

# LIFE-COURSE EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE TRAJECTORIES FROM ANTI-FRANCOISM TO THE 15-M IN SPAIN\*

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*Using life stories, this article analyzes the effects that youthful political participation during the final years of Spain's Francoist dictatorship had on the public and private life-course trajectories for a group of activist women. Noteworthy among our conclusions is the fundamental role that political engagement plays, becoming a key element of the interviewed women's identities. They associated political activity with mainly positive emotions, learnings, and empowerment, as well as with the creation of social networks that became especially relevant when reengaging in activism later in their lives. Similarly, their political activism favored the development of heterodox attitudes and behaviors. In general, their personal trajectories were marked by political and social commitments, regardless of the differences in relation to formal participation in political parties and other organizations.*

Many researchers have analyzed the outcomes of social movements and political activism (Bosi, Giugni, and Uba 2016; Prado and Fersch 2021), despite the challenges of measurement and data collection. Studies have examined not only intentional policymaking impacts, but also the unintended political, institutional, cultural, and personal consequences (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su 2010; Earl 2004; Giugni 2008). Although the latter focus has received less attention, several studies have analyzed the life-course effects of political participation on the public and private trajectories of the activists (McAdam 1999; Giugni and Grasso 2016; Van Dyke, McAdam, and Wilhelm 2000; Van Dyke and Dixon 2013).

Broadly speaking, research findings have consistently suggested that political participation has both short- and long-term effects on the political and private lives of activists (McAdam 1999: 121; Bosi, Giugni, and Uba 2016: 6). Specifically, the research indicates that, in the long run, activists tend to maintain their political attitudes, show higher levels of sociopolitical commitment, and display lifestyles consistent with their beliefs. Although studies have also been performed in other contexts and on other cohorts and forms of activism (Fillieule 2018a; Giugni and Grasso 2016; McAdam 1999; Sherkat and Blocker 1997), most of the research on the biographical outcomes of activism and political participation has focused on the highly committed activism of the New Left in the United States during the long 1960s (Braungart and Braungart 1991; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Fendrich 1993; McAdam 1989). Moreover, there is still little research on biographical effects from a gender perspective or on the idiosyncrasies of women activists (Cole, Zucker, and Ostrove 1998; McAdam 1992; Olivier and Tamayo 2017).

This article applies a case-study methodology to analyze how political participation during one's youth affects activist trajectories. It examines a group of Spanish women who became involved in activism at the early 1970s during the last years of the Franco dictatorship. In this sense, we look at political activism at a moment of transition to democracy, which is similar to other experiences that have been scarcely analyzed, such as those of Portugal and Greece (Accornero 2019a; Kornetis 2013; Ramos 2008). We focus on one example of what McAdam

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(1989) calls “high-risk activism,” and contrast it with previous studies with the ones obtained from a context that has been rarely analyzed from the perspective of biographical effects.

To analyze and interpret the political and private trajectories of our female activists, we draw from a theoretical framework of gender studies. This involves the inclusion of gender norms, relationships, and identities in the analysis, as well as questioning their roles in shaping the life-courses of the interviewed women. A qualitative approach based on biographical accounts has been chosen because it facilitates the study of deep processes shaping personal trajectories, processes that are difficult to quantify. In short, our study analyzes several dimensions not usually found in previous studies: the effects of activism in a country transitioning from dictatorship to democracy, the analysis of long-term life trajectories to apprehend activism’s enduring effects, the adoption of a gender approach to activism, and a deeply rich and biographical qualitative methodology.

## GENDER AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The analysis of political participation from a gender approach implies questioning the boundaries between both public and private spheres and political and social ones (Yusta 2015). Since its origins in the Enlightenment, the world of modern politics has been defined in masculine terms, excluding different social groups (such as women) and establishing a strict separation between public and private spaces. Although this division began to be challenged at the beginning of the twentieth century, stereotypes that assign men political roles and women social ones still prevail, even though it is often difficult to distinguish between these two roles. In fact, the complex relationship between power and resistance reveals that individuals and subordinated groups, like women, can develop both political actions of confrontation and less visible ones, such as everyday initiatives defined as social and even private, which also subvert the social order and hierarchies and are thus political (Scott 2003).

Women can become engaged in politics after a prior process of heightened female self-awareness resulting from their roles as family caregivers, or after building a collective identity through sharing personal experiences and common emotions with other women. Both processes highlight the close relationship between the personal and the political (Nash 2004). On many other occasions, their involvement in politics is due to their convictions and ideals. However, while women’s ideological motives are frequently questioned, the importance of personal relationships in men’s involvement in politics is rarely signaled. Women’s studies, together with the growing interest in masculinities and emotions, are helping to modify these stereotyped representations (Accornero 2019b; Ahmed 2017).

As Taylor and Whittier (1998: 623) state, “mobilization, leadership patterns, strategies, and outcomes of social movements are gendered,” as also occurs with political parties. Gender affects all phases of activism (McAdam, 1992), since significant differences between men and women and the weight of stereotypes are found in recruitment, activism experiences, and their subsequent effects on activists’ lives. According to Bourdieu (2000: 82), positions of power are delimited by a series of capabilities with sexual connotations and custom designed for men. Likewise, gender socialization tends to associate women with values that exclude them from positions of power and direct them towards social maternalism or roles regarded as auxiliary or secondary. This exclusion can be observed not only in concrete political practices, but even in the symbolic realm. For Bernárdez (2010), symbolic equality has not been achieved insofar as female politicians are still identified with the private sphere, which depoliticizes them. Moreover, not only are there prevalent mind-sets and discourses that continue to consider politics as a male realm and that downplay the opinions and experiences of women, but also issues like the unequal distribution of caregiving tasks are hampering women’s development of a political life on an equal footing with men (Quaranta 2016; Quaranta and Dotti Sani 2018).

In an adverse but changing context, the political commitment of women often shapes identities that transgress the dominant gender order and lead to disruptive attitudes and behaviors that can even challenge and modify prevailing militant practices and the definition of politics itself

(Moreno 2020a). These transgressions can be expressed in different ways, whether they be the mere presence of women in traditionally male settings, criticism of the traditional gender relations, or opting for an unconventional private lifestyle. It can also be observed in the cross-gendered adoption of stereotypical male or female images and behaviors; namely, living at the crossroads of gender performances (Bourdieu 2000). Such “gender transgressions” were themes that came up in our research, which we will discuss.

In this sense, the main hypothesis of this article is that political activism had a transgressive effect on the private and public life of the interviewed women. All of them had been socialized by a military and Catholic dictatorship that supported a domestic and conservative feminine ideal and repressed political opposition. We suggest that their youthful political experiences had a determinant influence in these women's political and personal later decisions. Additionally, in some cases, being in contact with feminism during the transition to democracy allowed them to secure some transgressive options in their public and private lives.

### BIOGRAPHICAL EFFECTS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Many authors have analyzed both the subjective (identity, empowerment, emotions, knowledge, etc.) and objective (subsequent political participation, marital status, career choices, etc.) effects of political and social involvement on activists' personal trajectories (Fillieule 2018b; Giugni, 2013; McAdam 1999; Vestergren, Drury, and Hammar Chiriac 2017). Although some authors distinguish between short-term and durable consequences (McAdam 1989; Passy and Monsch 2019), most highlight the existence of “a powerful and enduring effect of participation on the later lives of the activists” (McAdam 1999: 121).

Thus, political participation seems to influence worldviews, identities, values, ideological principles, and political orientations (Passy and Monsch 2019; Fillieule 2018b; McAdam 1992; Giugni and Grasso 2016), as well as sociopolitical involvement in later stages of one's life (Fillieule 2018b; McAdam 1992; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Whittier 1995). Similarly, the professional and private trajectories of activists can also be affected. They are more likely to work in education or welfare areas, to have lower incomes and discontinuous work histories (Corrigan-Brown 2012; McAdam 1989; Passy and Monsch 2019; Van Dyke, McAdam, and Wilhelm 2000) or to “transfer their activism to the practice of their professional activities” (Fillieule 2018b). Moreover, activists tend to display more “deviations” in their private lives with respect to normative behaviors (McAdam 1999). For example, greater instability in intimate partner relationships and a greater likelihood of remaining single or childless have been observed among different groups of activists (Fillieule 2018b; McAdam 1989). The consensus on the presence of these effects has led McAdam (1999: 122) to contend that “intense and sustained activism should be added to that fairly select list of behavioral experiences (e.g., college attendance, parenthood, military service) that have the potential to transform a person's biography.”

Some of the studies about the biographical effects of social movements and activism apply the concept of political generation (Jennings 2002). Thus, following the approaches of Mannheim (1952), Braungart and Braungart (1986: 207) observe that, while a cohort is “an age group born around the same time in history,” a political generation is “a special age group in history that becomes aware of its uniqueness and joins together to work for social and political change.” One of the fundamental precepts of the generational politics approach is that the generational consciousness acquired during youth activism paves the way for interpreting the social world and acting during the rest of the activists' trajectories (Braungart and Braungart 1991; Whittier 1997). Consequently, this line of research is especially focused on analyzing the continuity of both the differences between political generations and the rest of the members of their age cohorts, as well as the ideological values and principles acquired during youth activism (Braungart and Braungart 1986). However, the generational approach also allows the researcher to observe the collaboration and tensions between veteran activists and new generations (Flesher 2020; Whittier 1995), continuities and changes within social and political movements (Whittier 1997) and the existence of “chains of mobilization” that link protests to subsequent ones (Tejerina 2017).

Many follow-up studies of political generations have focused on the profoundly committed activists from the 1960s in the U.S. (Dunham and Bengtson 1992; Franz and McClelland 1994; McAdam 1988, 1992), and have tended to highlight the enduring impact that political participation has had on the activists' lives. This same conclusion has usually been reached when researching the generation of the long 1960s in other countries, such as Mexico (Olivier and Tamayo 2017) and France (Fillieule 2018; Pagis 2011), and even in studies performed on more recent groups of activists or those with lower levels of commitment (Giugni and Grasso 2016; McAdam 1999; Sherkat and Blocker 1997; Terriquez 2015).

Our study hypothesizes that our respondents identify themselves not only with a political generation marked by anti-Francoism, but also by the experience of gender discrimination in politics and social activism, which sets them apart from both the nonpoliticized youth of the 1970s and their male activist peers. They are a generation marked by their youth activism and which, despite some clashes with the younger generations, stay interested in politics later in life.

To explain how political participation affects activists' cognitions and practices, Nick Crossley (2003) employs the concept of "radical habitus." It refers to the acquisition, through political involvement, of specific schemas that are applied to interpret society, in addition to a series of skills for political action. In the short and long term, this radical habitus guides activists in the different areas of their lives. For their part, Passy and Monsch (2019) incorporate the interrelation between cognitive processes and social relations as an explanatory element. Indeed, for many participants, activism involves establishing new "networks of sociability" (Fillieule 2018b) that play a fundamental role in the acquisition of knowledge and behaviors. The continuity of these social networks over time makes "it more likely that the activist will be drawn into subsequent activist episodes, thereby deepening his or her commitment to activist values and perpetuating the process of personal change that initial forays into activism have set in motion" (McAdam 1989: 754). A final factor to be considered is how individuals interpret their activism, namely, whether it is with feelings of disillusionment and disappointment that make it difficult for them to maintain their political commitment (Accornero 2019a; Kornetis 2013), or with pride for having contributed to the improvement of society (Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013).

Although some studies have analyzed the differences between men and women, there are few that have done so from a gender perspective, focusing on the effects of political action on women's personal trajectories (Chen 2019; McAdam 1992; Olivier and Tamayo 2017; Whittier 1995). Some studies highlight the relevance of emancipatory and sanctioning processes. The first set of processes involve learning languages and practices that transform and empower women (Radcliff 2019). It is also possible to talk about effects on their personal relationships and in terms of self-esteem and self-knowledge (Fernández Lamelas 2015; McAdam 1992). In many cases, these changes lead or are related to interest or activism in the feminist movement (Evans 2009; Cucó 2014; McAdam 1992; Moreno 2017). The second set of processes, reflect the prevalence of impediments and stereotypes. Women are judged severely in politics. Not only are ambition and firmness disapproved of but excessive sentimentalism and weakness are too, as well as autonomy in personal relationships and the alleged abandonment of maternal duties. Women can be perceived as being dangerous and, as such, punished in a symbolic or real way (Fuente and Ruiz 2019). As a result, many choose to project an ambivalent image, combining firmness and empathy, which reveals the tensions between the norms and their transgression, and between discourses and practices (Ribberink 2005; Llona 2016).

Building on these approaches, the last hypothesis of our research is that, despite the personal costs that their social and political commitment has entailed, our interviewees evaluate their activism very positively. In this sense, they highlight the acquisition of social capital and feelings of fulfillment and empowerment. This positive interpretation is also likely related to the consolidation of the democracy in Spain and the subsequent expansion of social rights, especially for women.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Franco dictatorship, which resulted from the victory of the Nationalist rebel army in the Spanish Civil War in 1939, lasted nearly forty years until the death of the dictator in 1975. After an initial period of harsh repression, international isolation, and economic autarchy, the government implemented policies of modernization in the 1960s to attract foreign investment and create conditions for widespread industrial development. As a result, there was an important exodus to the country's cities and industrial centers and an increase in the demand for low-skilled female labor. New ideas and benchmarks reached Spain through cinema, music, and tourism, thus challenging traditional Catholic values. But all these changes also gave rise to the reconstruction of the workers' movement and the growth of opposition to the dictatorship revolving around the Communist Party of Spain, hereafter PCE (Fishman 1990; Molinero and Ysàs 2008; Ortiz 2018; Radcliff 2019). Even though the repression did not abate, during the first years of the 1970s many young women with low academic qualifications and enduring harsh working conditions joined the PCE or other recently created communist parties (Molinero and Ysàs 2017; Wilhelmi 2016). They were driven, as many of the regime's opponents were, by emotions of hope and indignation (Romanos 2014). Unlike the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (hereafter PSOE) and its conservative counterparts, there was a significant proportion of women (between 25% and 35%) in the country's communist organizations (Moreno-Secco 2017).

The transition to democracy began in 1975 and culminated in 1982, when the PSOE came to power. It was a period of political instability characterized by the communist parties' poor election results, and strong working-class, neighborhood, and feminist mobilizations (Molinero and Ysàs 2018; Quirosa, 2011). The young activists that make up our case study participated in political debates and street protests to call for a fair and equal society, bringing pressure to bear on the main political actors from the fringes of political life and, through mass mobilization, in a much more militant fashion than in other countries (Ramos 2008; Bermeo 2003).

The consolidation of democracy and the successive economic crises between the 1980s and the beginning of the twenty-first century led to the demobilization of large sectors of society and their estrangement from institutional politics (Fishman 2012). However, many former (and new) activists continued committed to feminism (Beorlegui 2017) and other social movements. The advent of the 15-M movement in 2011 and the subsequent political party Podemos in 2014 raised the hopes for political change of both the new political generations and former activists of the 1970s (Flesher 2020; Razquin 2015).

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

Following the methods proposed by Small (2015), our research is a case-study design whose purpose is to compare and contrast its conclusions with previous studies. We focus on analyzing the political and personal trajectories of a group of Spanish women who first became involved in activism in the 1970s, that is, in the final years of the Franco dictatorship. All of them participated in highly committed and risky activism in the different Marxist parties of the period (the main organizations of the anti-Francoist opposition at the time)<sup>1</sup>. The choice of these women's activism as the object of study offers several advantages. First, given that they are now approximately seventy years old, it is possible to perform a longitudinal study on the short- and long-term effects of their activism. Moreover, they are part of a generation marked by intense anti-Francoist activism in their youth (Martín, González, and Ortiz 2009), which is precisely the life stage that different studies have shown to be particularly propitious for people to be affected by lasting impressions (Brown and Rohlinger 2016: 97).

### *Study Participants*

The participants were selected based on their possible contribution to the research objective. The basic selection criteria included (1) being a woman, (2) having been a youth activist in any

**Table 1.** Political Membership of the Interviewed Women

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Main Political Party in the 1970s</i>	<i>Political Party in 2017</i>
María	MC (Maoist)	None
Lola	MC (Maoist)	None
Pilar	MC (Maoist)	Podemos
Gloria	PCE	Podemos
Teresa	MC (Maoist)	None
Nuria	MC (Maoist)	Podemos
Blanca	PCE	PCE, IU (United Left)
Marisol	PCE	PCE, CUP <sup>a</sup>
Carmen	PTE (Maoist)	None
Isabel	ORT (Maoist)	None
Julia, Ana and Pepa (group interview)	PCE	PCE
Laura and Paqui (group interview)	PCE	None

Note: <sup>a</sup> Candidatura de Unidad Popular, a citizen candidacy created ad hoc for the local municipal elections near Madrid.

of the Spanish communist parties in the 1970s, and (3) having done so in Madrid. This city was chosen because it was one of the principal focal points of anti-Francoist activism and the center of most of the political changes occurring during the transition to democracy.

Most of the previous research on this Spanish political generation has analyzed the experiences of leaders and university students (Moreno, 2020b; Rodríguez 2004), sometimes through their testimonies (Alén, Díaz, and Vega 2017; García 2008). Our study, however, focuses on the trajectories of working-class women and grassroots activists to analyze experiences of “ordinary activists” (Fillieule 2018a), which are studied less often. In addition, since this was the first time that our selected women had been interviewed, their testimonies were open ended, which facilitated the spontaneous emergence of recollections and opinions (Accornero 2019b). To enhance diversity in the interviewees’ experiences, we considered differences in political memberships during the 1970s and in the links currently maintained to political and social organizations. We employed a research assistant to make the initial contacts. A snowball technique was used to sample participants, meaning that the first interviewees facilitated contacts with other potential participants (Weiss 1994). This allowed for obtaining a diverse group of women in terms of current political involvement, including those who did not belong to any social or political organizations and who maintained relatively few links to activist networks. The final set of cases (table 1) was made up of the life stories of thirteen women, aged between 60 and 72.

The selected cases are not intended to be representative of Spanish women activists, not even of those who first became involved in activism in the 1970s. Rather, our goal—as is often the case with qualitative methods—is to obtain information for uncovering microlevel mechanisms and tracing processes. Previous quantitative studies have established the existence of a relationship between activism and a series of effects on the political and personal lives of activists. In our research, a qualitative approach has been applied to gain further insight into the way in which that relationship may work.

### *Data Collection*

Life stories are highly useful for studying private political trajectories (Accornero 2019b; Fillieule 2018) because researchers can record not only experiences but also the interpretations that interviewees make of them (Llona 2012). Each story is both the subjective testimony of individuals’ experiences, and the reflection of a historic period and shared social norms and values (Pujadas 1992). Thus, stories are more than a mere compilation of individual facts (Bermúdez and Roca 2018). As Blee (2016) notes, a qualitative approach to life courses offers the opportunity to perform a detailed analysis of complex processes instead of being restricted to quantifiable measures of variables.

**Table 2.** Main Topics of the Interview Guide

<i>Initial questions</i>	Childhood and family, education, work, places of residence
<i>Sociopolitical commitment</i>	Moments/stages: how they started, what defined them, what changes occurred
<i>Gender/feminism</i>	Relationship with the feminist movement, work among/with women, and gender dynamics in the organizations
<i>Private sphere</i>	Effects of their political commitment on their private lives: professional, family, social, academic, identity-related, etc.
<i>Appraisal of political trajectories</i>	Milestones, overview of their activism

The interviews were conducted in 2017 and lasted approximately from one and a half to three hours. All were individual interviews, except for two in which two and three women, respectively, with similar political trajectories participated.<sup>2</sup> In one case, the interview was conducted in two different sessions. Although most of the women were interviewed at home, one of the interviews was carried out at the workplace and another at the premises of a political party. The interview guide was based on the objectives of a more comprehensive research project whose aim was to explore the political trajectories of female anti-Francoist activists. Emphasis was not only placed on gaining insight into how their activism was and still is performed, but also the extent to which their commitments to social change have shaped their ideas, identities, relationships, and life options. The open interviews were guided by general questions that allowed the participants themselves to pinpoint the fundamental aspects of their personal trajectories. Stress was placed on our main points of interest, including the appraisal of their activism and the impact that it has had on their lives (see table 2).

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed (Graneheim and Lundman 2004) using the Atlas.ti software package. The transcriptions were read several times to identify sentences with the same meaning (meaning units) using an open coding process. Labels reflecting a higher level of abstraction were inductively assigned to each meaning unit. These codes were compared and, based on their similarities, grouped into preliminary categories, which we then discussed in order to define the final categories. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all interviewees quoted in this article.

Although our category construction follows an inductive process, the intention was to answer a set of questions resulting from previous studies and the theoretical framework: How do the interviewed women define their political generation? To what extent is it possible to talk about a continuity in the participants' political involvement and how is this related to their youth activism in the 1970s? To what extent did they commit "gender transgressions" in their private lives and how did these relate to their political youth activism? What role has feminism and feminist consciousness played in their political and personal trajectories? What social capital has activism brought to these women and how has it influenced the continuity of their commitment?

## RESULTS

The interviewees share a collective identity that allows them to relate to a political generation with its own unique traits, defined by a deep anti-Francoist commitment during the 1970s and boundaries between them and others. In fact, participants' life stories mainly focus on this first stage of their youth activism, to which they often refer as the moment "of our protests" or "my time" (Carmen). Their political activism opened new horizons for them. They conceived it as a total commitment that affected both their political and personal decisions, and which broke with the values that they had been taught in the Francoist education system and by their parish priests and parents. Often, they approached feminism through their work in political parties, which tasked

them with feminist issues to gain a foothold in the women's movement. One consequence of this strategy was that they discovered feminism to be a very enriching sphere of activism, and, in turn, attempted to convince their parties to embrace feminist theories. In addition to anti-Francoist activism, the interviewees were also part of the rebellious youth culture that developed during the 1960s in the West, which called for social and individual changes. As part of their new identities, our interviewed women experienced four dimensions of difference: (1) They felt different from their families of origin. (2) They also felt different from the veteran activists in their parties. (3) They were alienated from the nonpoliticized Spanish society of the 1970s. Finally, (4) later in their lives, they felt different from the other activists in M-15 protests and Podemos.

Regarding the first point, their decision to join one of the Spanish communist parties signified both a generational and family break. They came from working families who, in many cases, had emigrated from the country's underprivileged areas to Madrid and who often supported the dictatorship or had suffered the harsh political repression in the 1940s, for which reason fear and silence were habitual at home. Even in the case of those interviewees from progressive backgrounds, their intense activism caused apprehension and bewilderment among their families.

Second, notwithstanding the admiration that they felt, the interviewees were aware that their political and life priorities were different to those of experienced party activists, whose proposals were less radical and whose *modus operandi* was more conventional.

Third, the interviewees drew a distinction between their political generation and the rest of society in the 1970s. As María observes, "It was as if we were living a parallel life." In this regard, activism became an alternative space in which to socialize, to access culture, and share ideological interests: "It was a world that was completely different from the one I previously knew" (Lola).

Fourth, most of the interviewees distinguish their generation from subsequent activists, highlighting above all the predominance of attitudes of solidarity and collaboration among activists in the 1970s. For instance, Carmen compares her relationship with her former comrades to that of a family, "It was a fraternal relationship. . . . It's a feeling that I missed later." In this sense, a certain degree of generational tension with the young people linked to the 15-M movement or the political party Podemos is apparent in several interviews:

New, younger people began to appear, those who know everything. The world started with them. . . . We're nothing" (Lola).

They always say we're old, that we are old politics (Nuria).

The following sections offer detailed descriptions of how the intense activism as youths affected our interviewees. However, long-term effects should not only be deduced from youth activism but should also be observed in relation to a full life story of social and political commitment. As María claims, "I know I'm the person I am thanks to all this," stressing the fundamental role her lifelong political involvement has played in shaping her own identity. This was a theme that our interviewees alluded to, as shown in the far-left cell in table 3, and which shaped the more specific life-course categories in the cells to the right. In the remainder of this section we will focus on the four middle cells as categories to analyze the life-course trajectories.

**Table 3.** Categories Identified in the Interviews

<i>"I'm the person I am thanks to all this."</i>	Commitment as a way of life	Formal commitments; Informal commitments; Maintaining ideals
	Private transgressions	Sexuality, couples and maternity; Transgressing the prevalent gender order
	Discovering feminism	Awareness-raising, empowerment; Exercising sisterhood; Transgressive militancy and daily commitment
	Learning, relationships and emotions	Cognitions and practices; Opening up life options; Social networks; Emotional intensity



*Commitment as a Way of Life*

Political and social activism have been fundamental aspects of the interviewees' personal trajectories. "I couldn't understand my life without this," Blanca concludes. Most consider that "It couldn't have been otherwise" (Lola). However, it is possible to distinguish between formal and informal expressions of this commitment, although the line between them is sometimes unclear. Formal commitment is understood here as that developed in political parties and social movement organizations. Informal expressions of everyday solidarity and resistance have more to do with ideals of justice or inequality than belonging to any organization.

Regarding formal activism, these women's participation in communist parties during the 1970s can be characterized as a full commitment to political action. Subsequently, with the consolidation of democracy after the adoption of the 1978 Constitution and the electoral victory of the PSOE in 1982, the political involvement of many of the interviewees declined. Although some continued to be affiliated with their communist parties many others abandoned them. For some, this was due to the party's disappearance. Others rejected their party's nonparticipatory practices ("It was too hierarchical," Isabel admits). Some took on new family responsibilities ("That was when I didn't do anything else but devote my time to my children," Pilar recalls), or needed to find a steady job ("It wasn't that I felt disillusioned, it was that I had to get by," Teresa says). Even though many of these interviewees have never joined another party ("I don't think that [party] activism is the best option for me," Nuria recognizes), others have resumed their activism in newer organizations, such as the United Left (IU), founded in 1986 or in Podemos, created in 2014.

Many of interviewed women also joined trade unions in the 1970s and are still affiliated to them. On other occasions, they became interested in the feminist movement, and are still linked to it to a greater or lesser extent. At different moments of their lives, they have also participated in international cooperation organizations, neighborhood, or parents' associations, antiglobalization groups or the LGTB movement. Irrespective of whether or not they are still linked to political parties or organizations, they still continue to attend demonstrations and protests. In the words of Isabel, "I'm always going to things." That is why, the emergence of the 15-M movement in 2011 attracted the attention of all the interviewees. They joined the protest in the Puerta del Sol, the square in Madrid where the movement took shape.

Regarding informal expressions of commitment, the interviewees' identification with principles of equality have often led them to intervene in the face of daily situations that they perceive as unfair. As María states, "I can't help it, I see an injustice and I go against it. . . ." Some of the interviewees have developed this informal activism at the workplace. For instance, Carmen promotes feminism through her academic work. Others have become leading figures to whom friends and neighbors turn for help: "Sometimes you have a Mrs. Francis complex. . . ." Teresa claims.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from all these formal and informal practices, the interviewees note that they have remained faithful to their progressive ideals, although many of them no longer support communist principles. "My thought's still, of course, leftist," Paqui asserts; "I've never lost my class consciousness," Pilar observes. One of the interviewees directly relates her still critical and committed way of interpreting social reality to her youth activism, stating that "having become involved in activism at a very early age makes you acquire a very firmly rooted awareness" (María). In her case, that awareness "has been the leitmotif of [her] life."

*Private Transgressions*

The very act of joining an illegal communist party that rejected the Francoist regime was already a transgressive act—not only against the state but also against the interviewees' families. Overall, their political activism had profound effects on their personal relationships and decisions. In fact, the interviewees frequently committed transgressions in different areas of their private lives, which they also identified a dimension of their commitment: "This was a life attitude. It

wasn't, 'I'm red from nine to five'" (Carmen). "Breaking the rules" (in the words of Laura and Paqui) and "making waves" (in Nuria's words) were inextricably linked to their political action.

One of the areas that best reflects the interviewees' transgressive decisions is sexuality and couples. As Laura notes, "We didn't have normal relationships like everyone else." Indeed, this aspect signified not only a break with their social context, but also even with their party comrades. Carmen summarizes this as follows:

Imagine. . . . You're with a comrade you like. . . . For most of us . . . the sexual and the nonsexual didn't have clear limits. . . . There was no problem. The next day you were just as okay. And then [occasionally] the annoying one came along, who automatically became your protector and talked to you about making plans.

Open relationships were relatively frequent. Carmen observes, "I'm with you because I love you and I'm really comfortable and happy, but I don't need you to be my boyfriend or my husband." In some cases, meeting other transgressive women allowed them to find out a homoerotic attraction (Nuria). In some others, they openly showed their homosexuality, like Teresa, who asserts, "I turned lesbian at thirty something [in the 1980s]. I changed sides. I was fed up putting up with boys." She says this option was not always accepted in her working and union environment.

Those who decided to get married or to maintain stable relationships attempted to achieve a balanced distribution of household chores and family responsibilities with their partners, although this frequently required a complex process of negotiation, as María recalls:

It was necessary to educate them because . . . we [the women] were in the streets, in the factories and in politics, and so we couldn't return home and become slaves. . . . They [the men] called you colleague, comrade, but when you got home it was you who cooked and washed the dishes. And it was necessary to tell them, "No, comrade." . . . There were even strong arguments.

The decisions about maternity also reflected the impact of political action on them. In some cases, they decided not to have children ("I wasn't going to be a mother, that was crystal clear to me," Nuria admits). Furthermore, they often used contraceptives and some even had abortions when it was illegal in Spain. In other cases, they opted for a type of motherhood different from the socially accepted one, as regards both the division of tasks (for instance, Blanca decided to relinquish the "role of mother" to her partner) and their desire to make it compatible with work and political activity. But the experience of this unconventional maternity was not free from conflict, as María observes when referring to both the social rejection that she experienced ("They think that you don't love your child") and her own inner conflicts:

You always feel like you've been a bad mother, in the dichotomy between I'm a bad mother and I want to be a different mother. But your child doesn't want you to be different, your child wants you to be like the rest.

These decisions, which can be interpreted as refusals to comply to gender norms, were a constant throughout the interviewees' lives. Some continue to have open relationships with "guys . . . still available to us women who've decided to live a different life" (Nuria). Others have not become conventional grandmothers devoted to caring for their grandchildren:

Just imagine, I'm 70, what does a 70-year-old lady do? Apart from watching soap operas, being with her grandchildren. . . . Well, I'm now enjoying myself with . . . young people [in Podemos] and contributing with my experience and points of view (Marisol).

However, transgression often has its limits, especially when there is a need to look after dependent people. Thus, for instance, several interviewees illustrate the different effect, with respect to their male partners, that having children had on their political trajectories. While some managed, not without difficulty, to strike a balance between activism and childcare ("I always

went everywhere with [my child], I was the woman with the child. To the point that two lesbian friends in the association were surprised to learn that I was married because I was the woman with the child and they didn't know [my partner]," Lola recalls), others temporarily abandoned their formal political commitments. "After getting married, I took a break, and [my husband] continued with his activism" (Marisol).

### *Discovering Feminism*

Their activism led many of the interviewees to discover feminism, in most cases as part of their partisan work or after experiencing restricted access to positions of power, sexual division of political roles, and/or problems of balancing activism and family responsibilities. Other times, the discovery came in the workplace or in their personal relationships. In any case, the interviewees' contact with the feminist movement was a milestone in their trajectories—often described as a "discovery" (Isabel). Feminism put them into contact with other women in similar situations and with similar problems. Nuria expresses this in the following terms, "I remember I was deeply moved, I left, crying my eyes out . . . because I had understood that. . . . It was as if I didn't have to note anything down, [it was easy to relate what they said] to my experience, to what was real."

The interviewees emphasize that within the framework of feminism they have been able to pursue their activism without any serious tensions, with common objectives and establishing very solid personal relationships. Additionally, they stress that it has provided them with opportunities for learning and empowerment. As Isabel remembers, it has meant "growing as a person . . . enriching yourself, enriching each other"; "I've learnt a lot as a woman," Pilar admits. The appraisal that they make of their participation in the feminist movement is very positive, to the point of becoming, for many of them, their preferred sphere of activism. In the words of Carmen, "I don't feel communist at this point. . . . But I've never ceased to be a feminist."

Based on the interviewees' trajectories, it can be concluded that the effects of activism on aspects such as establishing new social networks, empowerment and learning political skills, or breaking with normative sexual and romantic relations take place from the beginning of their political activity. It happened prior to contact with feminism and even among women who had little to no relation with the feminist movement. In this sense, it shouldn't be forgotten that a large part of these women's feminist activism was part of their political militancy in the communist parties they belonged to. In any case, for many women their feminism may have worked to secure and consolidate different patterns of public and private transgressions since it increased their gender-oppression awareness and allowed them to establish contact with networks of women activists.

However, this involvement in the feminist movement was not always accepted in their political parties, which gave their activism a certain transgressive character. On the one hand, the interviewees underline the lack of interest in or the negative reaction towards feminist demands in their parties. As Carmen recalls, "We provoked distrust and apprehension." On the other hand, criticizing situations that they considered unfair and discriminatory frequently led to tense situations with their male comrades: "Always quarrelling with the effing macho bastard who worked in the building trade and was held in high esteem" (Carmen). These kinds of experiences were not limited to the political contexts in the 1970s but were also observed in subsequent activism and "still today in Podemos," according to Gloria. The commitment to feminism also extends to different facets of daily life and informal actions: "So your life as a feminist isn't only restricted to your activism, since it's also present in your daily life" (Nuria).

### *Learning, Empowerment, Relationships and Emotions*

For the interviewees, activism has not only provided knowledge of political theories but has also helped them to develop skills (e.g., problem solving and public speaking), languages, attitudes and values. As Laura indicates, "All the time we've been devoted to this. . . . I believe

it's been a learning process." These resources and experiences have facilitated a sense of empowerment: "So what activism did indeed give me . . . was the drive to dare to do different things" (María). In doing so, and for working-class youths with a very precarious education, as is the case of the interviewees, activism opened up new options and served to encourage them to live a different life from that which in principle had awaited them. According to María, "I began to be an activist . . . and all of a sudden, a world opened up to me, that is, I had many options, many possibilities." Teresa expresses this notion as follows: "I was expected to remain in the village, marry a country yokel who had more land than my father . . . but I've lived a full life."

An immediate effect of activism is the change in social networks and friendships. Indeed, during the 1970s, political activity was the pivotal point around which the interviewees' personal relationships revolved. According to Lola, "Activism and everything connected to it, personal relationships and so on, were the center of your life." In political parties close ties were forged, so that comrades became friends. Moreover, romantic relations between fellow activists were frequent. Some of those couples have survived and have pursued a life project together marked by political commitment, as Pilar recounts: "We have both experienced together the same awareness."

It is precisely the personal relationships established in activism that emerge as one of the elements most appreciated by the interviewees in their political lives. Laura claims, "The relationships established there were so strong. . . . I've got such fond memories of them. . . ." The preservation of this social capital has been crucial for the continuity or reactivation of their activism later in life. For example, it is possible to observe the relevance of these networks in the creation of new initiatives or projects or in the motivation to participate in the 15-M movement and new political parties: "I indeed trust the people in Podemos who I've known for fifty years. How could I not trust them? They're my comrades, my friends" (Teresa).

All the interviewees highly appreciate what the commitment that they have forged throughout their lives has meant for them: "It's been really beautiful, and it's been great," María summarizes. Their activism has awakened satisfying emotions in them: "I'm aware I've been consistent in my life and that makes me feel good" (Nuria). In their accounts, different milestones appear, all linked to intensely emotional moments, especially the transition to democracy and the 15-M protests. With respect to the transition, Carmen comments, "It's like when you're in love, it's the same sensation, it's like being drunk . . . that febrile moment, that was the transition." For its part, the 15-M movement was "a moment of expectation, of hope" (Lola); "A marvelous thing . . . a very beautiful moment" (Marisol). Lastly, in addition to great joy, activism has also involved negative emotions, such as fear in the face of repression (Pilar). Nor have disappointments and pain been lacking, since activism also leaves "many bruises," according to Marisol.

## DISCUSSION

Gender studies stress that attributing the public sphere to men and the private sphere to women hinders the political participation of the latter (Bernárdez 2010; Bourdieu 2000; Taylor and Whittier 1998). The analysis performed here seems to offer an example of the gender gap in political activism. Specifically, it has been possible to observe that the political commitment of our interviewed women has been affected by an unequal distribution of household chores and family responsibilities (Quaranta 2016; Quaranta and Dotti Sani 2018). Notwithstanding this, when women participate in politics (1) they challenge the gender order merely with their presence in masculinized spaces, (2) they frequently defend feminist ideals considered inappropriate by others, and (3) they opt for lifestyles that dispute the limits dictated by tradition (Moreno 2020). These three expressions of gender transgression appear in the life stories of the interviewees.

The findings of this study coincide with other authors that have demonstrated that "intensive political participation during the formative years fosters lifelong engagement" (Jennings 2002: 322), as the initial experience of building a collective identity marks a long track record of activism (Whittier 1997). Specifically, this study has confirmed the conclusions of prior research

on the long-term persistence of ideals and sociopolitical engagement (Braungart and Braungart 1991; Bonfiglioli 2014; Giugni and Grasso 2016; Olivier and Tamayo 2017). Furthermore, unlike other research on activists who are nowadays defined as nonpartisan (Olivier and Tamayo 2017), our interviewees have maintained, albeit discontinuously, their links with political parties. As has been observed by Corrigan-Brown (2012: 17-18), this formal commitment is frequently characterized by its intermittent nature, "moving in and out of activity as a result of life-course factors such as changing family status and resources." In particular, and coinciding with other research (Quaranta 2016; Serrat and Villar 2019), our interviewed women demonstrate that parenting reduced the chances of maintaining active political commitment.

It is particularly pertinent to compare the results obtained here with those of studies that analyzed political activism in the context of dictatorships and democratic transitions, such as in Portugal and Greece. In this vein, Kornetis (2013) notes that the establishment of a democracy far-removed from the revolutionary ideals led to feelings of disillusionment and, frequently, disengagement among the students who had been active against the Colonels' Dictatorship in Greece. In the Portuguese case, Accornero (2019a; 2019b) stresses that, after a fleeting revolutionary experience and once democracy was consolidated, many extreme left-wing activists broke with any form of political involvement. Similarly, Beorlegui (2017) has focused his research on the melancholy that the failure to meet their revolutionary expectations produced among anti-Franco activists in Spain, which led some of them to join social movements and others to become involved in counterculture practices and drugs.

In contrast to the above research, both the adoption of a wide concept of political and social commitment and our extended time frame have made it possible to analyze the trajectories of the interviewees after an initial stage of disillusionment. Thus, we have observed their participation in different social and political protests and organizations, their expressions of informal commitment, and their interest in and even enthusiasm for phenomena like the 15-M movement in 2011. In sum, following the approaches of Corrigan-Brown (2012: 32), the adoption of a life-course perspective allows for arriving at the conclusion "that individuals can disengage from a particular social movement organization, but perhaps not from participation as a whole." The results obtained here highlight the continuity of the political and social commitment of the interviewees, to the point of becoming a key aspect of their personal trajectories. It is precisely this aspect which seeks to encompass the central category of our analysis: "I'm the person I am thanks to all this."

The youth activism of our group of women had a clear influence on their personal decisions. As Passy and Monsch (2019: 502) have also observed, "they adopt, and adapt, cultural models acquired during activism in their private life." In this respect, McAdam (1989) places the accent not only on social action, but also on personal liberation and the private sphere as a defining trait of activism during the long 1960s. He states, "The ideological imperative of the 60s called for activists to recognize the political significance of their personal lives and to make choices about work, family, and relationships that reflected their politics" (McAdam 1989: 754). For the interviewees, these choices meant a transgression of the gender norms at the time and offered an opportunity for personal emancipation (Bonfiglioli 2014). In this sense, although different types of public and private transgressions appear from the early stages of these women's political activity, they may have been strengthened and enlarged through contact with theories about feminism and the feminist activism itself that many of the interviewed women have carried out. As McAdam (1989) also detected in his sample of U.S. activists, the unconventional lifestyle that the interviewed women adopted has continued over time and have facilitated their identification with the protests led by young people at different historical moments, as has been the case with the 15-M movement (Razquín 2015).

During their activism, the interviewees wove a dense network of friends and personal relationships that, in some cases, has withstood the passing of time (Cucó 2016). These networks serve as social capital for reengaging with activism later on (Razquín 2015; Corrigan-Brown 2012; McAdam and Paulsen 1993) and contribute to keeping alive the collective identity of their political generation (Vestergren, Drury, and Hammar Chiriach 2018; Passy and Monsch 2019).

Some studies have noted that engaging in activism also means breaking with old friends and even leads to tense romantic relations (Vestergren Drury, and Hammar Chiriatic 2017). In our study, the interviewees' youth activism had no such consequences. On the contrary, some of them met their partners in the parties and have built a shared political trajectory with them.

Nonetheless, there was some tension between the interviewed activists and their families of origin, owing to the apprehension or rejection that both their political involvement in a dictatorial context and their transgressive life options caused. Moreover, the interviewees form part of a self-aware political generation whose members differ from both the most veteran activists and the rest of their age cohort, who had little or no interest in political affairs. As has been observed in other studies on the political generation of the long 1960s (Braungart and Braungart 1991), this generational consciousness developed by the interviewed women during their highly committed youth activism has survived the passing of time, affecting both their private and public trajectories.

The interviewees experienced their activism against Franco's dictatorship and during the transition to democracy with great emotional intensity. Although their emotions have tempered over time, and despite the social, economic and psychological costs of their activism (Accornero 2019a; Fernández Lamelas 2015; Vestergren Drury, and Hammar Chiriatic 2017), the interviewees view their global political commitment in a very positive light. As previous studies have highlighted, activism seems to have a positive effect, for instance, in terms of empowerment, well-being, and satisfaction (Evrpidou and Drury 2013; Foster 2015). Moreover, as McAdam (1992) notes, the impact of their subsequent feminist activism in their political and private trajectories may have helped our participants, not only to recognize the obstacles that they have had to overcome, but also to value their activist experience as crucial and fundamentally positive. The association of political participation with positive emotions can contribute to the continuity of political ideals and commitment in the long term. In fact, it is related to what Passy and Monsch (2019) call the "experiential process," in the sense that the way in which activists experience their political commitment affects the likelihood of their maintaining it.

Finally, as has been shown in different studies (Braungart and Braungart 1991; Vestergren Drury, and Hammar Chiriatic 2017), political participation involves both a change in the way activists interpret social reality and learning political and social skills. It is thus possible to talk about a "radical habitus," as defined by Crossley (2003), to refer to the acquisition of interpretive schemas of social reality and skills for political action which explain how contentious politics affect an individual's cognitions and practices in the short and long term. In this regard, Cucó (2016: 215) underlines how extreme left-wing activists in Spain during the 1970s especially highlight the acquisition of personal and social skills, life attitudes, and moral values in the frame of their activism. In the specific case of women's political participation, and as has been observed in other studies (Braungart and Braungart 1991), feminist activism and political work with other women can reinforce processes such as:

Enrichment or personal growth, enhanced skills, greater autonomy, greater negotiating capacity with their partners, higher self-esteem, the discovery of one's own sexuality, self-knowledge, awareness of one's rights, empowerment or strength (Fernández Lamelas 2015: 32).

## CONCLUSIONS

Our results are consistent with those obtained in previous research on political generations and highly committed activism. For our interviewed women, political and social commitment is a central element of their personal trajectories. As Crossley (2003) observed through his concept of "radical habitus," the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills during their intense youth activism can be related to the development of subsequent formal and informal commitments and to different transgressions of gender norms in their private lives. Similarly, other explanatory factors, such as the acquisition of social capital (Passy and Monsch 2019; McAdam 1989) and the association of activism with positive emotions (Accornero 2019a; Gildea, Mark, and Warring

2013; Kornetis 2013), have also been fundamental for activist trajectories. However, as Giugni (2008) has noted, these results cannot be directly extended to other types of activism pursued at other life stages or historical contexts or with a lower level of commitment. Although some studies suggest the relevance of the effects of political participation on other types of activists (Giugni and Grasso 2016; Van Dyke, McAdam, and Wilhelm 2000; Vestergren, Drury, and Hammar Chiriac 2018), there is a need for more comparative research.

As to possible biases in our sample, even though we have attempted to ensure its diversity in terms of the subjects' current involvement in social movements and political parties, our use of the snowball technique may have excluded women who now have no links to former activists' social circles. This specific group, which is more difficult to locate, may provide interesting results in future studies. In any case, the adoption of a life-course perspective, the theoretical framework of gender studies, and a broad concept of political and social commitment yield a better understanding of the close relationship between the public and private trajectories of the interviewees. Similarly, this approach allows us to analyze elements of continuity between the different stages that the women themselves have distinguished during the open interviews.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As in other Western European countries, the Spanish Marxist political organizations were highly diverse. The PCE (Communist Party of Spain) represented the majority option, which was Eurocommunist. The New Left, a revolutionary option, was integrated by small Maoist (PTE, ORT and MC), Trotskyist (LCR) and Marxist-Leninist (PCE m-l) parties.

<sup>2</sup> In both cases, the participants have maintained a close relationship of friendship since the 1970s, joined the same political and trade union organizations, and their political trajectories are substantially parallel.

<sup>3</sup> "El consultorio de Elena Francis" was a radio program which broadcasted in Spain from 1947 to 1984. It was based on giving advice in response to questions from a mostly female audience.

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