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Ageing in the margins: Gerontology in Malawi's undergraduate social work curriculum

Agnes Gogo WIZI-KAMBALA and Charles KAMWANA-JUNIOR

ABSTRACT

Africa is often described as the world's youngest continent, yet countries such as Malawi are witnessing a steady rise in their older population. This demographic shift suggests an unprecedented demand for social services tailored for older persons. Given that social workers are expected to take a leading role in providing social welfare services to older persons, questions arise about their preparedness to practice in such contexts. This article examines the extent to which the undergraduate social work curriculum at the University of Malawi integrates gerontological content and prepares students for social work with older persons. In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposively selected group of twelve undergraduate social work students from the University of Malawi. Thematic analysis was done. Findings revealed that while ageing content is present in the curriculum, it is limited, fragmented and often latent. Students felt underprepared to work with older persons due to limited theoretical grounding and a lack of practical exposure. The elective nature of the only dedicated module on ageing, Gerontology, further limits student access to essential knowledge. Participants recommended curriculum reforms, including making Gerontology a core course and enhancing practical training through community engagement and diverse field placements to better prepare students for ageing-related practice.

KEY TERMS: ageing, curriculum, gerontology, Malawi, older persons, social services, social work practice, undergraduate

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Wizi-Kambala Agnes Gogo; MA Social Work Studies; Sociology and Population Studies Department; University of Malawi, Email: akambala@unima.ac.mw
- Kamwana-Junior Charles; Bsoc. Social Work; Sociology and Population Studies Department; University of Malawi, Email: ckamwana@unima.ac.mw

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INTRODUCTION

Africa, known for its youthful population, is currently experiencing a rapid demographic transition. This demographic shift presents profound implications for social welfare systems, particularly in countries like Malawi, where older persons already face significant socio-economic vulnerabilities. Social workers are expected to play a central role in addressing these challenges, providing care across micro, mezzo and macro levels. However, their ability to do so depends on the extent to which social work education equips them with gerontological knowledge and skills. While research in other regions has examined ageing content in social work curricula, little is known about the situation in Malawi. This article explores the extent to which the undergraduate social work curriculum at the University of Malawi prepares students for practice with older persons, drawing on in-depth interviews with undergraduate students analysed thematically. The paper begins with a background discussion of ageing in Africa and social work practice with older persons, followed by the study methodology, results, discussion, implications for social work education and policy, limitations and conclusion.

BACKGROUND

The population of persons aged 60 and above in Africa is projected to rise from 67 million in 2025 to 163 million by 2050, making Africa one of the fastest ageing regions in the world (WHO, 2025). This increase is unfolding within a context of enduring social and economic challenges which are affecting most older persons than other population groups. In most African countries, poverty rates among older persons are significantly higher than national averages (He et al., 2020). This has largely been attributed to the fact that most African countries lack comprehensive social security systems targeting older persons. Most older persons in Africa have never worked in the formal sector, resulting in a lack of pension support in their old age (He et al., 2020; Wamara & Twikirize, 2023). Most older persons in Africa live in rural areas, where they face enormous challenges, among others, inadequate access to health care and other services, high poverty rates as well as economic exclusion (Wamara & Twikirize, 2023). Additionally, most older adults live without proper care and support due to significant disruption of the traditional extended family systems which older persons have conventionally relied upon (Ene et al., 2024). Urbanization and migration have been linked to the weakening of families in Africa, as younger family members often move from rural to urban areas, or to other countries in search of better economic opportunities, often leaving older persons without adequate support (Wamara & Twikirize, 2023).

Furthermore, socio-economic pressures have strained those who would traditionally provide support to older persons within their families. Factors such as poverty and unemployment limit the financial resources available to family members, making it difficult for them to care for themselves, let alone their older family members (Hoffman, 2014). Moreover, due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the sub-Saharan region, older adults face increased caregiving responsibilities for orphaned grandchildren (Lazaro et al., 2023), while they themselves experience health issues including chronic diseases, cognitive impairments, and mental health disorders, which are worsened by insufficient medical care and support (Kohler et al., 2020). Similarly, older persons in Africa have often been subjected to violence and abuse through witchcraft accusations, neglect, sexual violence, asset grabbing and economic exploitation, discrimination, and physical assault (Wamara, 2022). Attributed to factors such as structural changes due to youth unemployment, challenges related to widowhood and inheritance, economic and social vulnerability as well as age related discrimination, abuse and violence against older persons has often caused physical injury, psychological impairments, forced relocation of older persons and in worst scenarios, deaths (Ebingbo et al., 2019).

Considering the unique challenges and needs associated with ageing, it is the argument of Spitzer and Mabeyo (2016) that Africa needs well trained social workers who can understand and effectively respond to the specific issues faced by older persons. Indeed, social workers in Africa require comprehensive gerontological training, grounded in indigenous scholarship, to effectively implement culturally, context specific and age sensitive interventions (Nabbumba & Tusasiirwe, 2023). Training social workers to effectively address the challenges posed by an aging population is therefore essential for successfully planning and managing the ongoing demographic changes in Africa (Tanyi & Pelsler, 2019).

Social Work practice with older persons in Africa

World over, social work with older adults engages interventions at the micro, mezzo and macro levels of practice. While these interventions differ depending on factors such as cultural context, availability of resources, as well as specific needs of a particular population, they all share the common goal of enhancing the well-being and quality of life for older adults. In Africa, like in other parts of the world, social workers work in close collaboration with a wide range of professionals, among others community development workers, health personnel, policy makers and legal professionals. At the micro level, social workers are involved in providing personalised support and services towards older adults. By conducting case management engaging in crisis intervention and psychosocial

therapies and providing end of life counselling social workers help older adults cope with a wide range of individual challenges which are prevalent in ageing populations (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2016).

Similarly, social workers in Africa are involved in community organising (Tusasiirwe, 2019), policy advocacy (Ene et al., 2024) and economic empowerment (Wamara & Twikirize, 2023) at the mezzo and macro levels of practice with older persons. In a study in Tanzania, Mabeyo et al. (2019) revealed that social workers are at the forefront of economic and social empowerment of older persons in rural areas, by encouraging their inclusion into community income generating activities. Social workers are thus very central to the wellbeing of older persons.

Despite the evident importance and roles of social work in promoting the welfare of older adults, there remains a dearth of knowledge about the engagement of social work education with gerontology in Malawi. While some authors (see for example, Lee & Waites, 2006; Walker & Pillai, 2005) have examined the gerontological content within the social work curriculum elsewhere across the globe, there is a significant lack of research on the infusion of gerontological content within the social work curriculum in Malawi. This study therefore set out to answer the following questions: 1. To what extent does the social work curriculum at the University of Malawi integrate courses/ content on ageing? 2. How does the current curriculum prepare students for practice with older persons, and what gaps and improvements do the students identify? This study is relevant and timely because it will not only reveal the current state of gerontological social work education but will also inform future research aimed at improving social work practice with older persons. Hopefully, the findings of this study will serve a gap in adequately preparing the professional social welfare workforce for practice with older adults, who are amongst the most marginalised groups of people in Malawi.

THEORETICAL LENS

This study is underpinned by the Ubuntu theory and African-centred perspectives, which emphasise relationality, community and culturally grounded knowledge systems in social work education. Ubuntu highlights that personhood is realised through relationships with others and has been identified as a key foundation for social work values, education, and practice in Africa (Mugumbate et al., 2023). In addition, Ubuntu-based education frameworks stress the importance of community engagement, participation and experiential learning, which are particularly relevant to the preparation of students for practice with older persons. These perspectives align with calls for African social work curricula to be contextually relevant and responsive to local realities rather than relying on externally derived models.

METHODS

Study design

As the research sought to centre experiences and perceptions of students an exploratory qualitative design was used. Bryman (2016) advocates for exploratory qualitative design in understanding human experiences arguing that it offers researchers a chance to ‘view events and the social world through the eyes of the people’ that are being studied (p. 399). In addition, this study is informed by African-centred research perspectives, which emphasise the importance of grounding inquiry in local contexts, lived realities and culturally relevant knowledge systems (Bangura, 2011; Chilisa, 2012). Such perspectives align with the study’s focus on understanding how social work students in Malawi experience and interpret their training in relation to ageing.

Study area

This study was conducted at the University of Malawi, the first public university in the country to offer a Bachelor of Social Science in Social Work, a programme introduced in 2012 (Wizi-Kambala, 2024). As of April 2025, the programme had a total enrolment of 274 undergraduate students across the four years of study. Of these, 115 students were enrolled in the third and fourth years. The university serves as a key institution for training social workers in Malawi and plays a central role in shaping the future workforce responsible for delivering social welfare services, including those targeting older persons.

Participants

The study involved 12 undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Science in Social Work programme at the University of Malawi. Participants were purposely selected from the third and fourth years of study, as these students had completed at least one sixteen-week field placement, providing them with substantial exposure to both theoretical and practical aspects of curriculum. The 12 participants also ensured data saturation given the qualitative nature of the study. The sample comprised six third year and six fourth-year students, with an equal gender distribution (six male and six female). This composition allowed for a balanced exploration of

student perspectives on the integration of gerontological content and their preparedness to work with older persons.

Data collection

Data collection was carried out through interviews guided by the dialogue approach promoted by the African Social Work Network (ASWNet). This approach emphasises relational engagement, co-construction of meaning and culturally grounded conversational processes, making it appropriate for eliciting student narratives in depth. An interview guide was developed by the principal investigator who has expertise in gerontology. The guide was created through an iterative process informed by the study's research questions and a review of existing literature on gerontology and social work curricula. To ensure technical accuracy, clarity and alignment of the questions with the study aims, the guide was reviewed by the co-researcher, who has expertise in ageing and qualitative research. The interview guide was then informally piloted with two individuals similar to the study population to assess clarity and flow of questions. Minor adjustments were made based on this pilot to enhance the precision and suitability of questions. Data were collected between April and June 2025 through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives in detail, while also enabling the researcher to probe for deeper insights (Bryman, 2016). Each interview was conducted in person, lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and took place in settings convenient for the participants. Informed consent was obtained, and with permission, all interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate capture of participants' narratives.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) was employed to analyse the data. All audio -recorded interviews were manually transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and to preserve participants' original expressions. The analysis was conducted manually and followed the key phases of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review and refinement. A deductive analytic approach (Bryman, 2016) was used, with the initial coding framework informed by the study's research questions and existing literature on gerontology and social work curriculum. The use of thematic analysis is also consistent with African-centred research approaches, which emphasise flexible, context-driven and interpretive methods that prioritise participants lived realities and local meanings (Africa Social Work Network, n.d.; Chilisa, 2012). Both the principal investigator and the co-researcher independently coded the transcripts to enhance the rigour and credibility of the analytic process. The two sets of codes were then compared and discussed, with discrepancies resolved through consensus. This collaborative process reflects relational approaches to knowledge production that are increasingly emphasised in African research methodologies (Chilisa et al., 2017). Themes were subsequently developed to capture key patterns related to the integration of gerontological content and students' preparedness for practice with older persons.

FINDINGS

Gerontological content in Social Work curriculum

Participants in the study acknowledged that the curriculum includes some content related to ageing, though they consistently described it as limited and not explicitly emphasized. Several students pointed to modules such as *Analysis of Social Problems* (first year), *Human Rights and the Law* (second year), and *Special Populations* (third year) as incorporating aspects of ageing. However, they noted that the inclusion of ageing-related content in these modules is often latent and not clearly articulated. As one participant explained:

"So basically, Human Rights and the Law and Special Populations, these are the main modules that provide basic information about the elderly. But from the first year, we also had modules that were incorporating concepts of the elderly, but latently. And they were not manifest..." Participant 5

Students also highlighted that the curriculum tends to address various vulnerable groups within the community, but older persons are not given adequate attention or emphasis. The module *Gerontology*, offered in the fourth year, was widely recognized as the only course that provides comprehensive content on ageing. Some participants also mentioned *Disability and Special Needs* as including relevant material, though to a lesser extent. As one participant noted:

"So, I feel like for Gerontology it's the whole course, but for Disability and Special Needs, it's just a little bit of it, whereby we talk of some issues that may come due to ageing, some disabilities that can come because of ageing." Participant 2

Despite the presence of these modules, many students expressed concern that the overall content on ageing is insufficient. One participant described the inclusion of ageing topics as “unintentional,” suggesting that curriculum developers may not have deliberately aimed to address ageing in a meaningful way:

“...of which I can tell them that the older person is being mentioned unintentionally. I would really say it's unintentional. The main focus wasn't that...” Participant 1

Another student emphasized the elective nature of the *Gerontology* module, raising concerns about the risk of students graduating without any substantial knowledge of ageing if they choose not to take it:

“In the same way, the course in fourth year Gerontology, which is also looking at ageing, it's just a course and then it's just an elective. It's something which somebody would choose to go for and another one would not.” Participant 4

Overall, students felt that while ageing is present in the curriculum, it is addressed in a fragmented and minimal way. The depth and quality of content on ageing often depend on the lecturer’s individual knowledge and interest, leading to inconsistencies in how the topic is covered. This raises concerns about the preparedness of graduates to engage effectively with issues related to older persons in their professional practice.

Ability of the curriculum to prepare students for practice with older persons

Participants expressed a general lack of confidence in their preparedness to work effectively with older persons upon graduation. They felt that the social work training at the University of Malawi does not adequately equip them, both theoretically and practically, for practice in the context of ageing. A recurring concern was the absence of dedicated modules on ageing in the first three years of study, coupled with limited exposure to older persons in practical settings. Many participants reported never having had direct engagement with older adults during their field placements or coursework.

“Okay, so from first year to fourth year, almost over 3...should be 30 courses, yes. So, from 30 courses, you only get one course which talks of ageing. So, you didn't get much information or be equipped with the necessary information for you to be working with older persons in a better way.” Participant 2

“I would say that I was not ready to work with the elderly at that point because I did not have as much information about older persons as I do now. Because I understand in first year, we were learning about the phases in psychology, the phases of development, but that was just...when I look at it now...it was shallow information. It wasn't really deep for me to really understand the phases of ageing and how to help older persons efficiently.” Participant 5

Some participants, particularly those who had opted to study *Gerontology* in their final year, felt more confident in their ability to work with older persons. They attributed this to the practical and theoretical grounding provided by the module. However, they were critical of the decision to make *Gerontology* an elective rather than a core component of the curriculum. This, they argued, undermines the generalist nature of the social work programme and limits students’ preparedness to work with older adults.

“For me personally, I would say yes, because as I said that in the fourth year, I had an elective of Gerontology so I've learned much with it and we've done much of practical work, that I can say I'm very ready. But for the curriculum, if I will answer on the part of curriculum, I don't feel like someone can be ready to work with the older people just going through without taking Gerontology because that is optional and it still remains being optional—unless if that can be incorporated to say it should be mandatory like other core courses, and then you can really say the students are ready.” Participant 7

Overall, the findings suggest that the Bachelor of Social Science in Social Work at the University of Malawi, as a generalist programme, is not adequately preparing students to work with older persons. Participants consistently highlighted the curriculum’s limited capacity to address ageing, citing a lack of emphasis, insufficient theoretical grounding, and inadequate practical exposure to older adult populations.

Gaps and suggestions for improvement

The findings reveal significant gaps in the current social work curriculum at the University of Malawi, particularly in its capacity to prepare students to work effectively with older persons. Participants identified two main areas of concern: the lack of core courses with substantial content on ageing, and limited opportunities for practical

engagement with older adults. Although *Gerontology* offers the most in-depth coverage of ageing in the curriculum, its status as an elective in the final year limits its reach, resulting in many students graduating without adequate preparation to work with older adults.

“...imagine that maybe in a class of maybe 50 social workers, only two are taking that course, yet 48 are not taking that course. But after the theoretical studies in classes, whatever, they're expected to go out there and work with the same people, work with the same disadvantaged group like of the older age. So, I feel like the gap is really coming in because it's not compulsory.” Participant 3

Participants also emphasized the need for more practical experiences with older persons, arguing that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient for effective practice.

“So, I feel like there is a gap. There is a need to incorporate more practical experiences to do with the elder because we are learning about older persons in theory. So, we also have to apply it because social work is a practical field...” Participant 10

Despite these challenges, participants offered several suggestions for improvement. First, they recommended a curriculum review to elevate the status of *Gerontology* to a core course, ideally introduced earlier in the programme. They pointed to existing core modules such as *Early Childhood Development*, *Child Protection*, and *Gender and Development* as examples of how specific vulnerable groups are prioritized. Participants suggested that integrating *Gerontology* alongside modules like *Group Work I & II* and *Case Work I & II* in the second year could enhance students' preparedness without disrupting the overall curriculum structure.

“Okay, I feel like for all the students, for all social work students to have the knowledge, then this Gerontology course needs to be made mandatory. It should be compulsory. Every social work student needs to get it. That's the only way that every student can be equipped with the knowledge of the older persons.” Participant 3

On the practical side, participants proposed leveraging local communities for experiential learning. They suggested organizing regular visits to elderly care homes and community-based organisations, rather than relying solely on formal field placements. This would ensure that all students gain exposure to working with older persons, regardless of their placement assignments. Additionally, they recommended rotating students across different agencies during their two placements, which conducted in the third and fourth years, to ensure a more comprehensive, generalist training experience

“And also, I believe that the module Special Populations should include experiential learning apart from the practical. As we're learning, we should also be able to go and visit organisations... institutions that have to do with the elderly. For us to have firsthand information and practical ideas of how to deal with older persons.” Participant 9

“I feel like there should be a balance. They should observe that in your third year, you handle children and women. And, you should make sure that in your fourth year, they should add you to work with the elderly... My friends in third year worked with children. In fourth year, you work with children again. So, there should be records... In the fourth year, they should allocate you in an organization where you can work with the elderly.” Participant 8

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the extent to which the undergraduate social work curriculum at the University of Malawi prepares students to work with older persons. The findings reveal significant gaps in both the theoretical and practical dimensions of gerontological social work education. Students consistently reported that while some modules touch on ageing, the content is often latent and lacks depth. Although the *Gerontology* module offers the most in-depth coverage of ageing, its status as an elective in the final year limits its reach, resulting in many students graduating without adequate preparation to work with older persons. From an Ubuntu and African-centred perspective, this marginal positioning of ageing within the curriculum is particularly problematic. Ubuntu emphasises relationality and interconnectedness, recognising that older persons occupy a central role within families and communities. The limited and fragmented treatment of ageing in the curriculum therefore reflects a misalignment with African value systems, where ageing is not peripheral but integral to social life. This suggests that social work curriculum at the University of Malawi may not be adequately grounded in culturally relevant understandings of care and support, especially for older persons, as advocated by African-centred perspectives.

These findings mirror global (especially Western) concerns about the marginalisation of ageing in social work

curricula, where gerontological content is frequently treated as peripheral (Lee & Waites, 2006; Walker & Pillai, 2005). However, within African contexts, evidence remains limited. A study from Ghana (Asante & Karikari, 2023) highlights fragmented and minimal coverage of gerontology across disciplines such as medicine, psychology, public health, and social work, rather than a systematic focus within social work education. Similarly, research from South Africa points to the near absence of gerontology content in tertiary curricula (Tanyi & Pelser, 2019). From a decolonial and African-centred standpoint, this pattern raises concerns about the continued reliance on externally derived curricular priorities that do not adequately reflect Africa's emerging demographic realities. This therefore highlights the need for curriculum reforms that not only embed ageing as a core component of social work education in Malawi and across African contexts but also introduce and scaffold gerontological content earlier in the training process to ensure progressive and sustained engagement with ageing throughout the programme. Such reforms would not only enhance student preparedness but also contribute to building a workforce capable of addressing the complex needs of Malawi's ageing population.

The perceived lack of preparedness among students to work with older adults is particularly concerning given the practical nature of social work. Participants in this study highlighted the absence of structured exposure to older persons during field placements, which are critical for developing practice competencies. These placements, which occur in the third and fourth years, often lack diversity in agency settings. Students noted that some peers completed both placements in the same organisation, limiting their exposure to different vulnerable populations. From an Ubuntu-informed educational perspective, learning is inherently relational and grounded in lived experience, with knowledge emerging through engagement with communities. The absence of meaningful interaction with older persons during training therefore undermines the development of relational competencies essential for social work practice. It also reflects a disconnect between classroom-based knowledge and the community contexts within which social work is practised.

While Karasik et al. (2022) underscore that experiential learning is essential for developing robust gerontological skills, social work students in Malawi face structural constraints that limit opportunities for practice with older persons. These include the limited number of institutions providing services specifically for older persons, which restricts students' access to relevant field experiences. While learning in formal institutional settings remains important, African-centred perspectives encourage a broader conceptualisation of learning spaces that extends beyond formal organisations. Such perspectives recognise communities, families and informal care systems as legitimate and valuable sites of knowledge and practice. Integrating community-based learning approaches could therefore provide students with more culturally relevant, relational and contextually grounded exposure to ageing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND POLICY

The findings have important implications for social work education and policy in Malawi and similar contexts. First, they highlight the urgent need for curriculum reform to ensure that all social work students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to work with older persons. Making *Gerontology* a core course and embedding ageing content across multiple modules would signal a commitment to inclusive and comprehensive training. Second, the study underscores the importance of practical exposure. Universities should explore partnerships with informal care systems, community-based organisations and research institutions to facilitate experiential learning opportunities. Strengthening these partnerships could help to ensure that academic institutions respond proactively to demographic shifts and policy priorities.

LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted with a small, purposively selected group of undergraduate students from a single institution. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to all social work programmes in Malawi or other countries. Additionally, the study focused solely on student perspectives, without incorporating the views of faculty, curriculum developers or policymakers. Future research could adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in gerontological social work education.

CONCLUSION

As Africa's older population continues to grow, the need for social workers who are adequately trained to support older persons becomes increasingly urgent. This study has shown that the current undergraduate social work curriculum at the University of Malawi falls short in preparing students for this role. The limited and optional nature of gerontological content, coupled with insufficient practical exposure, leaves many graduates underprepared to meet the needs of older adults. However, the insights and suggestions offered by students point to clear pathways for reform. By integrating *Gerontology* into the core curriculum and enhancing practical training, social work programmes can play a pivotal role in strengthening care and support systems for older

persons in Malawi and beyond.

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