

Political Participation, Stereotypes and Support Networks among Elderly Migrants

Participación política, estereotipos y redes de apoyo entre personas mayores migrantes

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Abstract: While some progress has been made in researching political participation in old age, awareness of older migrants' involvement in protests remains limited. This ethnographic study aimed to explore the role of older adults in the pension protests organized by Venezuelans in Spain from the subjective perspectives of those involved. Twenty-two protesters were interviewed, with additional insights gathered from documentary evidence and participant observations. The findings challenge traditional notions of declining involvement in old age and confront common stereotypes of passivity and frailty. Protests emerge as expressions of transnational identity, agency, and resilience, actively countering age-related stigmas and even leveraging them. This study highlights the underappreciated participation of older adults in collective action, offering new perspectives on their vital role in challenging commonly held assumptions.

Keywords: Stereotypes; migration; political participation; protests; old age.

Resumen: Aunque hay avances respecto al estudio de la participación política en la vejez, falta conocimiento sobre la participación de personas migrantes mayores en protestas. El propósito del presente estudio etnográfico fue el de conocer el papel de adultos mayores migrantes en las protestas por el pago de pensiones organizadas por venezolanos en España, desde la perspectiva subjetiva de los propios actores. Se realizaron entrevistas a 22 manifestantes, complementadas con revisión documental y observación participante. Los hallazgos refutan la idea de disminución de la participación política en la vejez, cuestionando estereotipos como la pasividad y vulnerabilidad. Además, las protestas se presentan como formas de agencia y resistencia identitaria transnacional que desafían e instrumentalizan estigmas relacionados con la vejez. En conclusión, este estudio contribuye a comprender la participación política de los mayores migrantes, subrayando su

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papel significativo en la acción colectiva y cuestionando estereotipos edadistas.

Palabras clave: estereotipos, migración, participación política, protestas, vejez.

Introduction¹

The participation of older adults in political protests has traditionally been considered low, largely due to ageist stereotypes surrounding this group, which associate it with ideas such as passivity, political apathy, and conservative voting (Serrat, 2016; Guillemot & Price, 2017). However, their political involvement has gained greater attention in the last two decades (Amezcuá & Alberich, 2020), not only due to global demographic aging and their increasing numerical relevance in electoral processes, but also because of the growing frequency of protests led by individuals from this age group. Examples include the 2005 Zhejiang protests in China, the Iaioflauta movement in Spain, which began in 2011, the #OcupaINSS protest by older adults in Nicaragua in 2013, and the “March of the Canes” in Chile in 2018, among others.

Traditionally, studies on the political participation of older adults have focused on voting analysis. However, in recent years, research has begun to explore other informal political actions, such as participation in assemblies, collaboration in action platforms, petition signing, and involvement in protests (Nygård & Jakobsson, 2013; Guillemot & Price, 2017; Dabbagh, 2018). These studies have gathered empirical data showing a significant increase in the participation of older adults in protests and other forms of informal political activities, especially following the public policy cuts resulting from the global economic crisis of 2008 (Dabbagh, 2018; Amezcuá & Alberich, 2020). It is important to note that much of this research is based on quantitative data (Dabbagh, 2018), with few qualitative studies focusing on understanding the political participation of older adults by highlighting the narratives of the individuals involved and their subjective experience of what

¹ This article is part of the results of the project “Migration of the Elderly between Spain and Venezuela in the 21st Century,” conducted with the financial support of the University of Salamanca, within the framework of the 2017 Postdoctoral Research Program Call at USAL.

participating in protests means for people in this group. Furthermore, there are also few works that emphasize the heterogeneity within this group, showcasing differentiated profiles based on gender, abilities, social class, territory, etc. Specifically, and in relation to our study, there is limited literature focusing on the political participation of older migrants (Serrat *et al.*, 2023a).

Considering this, this article offers an ethnographic approach to the political participation of older migrant adults. To this end, we will focus on studying the protests organized by Venezuelan migrants in their third and fourth ages in Spain between 2016 and 2022, with the aim of understanding, from the perspective of the individuals involved, the intersubjective meanings attributed to the experience of political participation in the migratory context and in old age. We are interested in learning how members of this group channel their experiences, frustrations, and demands in a foreign country; what motivates their political activism; and how they use the network of retiree associations as a platform to express their grievances. In this regard, the goals of this study are: 1) to identify the benefits that transnational political participation brings to older migrant individuals; 2) to provide new perspectives and empirical data on the participation of this group in protests and demonstrations; and 3) to explore some specific challenges and facilitators faced by older migrant individuals in their political participation.

Theoretical Framework of the Research

Political Participation and Age

The concept of political participation has been used to refer to a wide range of social actions. Following Verba and Nie (1972), in this article, we understand political participation as any action undertaken by individuals aimed at influencing the decisions of those in government positions and/or decision-makers. The relationship between age and political participation constitutes a fundamental field of study in contemporary political science and anthropology. In a world characterized by demographic aging and the growing importance of citizen participation in political processes, understanding how age influences political participation becomes increasingly relevant.

The life cycle theory was one of the first theories used in the social sciences to explain the supposed correlation between political behavior and the stages of life (Justel, 1992; Goerres, 2006). From its emergence in the 1930s until the 1960s, it was employed to explain, for example, the relationship between the supposed rebellion of adolescence and the tendency to participate in protests during this life stage, or the alleged apathy of older adults and their conservative political inclination. However, the life cycle theory in politics has been widely questioned for being considered overly reductionist and for the lack of sufficient empirical evidence to support it (Fillieule, 2013).

More recent political sociology studies argue that, rather than age, other factors influence individuals' political participation and engagement. In this regard, Nolas *et al.* (2020) assert that life trajectories and generational factors are essential elements determining political participation in old age. Meanwhile, socio-structural theory has focused on the relationship between older adults' political participation and factors such as education level, income, and health (Guillemot & Price, 2017), showing a correlation between higher participation and greater educational attainment, income, and good physical and mental health. On the other hand, social capital theory emphasizes individuals' social networks and connections as triggers for civic engagement and participation (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2003). The resource mobilization theory, in turn, takes into account the availability of economic, social, and time resources; according to this theory, political participation is a rational decision that weighs the costs and benefits of engaging (Jenkins, 1994). Additionally, gender theories highlight the inequality in political participation forms between men, women, and gender-diverse individuals, as a result of the sexual division of labor and androcentric structures that hinder and obscure women's roles in public and political spaces (Freidenberg, 2018). All of these theories complicate the factors determining individuals' political participation, pointing out that, rather than age, there are other socio-structural factors influencing people's level of commitment and political engagement (Serrat *et al.*, 2019).

Migration and Political Participation in the Elderly

As migrant populations age, the need arises to understand how older migrant individuals participate in political processes, both in their countries of origin and in their host countries. Studies on the civic and political participation of migrants suggest that the participation of migrants is typically lower than that of native populations (Calderón, 2003) and that their level of political engagement tends to be lower, both in relation to issues concerning their country of origin and the host country (Escrivá, 2013).

This low level of participation is attributed to two factors: first, political participation requires individuals to have a set of knowledge and skills about the political system and their participation rights—such as knowledge of political actors, parties, the political system, and the forms and benefits of political participation. For migrants, acquiring a new political culture demands time and other social and economic resources, which they may not have. Second, the participation of migrants is also conditioned by the structure of political opportunities in the host country, which can either facilitate or hinder their participation (Escrivá, 2013). In relation to this latter factor, there are significant differences depending on the migratory group to which individuals belong and the rights granted by states. For example, the likelihood of irregular migrants participating in demonstrations and protests is low, as attending such activities poses a risk of exposure to immigration authorities (Laubenthal, 2005). Therefore, the structure of political opportunities can hinder the participation of migrants depending on their migration profile. Moreover, several studies suggest that, even in political activities that do not require citizenship or residency for participation, migrants tend to participate less than the average citizen of the host country (Calderón & Martínez, 2002).

Concerning the political participation of migrants in the later stages of life (third and fourth ages), the few studies conducted on this topic have focused on their participation in civic activities such as volunteering, but there are no studies on their political participation in activities such as protests (Serrat *et al.*, 2019). From the small number of available studies, after a thorough literature review, Serrat *et al.* (2023a) suggest that the participation of older migrants in civic activities, such as volunteering, varies according to various migration-related characteristics, such as the age at the

time of migration, ethnicity, and holding citizenship in the host country, with the latter factor increasing the likelihood of political participation. The results from the study by Serrat *et al.* (2023a) show that older individuals born abroad participate less in civic organizations and activities than their native counterparts, a finding that aligns with the lower participation observed among migrants in other age groups (Calderón, 2003; Escrivá, 2013).

However, despite the growing importance of political participation among older adults and the increasing relevance of political participation among migrant groups, there has been a noticeable lack of research that combines both groups. In light of this, this article aims to present an anthropological case study that will analyze the political participation of Venezuelan older migrant adults in Spain, who, since 2016, have organized and/or participated in protests against the Spanish and Venezuelan states to demand the payment of their pensions and retirement benefits.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative anthropological study that combines semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and social media monitoring. Interviews were conducted with 22 elderly Venezuelan individuals involved in protests demanding the payment of Venezuelan social benefits abroad, across various autonomous communities in Spain. Additionally, participant observation was carried out during different activities related to these protests. Special attention was given to the motivations and subjective experiences of the participants, as well as the collective dynamics and interactions among individuals. This study was grounded in the analysis of the following elements:

1. **Semi-structured Interviews:** A total of 22 verbal testimonies were collected from individuals affected by non-payment² through semi-structured interviews conducted between June 2018 and September 2022. The interviews were carried out both in-person and online, depending on the availability and convenience of the participants. Informant selection was made using a convenience, selective, and non-probabilistic snowball sampling method. This

2 See Table 1 in the Annex at the end of this article, which details the profile of the participants in the present study.

approach was chosen due to the difficulty in accessing older migrant individuals who were actively participating in the protests. The initial participants were recruited through outreach to Venezuelan retirees' and pensioners' associations in Spain, with subsequent participants being referred by the initial informants. The sample selection criteria were: being over 65 years old,³ having participated or being actively involved in protests demanding the payment of pensions to Venezuelan residents in Spain, and having lived in the country for at least two years, ensuring that participants had sufficient time to integrate into local dynamics and engage in the advocacy efforts. Although immigration status was not a selection criterion, all participants were in regular legal status in Spain at the time of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in four autonomous communities: Galicia, Madrid, Canary Islands, and Castilla y León. These regions were selected for their diversity in integration policies and the presence of Venezuelan communities, providing a more comprehensive analysis of migratory experiences and political participation in different contexts. The sample was derived from a broader study conducted on Venezuelan migrants in their third and fourth ages in Spain (Manjarrés, 2023).

To guide the interviews, a thematic outline was developed that addressed the following topics: 1) prior political participation, 2) experiences related to the Venezuelan retirees' and pensioners' movement in Spain (reasons for participation, level of involvement, time invested, roles performed), 3) evaluation of the activities carried out and future perspectives, and 4) migratory experience. This outline was used in all interviews, adjusting the questions and adding others based on the specific circumstances of each case. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Before starting the interviews, the participants were informed about the research objectives, the data collection process, the confidentiality and anonymity policy, and their right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any time. All individuals invited agreed to proceed with their participation and provided their consent. The names have been changed to preserve anonymity, except in one case at the request of the participant.

³ Only one of the informants did not wish to disclose her exact age; however, she confirmed meeting the age criterion for the research.

2. Online Monitoring: The Facebook profiles of three Venezuelan retirees' and pensioners' associations were monitored, namely: the *Asociación de las y los Pensionistas y Jubilados de Venezuela en Asturias* (Association of Pensioners and Retirees of Venezuela in Asturias), the *Asociación de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en la Comunidad Autónoma de Galicia* (Association of Pensioners and Retirees of Venezuela in the Autonomous Community of Galicia), and the *Federación de Asociaciones de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en España* (Federation of Venezuelan Pensioners and Retirees Associations in Spain). Additionally, the publications on the YouTube channel of the *Federación de Asociaciones de Pensionados y Jubilados en el Exterior* (Federation of Retirees and Pensioners Associations Abroad, FAPEJUVEX) were followed. The most relevant posts for our study topic were collected between June 2018 and August 2021.

The online monitoring was not limited to collecting and categorizing posts but also involved participation in three virtual events organized by these associations. The most significant of these was the one held on July 23, 2020, known as the *Gran Protesta Virtual Mundial* (Great Global Virtual Protest). On this day, participants made various posts on Facebook, organized debate threads on Twitter, and uploaded videos on YouTube, all addressing the issue of non-payment. Observing these online events was crucial due to the disruption of in-person activities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The transcription of the interviews, along with the information collected from social media, constituted the empirical basis for this research. The data analysis was carried out in two phases. First, a singular analysis was conducted, focusing on the subjectivity and specificity of each individual narrative (Bertaux, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, the interviews were manually read and coded, adjusting and adding codes based on the particularities of each participant, which allowed for an initial approach to the main themes. An open coding process was used to identify emerging patterns related to the topics covered in the interview outline: prior political participation, reasons for involvement in the Venezuelan retirees' and pensioners' movement in Spain, level of commitment, roles performed, evaluation of activities and future perspectives, as well as migratory experiences.

In the second phase, a cross-sectional analysis was conducted through axial coding, where common elements among the different narratives were grouped and compared. This process allowed for the identification of continuities and discontinuities between individual experiences, connecting them to broader social and collective dynamics. From this axial coding, thematic categories were generated that linked the subjective meanings of personal experiences with social practices and forms of collective organization. The thematic categories were refined through an iterative process (Moreno, 2023; Olivier, 2018), ensuring that they aligned with the objectives of this research. In this way, the analysis facilitated a collective approach to the phenomenon under study, while still preserving the specificity of each participant's individual experiences (Bertaux, 2005).

Analysis of Results

Non-payment of Pensions and Political Mobilization

Venezuelan migration to Spain has experienced a significant increase in recent years, largely due to the profound political and economic crisis in Venezuela. In particular, the number of older migrants has grown substantially since 2016, when the economic situation in Venezuela worsened, severely impacting this age group, especially in terms of food shortages, poverty, and access to the healthcare system (Sifontes *et al.*, 2021). Although older adults tend to be one of the least likely demographic groups to migrate, according to data from the National Statistics Institute (2023), the population of Venezuelans over 60 years old in Spain quintupled between 2016 and 2022, reflecting a rising migratory trend within this demographic segment.

According to a bilateral agreement signed between Venezuela and Spain in 1988, Venezuelans with recognized pensions or retirement benefits in Venezuela can receive their social benefits in Spain, provided they reside in the country⁴ on a stable and regular basis. This agreement enabled thousands of Venezuelan retirees and pensioners to migrate to Spain, relying on the financial support of their benefits. However, since 2016, they suddenly, abruptly, and unjustifiably stopped receiving

⁴ This article will analyze only the case of older Venezuelans residing in Spain; however, similar agreements with other countries in Europe and Latin America have also been breached (Armas, 2023).

these pensions, causing a significant economic impact on their lives and their migratory process, as evidenced by the following testimony from one of the affected individuals:

Serious cases began to arise, with people who paid for rent, food, and so on with their pensions. Tragedies started to unfold, such as the pensioner asking for money on the streets of Tenerife with a sign that said, “Venezuela doesn’t pay pensions, I have nothing to eat,” or the case of a woman who lost her father and couldn’t afford to pay for the funeral (Iraida, personal communication, September 7, 2022).

In response to this situation of non-payment, those affected have adopted various economic strategies for their survival. In the more fortunate cases, they have relied on their savings and the sale of properties; while in other, more vulnerable cases, they have turned to family and friends for support, reintegrated into both the formal and informal economies, and/or sought assistance from NGOs and solidarity institutions such as Cáritas, the Red Cross, or food banks.

According to the report by HelpAge (2022), access to formal employment for older people in Spain presents significant barriers and challenges. These are largely due to ageist stereotypes that discriminate against seniors by viewing them as less up-to-date in their professional fields, less capable of learning (Cabezas, 2022), and/or less productive (Rivera-Bravo, 2021). In addition to age discrimination, being non-EU migrant individuals adds another layer of obstacles to accessing formal employment, as they require residence permits that allow for legal hiring—a process that can be lengthy and complicated, further aggravated by xenophobic attitudes (Ballester, 2006). Regarding the difficulties of reintegration into the labor market, one of the participants in this study, aged 67, pointed out: “They don’t want to hire us because we are old and can’t do the same things as a young person” (Joaquín, personal communication, June 26, 2019); another participant lamented, saying: “Imagine what it’s like to have nothing and be an old person who can no longer go to work, look at me, no one will hire this” (Carlos, personal communication, October 2, 2021).

Of the 22 testimonies collected in this study, only one person reported being formally employed: a lawyer. Five others indicated that, after the non-payment, they had started working without a contract, informally. Additionally, six women and one man mentioned that they lived with family members and took care of household duties to offset the expenses they generated. One of the interviewees stated:

“Since my daughter works all day, I take care of the children, it’s my way of helping them because I don’t contribute even for coffee” (Claudia, personal communication, June 30, 2019). Another testimony reinforces this idea: “I am happy to be with my granddaughters, watching them grow, helping them, I take them to the parks [...] of course, I get tired, but I don’t want to be a burden” (Isabel, personal communication, August 3, 2019). These testimonies highlight the precariousness faced by Venezuelan pensioners in Spain, who are forced to depend on their families and take on caregiving responsibilities that can become physical and emotional burdens (Soria and Manuel, 2022).

In response to the non-payment of their pensions and the difficulty of accessing other sources of income, the affected individuals began to mobilize and formed eight local associations,⁵ in addition to a national federation. These organizations have promoted mutual support and facilitated the articulation of collective demands to strengthen their claims. The associations have led protest activities, such as marches and rallies in front of Venezuelan consulates, Spanish Social Security offices, and public squares in various cities, as well as virtual demonstrations. Their political objective is twofold: on the one hand, to demand the payment of overdue pensions from the Venezuelan government, and on the other, to request transitional assistance and social protection from the Spanish State.

Participation in Protests Throughout Life

Although it is commonly believed that people tend to participate less in protests as they age (Justel, 1992; Goerres, 2006), none of the cases interviewed in this study show evidence of a decrease in political participation. On the contrary, of the 22 cases studied, 18 stated that their participation in protests was more regular and consistent at this stage of their lives than in previous stages. When questioned about their prior political participation in protests and social movements, all the interviewees, except for one, reported having participated in protests at some point in their lives, albeit sporadically.

I always voted, I participated in many pot-banging protests and some marches, especially when I was studying [...] I was never very political, just the usual, I mean, I didn’t do too much, just what everyone did [...] It’s also true that until now nothing had affected me so personally, I mean, when I was

5 See Table 2 at the end of this article.

a student sometimes it did because they would close the university or raise the fare, and you'd be left without money, but it wasn't so serious, you'd manage. Now, I really have no other option but to protest, so I believe that yes, it seems like I participate more now (Antonio, personal communication, December 18, 2018).

Although Antonio was never part of any political party and considers his involvement to be of no particular significance —describing it as “normal”—he highlights his political commitment throughout his life, pointing out that he “always” voted and participated in pot-banging protests and marches, especially during his student years. However, when referring to his current participation in the movement of retired and pensioned Venezuelans in Spain, he emphasizes that his involvement now is greater because he has “no other option,” as the non-payment of pensions affects him personally and has serious consequences. This emphasis on the personal and the gravity of the situation is related to what Guillemot and Price (2017) mention regarding the politicization and political participation of older adults. According to these authors, older individuals who have not had active political engagement throughout their lives can become committed political actors in old age when the perception of risk is high. In Antonio’s case, although this is not the first time he has participated in political activities, it is the first time he has done so in a constant and committed manner, justifying his participation in protests by stating that, this time, he is fighting for “serious” issues, so he has no other option but to protest.

On the other hand, one of the interviewees mentioned that throughout her entire adult life, she had always participated in protests, even in some that ended with police intervention; however, she found her current participation to be more intense, as it required more physical effort on her part. When asked how she saw her current participation compared to her involvement before her retirement, Marta stated:

Going from one place to another [now] is more difficult because I get tired quickly, I have to be careful because I can easily fall, I think twice before leaving the house, but I wasn't aware of that before. During the *guarimbas*, if the police showed up, we would run over there before they threw the bombs, but here I don't do that [...] but the fatigue when I get home is similar or even worse (Marta, personal communication, August 1, 2019).

As can be seen in these accounts, despite the widespread perception that older people do not protest, the reality is that this group, prompted by the grievance of non-payment, has mobilized to such an extent that some individuals consider they have much more political participation now than before and perceive that they are now investing more resources, such as physical energy.

Another factor of analysis that influences participation in protests throughout life and aligns with the resource theory is the availability of time. In relation to this idea, when asked about his previous political involvement, one of the participants interviewed in this study mentioned the following:

I would have liked to, but I don't know, maybe because you have to support the family, you're always working, "*matando tigritos*"⁶ (taking on odd jobs), and here's no time [...] Now the advantage is that we have little time left to live, we're going to die soon, but we have plenty of hours in the day (José, personal communication, July 20, 2018).

José stated that in his youth, he had always wanted to engage in politics, but the need to work prevented him from doing so. However, at the time of the interview, at the age of 65, he remarked that he had more than enough free time. From the perspective of resource mobilization theory—which emphasizes factors such as time, money, social connections, and knowledge in the development of social movements (Amezcuá and Alberich, 2020)—José's assertion is linked to the availability of time following retirement, which enables individuals who wish to do so to engage in civic and political activities. Consequently, retirement can serve as a factor that fosters political participation, challenging the life-cycle theory, which associates aging with lower levels of participation. Similarly, Antonio's account, referenced at the beginning of this section, reinforces this idea. He noted that the two periods in his life when he was most politically active were his years as a university student and his retirement, phases in which free time is often greater than during working life.

Another noteworthy aspect is that the demonstrators not only invested time and physical effort to participate in the protests but also mental effort. During the confinement imposed by the Covid pandemic, protests did not come to a halt but instead migrated to online spaces (Manjarrés, 2021). Although the use of digital

⁶ Venezuelan colloquial expression referring to occasional informal work.

technologies poses a series of challenges for this age group, their determination to keep the protests alive motivated them to learn how to use digital tools. As one protester stated: “I am someone who will not throw in the towel; I will keep going, even with Covid. Look, I’ve had to learn to record videos, use Zoom, and figure out these gadgets” (Salvador, 2020).

Aware that the use of online communications has become a key element in protest contexts (Castells, 2012), particularly in the case of transnational demonstrations such as the one studied, the elderly interviewees stated that when Covid began, they did not want to suspend their activities, as they believed that such an interruption could dismantle the movement. Therefore, they decided to hold online protests, in which not only individuals from Spain participated but also other groups of older adults from Venezuela and other countries joined in. As a result, their protest began to connect with other groups facing similar issues (Manjarrés, 2021). In this regard, the cases studied demonstrate that political participation in later life not only does not decline but can also increase, even breaking down other barriers and stereotypes associated with older adults, such as the use of technologies and digital communications.

The Use of the Vulnerability Stereotype as a Strategy for Political Pressure

Although many of the actions and statements observed within the studied group contradict stereotypes about old age, the accounts collected through the interviews reveal a narrative pattern suggesting the strategic use of certain ageist ideas. In this context, narratives referencing stereotypes such as the fragility and vulnerability of older migrant adults have been identified, often juxtaposed with allusions to the power and indifference of the state. For example:

We have collected [money] for burials; some have passed away alone and had nothing. We’ve raised funds to pay for funerals, and you cannot imagine the sadness this brings us—it’s a tragedy that the organisations we’ve approached view with complete indifference (Marta, personal communication, August 1, 2019).

The term to describe what Maduro is doing to the elderly is massacre—both to those of us who migrated and to those still in Venezuela. The government is killing us; it’s a massacre. Of course, everything is wrong,

but with us, we're the first ones they let die while they stay there stealing and becoming multimillionaires (José, personal communication, July 20, 2018).

You'll see when you're old, and, like me, your legs fail you. That's why I'm telling you—doing this to the elderly is despicable, because we can no longer survive by other means. It's worse than killing us [...] the indifference is overwhelming (Carlos, personal communication, October 2, 2021).

The testimonies of individuals such as Marta, José, and Carlos contrast, on one hand, their perceived vulnerability as individuals and as part of the older adult community, and on the other, the lack of attention and support from governmental bodies. Marta's account, for example, emphasizes the tragedy of institutional indifference regarding the need for funeral resources. José's use of the term "massacre" strengthens the strategy of depicting older adults as a population especially vulnerable and mistreated by the government—one that is not only being abandoned but where this neglect has fatal consequences. Similarly, Carlos describes the failure to make payments as a morally reprehensible act, characterizing it as "despicable." The narratives shared by the interviewees also resonate with those expressed in the virtual protests led by Venezuelan activist Yolanda Salvador:

Many of us migrated relying on that single, essential income, such as your retirement pension [...] they left us without coverage at this age, and from there, just imagine the drama. I won't tell you, because at the age of sixty-five, most of us over seventy, you have no way of re-entering the workforce to earn supplementary income. This is a struggle that, from the very first moment of non-payment, I took on as my own and continue to do so, denouncing to the world the atrocity the Venezuelan regime is committing against the elderly (Salvador, 2020).

These excerpts corroborate the findings of Guillemot and Price (2017), who, after comparing the narratives of older adults participating in political protests for the first time, observed that while older adults are a group where multiple layers of vulnerability overlap (Ciobanu *et al.*, 2017), they are not inherently weak individuals. However, they often resort to age-associated stereotypes, such as vulnerability and illness, as discursive tools to influence public opinion. In our case, the stereotype of vulnerability may be strategically employed to exert greater moral pressure on the political actors involved. In terms of political pressure, this strategy proves to be an effective way to mobilize support and generate empathy and outrage by linking the stereotyped fragility of this group with governmental

neglect. Thus, in line with the theory of strategic weakness mentioned by Guillemot and Price (2017), the demonstrations of the pensioners' and retirees' collective from Venezuela in Spain aim not so much to threaten those in power but to use the moral strength conferred by their old age to shame Venezuelan and Spanish politicians and force them into action.

Agency: From Individual Interest to Collective Action

According to the resource mobilization theory (Klandermans, 1984), one of the primary conditions for individuals to engage in political activities is that they want to participate and are able to do so. The latter relates to the concept of agency, understood as the individual freedom to make decisions and the capacity to act, with the aim of experiencing personal satisfaction and exerting influence on the environment through their actions (Ciobanu *et al.*, 2017). One aspect observed in the narratives of the interviewees in this study is the emphasis placed on their ability to actively respond to grievances, demonstrating through their discourse that they perceive themselves as individuals with agency. For example, one of the individuals aggrieved by the non-payment described her experience in the following way:

I didn't sit idly by, nor will I. The first thing I did was write a complaint, and I offered it to the federation [FAPEJUVES] because I imagine that if presented by a federation, it will carry more legal weight than if presented by an individual (Iraida, personal communication, September 7, 2022).

Iraida emphasizes not only her individual capacity to act but also the importance of collectivizing the grievance in order to exert more pressure, recognizing both herself and her peers as individuals with the ability to have political influence. As highlighted by Serrat *et al.* (2023b), narratives about political participation often feature discourses that, on one hand, emphasize individual agency and, on the other, stress the importance of collective action in order to present demands jointly and increase pressure on the relevant authorities.

In this regard, one of our interviewees stated that when the non-payment began, he regularly went to the Spanish Social Security office to request assistance, and "at Social Security, they only told me that they couldn't do anything, that there were many others like me. So, I thought about finding them [...] we had to unite" (José, personal

communication, July 20, 2018). José demonstrates his agency, on the one hand, by approaching the Spanish public administration to seek help, and upon realizing he was not receiving a response to his issue, he sought out others who had been similarly aggrieved by the non-payment. From the collectivization of this situation, they began to organize a repertoire of political actions. Both Iraida's and José's statements express a clear capacity for agency and decision-making. On the other hand, another person who was aggrieved, in an interview conducted on the programme *Personajes de la Venezuela Virtual*, shared her experience regarding the non-payment:

I continue fighting, no one can silence my voice, and I keep encouraging anyone who will listen to do the same because, at this age, the greatest enemy we have is existential time—how much of our useful life remains to continue fighting. So, I remain committed to this, determined, and one day, someone, even if it's out of sheer exhaustion, will focus their attention on this blatant violation of human rights (Salvador, 2020).

In the three previous excerpts from Iraida, José, and Salvador, the emphasis is placed on how the personal efforts made are channeled towards the common good, not towards individual interests. These excerpts align with the findings of McAdams *et al.* (1996), who, after studying and comparing the narratives of young people and older adults participating in political activities, found that, regarding motivational themes, young and middle-aged individuals tend to emphasize in their stories the individual effort made and their personal contributions to achievements (Taft, 2017), while the motivational narratives of political participation among older adults tend to highlight community aspects, such as the desire to connect with others, cooperate, and help improve the lives of others (McAdams *et al.*, 1996; Serrat *et al.*, 2023b).

In this regard, the political experience of this group is closely linked to the collectivisation of their demands and to associational practices. Despite recognising themselves as agents capable of exerting influence, they do not limit their responses to the adversities of non-payment to individual action. Instead, they seek to collectivise their efforts. This drive towards joint action is reflected in the creation and active participation in associations, which have become solidarity-based spaces for providing collective responses to the complexities of ageing in a migratory context.

Benefits of Associationalism and Transnational Political Participation

According to Ciobanu *et al.* (2017), one of the vulnerabilities associated with migration is the risk of unwanted loneliness, a risk that increases among migrants from older age groups. Indeed, loneliness is a challenge affecting the elderly population globally; however, Fokkema and Naderi (2013) demonstrate that transnational migrant elders experience higher levels of loneliness compared to their native peers. Migratory processes entail significant changes and deep ruptures in individuals' social connections and networks. In this regard, migrating during old age often entails the loss of affective ties forged in the place of origin, while establishing new connections in the destination context proves considerably more challenging (Ciobanu *et al.*, 2017).

In the narratives collected for this ethnography, it is evident that the associations of Venezuelan retirees and pensioners in Spain serve purposes that go beyond advocating for the recovery of lost economic rights. Within migratory contexts, associations can become spaces for creating affective bonds, exchanging emotions, concerns, and experiences, while also providing security and a sense of belonging (Morell, 2005). In line with this, several individuals interviewed for this study, when asked about their participation in these associations, highlighted their socialising role rather than their political function. For example, prior to the pandemic, one of the associations organised regular gatherings at a central café in the city of Vigo, enabling members to meet, converse, and share experiences. According to resource mobilisation theory, individuals involved in a social and/or political movement maintain consistency and commitment by constructing a collective identity that is reinforced through the creation of affective ties and interpersonal relationships. In this sense, political participation in social movements entails the creation and/or consolidation of a mobilising collective identity, which fosters group cohesion and facilitates the organisation of joint actions aimed at achieving common goals (Turner *et al.*, 1987).

Despite the existence of critical voices suggesting that migrant associations hinder individual integration into host societies (Morell, 2005), the interviews conducted highlight that associations of older migrants are vital spaces within the transnational resistance network. They play a crucial role in building strong communities and advocating for the rights and well-being of their members. These organisations

serve as spaces where shared experiences, solidarity, and the preservation of cultural identity are reinforced, providing a safe haven against the challenges of ageing in migratory contexts. In this regard, these associations not only enhance the political participation of older migrants but also contribute to the development of care networks and community support systems.

Roles Played and Gender Inequalities in Political Participation

Gender influences the ways in which individuals engage in political participation (Freidenberg, 2018; Francovich *et al.*, 2022). In the case under study, this disparity is evident in the leadership roles within the associations. According to the foundational document of the Federation of Associations of Venezuelan Pensioners and Retirees in Spain (FAPEJUVES), of the eight associations that came together to form the federation, only one was led by a woman (FAPEJUVES, 2016). Thus, despite women's active involvement in mobilisations from the outset, their representation in formal leadership positions has been limited.

Moreover, differences are also evident in the types of activities and responsibilities assumed by men and women. While men, as the predominant presidents of the associations, are typically the ones attending interviews and meeting with authorities, women often take on less visible tasks linked to community care. These include event logistics, organising association celebrations, managing internal communications, and providing emotional support. This division of labour reflects traditional gender roles and the sexual division of labour (Comas, 2017). In this context, one of the interviewees in this study, when asked about her role and participation in the Galician association, emphasised:

I help those who are just arriving by providing information about immigration processes and pensions, as well as practical matters like creating a résumé and offering employment guidance. [...] The most important thing for us is to listen to one another and come together to support each other through this tragedy (Consuelo, personal communication, August 3, 2019).

Consuelo also stated that she regularly attends the association's assemblies and participates as a collaborator in organising the protests that are convened. Although the activities mentioned in her testimony may not receive the same visibility and recognition as those carried

out by individuals who give media interviews or attend meetings with political leaders, her contribution is essential to the well-being of the community and the cohesion of its members (Comas, 2017).

Analyzing the influence of gender on political participation within associations not only highlights inequalities in access to leadership roles but also makes it possible to acknowledge and value the essential contributions of those who undertake support and community cohesion tasks (Oca & Lombardero, 2018). These activities, often overlooked and almost always carried out by women, are fundamental to the effective functioning of associations as platforms for political advocacy (Díaz, 2020). The group cohesion fostered through these efforts is indispensable for sustaining the movement, ensuring the unity of its members, and strengthening their capacity for collective action.

Conclusions

The suspension of pension and retirement payments to elderly Venezuelan migrants by the Venezuelan government in 2016 prompted an immediate response from those affected in Spain, who organized into associations and carried out protests and demonstrations to demand solutions. This swift and organized reaction highlights the agency and collectivization capacity of older adults. The cases studied in this research demonstrate that political participation among this demographic does not necessarily decrease with age, as suggested by the life cycle theory (Justel, 1992; Goerres, 2006), but can, in fact, increase and become a source of well-being, serving as a palliative to loneliness and identity loss in the migratory context.

The interviews collected in the research allowed us to observe, on one hand, regarding motivational themes, that narratives about political participation in old age tend not to focus on individual contributions but rather emphasize community aspects, such as the desire to build connections with other participants and collaborate for collective well-being. These findings align with the conclusions of Serrat *et al.* (2023b), who assert that the motivational narratives of older adults participating in political demonstrations, in contrast to those of younger individuals, tend

to downplay personal prominence in favor of focusing on collective contributions and achievements.

On the other hand, another component present in the narratives analyzed in this study has been the strategic use of the vulnerability stereotype. The study conducted by Guillemot and Price (2017) indicates that some groups, socially stereotyped as weak or vulnerable, are able to leverage these stereotypes to their advantage, using them as a symbolic and discursive mechanism to highlight the extent of the harm being inflicted upon them, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their claims. In the testimonies collected for this study, we observed a contrast between the power of the State and the vulnerability, poverty, and/or illness of those aggrieved. This narrative formula allows individuals in the third and fourth age groups to convey a more powerful message about their situation.

In addition, our results indicate that the availability of time after retirement is a fundamental resource that facilitates political participation among older adults. As suggested by the resource mobilization theory of social movements (Amezcuá and Alberich, 2020), the availability of time is a crucial factor that enhances participation. However, this availability of time after retirement contrasts with the notion that, despite having free time, older individuals may have little time left to live.

Conversely, this study highlights the benefits of associationism in migrant communities of the third and fourth age. It has been demonstrated that these associations, beyond their political role, function as support and resistance networks to address economic challenges, loneliness, and the loss of identity experienced in the diaspora (Morell, 2005). By joining forces and working towards common goals, older adults find in these spaces a sense of belonging that provides emotional support and mutual assistance. Furthermore, associationism offers them a platform to amplify their demands and collectively advocate for their rights both in their country of origin and in the host country.

Finally, it is crucial to highlight the role that gender inequalities play in the political participation of older migrant adults. Although women have been present and active in movements and associations from the outset, their access to formal leadership roles has been limited. Women are often the ones who take on tasks related to

caregiving and community cohesion, essential functions for the support and success of associations, yet these roles remain undervalued and receive less recognition. In this regard, this study brings to light how gender influences power dynamics within political organizations and underscores the importance of continuing to develop research from an intersectional perspective that considers not only age and migration but also gender differences.

Although the conditions of the Venezuelan case are specific and the campaign's driving force has unique characteristics, it is evident that there has been a global increase in social movements led by older adults. This political behavior, coupled with the growing demographic rise of the third and fourth-age population worldwide, suggests that older adults will increasingly become political and socio-economic actors of greater influence.

There is a scarcity of both quantitative and qualitative research focused on the political participation of older migrant adults (Serrat *et al.*, 2023a). In this regard, our work contributes to filling a gap in the existing literature by highlighting how older migrants emerge as relevant political actors in host countries, organizing to defend their economic rights and creating communities of mutual support and identity preservation.

Although this article has focused on the experiences of Venezuelan migrants in Spain, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that could be addressed in future research to complement and expand upon this study. Firstly, a significant limitation is the absence of a comparative analysis with migrants from other nationalities. Comparing the experiences of older Venezuelan adults with those of migrants from other countries, either in Spain or in other geographical contexts, would offer a more comprehensive view of migratory dynamics and political participation. Secondly, the geographic sampling of this study has been limited to four specific regions of Spain. Future research could broaden the analysis to other autonomous communities to examine potential differences in integration and participation dynamics, considering variations in policies and local contexts in each area. Additionally, it would be useful to expand the sample to distinguish between the forms of participation of individuals in the third and fourth age groups. Finally, it is essential to incorporate a deeper gender perspective in future studies in order to analyze how this factor influences the political

participation of older migrant adults, providing a more complete understanding of their experiences and barriers.

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Ethnographic Interviews:

Antonio, personal communication, December 18, 2018, Madrid, Spain.
Carlos, personal communication, October 2, 2021, Salamanca, Spain.
Claudia, personal communication, June 30, 2019, Madrid, Spain.
Consuelo, personal communication, August 3, 2019, Vigo, Spain.
Iraida, personal communication, September 7, 2022, *online*, Tenerife, Spain.
Isabel, personal communication, August 3, 2019, Vigo, Spain.
José, personal communication, July 20, 2018, Madrid, Spain.
Joaquín, personal communication, June 26, 2019, Madrid, Spain.
Marta, personal communication, August 1, 2019, Vigo, Spain.

Annex

Table 1
Profile of the Interviewees

Identifier	Gender	Autonomous Community of Residence	Age	Occupation
Ana	Female	Madrid	85 years	Retired
Ángel	Male	Castilla y León	73 years	Retired
Antonio	Male	Madrid	67 years	Retired
Carlos	Male	Castilla y León	65 years	Retired
Claudia	Female	Madrid	68 years	Food sales (informal)
Consuelo	Female	Galicia	No response	Volunteer
Cristina	Female	Madrid	66 years	Caregiver (informal)
David	Male	Madrid	70 years	Retired
Hugo	Male	Galicia	70 years	Retired
Iraida	Female	Canarias	76 years	Retired
Isabel	Female	Galicia	67 years	Retired
Joaquín	Male	Madrid	67 years	Delivery worker (informal)
José	Male	Madrid	65 years	Retired
Juan	Male	Madrid	81 years	Retired
Luz	Female	Madrid	65 years	Retired
Maite	Female	Castilla y León	66 years	Caregiver (informal)
Maricarmen	Female	Madrid	80 years	Retired
Marta	Female	Galicia	68 years	Cleaning work (informal)
Milagros	Female	Madrid	65 years	Retired
Pablo	Male	Canarias	67 years	Retired
Paco	Male	Castilla y León	71 years	Retired
Pedro	Male	Galicia	77 years	Retired

Source: Own elaboration based on fieldwork.

Table 2

List of Associations of Retirees and Pensioners from Venezuela in Spain

Name of the Association	Geographic Scope
Asociación de las y los pensionistas y jubilados de Venezuela en Asturias	Autonomous Community
Asociación de Pensionados de Venezuela en Canarias	Autonomous Community
Asociación de Pensionados y Jubilados de la Comunidad de Madrid	Autonomous Community
Asociación de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en Andalucía	Autonomous Community
Asociación de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en Cataluña	Autonomous Community
Asociación de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en la Comunidad Autónoma de Galicia	Autonomous Community
Asociación de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en las Comunidades del País Vasco, Cantabria, Navarra y La Rioja	Broad Autonomous Communities (Includes four regions)
Asociación de Pensionistas y Jubilados de Venezuela en la Comunidad Valenciana	Autonomous Community
Federación de Asociaciones de Pensionados y Jubilados de Venezuela en España	National

Source: Own elaboration based on the Associations file from the Ministry of the Interior of Spain.

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