powers of university governance, through Decree Law No. 50, promulgated on 1 October 1973, which granted the rector delegate of the Governing Board the following powers:

> 5.- The power to decide on all matters relating to the status of the staff of the University of Chile and its Television Corporation, their rights and duties, and to exercise broad disciplinary authority over this staff; the power to declare that certain positions and functions are of his exclusive confidence, to abolish or create permanent and contract

positions; the power to hire and terminate employment, service provision and fee contracts in advance; the power to suspend staff from their duties with or without full or partial remuneration for an indefinite period and to transfer them to other university departments anywhere in the country for reasons of good service. The Deputy Rector may also make appointments without being subject to competition regulations and impose working hour obligations on professional and full-time staff who enjoy special reduced working hours, except in the case of staff paid by the hour.

6.- The power to appoint a substitute for the position of Rector; to appoint and terminate in advance the legal term for which the Secretary General was appointed; and to establish substitution arrangements among other authorities and officials.

7.- The power to exercise broad disciplinary authority over university students, including the power to apply sanctions such as reprimands, suspensions, cancellation of enrolment and expulsion. (Ministerio de Educación, 1973, pp. 1–2)

The first actions were aimed at expelling professors, students, and officials linked to the government of Salvador Allende, who suffered serious consequences such as detention, execution, torture, exile, or disappearance. Some academic units were also completely dismantled. In this way, the advances achieved with the university reform, such as institutional autonomy, freedom of expression and teaching, and ideological pluralism (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2003), were completely lost, and a repressive regime was established with a vertical command structure and absolute concentration of power in the rectors appointed by the dictatorship.

From 1980 onwards, with neoliberalism established in Chile, the traditional state-centred development model was left behind. The promulgation of the 1980 Constitution facilitated the legalisation of various "modernisations", including the privatisation and deregulation of the education system. These modernisations had a dual objective: to create or open up markets to stimulate competition and to encourage private sector participation in the production of goods and services (Brunner, 2008). This change meant a transition from a vision of higher education as a public right, based on universality and free access, to a decentralised, privatised and deregulated system. The first steps in this transformation were taken with Decree Law No. 3,541 of 1980 and were consolidated and expanded with the Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Educación (Organic Constitutional Law on Education) (LOCE) No. 18,962, enacted on 10 March 1990, just before the end of the military government. According to Fernández & Fernández (2005), the main reforms in higher education in the institutional, financial, accreditation and evaluation areas were as follows.

Firstly, the institutional reform distinguished four categories of institutions: universities, professional institutes, technical training centres, and academic centres of the Armed Forces and Carabineros. Additionally, with the intention of controlling the political influence of state universities (Fernández & Fernández, 2005), the dictatorship segregated the regional campuses of the University of Chile and the Technical University of the State. This gave rise to fourteen new autonomous public universities, called "derivatives" because of their inheritance of the regional structures of the original universities. As a result, the old system of eight universities expanded into a more complex system of twenty-five universities, called "traditional," to which were added the private universities created in the 1990s. Data from the Ministerio de Educación (Ministry of Education) (2024) show that, in Chile, the tertiary system is made up of fifty-seven universities, of which eighteen are state-owned, nine are private with state funding, and thirty are private. In addition, there are thirty professional institutes, twenty-seven private technical training centres and fifteen state technical training centres (located in each of the country's regions) that are part of the tertiary system.

Meanwhile, in the financial sphere, a radical reform was carried out to support competition, forcing institutions to raise funds in the market through various channels for self-financing. The current financing system is complex and, since 2016, following a period of widespread student protests, includes free tuition for students from the poorest 60% of the population who study at accredited universities for at least four years and are enrolled in the free tuition system. Other sources of funding include direct fiscal contributions to traditional universities, which do not cover the operating costs of state universities, student fees, (scarce) research funds, student grants, etc.

Finally, in the area of accreditation and evaluation, the LOCE established the creation of the Consejo Superior de Educación (Higher Education Council) (CSE), an autonomous body with legal personality and its own assets, whose purpose, among others, was to administer the system for supervising private higher education institutions. Currently, the accreditation function falls to the Comisión Nacional de Acreditación (National Accreditation Commission) (CNA), an autonomous body created by law and responsible for verifying and certifying the quality of higher education institutions, as well as their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Its main function is to ensure quality and promote continuous improvement in the Chilean higher education system.

The result of these transformations can be seen, among other things, in the exponential growth in total higher education enrolment, which in 2024 reached 1,385,828 students, including undergraduate and post-graduate programmes (Servicio de Información de Educación Superior [SIES], 2024). While in 1990 only 18% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in higher education, by 2022 that figure had reached 52% (Zarzuri & Vásquez, 2023). On the other hand, statistics also show a change in

the socioeconomic profile of students accessing higher education, with a significant increase in the most vulnerable deciles. In 1990, only 6% of young people in the lowest income decile were enrolled in higher education, while in 2022, that figure reached 44% (Zarzuri & Vásquez, 2023).

In the case of social work, the transformations described above severely affected the social work profession and its training processes. In 1970, there were five universities in Chile (Iturrieta, 2005; Vidal, 2016); however, "of the 11 existing social work schools, 7 of these depended on the University of Chile" (Vidal, 2016, p. 31). After the coup, the social work programme at all universities underwent a complex process of internal restructuring that included not only curricular changes but also changes in academics, students, and staff.

In the case of the Social Work programme at the University of Chile, the campuses in Arica, Antofagasta, Valparaíso, La Serena, Talca and Temuco (Vidal, 2016) did not reopen as a result of the dismantling of the University of Chile's regional campuses, reducing it to Santiago only, but removing the Pedagogical Institute—turning it into the universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación (Metropolitan University of Educational Sciences) (UMCE)—and some degree programmes (such as Social Work) that would make up the IPS, a situation that we will return to later. This break not only limited the continuity of the process that had been initiated by the Reconceptualisation movement within the profession, but also considerably restricted its scope for development. A significant number of social work professionals, academics and students were persecuted, detained, executed and disappeared.

Another consequence of the dictatorship was the loss of the profession's university status, following the implementation of Decreto con Fuerza de Ley (Decree with Force of Law) (DFL) No. 1 of 1980 by the Ministry of Education, published on 3 January, 1981. This decree set standards for universities, establishing that only twelve degree programmes would be exclusively university-based, i.e. they required a bachelor's degree in a specific discipline in order to obtain a professional qualification. In the social sciences, only the degree programme in psychology remained exclusively university-based. The rest of the degree programmes could be taught by other non-university higher education institutions. In the case of social work, professional institutes could award a professional qualification as a social worker (not a bachelor's degree) and technical training centres could award a higher technical qualification in social services or social work. This phenomenon represented a huge step backwards compared to major international academic centres and resulted, among other things, in a delay in the provision of postgraduate courses in the country (González & Morales, 2010) and exclusion from official scientific research support circles, such as the Comisión Nacional

de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica (National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research) (CONICYT).

With the restoration of democracy in 1990, the possibility arose to make a joint demand for the reinstatement of the profession's university status, which was finally obtained in August 2005 through Law No. 20,054, which re-establishes the university exclusivity of social work. Despite this, professional institutes continue to award professional degrees in social work or social assistance. Within this framework of change, social work, like all other higher education programmes, became legally subject to the liberalisation of education and market forces. This resulted, among other things, in a gradual and progressive increase in the number of social work programmes offered throughout the country by various universities (public and private), professional institutes and technical training centres, with both daytime and evening classes, varying in duration and programme offerings. Currently, there are more than 136 social work programmes in Chile (Subsecretaría de Educación Superior, 2025), which affects the quality of training because they are taught in face-to-face, blended and online formats with varying requirements and durations.

Social Work from the University of Chile to the Professional Institute of Santiago

It is public knowledge that, in 1968, the political left won the student council of the social work programme at the University of Chile, thereby deepening the process of reconceptualisation that was taking place at the university, which reflected the degree of mobilisation among the students in the programme. During the Popular Unity government, the student union maintained its support for the changes that the people's government proposed with regard to the programme. This atmosphere is expressed in the account of the process experienced by a former social work student, Mario, who is now seventy years old. He entered the programme in 1970, when the Dr Alejandro del Río and Dr Lucio Córdoba schools had already merged, so political activism, participation in the FECH student organisation and in the social work student union were part of his daily life during the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity). The close relationship between the director at the time, Lucía Sepúlveda, and the student union was very promising, adding to the school's openness to experimenting with new areas where social work students could be trained. In this regard, Mario comments:

> There was an election for the student council, and I was asked to be the candidate for the Jota—Juventudes Comunistas (Communist Youth) (JJCC)—for the student council, and I was elected vice-president; a colleague from the MAPU (Movimiento

> de Acción Popular Unitaria) (Unitary Popular Action Movement)[6] was the president, and I was the vice-president. I was elected in 1971, again in 1972, and I was in charge of all teaching matters and activities at that time, participating in the implementation process of the University Reform, the structuring of the faculties and departments. We belonged to the Faculty of Legal and Social Sciences at that time, and there was the Department of Social Work, which had to be structured in terms of university councils and student participation in the councils under the tripartite system: teachers, workers and students. And in that process, and already elected as a leader, I worked with the school's management, Mrs Lucía Sepúlveda, the director at that time, to contribute not only to the process of change in the university, but also to the process of change in the country. With her at the helm, steps were taken to do professional internships in peasant settlements and in the trade union sphere, linked to trade unions. The role of the degree programme was very important, very active; it was a programme with a high level of political and social participation (...) In addition, I was elected director of the FECH, which played an active role throughout that period in organising volunteer work. And in the Communist Youth, I was given the task of being in charge of volunteer work, and as a result of that, in 1972, we organised the first reforestation project in the Pampa del Tamarugal. We had to spread the word, repair, finance. I was responsible for organising two important concerts, one with Inti Illimani and the other with Quilapayún, which took place in the old building, now Gabriela Mistral, which at that time was the UNCTAD building.[7] (Entrevistado 1, 2023)

The civil-military coup had an impact on all levels. In the case of the social service (or social work) programme at the University of Chile, it led to the brief closure of the programme between 11 September 1973 and early 1974. At the same time, there were detainees/disappeared persons, politically exonerated persons and persecutions. A former leader of the degree programme during the Popular Unity period tells us how he experienced the consequences of the coup on the degree programme:

> I wasn't there in '73. The Jota offered me a place on a political training course in the Soviet Union, so in February of that year I left for the Soviet Union for five or six months, until the end of June. So, I wasn't here for the first semester of 1973. It was a very interesting experience, and in the meantime, the Tanquetazo[8] took place, the first coup attempt at the end of June 1973, which caught us abroad, in Moscow, and I arrived at the end of July, around then. And in my degree programme, I failed the first semester. But that first semester, because of everything that was happening in Chile, had been

[6] Left-wing political party, which began as a split within the Christian Democracy party.

[7] UNCTAD III building, so named because it was built to host the Third United Nations Conference on Trade and Development held in Santiago, Chile, in April and May 1972.

[8] Refers to the attempted coup d'état in Chile on 29 June 1973 against the Popular Unity government.

> extended; the second semester hadn't started yet when the coup came, and the course was closed. The degree programme was closed and did not reopen until the following year, until 1974. So, from 1973 onwards, I didn't study, and well, the coup came and then another stage began, another phase, and it was basically a matter of immediately continuing with clandestine work. (Entrevistado 1, 2023)

When reviewing the list of students enrolled in courses at the University of Chile, we observed that in 1973 and 1974 students enrolled in the social work course at Antofagasta, La Serena, Valparaíso, Talca, Santiago, Osorno, and Ñuble (the seven campuses where the programme was offered), which shows that the closure—if effective—was for a very short period and in no case meant that students stopped enrolling in the programme at the University of Chile campuses in 1974, after the tragic and bloody civil-military coup.

A student from the class of 1978 recounts the traumatic experience associated with the move from Pedagógico, where the University of Chile's Social Work programme was taught, to the building on Sazié Street, where the programme remained until 1989, as a first sign of what was to come with the structural changes of 1981.

> I started studying social work in 1978, and I had to experience the departure from the Pedagógico. It was extremely traumatic for us to be taken to Sazié, isolated. We hated that building in República, full of DINA[9] everywhere (...) Those were very difficult times, the internships in 1981 and 1982, with the horrible economic crisis (...). They were very clever in designing the social sciences programmes to be scattered around so that the concept of a university was nowhere to be seen. Being at Sazié felt like being at school. (Entrevistado 2, 2025)

With the transformations implemented by the dictatorship, mentioned above, on 10 April 1981, Decree No. 2 created the Department of Social Work at the Santiago Professional Institute. On 25 July 1983, the Regulations for the Social Work Degree at the Santiago Professional Institute were approved with Exempt Decree No. 74.

However, since 20 March 1981, Professor Pilar Alvariño had been serving as director of the IPS Department of Social Work, which was made official on 23 July 1981 by Exempt Resolution No. 0173, which "appointed social worker Pilar Alvariño Martin as director of the Department of Social Work at the Professional Institute of Santiago" (IPS, 1981, p. 1). As has been discussed in other studies, Ms. Pilar Alvariño had been a teacher at the Dr Lucio Córdova School of the University of Chile in the 1960s, long before it merged with

[9] Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (National Intelligence Directorate) was a secret police of the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, which operated between 1973 and 1977.

the Dr Alejandro del Río School, serving, among other roles, as editor-in-chief of the *Revista Servicio Social* de la Universidad de Chile, Santiago headquarters (Vidal, 2016).

This phenomenon provides a certain continuity in the transfer of the academic team from the University of Chile's Social Work programme—those who were not dismissed, persecuted or exiled during the early years of the dictatorship—to the Instituto Profesional de Santiago, as well as civil servants. The library with course materials and curricula was also transferred. This dynamic of transfers from the University of Chile to the IPS is also expressed in the account of a former IPS student, who recalled that

> two of the professors we had in the programme came from Chile, Professor Beatriz Peña and Marta Jara. It was not for nothing that they passed the screening process; they were very Mary Richmond, very case-oriented, very welfare-minded (...) At school, in general, they sent you to do internships in super-authoritarian centres, where there were military mayors (...). On the other hand, when talking to the assistants, two had been officials at the University of Chile. In 1980, they were employees of the University of Chile, and in 1981, they moved with the building, the library, and the teachers to Sazié. (Entrevista grupal, 2025)

However, this indicator of continuity is also linked to the awarding of degrees. We know that the University of Chile continued to award professional degrees to those students who were initially admitted to this university but who obtained their degrees at universities or institutions derived from the University of Chile and were thus able to 'exchange' them for one from the University of Chile. This was upheld in DFL No. 30, published on 29 July 1981, which stated that:

> Students from universities and professional institutes derived from the legal restructuring of existing universities as of 31 December 1980, who applied and were admitted to their universities of origin until the 1981 academic year, may exchange their diplomas for those awarded by their respective universities of origin when the students began their studies.
>
> This option may only be exercised once, within one year of the date of graduation from the new university or professional institute, by means of a written request addressed to the rector of the university of origin, who will accept it if, in his or her opinion, the plans and programmes of the new universities and professional institutes are equivalent to those that existed at the university of origin or to those that have been modified with the authorisation of the latter. (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1981, s/p, 1981, n/p)

According to data from the University of Chile's degree office, a total of 417 people made use of this mechanism, of whom 223 came from the IPS and 5 from the

Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana (Technological Metropolitan University) (UTEM) (Valdebenito, 2025). It should be noted that the UTEM was created by law on 30 August 1993 and is the successor to the IPS.

The last Social Work degree formally awarded by the University of Chile was on 14 June 1983, after the programme had been transferred to the IPS. However, most degrees were awarded until 1981. A different situation applies to degrees awarded through "exchange," as the last one is dated 28 March 2003, even though most of these exchanges took place between 1982 and 1988 (Valdebenito, 2025).

This creates a more diffuse picture of the transition of the social work (or service) degree programme from the University of Chile to the IPS, an issue that becomes even more complex if we examine the understanding that the student movement or organisation had of the degree programme after the civil-military coup and during the 1980s. To do so, we must delve into the process experienced by the student organisation at the University of Chile at the time.

The Recovery of the University of Chile Student Federation (FECH) during the Dictatorship and the Struggle for Democracy

In 1973, the FECH was banned after the civil-military coup; its legal status was revoked and its leaders imprisoned. It was replaced by the la Federación de Centros de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (Federation of Student Centres of the University of Chile) (FECECH), which was controlled by agents of the dictatorship. Around 1978, Student Participation Committees were created to contest the student centre elections under difficult conditions, because the dictatorship had informers and guards at the university who controlled and even prevented access to the educational campus

> by the leaders of the newly conquered student centres, whose leaders were Patricia Torres, Manuel Canales, Jorge Pesce, Javier Sáez, Tito Pizarro, José Weinstein (...) One day, like any other, Patricia Torres was beaten at the entrance to the Faculty. The student reaction was immediate. (Brodsky, 1988, p. 26)

and began the strike. The leader at the time, Patricia Torres, was a social work student and was elected as a delegate, which allowed her to participate in the student reorganisation and the FECH after the coup. The FECH was refounded in 1984, after a constituent assembly drafted its statutes, which were endorsed in a plebiscite, and universal elections were held for the executive committee (Ramírez, 2016). Yerko Ljubetic was its first president, but the whole process highlighted the importance of student mobilisation in resisting the dictatorship and defending democracy.

Among the issues addressed in the constituent assembly's discussion was the incorporation of the IPS and the Pedagogical University, whose degree programmes

> were separated from the University of Chile for political and repressive reasons. The demand for their reintegration into the University of Chile has been a demand of the student movement. For this reason, all democratic sectors agreed to incorporate them into the FECH, as a demonstration of the spirit of breaking with the dictatorial project that inspired us and also as an example of our appreciation for the history of the university. (Ljubetic, 1988, p. 69)

Likewise, in April 1986, the FECH declared the profound crisis that Chilean universities and the University of Chile were experiencing as a result of military intervention and the failed self-financing system, which forced the entire university community to fight for autonomy and freedom in order to use it for the benefit of the people. To this end, among its demands was "The reincorporation of the Pedagogical and IPS into the University of Chile (...). In addition, we demand the participation of students, academics and staff in the decision-making processes that affect us" (FECH, 1986, p.1). This reflects the profound and ongoing criticism of the educational system implemented by the dictatorship and a call for recognition and unity of the student movement at the University of Chile, which had become fragmented as a result of that model. One way of rejecting this fragmentation was to allow students from these new universities in Santiago (UMCE and IPS) to vote in FECH elections, even accepting that the FECH leadership and presidencies could be held by students from either the UMCE or the IPS.

The FECH set out to fight for university autonomy and democratisation, to end military intervention, the clearest expression of which was the struggle "against Federici" in 1987, which succeeded in removing Rector José Luis Federici, appointed on 21 August 1987 by Pinochet to reduce staff, sell assets, close degree programmes, among other things; in short, to transform the university according to neoliberal logic. After months of strikes and mobilisation by the University of Chile community, on 29 October 1987, Pinochet asked him to resign.

Among the cases of social work students at the University of Chile after the coup, that of Patricia Torres stood out because she played an important role as a student leader. She enrolled in the programme in 1976 and participated in the first student protests, in the context of military intervention in all university spaces, including student organisations. As a result, she suffered persecution, sanctions, detention and expulsion from her degree programme, but she valued the ethics, commitment, participation and action of the students in the face of the dictatorship, which restored her conviction that things could be changed and that there was hope, despite the fear generated by the dictatorship with its policies of terror.

> I was just an ordinary citizen. I started studying and did really well, but I was always concerned about the social and economic situation (...). The federation of student centres of the University of Chile—spelled with a "C"—was supposed to appoint presidents and leaders at the beginning, until we had to elect two delegates per degree course in 1979. Those delegates per degree programme formed the faculty student union, and we were going to have a faculty student union, not a degree programme student union. We were representatives of the degree programmes, and I was elected (...). What I remember is that we were an icon in social service, we had a presence in many of the committees and in many of the activities that were carried out; and I, as president of the student union, even more so; but we managed to close down the CNI[10] at the Pedagogical University, which was a great achievement (...). They had started to punish me in March 1980. They wouldn't let me in because, according to them, I wasn't a student. So, I went in anyway, climbing over the walls or entering with a group of friends (...). They brought disciplinary proceedings against me three times (...), but in January 1981, they expelled me on the same date that the General University Law came into force. All of us were expelled, all the leaders of the Pedagogical University (...). Several of us leaders who had been expelled from the university in 1981 went on hunger strike and they arrested us because they had an arrest warrant (...). I think that perhaps we were very naive, we fought very bravely at that time, which meant that I spent more than ten years under this decree with the label of military prosecution, and I couldn't leave the country, and I was signing for many years in the military prosecutor's office, but I think it did help with the state of mind, that is, to say 'hey, the conditions were terrible, but organised students can defend themselves, they can move forward and achieve some of their demands'. (Torres, 2025)

Once the degree programme was transferred to the IPS, there was resistance and student demonstrations chanted "back to Chile", which "served to unite people in the protests" (group interview, 2025). There was hope that they would return to the University of Chile. Similarly, this demand was expressed in 1984 with the election of student representatives in the re-founding of the University of Chile Student Federation, since

> when the FECH is refounded, all faculties are called to vote, and that includes, as part of the demands, that the IPS and Pedagógico had to return to Chile to be part of the presidents' council (...) The student centre had already been established there, because it participated in the first FECH with Yerko Ljubetic (...). At the school, in 1984, there was a DC [Christian Democrat] board. (Entrevista grupal, 2025)

[10] Central Nacional de Informaciones (National Informations Centre): Chile's secret police and intelligence agency created in 1977 to replace DINA, operating under the Pinochet dictatorship until its dissolution in 1990.

The Christian Democrats were the first political force to rebuild the student union for the Social Work programme, with Andrés Lastra. Lastra, who was the leader of the IPS Social Work student union, was also secretary general of the FECH and, later, in 1988, became president of the FECH as representative of the Christian Democracy Party youth.

The most committed Social Work students at the time were active in politics, whether in the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Left Movement[11] (MIR) or the Christian Democracy, something that the interviewees greatly value, as political party activism played a fundamental role.

> because it taught you many things that school did not, such as a more strategic vision for analysis, learning to read the economy, understanding what was happening, but also in the daily struggle during the protests after 1983. (Entrevista grupal 2025)

IPS social work students also proposed, together with the Catholic University, the creation of the Confederation of Social Work Schools (Confederación de Escuelas de Trabajo Social) (CONETSO) in 1985, to bring together social work students in the defence of the university-level degree, the change of the curriculum, because it had been ideologically intervened, and to demand that the IPS degree be returned to the University of Chile:

> We advocated for democracy in the streets and in the halls, an end to delegated rectors, for the University to be the national university, for social work to once again be part of Chile, and to create a social work student chapter in the College. (Entrevista grupal, 2025)

At the same time, IPS and Social Work students were permanently and committedly involved in the FECH demonstrations throughout the 1980s. For example, in that most emblematic demonstration against Rector Federici, these students were committed to the struggle, without making distinctions, because they felt part of the same university, as they had been historically.

> [The students of] Chile assigned tasks and we had to go to Engineering to receive the specific tasks we had to do, to be at a certain point, for example, in the takeover of the Central House of the University of Chile [against Federici]. When Rovira spoke on the balcony, we all had specific tasks to support that activity (...). When Pachi Santibañez was shot, we got together very quickly at the IPS and said, "We have to go," and we

[11] The Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) was a Chilean political and social organisation of Marxist orientation, founded in 1965.

> set off walking along the Alameda and there were a lot of pacos [police] (...). It was extremely harsh repression, but it was a remarkable mobilisation (...), I admire that rigour, that conviction, that strength. In addition, there were very violent events (...) in which you risked your life (...), it was epic. (Entrevista grupal, 2025)

The demands of the IPS Social Work students were not only related to the return of the degree programme to the University of Chile, but also to the idea of returning to a University of Chile with a national vocation, given that the institution's campuses throughout the country constituted an important physical and cultural heritage. Therefore, this demand aimed to recover the presence of the national wealth that the University of Chile represented until 1981. This has not been possible to date.

Conclusions

Based on the above, we consider that the thesis proposed at the outset has been confirmed, namely that, after the civil-military coup, in the midst of the dictatorship, social work/social service students managed to maintain a student organisation at the University of Chile; and that, after 1981, with the creation and transfer of the degree programme to the IPS, they formed a student organisation whose identity and professional significance remained part of the University of Chile.

It has been demonstrated that these students participated in the FECH itself, as evidenced by the fact that there was a Social Work student president at the IPS, that they raised the demand for the reincorporation of the degree programme into the University of Chile, and that they fought for the demands of the University of Chile students against the dictatorship and neoliberalism. There was also continuity or transfer of academics and workers, as well as the Social Work library from the University of Chile to the IPS, and continuity in the awarding of degrees by "exchange" from the University of Chile. Not to mention that Social Work students fought and risked their lives to defend democracy at a time when military repression was severe.

The legacy of the epic student struggle in Social Work at that time, despite the fact that the IPS Social Work programme was not returned to the University of Chile, allows us, on the one hand, to appreciate a history that had not been told and, on the other, to learn that thanks to the hope, resistance, organisation and struggle of anonymous generations of IPS Social Work students, we can see the common thread between IPS Social Work and the University of Chile as a historical whole, during the hardest and most tragic years in Chile's history.

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PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

CRITICAL PROPOSALS IN SOCIAL WORK

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REVIEW

Book review: *Trabajo social: aportes a la historia reciente* [*Social Work: Contributions to Recent History*]*

Authors: Martín Hornes, Javier Nascone, Aldana Lescano, Alejandra Andrada, Belén Demoy, Denise Fernández, Paula Villadangos, Sabrina Giuliano, Yanina Rivolta.

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The editorial approach of this book is clear from the very first pages: it proposes a reasoned map in which each chapter follows its own thread and the whole outlines a pedagogical thesis: understanding intervention requires understanding the history that made it possible. To this end, the book identifies four moments in the recent history of Argentine social work: reconceptualisation; the period of dictatorship; the transition to democracy; and the period of neoliberalism and post-crisis as historical milestones that, in their evolution, reorganise professional knowledge, practices and identities.

The entry chosen for this map is the Reconceptualisation Movement, worked on by Paula Villadangos and Yanina Rivolta. The authors reconstruct an intellectual and political atmosphere that, since the mid-1960s, has disrupted the profession's self-perception. This is not just a shift in references—the reception of Marxist readings, debates on dependency, criticism of developmentalism—but a dispute over the meaning of intervention, over the question of whether social work reproduces the order or can contribute to transforming it. The text covers seminars, networks, journals, and training spaces where this unease takes shape and method, and shows how

* Hornes, M. & Nascone, J. (Comps.). (2023). *Trabajo social: aportes a la historia reciente*. Editorial Universitaria EDUNPAZ. ISBN: 978 987 8262 04 8.
Available at: https://edunpaz.unpaz.edu.ar/OMP/index.php/edunpaz/catalog/book/93

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reconceptualisation pushes us to write, research, and systematise practices with a Latin American perspective. In their account, Villadangos and Rivolta avoid the temptation to commemorate in order to highlight legacies that continue to operate today: reflexivity as the ethics of the profession, the search for one's own languages, and the construction of communities of thought that transcend national borders. In this sense, it allows us to observe how certain discussions opened doors and, at the same time, left unanswered questions that the following sections revisit from other angles.

The second section, written by Javier Nascone, delves into the darkest period of recent Argentine history: the civil-military dictatorship (1976–1983). Nascone does not choose the path of generalised synthesis; he articulates archives and testimonies—including those from the "Dictatorship and Social Work" project of the College of Social Workers of the Province of Buenos Aires—to show how the repressive machinery affected the training, practice, and institutional fabric of the professional field. The chapter does not reduce violence to numbers: it locates it in intervened classrooms, dismantled curricula, closed-down degree programmes, disarticulated work teams, and in the concrete experience of persecution, disappearances, torture and exile that marked generations of professionals and students. At the same time, Nascone opens up an essential counterpoint: resistance in university life and professional associations, the "catacombs" of reading and discussion, the links that made it possible to sustain, sometimes clandestinely, a critical culture. Thus, the chapter makes a twofold contribution: it documents rigorously and in the first person, while reminding us that the history of the profession is not unrelated to the political history of the , and that the conditions for intervention are also at stake in the struggle for democracy and rights.

The book then turns to the return to democracy and the transition of the 1980s, with Aldana Lescano and Martín Hornes. The chapter does not idealise the democratic spring but rather considers it a field of tensions where institutional reconstitution, the expansion of rights and the challenge of responding to poverty in a context of persistent economic crisis coexist. Lescano and Hornes focus on the National Food Programme (PAN) as an emblematic case: they not only describe its design—food transfers with federal aspirations and mechanisms for selecting recipients—but also question the type of knowledge and action it requires. The daily routine of the social worker who registers, targets and selects households—with all the technical and moral baggage that this entails—becomes a prism through which to view the shift from more universalist social protection to targeted policies, where mechanisms are territorialised and access criteria become a battleground. The chapter invites us to read the PAN not as an isolated precedent, but as a laboratory of practices and languages that will reappear, with different scales and rhetoric, in the following decade.

This is where Denise Fernández and Alejandra Andrada's contribution comes in, addressing the 1990s and the before and after of the 2001 crisis. The text reconstructs the neoliberal shift—decentralisation, targeting, outsourcing—not only from the perspective of macroeconomics or the repertoire of reforms, but also from its territorial translation into scenarios of intervention. The image that emerges is that of a fragmented fabric in which the state reconfigures its presence, outsources functions, and social organisations and NGOs occupy, in a heterogeneous manner, areas that previously were part of more dense public policies. Fernández and Andrada focus on the day-to-day: forms, income assessments, referrals, overlapping programmes, windows that do not communicate with each other; in short, the way in which the grammar of targeting and the logic of projects redraw priorities and timelines and produce a more segmented intervention. The chapter does not limit itself to observation; it shows how this reorganisation affects professional identity, the expectations placed on social work, and the ethical tensions that run through practice when resources are scarce and access criteria are restrictive.

The journey ends with Belén Demoy and Sabrina Giuliano, who propose reading the post-crisis period and professional expansion from a powerful image: that of the profession as a palimpsest. With this image, the authors suggest that the visible layer of state expansion—the entry of professionals, competitions, and hierarchisation processes in areas such as the Ministry of Social Development—is overlaid with earlier writings: persistent welfare and care practices with a long history (health visitors, charitable societies) that continue to shape expectations, mechanisms, and assessments of 'good practice'. The chapter, attentive to the territorialisation of policies and the non-linearity of processes, identifies contemporary dilemmas: how to think about the political nature of intervention when the institutional expansion coexists with old grammars; how to sustain reflexivity and systematisation as practices that make professional experience itself intelligible—and transformable. Demoy and Giuliano write from this perspective: they celebrate advances, record limitations, and invite us to view expansion without euphoria but also without cynicism, as an opportunity to dispute meanings.

Read as a whole, the compilation offers a dense and accessible narrative of the recent history of social work in Argentina. The main virtue of the book is the articulation between historical macro-processes and concrete scenes of intervention: it does not remain at the level of big words—dictatorship, neoliberalism, state expansion—but shows their effects in classrooms, teams, forms, canteens, municipal offices, ministries. This pedagogical decision makes the volume especially valuable for first-year students, but also useful as refresher material for teachers and professionals seeking to clarify genealogies and concepts.

However, the very operation that reduces complexity to make it teachable brings with it tensions. The heterogeneity of authorship, inevitable in compilations, produces imbalances in focus and depth between chapters; some sections privilege archives and testimonial evidence, others conceptually reconstruct or chronicle, and this counterpoint, although fertile, may require the reader to reorganise their own thinking. On the other hand, the pedagogical nature of the book pushes it to select and highlight certain themes, leaving grey areas that deserve further development: for example, systematic comparisons with other countries in the region in each period, or a more sustained dialogue with contemporary debates on universalism versus targeting from a rights perspective. These are not shortcomings, but reasonable choices in light of a clear objective: to provide a solid and careful introduction to complex discussions.

All in all, the compilation stands firmly in the field of current discussion. It does not inaugurate a new topic—debates on reconceptualisation, dictatorship, neoliberalism, and post-crisis are well known in the field—but it does update and organise scattered materials, giving them a pedagogical order and anchoring them in concrete experiences and institutions. This operation, accessible to those who are just starting out in the profession, has broader effects: it enables readers to critically examine naturalised practices, to identify tensions that are sometimes experienced as purely operational, and to recover the value of writing and systematisation as a constituent part of professional work, rather than as incidental appendices.

In summary, it can be said that Social Work: Contributions to Recent History more than fulfils the promise of its title: it contributes, and it does so from a specific perspective—that of training—with tools that allow for the historicisation and politicisation of intervention. As a projection, the volume invites at least three movements: first, to deepen regional comparisons that allow us to situate the singularities and continuities of the Argentine case in dialogue with Latin America and the Caribbean; second, to open a specific dossier on welfare regimes, targeting and universalism, which articulates history, economics, and politics and law based on local experiences; third, to link this conversation with debates on gender and care, a topic that is barely mentioned but crucial for questioning the welfare matrices that the book identifies as persistent. On all three fronts, the work offers a solid foundation for further writing and teaching.

In the context of the centenary of Social Work in Latin America (2025)—one hundred years after the creation of the first School of Social Work in the region—this volume takes on additional relevance: it offers a historically informed and pedagogically effective narrative for discussing the meanings of the profession today, while allowing for comparative bridges to be built between national trajectories and a shared Latin

American horizon. In the context of the commemorations, the compilation's recovery of archives, testimonies, and debates not only strengthens disciplinary memory but also enables a situated reading of the profession's commitments to social transformation and justice, and to the training of generations dedicated to community welfare.

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INTERVIEW

Interview with Teresa Quiroz. Part Two. 11 May 2011. Research on Social Work during the Dictatorship, Chile.

Interviewer: Teresa López[1]

Teresa López (T. L.): In your opinion, what are the basic ethical principles and what is the purpose of social work?

Teresa Quiroz (T. Q.): One very important principle is a multidimensional view of reality; concern for the relationship between theory and practice and for generating appropriate strategies for successful practice. Another relevant principle is teamwork. It is necessary to work with other professionals, precisely in order to address social multidimensionality and advance in the acquisition of knowledge. Another relevant principle is working for change and social promotion.

Meanwhile, the purpose of social work is to fight against social inequality and achieve more humane social relations, with a real concern for 'the other'.

T. L.: In your opinion, what is the relationship between social policies and social work?

T. Q.: Social work is carried out within the framework of social policies. They are its framework for action. That is why it is very important to be familiar with social policies and to propose modifications or the creation of new policies when appropriate.

T. L.: T.Q. returns to CELATS.[2]

[1] E. N.: Teresa López Vásquez was a prominent academic in Chilean and Latin American social work.

[2] Latin American Centre for Social Work (CELATS), an organisation under ALAETS.

T. Q.: A commission from ALAETS,[3] in which two members per country voted, chose the professionals who would join CELATS. I was selected, and so we went to Peru, and I became Academic Director. Diego[4] went to work at DESCO, an NGO working in social and local development. We spent five years in Peru, starting in 1984. Costa Rica and Peru were two very different worlds. In Costa Rica, people were open, friendly, fun and good-humoured; Peruvians were more introverted. However, in both countries, the experience was good and we made great friends.

When we arrived at CELATS, there were two researchers; we expanded and then began to conduct research with other countries on health, popular education, human rights, and social policies. We determined that social work is effective in social policies. We also financed the magazine. Our line of research and writing was Marxist, which caused us some difficulties with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which financed CELATS; but the foundation continued to support us, although it was very difficult for us to get support to work with Bolivia, Honduras, and Guatemala, partly because Peruvians had always worked on the Peruvian reality and did not share our investigative openness towards the rest of Latin America. Peru gradually gave in and accepted our position.

We carried out research, systematisation and training, and held one or two Latin American meetings per year. There was also a very good documentation centre. Both the research and the training were based on the reality and interests of each country. In training, in the first period we worked a lot on methodological issues, but then we also incorporated theory. The issue of subjects and citizenship was relevant, as was human rights, given the serious problems Latin America was experiencing in this area.

We received many invitations from universities in the region to give lectures or develop joint research projects, in addition to the regular projects we carried out with the countries. To this end, we divided the area into North, Central and Southern Cone, and we also had to travel to Europe to obtain funding. This required us to travel a lot, and what was entertaining at first became a sacrifice over time, because we had to be away from our families for long periods of time. The work experience at CELATS was very good. We managed to get Cuba, Guatemala and Nicaragua to join CELATS, which were not integrated or participating with us. This was considered a great triumph. However, despite the achievements and the interesting work, every day we wanted to return to Chile more and more.

[3] N.E.: Latin American Association of Schools of Social Work (ALAETS).

[4] N.E.: Diego Palma, husband of Teresa Quiroz.

T. L.: When did you return to Chile and under what conditions?

T. Q.: I returned first because I appeared on one of the lists of people who could return, which the Military Junta published.[5] Then Diego came, and soon after, my children. We managed to vote in the plebiscite.

At that time, Gloria Vío asked her brother Francisco,[6] director of the NGO Canelo de Nos, to hire me, so I went to work at El Canelo, where I was coordinator of the Women's Programme. The project was to create a Local Development School for women social leaders, within the network of centres that worked with El Canelo throughout the country. We started working at the school, and urban and rural women from all over the country came, because the courses were taught in Santiago.

Most of the women who participated were quite political and had had a very hard life during the military dictatorship. At first, the rural women were surprised to see diverse groups of people at El Canelo with whom they had never shared before. I remember a school session that coincided with a meeting of the largest homosexual organisation in the country. After an initial moment of rejection, analysed in the school sessions, they managed to establish relationships and valued the occasion as an opportunity for personal growth.

We also did some research with women during that period. Diego, meanwhile, was working at CEAAL[7] and, invited by Tomás Moulian,[8] began teaching classes in the Sociology and Social Work programmes at ARCIS University.[9] After working for a few years, I left El Canelo due to disagreements with the management. I was unemployed for six months; it was hard, and at one point, I felt a great emptiness, even though I was able to spend more time with my children. We needed the income I brought to the family.

[5] E. N.: Refers to the lists available in the digital archive of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos). For more information, see: https://archivommdh.cl/index.php/el-gobierno-da-a-conocer-nueva-lista-que-autoriza-a-volver-al-pais-a-200-exiliados?sf_culture=es&sort=alphabetic&sortDir=asc&listLimit=100

[6] N.E.: Francisco Vío, agronomist and creator of El Canelo de Nos, who passed away in October 2025.

[7] E. N.: Latin American Council for Adult Education, renamed the Council for Popular Education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

[8] E. N.: Chilean sociologist and political scientist, author of the book *Chile actual. Anatomía de un mito (1997). LOM Ediciones, among others.*

[9] E. N.: University of Art and Social Sciences (Universidad de Arte y Ciencias Sociales), a private Chilean university founded in 1982 and closed permanently in 2021.

T. L.: Can you explain a little more about how that process went?

T. Q.: Juan Campos, director of the Social Work programme at ARCIS, offered me the opportunity to supervise theses and collaborate in the design of a new curriculum for the school. I also started taking courses in Social Work, and Juan offered Diego and me the opportunity to pursue a master's degree. Diego and I got to work; we developed the project, it was approved by the Higher Education Council through a decree, and shortly thereafter, we began the student selection process and launched the Master's in Social Policy and Local Management programme, aimed at social workers and other professionals with experience in the social field. Three hundred Chilean and foreign students have passed through it. We have carried it out in Santiago and in regions in Chile, as well as in Argentina.

The University of Cuyo (Argentina) asked us to offer the master's programme in Mendoza and also in San Juan. Finally, it was decided to bring together the students from both cities in Mendoza. We ran the master's programme and forty-three of the sixty-one students who attended graduated. Both universities were undergoing educational reform and the lecturers needed the master's degree required by the university to continue to be employed as lecturers or researchers.

Then we did it in Talca, in Chile's VII Region. And later, through an agreement with the Municipality of Estación Central (Metropolitan Region), we did it there. In 2009, we received sixteen Venezuelan students who arrived on scholarships from the Ayacucho Foundation. All sixteen graduated. This was very intense work for us. Currently, the master's programme we run in Linares, Region VII, is coming to an end.

The master's degree has been an important and successful endeavour. The first generations arrived in very poor condition, with great difficulty in expressing themselves; they wrote very poorly. This has been improving in recent times. I am still the director, and we always grow fond of the students; their departure is always painful. Of the total number of students who have completed the programme, just over a third have graduated. Experts have pointed out that we have exceeded the level of numbers achieved in the country. They have also taught us that Chileans do not have a culture of writing theses. For this reason, we have social research courses throughout the four semesters where, through workshops, exercises are done on the thesis that is to be written.

T. L.: If you had to take stock of your life, what would you say was the best and worst thing?

T. Q.: In my professional life, my richest experience was teaching and directing the PUC school;[10] we had a very close-knit teaching team and we supported each other a lot, and we had very interested and hard-working students. But the end was very hard, terrible! But I think that in life, one adapts to the different demands and circumstances of each workplace.

In my personal life, my children have had a very good education. They are fantastic. Peru was more difficult because of the internal situation in the country, which was complicated at the time we lived there. My children had difficult experiences and remember Costa Rica more fondly. Back in Chile, the family dispersed: one of my sons went to study in the United States. La Teresita came to Chile to live with her grandmother and study for a Master's degree in Urban Development at the Catholic University. Domingo obtained a scholarship from Germany to do a Master's degree and then a PhD in Computer Engineering. Our relationship with Diego has been wonderful and that has helped us to cope with difficulties and sorrows. I have learned something from all my work experiences.

One of the experiences that left a mark on me was meeting indigenous social workers in Central America who were sensitive to their culture; they were very committed. Classes always began with a ritual, and despite the war, they were always in good spirits. Some who did their master's degree in Honduras, at MLATS,[11] were among the best students. More than once, they requested seminars to update their professional skills. On one occasion, they invited me to the Rural University, and I had a unique experience. First, someone I did not know took the bag I was carrying. When I woke up in the morning, all the material I had in my bag had been photocopied, leaving me with a folder to use for the course. In addition to that, they cut a ribbon for me, and I drank something special. During the course, they were very focused, but at the same time, they laughed.

One of the greatest pains of my life was the death of my father, whom I loved very much, but I couldn't come to his funeral because they wouldn't let me in. The other great pain was the death of my granddaughter Danielita,[12] which happened a few years after I returned to Chile.

T. L.: What do you think of the current training of social workers?

[10] Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile).

[11] E. N.: Latin American Master's Degree in Social Work (MLATS) from the National University of Honduras (UNAH), created in 1977 as a result of an agreement with CELATS.

[12] Danielita, daughter of her daughter Teresita, who died of cancer.

T. Q.: I think the level needs to be improved. They should have consistent training in social sciences, both theoretical and practical, at least in some schools that I know, but I cannot generalise because I do not know them all; I have, rather, 'flashes of opinion'. I think there are concerns among students and professionals: they ask good questions, they question and they question themselves.

Today I see a different kind of training from what I knew when I returned from exile; I think it is better, but there is still room for improvement. I believe that a lot of work needs to be done on the issues of development and local power. Certain ways of working need to be improved: computers are used a lot, but not well applied to social action. There should be much more "field work" which, in my opinion, is what allows us to "visualise what needs to be done".

In the commune of Peñalolén, I have seen interesting, creative professional work, a very good selection of strategies and a high level of participation from the people. I think the mayor of that commune is very good and undoubtedly influences the work of the commune's professionals, who carry out very interesting and creative social, cultural and economic activities. It is an intelligent example to be emulated.

T. L.: Tere, thank you very much for your collaboration with the research and for your contribution of knowledge, experience and life. The interview ends at 5.50 p.m.

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Publication note

This interview was conducted by Teresa López with Teresa Quiroz in two meetings, held on 2 and 11 May 2001. The interview is part of the Teresa López Vásquez Collection, which was formed from a donation made by her family to Gabriela Rubilar,[13] principal investigator of the ANID/Coniyt/FONDECYT 1230605 Project, and subsequently transferred to the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile through a donation signed on 28 January 2025. We thank both institutions for providing access to this unpublished material.

The published text is a verbatim transcript of the interview, including Teresa López's footnotes, following the interviewee's review of the transcript. Some minor edits have been made for publication in the Journal, and some additional footnotes have been added, differentiated as Editorial Note (N. E.).

The first part of the interview was published in issue 9 of this journal.[14]

We invite you to learn more about the history and work of Teresa Quiroz, who left a fundamental legacy for social work in Chile and Latin America, on the Memorias Póstumas website at the following link:

https://www.trabajosocialymemorias.cl/memorias-postumas/ver-memorias-p%C3%B3stumas/teresa-quiroz-chile

[13] E. N.: Gabriela Rubilar Donoso, professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile.

[14] López, T., Quiroz, T., & Rubilar, G. (2025). Interview with Teresa Quiroz, 2 May 2011: Research *on Social Work during the Chilean Dictatorship. Critical Proposals in Social Work, 5(9).* https://doi.org/10.5354/2735-6620.2025.78381