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Being Political Protagonists: Activist Trajectories and Gender Awareness of Female Chileans Exiled in Costa Rica

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This article reconstructs the political trajectories of Chilean exiled women settling in Costa Rica. It analyses the manifestations and transmutations of their political praxis before, during and after the period of ostracism, based on life stories reconstructed through semi-structured interviews with several women who began militancy before the 1973 coup d'état and are still active in the struggles for memory. Analysis shows how political praxis during exile facilitated alternative ways of conceiving citizenship, linking transnationally with solidarity networks and making their healing process a political instrument. During exile, the intersection between their background of militancy and detention, their political practices and social contexts promoted the development of gender perspectives that explain and redefine traumatic experiences.

Keywords: activism, exile, gender consciousness, human rights, memory, testimonies.

The political trajectories of militant women in Chile reached their zenith in moments of sociocultural shifts, which led them to reevaluate their condition as subaltern subjects from a perspective of rebellious humanism. That transformation took place in the 1960s–1970s and involved young people who participated in social movements as part of the rise of left-wing thought and militancy. Their activism produced discourses and practices raising the significance of historically marginalised sectors of society, on the route towards the transformation of power structures affecting young people, the popular sectors and women.

That historical framework is the point of reference to analyse the political trajectories of a group of Chilean women in Costa Rica, exiled as a consequence of their activism and after facing state violence. Far from abandoning their commitment and political connection with Chile during exile, their priorities shifted, turning towards demanding justice and validating their painful experiences under the dictatorship, condemning state terrorism and adopting a transnational activism for human rights. In this work, I suggest that their praxis in Costa Rica challenged traditional conceptions about what was seen as 'political' and how politics was carried out at that time. An intrinsic part of that transformation was the development of gender consciousness and the recognition of the gender particularities of their exile experiences, in relation to their male peers.

This text traces the trajectory of exiled Chilean women, on the basis of their testimonial reconstruction of their social and political action. The need to analyse their testimony from a gender perspective is recognised (Troncoso and Piper 2015: 65), in order to make them visible as social actors dedicated to human rights and whose actions usually remain in the shadows as they are linked to the private spheres or because they are loose memories (Stern 2000), not yet managed and effectively integrated into collective memories and even less so in the national imaginaries of the home societies and the societies of relocation (Roniger 2016).

Their experiences in Costa Rica are considered forms of female political action, coinciding with the global, regional and local positioning of women as actors in the public spheres during the 1970s and 1980s. Characteristics such as the extent of their autonomy with respect to their involvement

in parties or committees, associative links, female solidarity and the search for objectives with social impact bring them closer to women's movements (Molineux 2003). From the recovery of the gendered memories of the exiles, the text elucidates a route of political activities in transformation that includes their antecedents in Chile as organic militants or student activists, to the formation of groups such as the Frente de Mujeres Chilenas en el Exilio (FMCE).

Methodologically, life stories were reconstructed through semi-structured interviews with seven Chilean women, six of whom are residents in San José and one returnee. More than one interview session was held with each one, carried out over a period of 6 years. An eighth protagonist is Sara Astica, an actress and activist of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, Revolutionary Left Movement), whose memories are reconstructed through the voice of her children.

The relationship of each woman with political life in Chile has distinctive marks. Before the dictatorship, two were linked to university student organisations, three were members of the MIR and two, of the Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitaria (MAPU; Unitary Popular Action Movement); Another of the interviewees was a minor who provided details about her mother's participation in the Socialist Party. In turn, their exile was motivated by the need to survive following detention and torture (four women); the risks to life due to militancy (three); and the disappearance of family members (one woman).

Their stories constitute a sample of the diversity of experiences, profiles and realities of the Chilean people who arrived in Costa Rica as exiles or refugees during the 1970s and 1980s. This country was the main recipient of political exiles in Central America: according to calculations by the ambassador in Chile, at the beginning of 1976 there were approximately three thousand Chileans residing in Costa Rica and of these, seven hundred did not have a visa (Excélsior 1976: 6), a situation that reflected the urgency and massiveness of the wave of people forced to leave Chile due to political persecution. Currently, those who arrived in this context are part of a small community of non-returnees who differ from their countrymen in the home country – one thousand three hundred and sixty-four Chilean residents in 2017 (Embassy of Chile in Costa Rica 2017) – due to the reasons that led them to leave Chile.

Gender Perspectives in Studies of Chilean Women in Exile

The experiences of Chilean women in exile have been the subject of several studies. In Chile, one of the researchers dedicated to exile studies has been Loreto Rebolledo González, author of articles that explore the specificities of the lives of women in exile and the transformations in identities. Rebolledo published books and chapters that incorporate multiple dimensions of life before, during and after exile, among others in *Memorias del desarraigo* (2006a. See also Rebolledo 2006b, 2022). Rebolledo's analyses of political life in exile focused on the experiences of exiles in Spain, France, Denmark and Mexico, showing an organisational closeness with exiles from the Southern Cone and the continuity of ties with political parties. This aspect marks a substantial difference with the experience of Chilean women in Costa Rica, because, as presented in the following pages, they established strong ties with Central American women and their activity centred on human rights before political-party work.

Carolina Espinoza Cartes has investigated Chilean exile in Spain through the voices of women. Her work approaches thematic axes such as family life, emotional relationships, the transmission of trauma and militancy. For example, it covers general aspects of exile life, including political activities (Espinoza Cartes 2019a) as well as a literary project by Chilean women in Madrid and Barcelona (Espinoza Cartes 2019b, 2020). An innovative perspective is found in her study on the generational transmission of trauma (Espinoza Cartes 2024), in which she concludes that subjects can transform the meanings they give to traumatic events: the past can be operationalised by women and their offspring, as the engine that moves a deep sense of social commitment, party militancy or activism in favour of social justice.

Nathalie Jammet-Arias (2018, 2020) and Belén Rojas Silva (2019) have sought to position the testimonies of women in France as counter-memories that demarcate traditional framings of exile narratives. Both authors emphasise the processes of reconstitution of identities and approach exile as an opportunity and not only as a loss, arguments developed in this article from the angle of political participation.

The activism of women in exile is the central theme of Thamar Álvarez Vega (2023), Moreno Gacía (2019), Jasmine Gideon (2018), Gálvez Toro (2021) and Javier Maravall Yáguez (2012), who provide long-term analyses on the lives of activists. The findings presented by these authors exhibit similarities with the experiences of Chilean women in Costa Rica, despite the fact that their location is European. Aspects such as the continuity of patriarchal attitudes in political-party relations exile as an experience that allowed women to energise their political praxis, and professional growth as a cause and effect of the development of gender awareness appear as common denominators of the exile transition, regardless of destination.

At the same time, research on exiles in Europe denotes differences with the experience in Costa Rica. For example, Gideon (2018) delves into the psychological impact and political constitution processes of Chileans in the United Kingdom, exiled due to their marriage to union or party leaders, while Miorelli and Piersanti (2020) study the political transformation of exiles in the United Kingdom and the impact of organisations such as the Servicio Mundial de Universidades (SMU, World University Service) on the migration processes during the dictatorship. In the case of the exiles in Costa Rica, none had a history of affiliations dependent on their partner, but rather they have been political agents with their own trajectories. Likewise, educational entities such as the SMU were absent as mechanisms for entry into the country.

The testimonies collected by Espinoza Cartes (2020), Gálvez Toro (2021), Saidón (2019) and Tarducci (2021) found that women settling in both Europe and Mexico learned about feminisms and their intellectual production in the early phases of the second wave, which led them to identify as feminists and deepen their theoretical lenses between the 1970s and 1980s. As such, feminism contributed to the development of an awareness of gender inequalities that changed the perspectives of political-party and family relations. As examined below, for Chilean women exiled in Costa Rica, the approach to these currents occurred only in the 1990s, so that organisationally they did not come to perceive themselves as feminists before.

Works on Chilean exiles in Latin America are even scarcer. Claudia Rojas Mira (2019a, 2019b) has published works that reconstruct the work of multiple actors, including women and their political practices in the Frente de Mujeres Exiliadas en México and la Casa de Chile. For the specific case of female exiles in Central America research is minimal. A reference text is 'Voces y rostros del exilio chileno en Costa Rica', developed in the Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos of the Universidad Nacional and published in Ramírez-Hernández (2021) and in the text 'Cuando lo privado y cotidiano también es político: comunidades emocionales y redes de apoyo entre las mujeres chilenas en el exilio' (Ramírez-Hernández and Rojas Mejías 2023). In light of the above, this text attempts to contribute knowledge about the political trajectories of Chilean women exiled in Costa Rica. It is an opportunity to compare the experiences of exiles and their political transformations according to the geographies and temporalities of the host countries.

The Ideological Background of Chilean Women

The insertion of women into the political scene occurred in the context of the ideological upheaval and social mobilisations in Chile during the 1960s and early 1970s. Salazar et al. (2002) characterised that phase as one of 'gigantic political and ideological structures (…) gigantism was condensed in the State Machinery; in the magnified definition of the tasks of Development, the Social Revolution and the construction of the New Man' (130). There was a forward-looking aspiration to transform social structures radically and offset imperialism as part of a collective demand to eradicate social inequality.

With clear ideological positions in favor of the class struggle, women activated in varied organisations and fulfilled different roles, mostly according to the life stage they were going through. The local events that enhanced the protagonism of women in the political arena merged with family lives marked by association with left-wing parties or the development of a class consciousness that germinated in socioeconomic environments crossed by social inequality and labor exploitation (Varas, personal communication, March 31, 2022). For example, adult women like Engracia Gómez were members of the Socialist Party and councilor at the Aysén region in Coyhaique before the coup (interview with Anonymous October 5, 2021) while actress Sara Artica Cisternas was active in the MIR (Gaete Astica 2021).

Younger women found other breeding grounds for political discussions and praxis at the universities. These provided the theoretical tools to interpret life situations and allowed them links with student groups without a party affiliation (Varas, March 31, 2022), or with the young brigades of leftist parties (interview with Treguear, February 2024), or even with organisations such as the MIR or MAPU (interview with Anonymous, July 7, 2022 and Anonymous, October 10, 2021). Within the groups, they dedicated themselves to working with impoverished communities, supporting in the fields of health, education, housing, access to services and political organisation (interview with Anonymous, December 9, 2021).

Their associative and activist patterns in Allende's Chile coincide with the left-wing political culture predominant in the context of opposition militancy. They conceived themselves as a mobilising agent of transformation. According to Selci (2018), the militants assumed the attitude of 'tak[ing] charge of reality as if it were *their responsibility*' (119, italics in the source). Growing and developing this conviction generated an optimism that a radical turn was viable and welded the foundations of the constitution of Chilean women as political agents working to bring about a more just society.

Another detail of the historical moment that influenced militancy was the correlation between the rise of women's movements on a global scale (Molineux 2003) and, locally, the impact of the Allende government's policies encouraging female participation in public life, recognising women as subjects of rights in the world of work, education and politics (Maravall Yáguez 2012). For this, 'instances of political socialisation that promoted the training and education of women' were generated (Alfaro et al. 2021: 71); That is, an environment that motivated them to assume an active role in the public arena by getting involved in the joint search for solutions to problems, whether at their workplaces, in universities or in their communities. Thus, future exiles lived in a context that not only motivated their presence in public life, but, to a certain extent, demanded it.

Alongside the political conquests of women, a conservative lifeworld existed, permeated by the most traditional visions of gender roles. Discursively, among Unidad Popular (UP, Popular Unity) forces, even if potential agents of social transformation, women were portrayed above all as mothers, educators and other assistant roles. This was how those who would go into exile were militarised at that time: claiming rights as workers, students and mothers, but not from the specificity of being women (Maravall Yáguez 2012).

The cultural and ideological framework was not conducive to the emergence of analyses focused on gender inequalities, given that the specificity of women's demands and needs did not enter the repertoire of ideas of the left-wing parties and movements. The situation of female activists was that of going through a historical moment that legitimised them as political actors in class struggle and as protagonists in the public sphere; however, such a situation did not lead to drastic ruptures in the cultural order (Castillo Gallardo 2011).

Despite this, mothers and young activists were progressive for their time, as some held leadership positions within their parties or were the first women in their families taking part in revolutionary organisations. From a temporal distance, such actions can be conceived as generational and gender ruptures, although they do not evaluate them in this way, but as a necessity of the context: 'I decided to join the MIR because I actually agreed with the policies, strategies and tactics proposed. At that time, I was studying at the university, and the university front of the MIR was quite large. How did my family react? Well, not very well. Because my parents were not people involved in politics, I don't think they were even interested in it! The only [political] thing they did was to vote, they did not take it very well that one of my brothers and I militated, but they did not oppose us or get angry either. In some way I think it caught their attention because there was no history of political participation in the family, there being people on the right' (interview with Anonymous, July 7, 2022).

On the other hand, there was also an affective and emotional dimension intrinsic to the context. Memoirs reveal a complex panorama of emotions consistent with the reality of polarised political forces. Interviewees remember an environment permeated by multisensory stimuli and discursivities mobilising emotions, rationalities and actions that reinforced the sense of commitment and identification with the social struggle, that is, a context in which the political arena operated as much through affective resonance as through ideological convictions. Simultaneously, that was an environment of

uncertainty, instability and expectant fear in the face of expected responses from those opposing radicalism, feelings fueled by the radicalisation of the anti-communist discourse and 'black propaganda' (Timmermann 2014).

In an environment of confrontations and conjunctures, it stands out that Chilean women experienced new margins of freedom and political possibilities. The structural and ideological 'gigantisms' of polarised Chile at that time were the cultural framework that formed the perspectives of the women I interviewed and in which they channeled discomforts and concerns that were born from the disparity and injustice which they witnessed and later experienced as victims.

Resistance at the Heart of Repression: Women Organising in the Torture Centres

The coup d'état imposed a fascist system that made dissent a cause for punishment. The ideological divisions and the repression constituted the germ of a psychosocial trauma whose structures persist in the articulation of the memories of women (as well as men), finding that 'the wound that affects people has been produced socially (…) that is, its roots are not found in the individual but in society' (Martín-Baró 1990: 10). Among the Chilean exiles in Costa Rica, some were political prisoners and tortured, others faced the disappearance of relatives or lived in hiding (interview with Anonymous, October 10, 2021).

Although the topic of political violence has been the subject of multiple investigations, for this account it is important to briefly examine the organisational and support tactics of women in detention centres, which were fundamental for survival and emotional coupling (Hiner 2015; Troncoso and Piper, 2015; Pequeño Bueno et al. 2018), as well as emotional tools that, once in exile, favoured solidarity actions and human rights activism. Of the four exiled former political prisoners, each was arrested for the same reason: her activism in political parties and movements or as members of student organisations. Captured by the military and members of state intelligence between September 1973 and December 1974, they remained captive and were violated in places such as the Venda Sexy, Tres y Cuatro Álamos, José Domingo Cañas, the Valparaíso War Academy, the Silva Palma barracks, the Lebu ship and the Arica prisoner of war camp, for periods that ranged from two months to almost two years (interview with Treguear, 24 March, 2017 and Anonymous, February 22, 2017; Casa Memoria José Domingo Cañas 2022; Varas 2021).

In a gender perspective, the measures implemented by the military Junta, both discursively and in terms of the violence inflicted against women show that clear measures of patriarchal domination. Veneros (1997) points out that the dictatorship reaffirmed conservatism, since 'it generated a repressive discourse, whose objective was to produce citizens for a purified homeland in which the values of order, family and religion are recovered' (cited by Maravall Yáguez 2012: 62). This purpose was achieved through a chain of gendered actions and imaginaries that crossed all spaces, including the torture centres. For the conservative and patriarchal logic, the militants were bearers of social problems to be eradicated, such as rebellion or lack of attention to family, in short, those behaviours that challenged conventional femininity. One of the interviewees considered in this regard that.

Obviously, the treatment of women and sexual political violence was tremendous! First, because women had become politically involved and that was not accepted by those who carried out the coup, which were the right-wing forces. For them, women had to be at home raising children and that's it. They didn't have to be involved in politics. It was something that they always yelled at us; they insulted us for not doing our part: for leaving the family abandoned in the case of women who were already married or had children. And then, the use of sexual violence as a political weapon was fundamentally exercised against women (interview with Anonymous, December 9, 2021).

In detention centres, multiple daily resistance strategies were configured to confront violence such as the aforementioned. Inserted in the memory of detention and pain, the existence of forms of sorority organisation and solidarity between women in the torture centres appears solidly in the testimonies. Expressions and acts of solidarity provided emotional support, creating loopholes to cope with extreme situations and thus confronting in subtle ways the power of the military.

At present, women value the construction of affection in those spaces of terror and violence as one of the main pillars for survival and overcoming trauma. The prisoners used skills and knowledge to devise emotional and psychological support techniques and also generated affective and symbolic structures of surrogate family: some became adoptive mothers developing organisational patterns and care devices. In the following extracts, the existence of negotiation mechanisms with the military and affection between the detainees, actions of resistance restorative of dignity and the human condition are recounted:

The men had a situated ad hoc, confrontational approach [muy 'lance y morete']. The women had built a concerted organisation, which made the leaders of the prison camp very angry, because we did not accept anything if the commander did not come to speak with our council of elderly women. There was no other route, there was no other way (interview with Anonymous, March 22, 2017).

I was one of the youngest in the concentration camp, so there I created a family that protected me, took care of me, brought me to eat. I had a teacher who made me write a story every day to verbalise my feelings. I had an artist who taught me to draw, to do manual things. I had a friend with whom we hugged and cried. I had a wonderful spectrum of people who supported me and will stay with me forever' (interview with Treguear, March 24, 2017).

These testimonies allow us to open a parenthesis to highlight a core element in relation to the processes of memory-making, from the particularities of gender. On the one hand, one of the informants highlighted the difference in organisational patterns in prison such as, for example, the continuity in the men's cells of party hierarchies, ideological divisions, among others, the 'strategic adherence to essentialist notions of identity' (Troncoso and Piper 2015: 68). In turn, the situations that are important for interviewees could be interpreted as opposite binomials that reproduce and naturalise the difference between men and women. I suggest that their ways of shaping memory have been functional for reconfiguring their identities (Arfuch 2013).

The scenarios, actors and events that make up their narratives destabilise hegemonic stories about the prison experience that exclude 'secondary' experiences and relationships because they concern the private sphere, that is, feelings about everyday life and emotional ties. In the process of constructing memory in the present, there is a reaffirmation of their identities as active subjects of that past, as survivors and not as victims, who vindicate women's political practices and resistance mechanisms in environments designed to extinguish them.

In the testimonies of the female exiles about their stay in the torture centres, other names appear: those of militants, students, men and women of various ages who they saw alive and today are among the people disappeared by the dictatorship. As witnesses, women acquire and equip themselves with the responsibility of speaking for those who did not survive and undertake searches for justice in which they assume the dual role of survivors and witnesses. In their view, the unavoidable ethical duty to testify survives – an act that they have actually carried out – and that is juxtaposed with the difficulty of carrying and reliving the trauma that remains in their bodily memories, due to what they experienced firsthand and what they heard and saw in relation to third parties. As 'the witness is the one who gives existence to the event' (Wikinski 2016: 107), the women's testimonies confirm the existence of those people from whom the dictatorship took their lives and identity through disappearance.

Transformations During Exile: Strategies and Political Practices

The onset of the dictatorship produced a triple fracture in the lives of the women interviewed. One was the turn towards ultra-conservatism and the imposition of policies instilling fear that cut off the UP project and the hopes of a better future. A second fracture was produced by the punishments they, their kin or comrades experienced as a result of their activism. The third fracture was going into exile as the only alternative for survival. Each of these manifestations of violence produced an imbalance of identities and affected the exiles in their bodies, but also the social body (Jimeno 2007) of Chile, by inducing a forced distancing that curtailed the right to citizenship and the tacit contract with the State, the result of which was a society affected by mistrust and terror.

Being in exile temporarily truncated the path of politicisation these women had undertaken. Their conditions of existence shifted upon arriving in Costa Rica. Like Chilean women exiled in other

countries of Europe and Latin America, they experienced cultural shocks, ruptures of identity and were forced to devise strategies for adaptation, connection or distancing from the receiving society (Rebolledo 2006a).

On the one hand, they encountered a society with conservative premises on family, politics and sexuality, rooted in Catholic religiosity and with little participation of women in the political arena. For Chilean militants or activists, the dictatorship meant the sudden loss of the conquests and advances in women's rights, to which was added the question of whether or not they would be able to recover these spaces in the receiving country. Contrastingly, the testimonies of exiled women from the Southern Cone generally indicate that it was in exile when they approached feminism or acquired gender awareness (Saidón 2019; Tarducci 2021). To explain this seeming contradiction, one needs to examine the historical development of the 1970s and 1980s in the two geographies – Chile and Costa Rica – where differences appear.

For once, the policies of the Military Junta tended to set back the clock in terms of labor, educational, sexual and reproductive rights that directly affected women. For Maravall Yáguez (2012), the transformation of the economic model and the dismantling of the Welfare State was accompanied by the imposition of discourses and practices aimed at returning women to the domestic sphere through tactics such as the reduction of labour rights and the systematic persecution of people suspected of militancy. Still, in Costa Rica in the same period, family planning policies slowly expanded, the participation of women in the labour market increased, from 16 percent of the EAP in 1963 to 22 percent in 1984 (DGEC 1966; 1987), higher education was expanded and strengthened, which increased the enrolment of women in state universities with a presence from 40 percent in 1970 to 47 percent in 1984 (Brenes 2003) and feminist thought was surreptitiously consolidated within academic circles and small political organisations.

The Grupo de ex-detenidas políticas y familiares de desaparecidos

In the initial phase of exile, a first space for sociability and meeting was the Comité de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Chileno en Costa Rica (Treguear, March 24, 2017), where exiles reunited with former cellmates. In substance, it was a moment in which 'as women, we got together to do things (…) because many of us came from different prison camps, with different experiences, with missing relatives, with missing very loved people' (interview with Anonymous, February 22, 2017).

Several women organised themselves into one of the first groups created to exert international pressure against the dictatorship: the group of former political detainees and missing relatives, which emerged between the end of 1975 and the beginning of the following year. Their tools were dialogue with political leaders, human rights spokespersons and giving testimony (interview with Anonymous, February 22, 2017 and Anonymous, February 17, 2017; Grupo de ex detenidas 1976) aimed at denouncing in exile the political violence that they suffered and continued to be perpetuated in Chile.

According to the memories of former members, they opted to establish ties with political allies and human rights defenders so that they could mobilise their demands towards international organisations. Therefore, the group operated as a stepping stone in the promotion of human rights, connecting to institutions such as the Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH, Inter-American Court of Human Rights), established in 1979, or to organisations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation. The existence of a state of law in Costa Rica, the signing of agreements such as the Pact of San José in 1969, are milestones that contributed to defining a stable democracy in a regional context of instability. Associations and unions of public employees, student federations, state universities and political parties operated as spokespersons and spaces for the dissemination of the exiles' complaints (Rojas Mejías and Ramírez-Hernández 2020).

Former political prisoners and relatives of missing detainees took on the task of identifying the mechanisms facilitated by non-governmental organisations and international regulations to report the disappearance of loved ones and carry out the difficult task of searching for their whereabouts from exile. One of the women, whose father and brother had disappeared in November 1974, was able to mobilise a permanent demand from Costa Rica, together with the Grupo of former political detainees and relatives of the disappeared. Both relatives appeared on the list of 'the 119' that the newspaper El Mercurio published on July 25, 1975 (interview with Silva, February 17, 2017).

The pre-eminence of women in this group was evident. In the Grupo of former political detainees and relatives of the disappeared, one of the interviewees indicated that, from the first years of her exile, she and her companions perceived a reluctance on the part of the men to adhere to causes that involved giving testimony of what happened in the torture centres, of the violence to which they had been also subjected. The persistence of the fear of being the object of reprisals, of the stigmatisation in the host society, of the uncertainty in the reception that their statements could have, were part of the arguments held by fellow countrymen in exile: 'we always said: but they already kicked us out of Chile, what else is going to happen to us? If they throw us out of here, we will go somewhere, but *we cannot remain silent*, that is why we formed that group of former female prisoners, because the men never formed themselves as a group [to denounce torture], even if there were many former male prisoners' (interview with Anonymous, March 22, 2017, italics added).

The political praxis of those women adapted to the needs dictated by exile, where they discovered that their testimony had political potential. In this way, those who made up that group – and those outside of it, supported them and joined their causes – sought and created spaces for listening to their stories (Kaufman 2022), at a historical moment crossed by a culture of emotions and a regional reality receptive to and supportive of their affections and demands for justice.

Reclaiming Female Spaces: The Frente de Mujeres Chilenas en el Exilio

In the late 1970s, a group of women disassociated themselves from the Comité de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Chileno, in response to a discriminatory treatment by the men running the committee's newsletter who denied them the right to participate and reminded them that their political support should lie in the work of assistance and service (interview with Treguear, March 24, 2017; Varas, May 10, 2022). As a reaction, they formed the FMCE as a space for sociability, yet whose work was imminently political at the same time. Those women developed an active political life based on transnational solidarity, through reporting and fundraising for organisations in Chile, as well as publishing the Golondrina Bulletin, dedicated to political analysis and disseminating information about the home country. Secondly, it had an emergent function, as women created in the FMCE meeting spaces for emotional containment, where they could talk about their experiences, listen and be heard and through these exercises, promote rebuilding an emotional and political fabric.

In comparison with organisations of women in exile in other geographies (France, Sweden or Germany), these women broke away from party affiliations to acquire an autonomous, humanitarian and cultural profile, similar to that of groups like Tralún in Spain (Gálvez Toro 2021: 34–40). Like Tralún, the FMCE established links of solidarity with women and families in Chile and included individuals coming from a wide range of ideological backgrounds.

Promoting Transnational Solidarity

The FMCE was made up of a core of 20 women. Cultural clubs, creation and sale of *arpilleras*, and distribution of the Golondrina Bulletin were some of the actions that those women used for denouncing the dictatorship's policies. Through people in transit, they transferred money to Chile to support projects of the population in resistance, specifically funding a care centre and an economic initiative of wives of political prisoners (interview with Treguear, January 26, 2024). As one of their goals was supporting the sons and daughters of missing people, they came closer to a maternal model of human rights activism recurring in the Latin American context of battles for human rights (Luna 2002). Their activism operated at a historical moment in which bringing gender initiatives related to family, motherhood and care into the public sphere served to subvert silencing policies (alike in the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) and effectively counteract the exclusionary measures of women in masculinised political discourses (Forcinito 2004).

In this dynamic, appropriating what historically had been minimised because it seemingly belonged to the sphere of private life turned it into a mechanism of political participation (Luna 2002: 114). They thus discovered the potential of resignification of gender performativity. They did what women

'had to do', but with an intentionality and with results that produced fields of transnational social and political incidence (Keck and Sikkink 2000). The actions of the FMCE added substantially to the collective and subjective process of women repositioning themselves as political actors, capable of building agency strategies with impacts beyond their most immediate environment in the countries of exile. Also, they disassociated themselves from the goal of supporting political parties in hiding or in exile, which was a recurring pattern of militant life of South Americans in Europe (Saidón, 2019; Miorelli and Piersanti, 2020; Espinoza Cartes 2020).

If the position of the FMCE is analysed in the context of the transnationalisation of human rights activism in the 1980s (Keck and Sikkink 2000; Catoggio 2016), the group functioned as a connecting node in a regional network of Chilean women who transited from their country to other destinations with a low profile or in hiding. Their objectives could be to inform their countrymen and create sympathetic avenue reporting about the reality of what was happening in Chile and also to collect funds for the resistance.

Another central factor is the issue of citizenship. Exile implies the radical rupture of commitment between State and citizen, as the latter is expelled from their vital spaces and from the institutions responsible for guaranteeing their political rights and well-being (Sznajder and Roniger 2013). Exile and dictatorship made such a dynamic of relations impossible, which is why the FMCE is interpreted as a nucleus that stimulated alternative ways of building transnational and active citizenships that dispensed with the approval of the State. The exiles assumed an ethical commitment to those who remained in Chile, manifest in their activism, simultaneously reconstructing and transforming citizen praxis and the functionalities of exile. The prevailing need of the sectors in resistance within the native country to have external support – financial assistance, denunciation, mobilisation – was a vehicle for the exiles to acquire a purpose for their struggle and a new meaning for their life that contributed to re-signify the experience of exile.

Finally, the relationships woven by the FMCE not only pointed towards the homeland. The interviewees recalled a particularity of their experience in Costa Rica, where they established connections with solidarity committees of Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Nicaraguan exiled women, contrasting with various other geographies, where their links were with exiles arriving from other Southern Cone countries (Miorelli and Piersanti 2020). One of Treguear's reflections on the links with other exiles visualises a moment of enabling spaces for listening and contexts in dialogue. One of the effects, according to their statements, was the understanding of memory as a right and not as a duty (Jelin and Vinyes 2021), which women from other geographies and realities could follow and identify:

As women we also felt the need to articulate ourselves with other exiles who resided here because we felt the need to be part of the training and self-education processes in which we learned together. We mutually learned about our experiences, supported and showed solidarity in accordance with the comparative advantages of each group. Not only did we expand the reach of information, but we got rid of the idea that Chile had a monopoly on suffering. We humanised ourselves by recognising the pain of other peoples, not losing perspective since injustice is transversal. With them we learned a lot about what was happening in their countries, and they learned much about ours, basically in terms of human rights (interview with Treguear, March 24, 2017).

Emotional Community and Gender Awareness

On a more intimate level, the configuration of the FMCE was identified as a space for emotional containment, an emergent and vertebral function at the same time. Several of the exiles remember how, once in Costa Rica, an aspect that linked them was sharing certain experiences from their past. At least two of those women had previously met in Tres Álamos, a torture centre where the actress Sara Astica (Casa Memoria José Domingo Cañas 2022) and one other exile were detained.

According to those interviewed, the FMCE meetings operated as sites to communicate experiences of suffering, which drove political and cultural recomposition through meetings with other exiles affected by state terrorism. The emotional ties made women's organisations and their fields of struggle anchor points to create emotional communion, thus facilitating the transition from the awareness of themselves as victims to their recognition as survivors and human rights activists. Although the central objective was always solidarity with Chile through different actions, a returned exile remembers that.

There were not only those of us who always made up the group, but sometimes a Chilean colleague who came from somewhere else would pass by and join our meetings. That is, there was an exchange of experiences. Some very complicated cases were presented to us, because it was not intended to be a space of letting go of everything. We did not have a psychologist or someone helping us deal with that, but it was inevitable and it was part of being able to support them, let them get everything out … I think that was a very, very good part (interview with Anonymous, October 10, 2021).

Recounting some of the experiences during the dictatorship was a recurring practice for exiled Chilean women. In their condition as exiles, the institutional system and territory that was supposed to care for and guarantee their human rights excluded them and, therefore, their voices remained on the margins. Their voice was supposed to be silenced and could not be validated within the Chilean legal and social framework. In this regard, the proposal of Veena Das analysed by Jimeno (2007) is taken up regarding the restorative nature of testimonies in the reconfiguration of a social body and emotional communities atrophied by violence. According to that proposal, speaking materialises the memory and the feelings that pass through it and sets the objective of transmitting suffering to other people. The recognition of one's own feelings and the reconstruction of the facts activate a mechanism of subjective transformation and resignification of the past. Submission to violence damages people's confidence in themselves and in others, but being listened to and understood is essential to regaining a sense of belonging and protection that help create a social fabric and a solid emotional support system. Jimeno goes further and links these subjective and collective healing processes with the capacity to establish political-affective communities conducive to citizen action and the reaffirmation of identities.

In the FMCE, the participants shared a whole framework of meanings, memories and experiences that favoured understanding and empathy with the narrated realities. As a reparative tool, testimony was a practice that some of the exiles took into their hands for political purposes. As an act of memory, it contributed to reconstitute their identities, since returning to certain events, the selection of silences, details, the representation of themselves in the narration of the past, 'must be considered as instruments of reconstruction of identity, and not only as factual stories (…) in the work of reconstruction of oneself the individual tends to define social place and the relationships with others' (Pollack 2006: 30).

The functionalities of testimony during and after exile can be linked to the approaches that many Chileans had with feminisms in developing gender consciousness. Those who participated in the FMCE affirm that there they held discussions about the role of women in politics, the group's core concern and in family relationships and about violence against women (interviews with Varas, October 10, 2021; Varas, May 10, 2022). Likewise, although women do not identify it in this way, the opening of spaces for listening fulfilled the same objective as women's circles, widely practiced within feminist collectives since the 1980s in Costa Rica (INAMU 2011).

In this order of ideas, the cultural and ideational framework under which the group operated was conducive to the existence of its organisational pattern. In agreement with Maxine Molineux (2003: 221), it is viable to affirm that the FMCE was a female resistance organisation, due to the existence of conditions such as: a global and regional cultural context that encouraged the participation of women in political life (pre-dictatorship Chile and Costa Rica in the 1980s); political formation processes cultivated in the Chilean socialist reform and in exile; the evident presence of practices of female solidarity in contexts of confinement and exile; and the character of Costa Rican regional and national civil society that facilitated women's access to the public sphere. In the words of one of the FMCE leaders.

At that time we did not define ourselves as feminists because we did not handle the concept very well, but seen from now, I think we were a women's organisation, with women's logic, with women's priorities, with women's visions and many obviously coincided with the feminist movement. I believe we all now ascribe to feminism, but at that time that was not the germ of our formation' (interview with Treguear, February 6, 2020).

When comparing the different testimonies, appreciations appear from those who consider that, although the FMCE did not define itself as feminist, its praxis was feminist. In addition, it received such imprint on the part of colleagues who lived their exile in France (interview with Varas, May 10, 2022); from those who learned about it at a university or had work ties with Costa Rican feminist collectives such as Ventana, in which an informant collaborated as a graphic designer. Thus, I infer that those women exhibited a heterogeneity of approaches to feminisms and took different routes towards

the development of a gender consciousness flourishing in the midst of sociability during exile, in their contacts with fellow countrymen, in universities, in their work spaces or in the cultural environment.

When comparing the process of approaching feminisms between Chileans in Costa Rica and those who lived in exile in Europe or Mexico, temporal differences also appear. As one of the interviewees indicates, those who were in Europe had greater conceptual mastery of gender as a category of analysis and the theorisation of feminism due to the coinage in academia and in the social movements of the global North. Exiles from the Southern Cone in England, Denmark, France, Spain, Germany and Sweden directly witnessed this process of growth and complexity of feminisms (Gideon 2018; Carvajal 2020; Espinoza Cartes 2020; Tarducci 2021). By occupying a satellite position in the circulation of ideas from the North to the global South, feminist thought arrived in Costa Rica approximately in the mid-1970s, and yet, according to the exiles, they appropriated its conceptual principles progressively until the 1990s.

Chile's Political Transition and Shifts in the Female Struggle

A part of the central core of the FMCE decided not to return to their country of origin once the transition to democracy began. With the delivery of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report (known as the Rettig Report) in February 1991, a facet of tensions regarding human rights began that had the collective and underground memories of exile as the axis of women's struggle. That report led to significant progress in recognising the responsibility of the armed forces in human rights violations and publicly recognised the reality of missing persons. For activists in Costa Rica, the transition and the issuance of the Rettig Report could have meant the possibility of initiating searches for the remains of their loved ones and prosecuting those responsible for their disappearance. However, the permanence of impunity and protection laws for the military until the end of 2010 made it impossible for justice to be effectively carried out.

In 2003, several non-returnee women took up one of their main causes when victims of State terrorism were summoned to give testimony before the Political Imprisonment and Torture Commission (Valech I). In her autobiography, writer Valeria Varas captures the emotional difficulties experienced by her and her companions to relive again and in detail the humiliations of the past: 'For three months, a group of four Chilean women met every week in Costa Rica to support each other by opening our wounds and making that process less painful. But also, to help us reopen the doors of prisons and torture centres, places where suffering, rape, beatings and darkness appeared' (Varas 2021: 12).

That year they were accompanied by the exiled Chilean psychologist Ruby Zárate Carrizo, who for the first time provided them with professional guidance in looking at the wounds of the past. The objective was that their testimonies and collective sharing would nourish healing processes (interview with Anonymous, February 22, 2017). Along those lines, the political work of women continued, since meeting again to recount their stories served in the reconstitution of their identities and the redefinition of their axes of struggle.

To date, three of the former political prisoners have brought their cases for crimes against humanity to court and achieved rulings in their favor, albeit with lukewarm results in which the overwhelming result has been the acceptance of the responsibility of the State as a promoter of political violence (interviews with Treguear, June 24, 2022; Varas, March 1, 2024). In general, their work in favor of human rights has shifted and expanded: the interviewees remain linked to Chilean and international organisations of relatives of detained and disappeared persons, they participate in commemorations, memory rituals and denunciation exercises (Reineta 2022; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes 2023). Additionally, over the years they have integrated discussion panels and taken part in conversations in educational and political spaces, providing their testimony for the purpose of resisting oblivion and denialism.

Others are members of international organisations of exiles such as the Coordinadora de Mujeres Chilenas en la Región Exterior, the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Chile en el Exterior, the Colectivo de Expresas y Expresos Políticos de Valparaíso, the Colectivo de Familiares y Amigos de los 119, among others. They have joined forces in the formulation of human rights normatives and supported the Constituent Assembly and the approval plebiscite (interview with Treguear, January 26 2024); That is, they have joined a kaleidoscope of initiatives that reflect changing emphases and demands

while remaining committed to a political agenda of their home country. Using the devices of transitional justice, they have validated themselves as subjects of law before a society and a state that once denied them formal citizenship.

Conclusions

Since human rights are the backbone of the political trajectories of Chilean exiles, there is a continuous and solid commitment to carrying out actions leading to changes in different spheres of life, a necessary factor in the constitution of political agency. For them, this has included processing the traumas of the past and reconstructing themselves as autonomous subjects. Also, this has involved their participation in the public arena, through acts such as sharing testimonies, joining organisations of Chileans in exile and bringing their cases of violence to justice. These are all tactics that have validated and emancipated collective memories condensed in their experiences, pain, suffering and routes of struggle.

In the case of women, their memories of exile present fractures and distances in relation to the hegemonic memories of recent history. A first fracture was present in felt by the women who survived State terrorism, since their stories about sexual violence were ignored or made invisible for many years. For years, the lack of institutional frameworks for expressing and understanding those sexual crimes led to their dilution in testimonies. A second fracture appeared regarding the decision to remain in exile and not return to Chile. That decision distanced them from the sense of belonging to Chilean society. While the sense of estrangement had to be overcome from the beginning of exile, the decision not to return to Chile with democratisation signalled the definitive distance. The life stories of the female exiles have not been fully integrated into the memories about the coup, the dictatorship and the political transition.

Another important element of their struggles is gender awareness, which has allowed them to acquire a new language and a new consciousness to explain and narrate what happened. Recognising themselves as survivors came hand in hand with the search, application and creation of conceptual tools that have allowed them to give strength to their demands and create visible and quiet strategies to heal and redefine their past.

In response to their political trajectories, the democratic environment in Costa Rica has provided a set of opportunities, which facilitated their continued development as political subjects. But this continuity was not linear, because in the face of their experiences of detention, torture, disappearance of relatives and exile, the militancy of several of these female exiles took a turn during their years of residence in Costa Rica as a direct consequence of the political conflict, the practices that violated human rights by the military Junta and the transmutations of the scenario of human rights policies in a democratised Chile. Thus, in exile, their political practice expanded and changed:

1 Militancy expanded, since even in exile the women remained linked to their political parties, but in addition, they increased their spectrum of actions and objectives towards a broader agenda of denunciation and solidarity.
2 Their political activism and student militancy shifted to human rights activism. The sense of belonging and connection with the revolutionary political project of Chile in the early seventies dissolved. The reasons that led them to exile redirected their attention towards the problems of defence of human rights in the country of origin, giving testimony about their experiences and demanding accountability for the fate of detained and missing people.
3 Central to the practice of re-signifying the past was the approach and praxis of feminisms. Several of the exiles acquired in Costa Rica feminist tools to look at their political participation during their life in Chile and their current experiences from the particularity of women.

The practices of solidarity and the ways of advancing complaints and obtaining economic resources allowed them to build agency and open new possibilities to fully constitute themselves as women within a political field that restricted their actions before. In exile, they disputed and modified traditional views on how to practise politics. They constructed new links between their ethical ideals, their political commitment and the management of their memories with emancipatory purposes and a constant search for justice.

Finally, it is essential to highlight that the experience of Chilean women exiled in Costa Rica preserves similarities and differences with what their countrymen experienced in other geographies. The systematic exclusion of women in decision-making within the spaces of party organisation or solidarity committees was a problem that women experienced both in Europe, in Mexico and in Costa Rica. The reproduction of patriarchal behaviours in exile was also common, a situation that mobilised them towards autonomous political practices and the acquisition of a gender consciousness in accordance with realities split between a conservative Chile and the freedoms they found in their host countries.

For its part, political life in Costa Rica contained its particularities. Gálvez Toro (2021), Tarducci (2021) and Saidón (2019) describe the existence of 'female' branches of parties in exile as important spaces for the political projection of women. However, the comparatively small number of Chileans in Costa Rica hampered such dynamics. I infer that this situation quickly pushed the activists to create their own spaces to validate their voices, without feminist thought directly intervening in that decision.

Regarding this last point, the testimonies of the Chilean exiles allow us to identify that knowledge about feminism and the acquisition of gender awareness are not necessarily simultaneous. The interviewees agree that they knew little or nothing about feminism when they separated from the Solidarity Committee. They also value that, although the work of the FMCE was based on solidarity with Chile and the vindication of women as political subjects, their self-identification as feminists occurred after the group dissolved in the early 1990s.

One of the most significant differences was the possibility that Chilean women found to learn about other cultures and the problems specific to the Central American region. The geographical and political condition of Costa Rica during the decades of armed conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala made the country a point of confluence for exiles. While the expressions of violence and displacement of Central American citizens were recognised as different from those of the Southern Cone, Chilean women were able to link politically with women with life stories and cultural backgrounds different from their own.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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