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Precariousness(ies), Agency(ies) and Old Age in Seasonal Fruit Workers in Chile

Precariedad(es), agencia(s) y vejez en temporeras de la fruta en Chile

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Abstract: Work in fruit growing industry in Chile presents structural characteristics that normalize the precariousness of working conditions which, when studied in elderly women, with more than three decades of experience in the industry, in the crossroads with reproductive work, show a condition of overall precariousness of life. The article sought to address the relationship between the precariousness of both jobs and the emergence of elements of agency as a buffer against inequality. The methodology was designed based on the qualitative analysis of 10 interviews of women workers between 59 and 74 years of age who have grown old as seasonal workers. The results show that the concept of precarious emancipation would crystallize in access to economic autonomy, but at the cost of sacrificial work rhythms in tension with reproductive labour. It is concluded from the link between precariousness and agency, there are limitations in collective social action, even when individual agency signals are visible.

Key words: Precariousness, agricultural wage labour, elderly women.

Resumen: El trabajo en la fruticultura en Chile presenta características estructurales que normalizan la precarización de las condiciones laborales que, estudiadas en mujeres mayores, con más de tres décadas de trayectoria en el rubro —en el cruce con el trabajo reproductivo—, evidencian una condición de precariedad global de la vida. El artículo busca abordar la relación entre la precariedad de ambos trabajos con la emergencia de elementos de agencia como amortiguadores de la desigualdad. La metodología se diseñó a partir del análisis cualitativo de 10 entrevistas de trabajadoras de entre 59 y 74 años que han envejecido siendo jornaleras. Los resultados muestran que la noción de emancipación precaria se



cristalizaría en el acceso a la autonomía económica, pero a ritmos de trabajo sacrificiales en tensión con el trabajo reproductivo. Se concluye que, desde el vínculo entre precariedad y agencia, existen limitaciones en la acción social colectiva, aun visualizándose señales de agencia individual.

Palabras clave: precariedades, trabajo asalariado agrícola, mujeres mayores.

Introduction ¹

Fruit production is a significant sub-branch of Chile's export agribusiness, with table grapes, avocados, walnuts, and cherries being the primary crops (Radovic, 2021; Ramírez *et al.*, 2021). Since its installation in the 1990s, the industry has been characterized by high labor flexibility. Seasonal work is carried out in a fragmented manner during its main production phases, generating a growing dependence on a working population called 'temporera' (or 'jornalera' in other Latin American countries) due to the overall intensive nature of the work, but only for limited periods of time (Valdés, 2022) and organized by specific tasks.

It is necessary to pay attention to the working conditions and compliance with labor and social protection rights, including social security and health, during *peak* months. This is due to the historical changes in typical wage and work conditions resulting from the expansion of neoliberal agro-exports over the past three decades.

Analyzing data from the 2022 National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey (CASEN) database in the 'agriculture, hunting, and forestry' sector, it was found that nearly 500,000 individuals (494,748) were employed as salaried workers. The majority of these workers were men (73%) and held temporary positions (58%). Temporary employment is more prevalent among women (71%) than men (53%), indicating greater instability in women's access to salaried employment (Caro *et al.*, 2021). A majority of female seasonal workers are concentrated in fruit growing (62%) and to a lesser extent in horticulture, traditional crops, livestock, and forestry. Labor instability is the main characteristic of this working population (70%), which is more acute among women (82.5% are seasonal workers and only 17.5% are permanent).

1 This article presents results from the ANID/Fondecyt/Regular project No. 1210665, for which we gratefully acknowledge funding from the Chilean National Agency for Research and Development (ANID).

The working conditions of this population are of interest due to the transformation and confluence of phenomena with specific particularities in the present. It is important to update the problematization objectively, avoiding biased or emotional language. For instance, there have been sociodemographic changes in the seasonal or day laborer population. In addition to the already documented feminization of agricultural wage labor (Lara, 1995; Caro *et al.* 2021), there has been an increase in schooling, a decrease in the fertility rate, and an increase in female heads of household (Valdés, 2020 and 2022). Furthermore, there has been a recent increase in the cross-border Latin American and Afro-descendant migrant population, as well as the presence of older people in agricultural work, including those over 70 years of age.

Previous studies have identified common elements in precarious working conditions, including long hours, informal work relationships, low and unstable wages, occupational accident risks, and lack of social security protection due to wage gaps (Anríquez, 2016; Caro *et al.*, 2021; Radovic, 2017; SUSESO, 2021). However, a comprehensive assessment of the vulnerability and risks faced by women should not only consider the working conditions in fruit farming but also take into account the characteristics of domestic work and the different forms of overall workload. It is important to understand that both the productive and reproductive dimensions are interrelated and necessary for the sustainability of life (Carrasco, 2017).

The labor force in the fruit industry has aged in tandem with Chilean society. Evidence suggests that older women experience worsening inequality and exclusion as they reach old age with economic and social disadvantages (Huenchuan, 2009). They are often employed in informal jobs for economic reasons, which poses health risks (Vives *et al.*, 2017).

The research question that guided this article within the framework of a broader research is: what is the relationship between labor precariousness and reproductive precariousness of women seasonal workers who have aged in the activity and the emergence of elements of agency? The analysis is based on qualitative interviews that focus on the construction of biographical trajectories and narratives related to experiences of precariousness and agency among Chilean seasonal fruit workers during retirement in the Central Valley of Chile.

As an interpretive hypothesis, we maintain that although precariousness has become normalized in the fruit sector and has expanded to daily and reproductive life, this is expressed through fragile material conditions and precarious arrangements to face the overall workload. Paradoxically, in the case of rural women, from an analysis of their biographical trajectories, it is possible to observe agency actions that were more individual than collective and were understood as resistances and links. These actions were a response to the historical experiences of 'precarious emancipation'², which involved wage labor (Valdés, 2022) from a gender perspective.

The objective of this research was to expand the comprehension of the experiences of work precariousness in older women who continue to work in fruit growing. The study aimed to explore the relationship between work precariousness and reproductive work, as well as the strategies used to cope with it. The research also analyzed the relationships established by these women with state institutions and social organizations, using the theoretical concepts of individual and collective agency.

Theoretical Perspective on Precarity is Employed to analyze the Labor and Life of Older Female Seasonal Workers

Labor precariousness is addressed in this text, drawing from Castel's (1997 and 2009) work. This concept contributes to understanding the structural situation of temporary wage labor in fruit growing. Castel (1997) refers to the metamorphosis of the social question, which involves the erosion of decent working conditions and a regression of social security due to the establishment of fragile labor relations that give rise to economic insecurity and vital instability. Associated with the flexibilization and deregulation of national production processes and the demand for goods, products, and services that respond to international economic cycles, this phenomenon generates atypical job offers. These offers are often linked to subcontracting, temporary or part-time contracts, and are accompanied by less social protection and lower wages (Borderías and Martini, 2020).

2 The term involves a double meaning, which characterizes the situation of women seasonal workers in terms of access to civil rights and freezing of labor rights (Valdés, 2020).

The new working conditions are subjectively experienced as individuality, risk (Beck, 2000) and uncertainty (Castel, 2009). The lack of social protection and denial of collective recognition has been called social dequalification (Paugam, 2012).

Agricultural work is defined by its seasonality, polyfunctionality, and the need for knowledge of the domestic world (Martin, 2009). It is an update of traditional agrarian capitalism (Bengoa, 2017). The precariousness of agriculture is changing, revealing the unique identities and subjectivities of productive work in dialogue with the spaces of life it reproduces. Qualitative studies conducted in the central zone of Chile indicate that unstable labor relations are prevalent, along with mistreatment, transportation insecurity, and poor environmental conditions such as low provision of drinking water, lack of sun protection, and remote access to toilets. Additionally, workers in orchards and *packing* facilities face risks due to repetitive movements (Caro, 2016). These conditions can lead to moral distress and psychological risks (Baeza *et al.*, 2017).

In this context, women are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of stability, security, and sufficiency (Baeza *et al.*, 2017; Blanco *et al.*, 2020). According to a previous study based on a representative survey of 1,201 cases, only 20% of women work in agribusiness as seasonal workers because they enjoy it, while 40% do so because they have no other opportunities (Anríquez *et al.*, 2016). In addition to working conditions, there is a low rate of unionization (Osorio *et al.*, 2018) and limited opportunities for collective bargaining. For agricultural seasonal workers, original analyses of the SPSS software database of the CASEN 2022 survey revealed that only 1% are unionized, while 71% do not participate in any organization. There were no significant differences between men and women in this regard.

According to Piñeiro (2011), precariousness at work can have objective (being precarious) and subjective (feeling precarious) dimensions, each of which can generate physical and moral suffering or personal satisfaction and fulfillment. In the case of seasonal agricultural workers, labor precariousness is expressed in contractual terms in the loss of stable employment ties and periods of unemployment (winter months) and, in personal terms, in social humiliation and feelings of uselessness due to the fragmentation of the labor bond which, as a whole, has effects on the working and personal lives of the workers.

Analyzing the precariousness of work from an integral and feminist perspective requires considering domestic and reproductive work. Domestic and care tasks play a crucial role in reproducing and caring for the available workforce (Logiovine, 2017), and the wage relationship would not exist without them (Kandel, 2006). On the one hand, this research considers reproductive work as a form of work that generates exchange value. This approach intertwines productive and reproductive work, which is particularly relevant in rural territories due to their economic characteristics and distinctive socio-cultural processes (Logiovine, 2017; Caro and Cárdenas, 2022).

According to Aguirre *et al.* (2005), reproductive care work incurs three types of costs for those who perform it: economic, emotional, and physical. Economic costs arise when care workers do not receive remuneration for their work. Emotional costs arise due to overload, stress, and anxiety. Physical costs arise when care workers assist individuals with severe dependency. Additionally, its impact hinders the inclusion of women in the workforce (Aguirre *et al.*, 2005; Brunet and Santamaría, 2016) by reducing their time and motivation.

When both jobs are done at the same time, it increases the overall burden and reduces personal time availability, leading to conflicts and tensions in reconciling various demands. This reinforces the idea that household work, particularly care work, remains invisible (Caro and Cárdenas, 2022). The fragility of life can be expressed as a decrease in quality of life and well-being, which is linked to stress and anxiety. This is due to the extreme workload during seasonal periods and the lack of rest time, which is not compensated by the distribution of tasks within families (Caro and Cárdenas, 2022; Wilson and Caro, 2010).

Agency Theory for Understanding the Resistance Practices of Older Women Seasonal Workers

Amartya Sen (1985) proposes a conceptual scheme understood as a normative framework to evaluate personal well-being and social agreements in a context of social change, emphasizing what people can do and be, that is, in their personal capacities (Robeyns, 2005). They would reflect the freedom to choose between options, an issue that would provide opportunities for a dignified and rich life (Cejudo, 2007). The capability approach also includes operations

and agency. Functions are the things a person can value doing or being. Therefore, they are the states or actions that are successfully accomplished, either for survival —such as nutrition or avoiding getting sick— even more complex actions —as social participation or self-respect— (Dubois, 2008). Skills are a type of freedom that allows people to combine functions, understand skills and choices, and show the opportunities that people actually have to achieve well-being. These circumstances are individual and contextual. Without institutional relations it is not possible to establish personal preferences (Delgado, 2017).

The approach considers social relations, and the limitations and opportunities that social structures represent on people, when social and environmental factors are recognized in the process of converting goods into achievements. This means that people's choices must take into account the influences of constraints (not every choice is realistic or possible) and social structures; recognising the role of community and groups in influencing personal decisions, showing that capacities vary when resources become operational (Davis, 2002; Dubois, 2008; Nussbaum, 2009; Robeyns, 2005).

Incorporating the collective in the proposal implies the assumption of a beneficial relationship between social action and individual agency, in a diverse framework of social structures, which can simultaneously facilitate and/or constrain capacities, and assessing the impact of institutions on individual freedoms (Otano, 2015).

Metodology

This article is based on interpretative research that is guided by the qualitative paradigm. A total of 42 in-depth interviews were conducted with seasonal and seasonal fruit growers living in rural areas in the country's two main fruit regions, such as Maule and O'Higgins, both in the central area, between November 2021 and June 2022. Interviews were conducted in the communes of Sagrada Familia, Molina, Teno, San Vicente de Tagua Tagua, Rengo, Rosario and La Cabras. In this article we analyze the interviews of 10 elderly women (between 59 and 74 years, being the average 65 years), of Chilean nationality, who began in the nineties in the activity, when the monoculture of export expands, and who have aged working each agricultural season in different crops and

under different employers, so they have a trajectory of three decades in agro-industry.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and a content analysis was made, using a matrix of emptying that considered the following categories: 1) Experiences and meanings of working and being a senior temp; 2) Work trajectories and precariousness; 3) Body and working conditions; 4) Reproductive work: care and families; 5) Agency and relationship with social, trade union and governmental organizations.

Regarding the ethical aspects, the study was approved by the University Ethics Committee and an informed consent was given to each participant, which explained the purpose of the study and the purpose of their participation, considering the voluntary nature and confidentiality of the interview³. In addition, taking into account the contingency for Covid-19, the sanitary protocols proposed by the Chilean Ministry of Health for that time were followed.

Results

Experience and Meanings of Paid Productive Work in Old Age

Short-term, labour-intensive fruit farming is a favourable scenario for the growth of people with economic needs, as is the case with elderly rural women, who—in contexts of poverty and low pensions—have been pressured to continue roasting each fruit season, in various pre-harvest, harvest and post-harvest tasks (pruning, pollination, thinning, harvesting and planting) in crops such as plums, cherries, blueberries and table and wine grapes. They have even been explicitly called by companies in the category as ‘retirees’ to short-term jobs and low wages, as happened in 2020 when the call was publicized in those terms in an agricultural commune in the Metropolitan Region.

The long trajectory of work in the field is meant by older women as a vital experience that although it reveals a long-standing labor participation performed in agro-industry, has been in the history fragmented and multiple, from the point of view of the type of employer, location, means of transport, cultivation, slaughter and peer relationship; generating a fragmented and highly discontinuous working life. In this profession, the senior temporary workers

³ The first names have been modified to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.

are recognized as knowing their specific functions and tasks, type of labor relations suitable to the characteristics of agro-industry, forms of transfers, working hours and schedules, which would enable them to cope with the difficulties they face. However, the absence of work continuity, the prevalence of labor informality and inability to negotiate better working conditions and wages, generates an adaptation to labor precariousness and its implications.

It is concluded that the most valued aspect of their current labor insertion is the economic dimension —income that it reports— and secondly, subjective attributes —such as recognizing the economic autonomy and ability to decide the destination of those incomes, the expansion of the network of relationships with other people and the potential to share extra-domestic spaces beyond their kinship group—. For older women, paid work is meaningful in at least three ways: as a source of subsistence, autonomy, and socialization. Elements that reaffirm identities, legitimize decisions and channel the fight against poverty and exclusion (Milkman, 2016), even when it is hard experiences physically and with characteristics of humiliation and grievance (Baeza *et al.*, 2017; Piñeiro, 2011).

At this stage of life, according to legislative consensus, women would find themselves in a population that ‘should’ be outside the labor market, sustaining themselves economically from a retirement. Consequently, access to paid work seasonal and precarious would emerge as a choice limited to complex material conditions, in the context of normative frameworks that reproduce social hierarchies. It is evident that the cross of class, gender and age variables in this group is determinant, deepening existing inequalities (Crompton, 2006).

How much longer do I have to keep living? If I don’t work, what am I going to live on?
The pension gives me 147 thousand pesos (184 dollars). What am I going to do with that money? I don’t do anything (Sonia, 63 years old).

The axes of valuing productive work are shifting according to the place their salaries are in the family income. Paid work is something they won’t give up soon, indicating its inescapable nature. Here we see the obligation of paid productive work put in tension —as we will see later— with the physical and health conditions with which they have, as well as with interest, which are tested and updated every beginning of the agricultural season.

I have always said here that I will work until I am no longer able to work (Marta, 59).

The centrality of paid work among older women extends beyond paid employment in fruit growing, as evidenced by their incursions into self-employment in food production, clothing and trade, tissues, and flowers, focusing motivations in these cases on 'staying active' to prevent mental health discomforts, as these are very low and sporadic incomes.

I work weaving, now in this season I make cakes, I make humas (Andean food based on corn), or I plant, and I go out to sell flowers to exhibitions... because if you do not work you let yourself be, here come the diseases because the mind begins to close (Peace, 64 years).

In the fruit work spaces they have been victims of discriminatory ageist opinions, based on age prejudice, whether from heads or peers. They respond by countering a valued image of themselves. It would be women who recognize their skills and, from that, perform labor, concentrating on their productivity, because in a context of pay-as-you-go, depends on the amount of their salaries. Since age is an attribute they cannot change, their responses are far from confrontational, they are elusive, moving from work to spaces where their presence is accepted. That is, the permanence in the labour market in older adults may be marked by the need for social reproduction, but at the same time there would be an extension of the limits on who is considered to be the working population and it redefines the image of this group in the labour market. Faced with social prejudices, they are patient, relying on the knowledge provided by experience and the deployment of individual mechanisms.

I was going to go to another *packing* because it was over, and by that time I was 60... Older people are more responsible for work (Ana, 74).

Precarities and Work Trajectories

The women interviewed were the daughters of large rural families with an average of 5.5 children per woman during the 1950s and 1960s (Superintendence of Health, 2006). In a context of normalization of child labour in the past in Chile, this was part of the activities of the children/s within the family home, as support to the productive work of their fathers in peasant tasks or of their mothers in minor agricultural or domestic work in the employers' houses, always under the category 'unpaid family',

therefore economically invisible. In adulthood, although they have worked most of their lives in agriculture, in different crops and jobs, they have combined such employment with domestic work in private homes, 'indoors' or for days, for different periods, giving continuity to the early childhood experiences.

We were 8-9 years old, and we already had to walk with the shovel, the hoe, working in the field. My life was very hard (Paz, 64 years).

They accuse their mothers of teaching in the rigour of physical labour, typical of the family mandates of the mid-20th century in rural areas, where continuity in the trade was projected in/as children/as and the/as children were seen as labor to increase family income.

We were working, she [the mother] taught us and I thank God, because if she hadn't taught us, I wouldn't be like that ... maybe we would have been lazy, but she taught us work since we were little (Pilar, 60).

The condition of child labor, as an inescapable reality of the past of children/women in similar positions, marked the beginning of an uninterrupted trajectory, of almost half a century, of workers' work of the women interviewed. As recorded, the meanings they give to paid work in childhood and youth are extensive, as a complex and hard life experience, and at the same time as an opportunity to learn discipline and rigor. Both perceptions may seem contradictory; however, they are complementary considering the historical conditions of agricultural work (Bengoa, 2017).

Over the course of almost fifty years of employment in the agriculture of the interviewees, first in traditional agriculture and then in agro-industry, the temporary workers who have aged in the activity identify improvements, which are nothing more than compliance with basic labour legislation, such as the provision for mobilisation to and from the workplace where the distance is more than three kilometres and spaces specially equipped to maintain, prepare and consume food or be provided by the employer (obligations dating from 2001, through Article 95 of the Chilean Labour Code and not always fulfilled) and weekly working hours of not more than 45 hours (reduced from 2005 to 48 hours). Although these improvements are part of the achievements of the workers for about two decades, they are not implemented by all employers, recognizing the nature and limited coverage of compliance with labor law in this industry.

They have changed a little, because now at least they take people to work... they take them to and from work and they don't work the same hours as before, almost from sunrise to sunset, now they don't because they start work early and at 1 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon... also for meals, you used to eat on the land there and now they have changed a little, they have some dining rooms in some places, not all, because before you ate right there at work, on the ground, with dirty hands (Paz, 64 years old).

Of the women surveyed, only half had a formal written contract from their employer for a fixed term or for a specific job or task. However, among those who have a contract, the figure of the 'false temporera', already documented more than a decade ago (FAO, 2012), reappears, who have a contract of 11 months, with successive terminations, which prevents them from exercising the rights of an indefinite employment relationship, such as severance pay for years of service. This situation has been clarified by the government authority, which, in accordance with Article 4 of the Labor Code (Dirección del Trabajo, 2023), indicates that the signing of successive fixed-term contracts, with a termination between one and the other, is not in accordance with the law.

Since the age of 16, I have consistently worked for 11 months at a time. The first time I was employed there, I was given an 11-month contract, and I have continued working under the same terms. However, they eventually terminate our employment. (Mirta, 59 years).

Women who have retired under the Universal Guaranteed Pension (paid by the State from the age of 65) or under the Old Age Pension derived from individual savings in private Pension Fund Administrators (AFP) from the age of 60 may be concerned that having an employment contract could result in the loss of their pensions. However, it is important to note that this restriction does not actually apply in practice. Therefore, the lack of information regarding pensions constitutes a violation of labor rights.

I retired at 65, then they could not give me a contract, because they would take my money and I started to work without a contract (Rita, 68 years old).

In addition, bad employer practices are reported, such as deducting pension contributions for old age from the workers' taxable salary, without depositing them in the administrative entity, thus generating a reduction in their individual pension funds.

Sometimes we worked in corn, and they discounted us through the AFP and did not put it in the AFP and that is when you realize; my retirement, when I came to

retire it lasted about six months no more, thinking that I had more months in the AFP and no (Paz, 64 years old).

Finally, there is agreement on the importance of managers' treatment of their employees and the quality of relationships within the work group. These factors can be decisive in determining whether employees choose to continue working, even when they feel they lack the ability to influence their own improvement. The older female seasonal workers distance themselves from interpersonal conflicts in the workplace, stating that they do not intervene or contribute to them. They are inclined to collaborate with a low confrontational attitude to create a positive working environment.

When they are treated well [...] good treatment is that they don't shout at each other, because some bosses shout just the same (Norma, 65 years old).

Body and Working Conditions

The women state that the main difficulties they have had at work refer to physical issues, mentioning their bodies as a limitation. Three decades of work in the fruit export industry have had consequences. Periods of intensive use of strength and balance in uncomfortable positions and without proper protection (several tasks are performed on ladders) have generated chronic ailments, which are activated once the whirlwind of the agricultural season is over, triggering self-medication practices.

No, I was not going to go to the doctor [...] I fell, but nothing happened to me, it just hurt here on the side, but nothing serious happened [...] one has to take care of oneself, remedies, everything alone. (Norma, 65 years old).

During the peak of the season, the perception of seriousness and importance of a traumatic event or chronic pain is reduced to a minimum, since the priority at that time of the year is to continue working, in order to accumulate income for the winter months, when the supply of jobs disappears.

Previous research has evidenced complex accounts of the effects of the type of chain labor and repetitive movements that have generated tendinitis and other pathologies, due to the absence of rest breaks, aggravated by the conditions of piecework, per piece or per task (Valdés *et al.*, 2017), which demands speed from them. Others refer to the loss of physical capacities after the passage

of age, fatigue, and the accumulated effort of so many years of arduous physical work, which makes them relate with melancholy and sorrow that they are currently less resistant, for example, to exposure to the sun of the orchards in open field activities at midday, or exposure to the cold, at dawn, at the beginning of the day.

I used to work day and night, I worked a lot, I did not get sleepy, I could stay up all night and the next day I went to work, nothing hurt. Now I have pains, I work, and my performance is not like it used to be, I see that the years have passed and work has left a deep mark on me. Sometimes I get nostalgic because I look back when I had no pain, they invited me to work and I went, always with enthusiasm, with spirit and joy, now I do it anyway, but it's hard for me, but when I stand up my bones feel cold. So, it has changed my life (Mirta, 59 years old).

Those who work in packing houses generally have better environmental and working conditions than those who work in orchards. The ability to work indoors is a significant advantage, particularly for older workers such as some women in their 70s. Those who work in packing houses generally have better environmental and working conditions than those who work in orchards. The ability to work indoors is a significant advantage, particularly for older workers such as some women in their 70s.

I started working in *packing* because one has more shade, which are some large sheds (Ana, 74 years old).

The term 'sacrifice' is used by older women seasonal workers to describe the demands of seasonal fruit work in old age. This work involves sweating, physical risk, pain, and contorting the body during the summer months. In the winter, workers experience bone pain.

Sacrifice... in the summer, the heat, the sun, the earth, up the stairs, with hoods hanging down, sometimes weeding with scissors, and crouching under the vines at full sun [...] at about two in the afternoon, crouching down, and sometimes picking fruit or when it was our turn to pick in the vines (Rita, 68 years old).

The physical strain resulting from intensive manual labor and repetitive movements in adverse environmental conditions, such as extreme temperatures and exposure to ultraviolet radiation, can be a limiting factor. Workers may adapt their bodies to withstand the strain and perform better, but this is often done to benefit the owners of capital, labor intermediaries, and the workers' own income. This creates a chain of pressure that can be difficult to break. Individuals assume personal responsibility for bodily changes and confronting

greater demands without expressing a need for collective action or better working conditions from their employers or the state.

They are constantly exposed to risks, suffer occupational accidents, or acquire occupational diseases that are theoretically protected by Law 16.744 of the Undersecretariat of Social Welfare (Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2022), which can even lead to death. Empirical evidence shows that, unfortunately, these events do occur and are part of the recurring concerns of older female workers, who recognize that they feel more vulnerable to this type of event. On the part of employers, there is no reasonable accommodation of workplaces according to the age of employees.

Recently, a man passed away... This is why there has been a demand... Many individuals have fallen down the stairs, which is why it is requested that the fruit trees be lowered (Ana, 74 years old).

The risk of accidents remains a pressing concern in fruit growing, despite legal regulations that require employers to take all necessary measures to effectively protect the life and health of their workers. This situation is even more precarious for those who work without a formal labor contract.

Reproductive Labor: Care and Families

The trajectories of older women seasonal workers in both reproductive and productive work begin at a very early age, often before the age of ten. In most cases, combining agricultural and care work at such a young age resulted in dropping out of school.

I had the possibility of studying until 7th grade, but my parents wouldn't let me because of the money. Before, we were six children and I was the oldest, I had to take care of all the other younger ones [...] I had to work and take care of my siblings, first as a housewife, since I was nine years old, then I had to work (Sonia, 63 years old).

In intergenerational households, older women often cohabit with extended families, particularly single-parent families in the older generation due to marital separations or longer female life expectancy. As a result, these women typically assume the role of head of household. Unmarried children or young couples, who cohabit due to economic necessity, are usually housed in close proximity in these households owned by the older generation. These households distribute domestic and care tasks more evenly than heterosexual biparental elderly families.

Similarly, reducing household costs benefits all members by distributing the pressure of income generation. However, patriarchal family structures still perpetuate gender inequality, reinforcing the notion that domestic work is solely a woman's responsibility (Palma, 2021).

However, the older women interviewed noted that gender reproduction occurs within a flexible mandate. Even when demand exists, it is accommodated to the rigid times of cherry harvesting work, which is where they are mostly employed. This work is generally carried out between 6:00 and 15:00 hours, with extensive travel times that include a change of commune. The level of fatigue is high due to the schedules and the physical demands of the job.

They are primarily responsible for reproductive work in their households, even though, nowadays, some partners, children, or other family members (men and women) have recently begun to participate in some domestic tasks, but within the framework of masculinized roles. Such participation is valued because it lightens the burden and lessens the burden. And although it is based on a discourse based on the idea of 'equality', it does not modify the structural gender inequality present in families.

I come home from work to cook, wash, everything that we housewives have to do [...] my husband doesn't like cleaning things because he's like an old-fashioned person.... But yes, for example, he brings me the firewood for the winter, he tidies it up... on days when the garbage comes by, he gathers all the garbage and takes it out [...] but I didn't do that before, for me it is a great achievement, because it is a job, I am saving myself [...] I think it is fantastic... I feel good [...] in the past they said that these were women's things and no, we are equal to men (Mirta, 59 years old).

The precariousness of the organization of productive and reproductive work is manifested in the overload and excessive fatigue caused by the double workday it entails. However, when it is difficult to reconcile both demands, people opt to abandon paid work, since the concern for care, especially for children or parents, absorbs them in solitude and in the absence of family co-responsibility and male participation, which becomes even more burdensome in the face of the scarcity of robust public policies on care.

My mother got sick, one of her lungs dried up, she handled oxygen and then I stopped working for the season [...] because I was the one who took care of my mother day and night, and she had gone to live with me, the other siblings were already all divided up... everyone went on to live their own lives (Pilar, 64 years old).

When there are no critical situations of caring for dependents, the older seasonal workers manage to accommodate the multiple demands, resolving potential tensions between both spheres without abandoning either, since they value productive work as a way of reducing tension in the face of household chores, generating a distraction from routine and family conflicts.

Here at work [...] frees all the worries... because at home, every day the same thing, the same routine, but at work you get distracted... talk to your colleagues... it's good to work, because you de-stress (Ana, 74 years old).

Agency and Relationship with Social, Trade Union and Governmental Organizations

None of the interviewees belong to an agricultural union, like the majority of seasonal workers. They are unsure if the company or territory has union organizations for casual, temporary, or independent workers, and some are hesitant to join, perceiving them as disconnected from their daily work environment. This may be a result of individualism caused by the implementation of the neoliberal model in rural areas, recent historical oppression of union organization in the peasant world, or the ineffectiveness of current temporary workers' unions. The argument to justify non-adherence to formal organizations for the vindication of labor rights is often based on the subjective evaluation that 'they are doing well in their jobs', and therefore, they would not need to belong to a union.

The paradox that exists is as follows: older women workers only see forming a union as justified in the face of 'labor problems', which are widely recognized and described, but there is no apparent intention to mobilize to solve them. This lack of interest may indicate a flawed perception of the value of collective efforts. It suggests that improving working conditions does not require a group approach or communication and negotiation with institutional levels.

The participation of older women seasonal workers at the social level has been mainly limited to neighborhood activities related to subsistence and family welfare. These activities include actions in the Neighborhood Councils or territorial groups, where the women carry out activities for the benefit of the community or engage in group ventures selling products made by themselves.

I don't get involved in any of that, for example, here I go to the meeting of the neighborhood council that is in the town, that's the only thing I go to (Mónica, 71 years old).

Some are familiar with the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Anamuri), a more global political organization, with a history of a quarter of a century in Chile, which articulates the defense of land rights, territory, food sovereignty, water and labor rights, among others; and participate sporadically in its activities, which may constitute a glimpse of the transition from an individual vision to a collective and macro-social political vision.

I am also there [Anamuri], they invited me [...] seasonal women, housewives, from all over [...] have meetings and invite us, but sometimes I can't go because of these things. When I can I am very blessed (Mirta, 59 years old).

The relationship between individuals and government institutions is limited to the request and receipt of monetary transfers, such as the Family Income for Labor Emergencies (IFE), which were generated due to the loss of work during the pandemic. This is a monthly subsidy that aims to encourage formal reintegration into the labor market, particularly for women. It complements salaries and other subsidies, such as the exclusive bonus for female workers. The recipients express gratitude for these transfers.

I have been receiving the IFE, and they also gave us this bonus for working women, so we are fine with that (Monica, 71 years old).

Receiving bonuses to supplement income can temporarily improve material living conditions. However, women workers express concern about post-pandemic inflation and the resulting loss of purchasing power experienced by the Chilean population since 2021. Nominal wages have not kept up with the inflation of basic goods for family consumption. In this section, a social demand is presented to the political power. However, it is not sufficiently articulated and there is no clear channel for it to be directed through politically or union-oriented organizations.

Women workers have expressed concern about the low amounts of old-age pensions. Although they currently receive them, their minimal income pressures them to continue working for pay each agricultural season as temporary wage earners. This makes them ineffective instruments for covering the risk of poverty in old age.

As age advances and physical conditions worsen, individuals may experience heightened levels of anguish and emotional

tension. The government (Executive Branch) is identified as the party responsible for proposing improvements to pension conditions, rather than the private sector (employers and pension fund management companies).

They [the elected government] should do it well, and help those of us who need it, for example, the same pension, to give us a little more, because we can see that things are going up day after day and the pension is nothing... because if we are no longer able to work, then we are going to have to adapt with the pension itself (Pilar, 64 years old).

Discussion and Conclusions

This article sought to analyze the presentation of the *precariousness* of the lives of older women who work as seasonal fruit workers in Chile. It considers the articulation between the experiences and meanings they attribute to paid productive work and unpaid reproductive work. This novel element contributes to the discussion of precariousness, analyzed from a genderperspective and through a reflective reading of their life trajectories.

The concept of precariousness is sustained in both working conditions and in the performance of domestic and care work, as well as in the limited capacity to make demands for better working and living conditions vis-à-vis others: their employers, their families, and the State. At the socio-labor level, the concept of 'precarious emancipation,' coined by Valdés (2020), is useful in demonstrating that the access of older women seasonal workers to wages generates autonomy and economic independence, but at the cost of enormous physical wear and tear and sacrifice. This concept brings together liberating elements with others that, contradictorily, maintain remnants of a traditional past and give rise to configurations that reproduce existing gender, class, and age inequalities, thus showing the complexity of experiences and symbolic plots.

Participation in paid work allows for improvements in their own living conditions and those of the family members who live with them (children and grandchildren) due to the seasonal income it generates. However, this improvement comes at the cost of the deterioration of their bodies, treated as a physical resource exploited to achieve better levels of economic and social welfare. This exploitation is exacerbated by the age of the workers and

the piecework payment methods that demand extremely fast work to generate income distributed throughout the rest of the year.

The analysis of the demands of paid and unpaid work reveals a high level of demand, manifested in an overload of work and fatigue, indicating an intensification of both physical and emotional resources. Remaining in the labor market, even at retirement age, opens opportunities for both income and social interaction, as well as for changing perceptions or prejudices associated with old age (often labeled as inactive or lacking job skills).

We corroborated the hypothesis regarding the normalization of precariousness for women seasonal workers who have grown old working in orchards and fruit *packing*, reviewing their biographical trajectories and current conditions of temporary employment. The duality of sociomaterial and subjective processes evidences the transitions and transformations they experience and places this group in an overall disadvantaged social position, as variables such as class, sex and age intersect, amplifying inequality.

According to Piñeiro's perspective (2011), the results indicate *objective precariousness* caused by inadequate environmental conditions, absence of contracts, exhausting workdays without rest breaks, intermittent work periods, and lack of occupational safety and health guarantees. While it is mentioned that infrastructure conditions have improved in some agricultural operations, such as canteens, bathrooms, or showers, they are often viewed as employer benefits rather than acquired rights and therefore not always fulfilled as employer obligations.

Paradoxically, despite experiencing *subjective precariousness*, older women often refrain from complaining about their current working conditions. This paradox arises from the trajectory and meanings associated with their experiences, rooted in a history of precariousness dating back to childhood labor. Many workers view their present conditions as an improvement compared to the harsh working environments of their predecessors or their own childhood experiences in agricultural and peasant work. As a result, they tend to adopt passive and adaptive positions in the face of challenging labor practices.

Perceptions about the motivation to work in fruit growing as an older woman are nuanced. Some argue that it is a sort of "obligation", due to the low amounts of old age pensions they receive.

Others see it as an opportunity to interact with other people and remain socially active. Thirdly, they feel that they still have the physical capacity and willingness to work seasonally, so they will continue in this role as long as 'their bodies can take it'.

There is a consensus regarding the necessity to enhance social security conditions, particularly in the realm of pensions. However, the focus of scrutiny is directed towards the State rather than private actors in the labor market. The appeal is made to the authorities for enhancements in state-funded old-age pensions, specifically targeting the most economically vulnerable population. Additionally, there is a call for the regulation of prices in the basic food basket to prevent a loss of purchasing power due to inflation.

Their life trajectories have been shaped by normalized child labor, with no subjective expression of threat, along with engaging in domestic and caregiving responsibilities since childhood. Throughout this journey, they have simultaneously assumed the roles of economic breadwinners and primary caregivers in both their original families and their current households. This issue is analyzed through the lens of capabilities (Sen, 2000, as cited in Delgado, 2017), viewing it in terms of functionings, the range of possibilities available to them.

The current *risks* faced by employees include low pension amounts, mistreatment by bosses affecting their relational wellbeing, and the latent risk of accidents. This risk becomes more acute with age due to unavoidable physical limitations, even when employees intensify their personal pseudo-protection resources such as self-medication.

In life stories, expressions of agency are prominent. Agency is understood as the power to enhance capacities through both reflection and practice (Delgado, 2017). At the labor level, individual agency is activated when there is a disagreement with changes in the payment conditions of contractor employers, such as amounts or terms. In these cases, after careful consideration, workers may decide to abandon the job, leaving the employer stranded. This negative experience may also prevent them from considering future employment with the same employer.

In contrast, when interacting with peers or middle managers, individuals tend to exhibit moderate agency by taking steps to prevent age-based discriminatory remarks in the workplace. This helps to prevent such comments from becoming a cause for employee turnover.

At the family level, the reduction in guilt acquired over the years due to reduced dedication to domestic activities and decreased attention to the demands of adult children or grandchildren could be interpreted as agency, albeit to a moderate extent, as it does not completely absolve them of their gender responsibilities.

A common element among the aforementioned expressions is that the resources available to address daily problems are limited to individual actions or strategies within the immediate interactional environment. Consequently, the agency's deployment is limited to their closest and daily connections and is closely tied to traditionally masculine values such as being responsible for financially supporting their families, even when they are over 60 years old, through their seasonal insertion in the labor market. They do not envision actions that challenge social structures or macro-social institutions such as the industry or the state to appeal for better working and social security conditions. In the latter case, they are only considered as 'vulnerable' elderly people.

Some participate in territorial organizations that carry out neighborhood activities for specific events, such as preparing the Christmas party, social assistance, and recreational activities. None participate in trade unions. The knowledge and sporadic participation in organizations of a political nature for the defense of the rights of rural women, such as Anamuri, would be a hopeful horizon.

We conclude that *the relationship between precariousness* in both productive and reproductive work leads to global precarious conditions of life. In the case of older seasonal workers, this is manifested in physical overload on aging bodies and economic vulnerability, as well as the expectation of greater future impoverishment. The normalization of precarious working conditions has led to more than 30 years of labor uncertainty, exhausting workdays during peak periods, risks of accidents, informality, and self-medication to cope with physical ailments and exhaustion (Lorey, 2016). This has affected both the lives and bodies of workers throughout their existence.

The relationship between *precariousness*, both *subjective* and *objective*, and agency highlights the limited scope of collective social action, which is influenced by the constraints of social structures (Nussbaum, 2009). Chilean agribusiness faces several challenges when it comes to collective bargaining for seasonal workers. These challenges include restrictive legislation, limited political union

training in rural areas, a hostile employer culture towards unions, and entrenched neoliberal modes of thinking that can lead to certain decisions in the face of labor difficulties. Even though there are instances of individual agency (Otano, 2015) operationalized as links, which make daily life bearable and demonstrate potential choices, they exist within structural frameworks of constraint. The limited involvement in collective actions of a trade union or protest nature exacerbates the already existing precariousness. However, new forms of association and communication at the local community level, and in some cases, in rural women's groups of national scope, such as Anamuri and its recent National Union of Women of the Land and Sea, could account for a latent, local, and sectoral collective daily action. As this action increases in density, it could constitute an impulse towards social transformation, in accordance with what agency theory points out. These groups have the capacity to influence personal decisions (Dubois, 2008; Nussbaum, 2009). This sentence demonstrates the existence of a relationship that can be synergistic between individual agency and social participation and action, even in its early stages.

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