

# ACTIVIST TRAJECTORIES OF OLDER WOMEN IN POST-DICTATORSHIP CHILE

*TRAJETÓRIAS ATIVISTAS DE MULHERES  
IDOSAS NA PÓS-DITADURA DO CHILE*

*TRAYECTORIAS ACTIVISTAS DE MUJERES  
MAYORES EN EL CHILE POSTDICTADURA*

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**Resumen:** La vejez de las mujeres mayores suele ser descrita como una etapa en la que se vivencian múltiples cambios y pérdidas, donde se acrecientan las discriminaciones de género. Sin embargo, poco se ha explorado la experiencia biográfica al envejecer. En este artículo, identificamos como construyen narrativamente trayectorias de acción política mujeres mayores activistas de la Agrupación Bordadoras por la Memoria de la ciudad de Valparaíso-Chile. Realizamos un estudio cualitativo con entrevistas biográficas siguiendo la propuesta de relatos de vida. Sus itinerarios biográficos dan cuenta de un continuum en su acción política y un cuestionamiento al sistema neoliberal. Por medio de sus bordados, contribuyen a la lucha por la memoria y la justicia social. Resignifican su activismo en la vejez, incluyendo nuevos repertorios de acción y proyectos, mediante prácticas de sororidad. Concluimos la importancia de disputar la vejez desde el ciclo vital convencional, dando cabida a trayectorias femeninas agencializadas.

**Palabras clave:** Envejecimiento; Mujeres Mayores; Trayectorias; Experiencias de vida; Activismo Político.

**Resumo:** A velhice das mulheres idosas é muitas vezes descrita como uma época de múltiplas mudanças, perda e maior discriminação de gênero. No entanto, pouco tem sido explorado sobre a experiência biográfica do envelhecimento. Neste artigo, identificamos como as mulheres ativistas mais velhas da “Agrupación Bordadoras por la Memoria” na cidade de Valparaíso-Chile constroem trajetórias narrativas de ação política. Realizamos um estudo qualitativo com entrevistas biográficas na sequência da proposta de narrativas de vida. Os seus itinerários biográficos mostram uma continuidade na sua ação política e um questionamento do sistema neoliberal. Através dos seus bordados, elas contribuem para a luta pela memória e justiça social. Dão novo significado ao seu ativismo na velhice, incluindo novos repertórios de ação e projetos, através de práticas de irmandade. Concluimos que é importante contestar a velhice do ciclo de vida convencional, criando espaço para trajetórias femininas agencializadas.

**Palavras-chave:** Envelhecimento; Mulheres Mais Velhas; Trajetórias; Experiência de Vida; Ativismo Político.

**Abstract:** Old age among older women is usually described as a stage in which multiple changes, losses and gender discrimination are experienced. However, little has been explored about the biographical experience of aging. In this article, we identify how older women activists of the Agrupación Bordadoras por la Memoria in the city of Valparaíso, Chile, narratively construct trajectories of political action. We conducted a qualitative study with biographical interviews following proposal of life narratives. Their biographical itineraries show a continuum in their political action and a questioning of the neoliberal system. Through their embroideries, they contribute to the struggle for memory and social justice. They re-signify their activism in old age, including new repertoires of action and projects, through practices of sorority. We conclude the importance of disputing old age from the conventional life cycle, making room for agentialized feminine trajectories.

**Keywords:** Aging; Older Women; Trajectories; Life Change Events; Political activism.

## Introduction

In Latin America, the population over 65 years of age is 8.7% of the total, and it is estimated that by the year 2100 it will become the oldest region in the world (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019). Globally, the proportion of women and their life expectancy is higher than that of men, although they age in worse conditions (World Health Organization, 2021). In this context, the experience of aging arouses increasing academic interest, although studies on the subject have understood old age as the result of evolutionary development, rather than as a process throughout life (Yuni, 2019). In this line, the contribution of the life course approach is crucial to analyze aging, since it explores the transition to old age, adaptations to it, health-disease processes, among others (Blanco, 2011; Elder, 1995; Riemann & Schütze, 1991). From this approach, some studies (e.g., Serrat & Villar, 2019) have shown that women's political participation is influenced by family life transitions resulting from gender inequalities that affect the political sphere.

However, despite its contribution, the inquiry around the political action of the elderly has neglected its gendered character, the influence of socio-political contexts and historical processes, as well as the point of view of its own protagonists (Serrat, & Villar, 2019). Moreover, when this refers to women, who are usually invisible from conventional gerontological production or integrated into it, taking the life course of men as a point of reference (Chazan, 2016). Therefore, older women are described from the deprivations and inequalities in which they live, product of gender discrimination accumulated throughout life (Freixas, 2021). This makes invisible the resources they develop and ignores their political and vindictive commitment, since activism is usually associated with the masculine and youth (Chazan, 2016).

The incipient development around the political action of older women has shown how their trajectories of participation expose a continuity in the commitment to social changes (Chazan, 2016; Mazzucchelli et al., 2021). This approach allows to expand the reflection of old age, articulating the socio-historical dimension and the experiences that women have developed, from their current biographical situation (Bertaux, 2005). Consequently, we recognize activism as a set of common actions, carried out by people, with the intention of achieving a change in society through a collective implication (Oliver, 1984). Therefore, this article aims to identify the trajectories of political action of older women activists, from a gender and life course perspective.

We begin by sharing theoretical-conceptual references on the course of life and the trajectories inscribed in the political-social scenario. We continue with a methodological design from the biographical perspective. Then, we present the results around three central categories of the participants' stories and finally share some reflections by way of closure.

## Women, life course and trajectories

In the analysis of the life course, exploring the trajectories of a particular generation-cohort- allows us to examine how these are strongly influenced by institutional frameworks, the socio-historical context and one's own experiences (Elder, 1995). Likewise, participation in political organizations can be significantly influenced by the vital transitions that people experience and by the gender roles assigned, affecting as opportunities or limitations (Serrat & Villar, 2019).

The socio-political changes of recent decades, in Chile and Latin America, work as a backdrop questioning biographical itineraries and stressing their subjective structures (Riemann & Schütze, 1991). In this way, the life trajectories of older women were marked by the civic-military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Period in which they took part in social organizations to express solidarity with the victims and combat poverty. As in the rest of the Latin American dictatorships, in Chile women led the organizations that denounced human rights violations, the disappearance of children and grandchildren and the struggle against the dictatorial regime (Kirkwood, 2010). This socio-political context was influenced by the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 70's that promoted exclusive individual responsibility, privatization and the weakening of social protection systems, strategies that were reinforced from a public action of a welfare type promoted by post-dictatorial governments (Alfaro & Zambrano, 2009).

The social upheaval of October 18, 2019 -18-O-, under the slogan "it is not 30 pesos, it is 30 years", showed a multidimensional crisis, which denounced the social inequities entrenched since the dictatorship and the shortcomings of the neoliberal model, and promoted a democratic constituent process to abolish the Pinochet constitution (Akram, 2020). Thus, the revolt promoted an openness to the participation of groups that have been systematically excluded, as is the case of women who have had a leading role in the visibility of demands that affect the elderly and the vindication of historical struggles (Mazzucchelli et al., 2021).

Older women, challenged by their experiences and by the political and socioeconomic context, have confronted mechanisms of exclusion from a political action that has made visible in the "public" what was limited to the sphere of the private -domestic- and excluded (Kirkwood, 2010). At the same time, they have made their own values and ideals of struggle, such as the denunciation of neoliberalism, patriarchy and all forms of social injustice, reinventing their praxis (Mazzucchelli et al., 2021). Activism in organizations requires greater dedication compared to other forms of political participation (Serrat & Villar, 2019), and is experienced by women influenced by their vital transitions (motherhood, widowhood, retirement, etc.) and biographical experiences, which are articulated as specific modes of a women's political work (Kirkwood, 2010).

Therefore, we understand the notion of trajectory as a theoretical-methodological concept that tries to articulate biography and social structure (Roberti, 2017), standing for a dynamic itinerary, which can vary its direction, proportion and degree throughout the course of life (Elder, 1998). In this way, exploring the trajectories of political action allows to recognize meanings from the perspective of its own protagonists and enrich their understanding from a gender perspective (Freixas, 2021).

## Method

Given the interest in analyzing the subjective experience of aging, we work with a qualitative-comprehensive design, using the technique of the biographical interview -life story- as a method and product, considered a discourse that gives meaning (Bertaux, 2005). Access to the camp took place from May 2020 to January 2021 in the city of Valparaíso, Chile. We work with the Association of Women Embroiderers for Memory (Agrupación Bordadoras por la Memoria<sup>1</sup>). We chose this group because it is an active political organization, which meets for the defense of human rights, memory and social justice. We interviewed all the older women of the group, and the selection criteria of the participants was based on their political activism in old age.

*Production procedure and analysis*

We conducted a total of 10 biographical interviews in remote format (platform zoom.org), aimed at investigating the central themes of the study which were contained in an interview script (Piña, 1999). The interviews had an average duration of 2.5 hours, and were transcribed in their entirety. We adapted to the rhythms and needs of the participants, both due to internet connection difficulties and the themes that appeared during the interviews, which, on some occasions due to their strong emotional charge, required pauses. Thus, with 4 of them we carried out two interview sessions to build the life story and with the other two 1 session. The ages of the participants ranged from 63 to 74 years. All of them were retired at the time of the interview, took part in other political and community organizations -in addition to the Embroiderers-, they had adult children and grandchildren.

For the analysis of the interviews, we used the method of narrative analysis of the biographical story (Arfuch, 2007; Bertaux, 2005; Piña, 1988, 1999), which considers the story of life as a text of an interpretative nature, generated by a narrator who elaborates through the operation of memory, his past time, experiences and meanings. Likewise, we follow the analytical proposal of life stories that includes a singular logic, which addresses each interviewee as a case and then integrates a logic and transversal analysis to the set of stories (Cornejo, Faúndez, & Besoain, 2017).

For the first analysis, we elaborated a text of each interview, with a temporal ordering of the events of the life course of the narrators. In this one, the different elements of the story were organized between themes, sequence and stages. Subsequently, we carried out an open coding to deepen the interpretation and analytical organization of the categories, thus addressing both the a priori -conceptual- and emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006). In turn, we named the distinctive categories that ordered the structure of the story, in line with the biographical-narrative research -Table 1- (Arfuch, 2002; Bertaux, 2005; Piña, 1988, 1999). We perform this analysis with the help of Atlas.ti v8 software designed for textual data analysis. In the third step, we conduct a cross-sectional analysis of the cases to find and organize life stories about the trajectories of political action. Subsequently, a pool was made with the interviewees to refine, compare and confirm that the results of this analytical process coincided with the descriptions that the participants themselves highlighted about their life stories. Finally, the results were discussed with other researchers for validation.

**Table 1: Narrative resources**

Narrator character	A verbal construction of the self in the story. Particular point of view.
Milestones	External events narrated by the character that are crucial during their life
Stages	Temporal fragments that life presents
Reasons (For and Why)	Direct or indirect statements that explain the narrator’s own behaviors
Causality	Chainer that relates, unites and explains events and stages
Value universe	Which the speaker currently identifies with
Characters	Actors of the plot, to whom roles and qualities are attributed
Clutch ( <i>Embrayage</i> )	Involvement of the self in discourse
Disembowel ( <i>Débrayage</i> )	Enunciative procedure of referral to the third person. Effects of distancing and objectivity

Actions	Actor's practices, public appearances
Blank zone	Zones, ideas where no information is received (forgetfulness, segments that are not meant to be mentioned, silences)
Biographical reflection	Focused on one's past, it finds and selects episodes and experiences that become meaningful
Turning points	Especially significant moments that cause modifications-turns in the direction of the life course

Conceptual scaffolding of own elaboration

### *Ethical considerations*

The research was approved by the Ethics and Biosafety Committee of the University of affiliation of the first author. Each participant authorized their participation in the study with informed consent. To preserve the identities of the participants, their names were omitted and replaced with fictitious names.

## Results

In this section, we address the main findings around the trajectories of political action of the older women of the Group. To do this, we have arranged the stories around three axes that allow us to approach the vital path of their activist trajectories: (a) The origins of their political action, (b) the dictatorship as a turning point and (c) the evolution of their political projects.

### **The origins: “and that’s where it comes from, from the *mamadeira*<sup>2</sup>... it was a trade union multivitamin” (Michelle)**

Historical and collective processes of social change and biographical itineraries interact in a reciprocal way (Bertaux, 2005). The participants understand society as a reproducer of injustices and inequalities, which leads them, at the time of Popular Unity<sup>3</sup> (UP), to be represented by the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and other left-wing organizations. Politically, his stories give an account of a shared value universe, based on the class struggle, the right of workers and the search for equality as fundamental aspects.

*It is because of a class consciousness. It is not that one is the enlightened one and that one says: Oh, I am going to help people, it is not that way... you feel that you are part of that vulnerability of rights. (M<sup>a</sup> Cecilia)*

At the family level, inequality and precariousness encouraged the participants to start participatory trajectories early. Through the reflection of the past, they explain the reasons why childhood was the cradle of their socio-political construction, where their mothers had a leading role, being characterized as active women, militants or leaders:

*[about her mother] when the coup came, they took her prisoner... my mother was always a very hard-working woman; well, until the end... my mother died at the age of 86... her philosophy of life, which always told us: that you should not have your hands free, because the devil was taking them (Laughter). (Reinalda)*

Reinalda exposes her mother's political commitment, but also integrates values around the work and effort she deployed as head of household, hinting at the multiple functions and roles she played, both at the family and public levels. On the other hand, mothers are also represented as women from another era, who, due to the historical context, had to face a series of social mandates that limited their possibilities of appearance in the public sphere.

*And my mother was a lady of her house, educated by the nuns... a teacher of Cutting and Dressmaking, do you notice?... deeply rooted in customs and subject to patriarchy, who fortunately in my case, was a loving father. (M<sup>a</sup> Cecilia)*

As a narrative resource, they use historical causality, which makes it possible to understand the behavior and differentiated roles between their parents. It even exemplifies a type of education and craft traditionally linked to the feminine. Likewise, the participant finds her father as a loving subject, emphasizing that this situation was exceptional for the family referents of the time.

The location of a specific historical context in which their mothers grew up allows them to distinguish the social limitations they went through and the possibilities of resistance they had, which generates a biographical reflection on their experience. In this regard, Michelle says that this reflection was achieved in maturity:

*[about her mother] she was a daughter of her time. And that's why I understand her, at that... at the time I was young I didn't understand her and it made me very angry the way she used to treat me. But now I understand her; I understood her later, when I grew up. (Michelle)*

On the other hand, the interviewees associate their values of participation and search for social justice with the learning they obtained from their parents, who turn out to be very significant characters in the stories, describing them as men with a strong social commitment and respect for humanity. Thus, the father figure is a reference in the construction of identity:

*I think my father. My father was a very important model of a man who determined my future life towards man, in relation to the masculine gender. In other words, it is that training my father gave me with great affection, with great affection, with great sweetness, he marked me and I thank him... but until the day of my death; it has truly made me a free woman. (Aylen)*

This allows us to see how the intergenerational value transmission was relevant to their world-building in their childhood, youth, but also from the re-elaboration they carry out in their old age, that is, from the biographical time in which they produce their story. In Reinalda's case, the significant male character in her speech is her stepfather, in whom she finds protection, training and restraint. He early begins to transmit to her the values of the party in which he and his mother militated:

*my mom was a communist, he was a communist, and everything worked around that; He taught me to read with his books... he liked to teach and that is how I learned the doctrine that they had and that what they fought for was a super fair thing, because I had also lived all my life with social injustice since I was a child.(Reinalda)*

On the other hand, Gabriela was raised by her grandparents, who kept a distant attitude towards political issues, instilling in her the convenience of not being linked to them. Thus, the desire for political participation appeared later, when she met her husband - a left-wing militant. In the story, he is found as a leading character that brings her closer to the struggles and projects of social transformation:

*I began to get more and more involved... I thought: all the circumstances of poverty that exist, that have always existed; this was the best thing that could happen [about Popular Unity]. The conventions, what was discussed, what we could change one thing... and that it would be good for everyone the same... we were all going to be the same. (Gabriela)*

The story of the participants is presented as a progressive narrative in which the events lived are linked in such a way that they approach the passage of life from an evaluative perspective (Gergen, 1996). In this sense, the narratives show the maintenance of the values got in childhood, throughout life. Their struggles stay unscathed, although some forms of participation have been changed, which, in this organization, is through embroidery: *“We are not going to just pass the needle. I mean, it is a... in fact our definition as a group, we define ourselves as political women... Our embroidery is not flowers, hearts, little animals (laughs), it is political”* (Gabriela).

Women claim that their actions, through the act of embroidery, are aimed at fighting for memory and justice. Their works are a historical political production, allowing them to dispute official discourses. In this way, the act of embroidery, traditionally associated with a feminine trade, reposition forms and practices linked to femininity, from a sensitive action that stands for another logic about what politics means, associated with inclusion, dialogue, and creativity (Kirkwood, 2010).

Likewise, four participants report having become disillusioned with traditional politics (parties), focusing their struggle on territorial organizations:

*I never militated again. I am a leftist woman, but I am not a militant, because I also want, from that independence, to be able to criticize without having to ask permission to criticize what I think is wrong... many times the comrades who are militant cannot do it because they have to do what the party tells them. (Reinalda)*

Traditional militancy is re-signified for women from their daily and community experience, doing politics outside the margins of conventional politics (Kirkwood, 2010).

## Turning point: “later came the dictatorship, that is another... tremendous story, and then we continued” (Aylén)

As an exercise in reminiscence - referring to the ability to remember the past in older people -, the participants articulate a generational story that links them for having lived the same historical processes, such as the UP, the Pinochet dictatorship and the later struggle for democracy. Using *embrayage*, they refer to a collective identification, involved in a historical-political process, in which their experiences of youth are inscribed: *“I think that all the people who came from... our time. We went through hard times, we are strong. We did not give up easily... They did not stop us before, now we are not going to give up”* (Laura).

This political scenario is decisive in their story, since they point out that they could not subtract from what happened (historical causality), as shown:

*The time had come when life decisions had to be made, options of what to do, to opt for a more critical thinking; and in college things have already changed with political militancy... Because you are inserted there, you cannot isolate yourself from things that are happening, you are part of it. (M<sup>a</sup> Cecilia)*

The sense of belonging to a collective is relevant in their narratives since political action is not configured only from individual projects but mainly from relational and intersubjective construction. This is fundamental in the Chilean dictatorial context, which set up another social order and conditioned the political trajectories of women, marking a break in personal, family and collective projects.

In this scenario, their trajectories of political action unfold from the margins and underground. Their practices are mainly focused on working with women, with their communities, but also in work spaces: “*So it was difficult... I started working underground, so to speak, helping people who came to the Hospital, who had been detained or who came as political prisoners. I always tried... not to be noticed*” (Aylen).

Despite this, women organized for struggle and resistance. They refer to a special support between them, a type of mutual care that allowed them to avoid abuse, protecting each other:

*I was detained by the Chilean Navy, and later taken to Santiago to different torture camps, ending up in Tres Álamos... Later, in the Women’s Pavilion, where there were 90 beautiful women that I met, we all helped each other, took care of each other to survive.. (M<sup>a</sup> Cecilia)*

Events such as dictatorship, political prison, are milestones that can change the biographical course, even generating new orders of life (Riemann & Schütze, 1991). Therefore, it is important to consider that the turning points in the lives of the participants involve subjective and collective processes that they share as a generation and as women of the left, which allow their life trajectories to coincide today, in adulthood:

*the fact that all of them in different ways went through more or less the same situations, like we understand each other and support each other in that. There were comrades who were detained, others who were in exile, and others who continued to work in the resistance...but all of us who are here have continued to fight. (Michelle)*

Thus, through the biographical story, the participants articulate their subjective processes in a complex social framework, which allows them to analyze and reinterpret their own history (Piña, 1999).

Similarly, with respect to the dictatorship, it is possible to appreciate blank zones in the narratives, specifically, about the arrest, imprisonment and disappearance of comrades, since the enunciation does not allow to hold the experience. Events become unspeakable, since you cannot verbalize what evokes so much pain. This experienced and silenced pain would draw a bridge between the individual and the collective, while it would be transmitted in social trans-generational ties, through acts, gestures, allusions, among others, as Reinalda expresses: “*my son was born, which was in May 1972, I did not know anything more about my partner (silence) I never saw him again, I never heard from him again*” (Reinalda).



Silence was also installed as a practice of recurrent resistance, used by the participants to avoid attracting attention and thus avoiding communicating what affected them. Thus, the blank areas and silences give an account of the suffering experienced by women, which is manifested in the biography itself and in the social dynamics they set up with other people (Riemann & Schütze, 1991).

*It was like that for many years, like it moves inside. And well, my brother, just at the end of 1973, they took him into custody... I could not discuss it with the people at the hospital where I was working. I could not talk about it with anyone. (Aylen)*

Despite the fact that the dictatorship is constituted as a computer milestone in their life experiences, with profound consequences on the subjective and social plane, they agree in affirming from a collective enunciation, that they survived: *“we live this from the pain, but also from realizing that we have had the strength to be able to continue, deep down continue living, continue fighting”* (Michelle).

Today, its political action continues to be guided by the fight against the crimes carried out during the dictatorship: *“it is a fight that has not ended there. So many unsolved cases without justice, because my daughter’s case went to the military’s Amnesty and none of them were detained for even a day”* (Reinalda).

The role of memory becomes substantial to transmit to other generations what happened, and denounce the crimes that were committed. Embroidery is a political denunciation, which allows to leave a record to keep the memory alive: *“we have worked with processes like this that marked the history of Chile, as a way of making people know it... so that it never happens again”* (Aylen).

Therefore, the link between historical events and the life experiences of the participants shows the processes of convergence as a generation of older women who resisted the dictatorship (Elder, 1995). In this line, personal strength, and overcoming adversity, are configured as one of the characteristics of the participants: *“all the pain I have had in my life, I have always managed to cope alone, to be able to hold on and continue. Women have that strength, how could I tell you?: emotional intelligence”* (Michelle).

## **Future and longing: “Well, my motto is that, step strong and leave footprints” (M<sup>a</sup> Cecilia)**

The narratives are intimately related to the sense of self which is constructed and re-constructed each time a biographical story is told (Piña, 1999). Thus, older women show a continuum in their political trajectories, which have been deployed over the years in different groups, and being configured today, with a view to future projects. While the origin of their activism can be linked to their families, today in their adulthood they refer: *“nobody stopped me until now (Laughter)”* (Laura).

Within their actions, from different spaces of militancy (political parties, guilds, collectives etc.), various reasons why they take part are distinguished: *“the part of the association is more social... and in the part of the embroiderers that is more political, I love that; what you cannot shout, you show it in embroidery”* (Gabriela).

Although their political participation is developed from various places and positions, they clearly tell the value adhesion of their Group and the goals they pursue through activism:

*when we go out to our protests, or when we protest at home, now we think of our children and grandchildren, and of those who will come... because we want to leave them a better society. With our embroideries we denounce everything... all the injustice.* (Laura)

These experiences are consistent with those studies that refer that activism in old age is renewed and materialized from different and innovative strategies, used by older women to express their demands (Chazan, 2016).

In the same way, the participants relate how their fight goals dialogue with the recent history of Chile, questioning the role of democratic transitional governments, social problems and the increase in inequality. In this line, their actions and protest strategies are adapted to the contingency: *“So we were beginning to embroider, the Degollados case, the Quemados case; all of which had caused a public uproar when October 18 arrived. So we had to change...we decided to start embroidering the contingency”* (Michelle).

On the other hand, the SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic is a major milestone for participants who, being older women, must follow a series of health control measures that focus, especially on their age group. They consider that: *“this pandemic, it has served to show how the dirt was kept under the carpet”* (Aylen). At the same time, pandemic daily life conditions their routines, influences their political actions and the ways in which they are deployed: *“even if we are at home we will always be embroidering”* (Gabriela), giving an account of an adaptation of their practices, from the confinement in their homes.

The participants explain that the political-social scenario in Chile will be more precarious post-pandemic, *“Oh yeah, people say, when this Coronavirus passes, but that is not it... Very hard times are coming”* (M<sup>a</sup> Cecilia), which leads them to the need to reactivate the social struggle, which was consolidated after the outbreak: *“When the pandemic is over, we are all going to go out to the streets!”* (Laura).

They say that they have lived a kind of “pandemic pause” after which they will resume those activities that were suspended: *“we are programming and accumulating things, we had left many things to do to be out on the street... now I am doing what I have to do so that I can go out again later (Laughter) (Gabriela).* This background is relevant, since it cracks the hegemonic narratives around older women, who usually build them in an apolitical way and without expectations or future projects (Freixas, 2021).

However, about the above, the participants also recognize the health crisis as a milestone of great impact at the social level, which they hope will generate a change in social relations, the ways of cohabiting in the world, where they value interdependence and reciprocity:

*I would like this shake-up to serve so that the generation that comes after us... because we don't know how long we are going to last; so that there is a new, a new way of seeing life, of being more human, of being more compassionate with other living beings, with plants and animals.* (Reinalda)

The aims of political action that the participants relate include the link with other groups, saying that, being older women, the impact they can generate in a mobilization -at the social level- is less than that produced by groups of people productively active in the labor market. Consequently, one of its strategies is to support other groups to have a greater social impact: *“we are supporting them... We cannot go on strike, nothing, but we are there to support them, the workers, the children... and in this way we are gaining strength”* (Laura).

Among the actions, one of her projects is the creation of groups of women embroiderers in other territories, with the longing for a different future, in which her own career can serve as an example of strength:

*the idea is that there are many embroidery spaces for memory; I wish there was one on each hill; because sooner or later, both of us are going to get out of hand, because it is a lot; if it is like gushing that energy and desire to do things. So you have to open up more to the community. (M<sup>o</sup> Cecilia)*

In this regard, they have executed their political agency embroidering demands of the social upheaval and later of the new constitution of Chile including in their works those values that, in their opinion, are indispensable to advance to a more inclusive society. These projects include an intergenerational dialogue on human rights, in which past and present materialize in embroidery, as they express referring to their tapestries of social revolt: “*That embroidery was also like a lot of feeling, very personal. And I said: My son goes out to fight, he is in the front line thinking of the elders. And the older ones always think of the children*” (Laura).

In fact, the participants narrate projects, strategies and action goals, which give an account of their political-social commitment and the development of their agency in old age, from a particular protest proposal, their embroidery. Thus, they point out that, at the end of the health crisis, they will return with force to show in the public space planning to resume their practices: “[referring to President Piñera] *we were about to, about to fall, but we were not going to give him the arm to twist, we are going to go out with everything again*” (Gabriela). At the same time, they project the transcendence of their works as a legacy to social memory:

*So we are always in a political process of embroidering memory and stamping what this stage meant in this country... it takes up a lot of us, the greatest amount of time... but it is a way of keeping the memory alive for all the comrades who are no longer here. (Michelle)*

## Final considerations

In this study, we showed how the older women of the Embroiderers for Memory Group build their trajectories of political action, which allowed us to articulate the past and the present in a socio-historical key, in dialogue with the experience of aging. Thus, we gave room to a situated understanding of their activist old age according to recent history, as well as the multiple positions that the participants have disputed from their biographical itineraries.

The analysis of their trajectories allowed us to recognize the origin of their political affiliation, the main turning points in their experiences and the evolution of their collective projects. In this sense, the study gives an account of the articulation between the biographical trajectories of the participants, with the historical, political and social scenario in which they develop, showing the mutual reciprocity between the biographical experience and the context. This dimension allows us to recognize that older women have been and are builders of social reality, through their interpersonal relationships and with the world, playing multiple roles throughout their lives.

Through the inclusion of narrative resources such as the symbolic universe, milestones, characters, causalities, among others, we were able to approach a production of the story of themselves in their old age and their political-militant construction, from which they dispute alternative narratives to hegemonic old age. Therefore, their stories enrich the homogeneous representation of older women. At the same time, they allow us to recognize how women continue to deploy their agency in old age and contribute to political and social transformations in their communities. Likewise, we could appreciate that they share a continuum in their political-activist role, which is not usually considered in the conventional literature on aging. This continuum exposes similarities in their political trajectories as a generation, but also differentiated positions of their activist praxis, which attend to their own biographical course. Thus, they give an account of a symbolic universe that they share and is updated, while producing diverse ages.

In this article, we stress the conventional perspectives on aging, related to organic-functional and individual development, giving way to a more complex look from the life course approach and the gender perspective, which offer critical looks to address the heterogeneous, situated and invisible old people, such as those of women activists.

On the other hand, the findings reveal how the memories of their political trajectories supply tools and inputs for their actions in the present, providing reflections on current problems. Likewise, their narratives allow us to trace continuities in violence and forms of structural oppression, which sustain their demands today. Thus, political memories contribute to the mobilizations of other collectives and generations, who can see in them a legacy of struggle and social commitment.

Finally, embroidery is re-signified as an artistic production that confronts the established social order, from a feminine aesthetic. We highlight the political character of embroidery, as an action of memory, as it involves the (re)elaboration of a painful past through the artistic expression of embroidery, expressing the unspeakable and building various frameworks from which events and experiences are given meaning.

## Notes

1 Inspired by the tradition of the *Arpilleras*, they claim the art of embroidery as a practice of political action, through which it can be expressed, healed, and fought for social transformation.

2 “La mamadera” is a Chilean idiom used to refer to the nursing bottle.

3 Left-wing political coalition, created on October 9, 1969, which presented the candidacy of former President Salvador Allende Gossens.

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