Transitions in the Post-pandemic COVID-19 Context: Building Youth Policies in the Global South

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Abstract
This article seeks to contribute to the field of youth studies, particularly to the tradition of youth studies as transition, from Global South standpoint and integrating a gender perspective into youth policymaking. Our approach endorses the development of plural public interventions, focusing on the debates of youth as a transition with a commitment to the construction of a political economy of transitions, through a feminist lens, and amidst the challenges of current youth policies within the post-pandemic COVID-19 context. Thus, in this article, we aim to promote the pluralization of socially just policies that can enable building new bonds of solidarity between generations, genders, and social groups. Ultimately, we argue for the importance of continuing the design of participatory, plural, and well-situated youth policies, underlining the importance of new intergenerational agreements in the construction of fairer and more democratic societies from a Global South perspective.

Keywords Transitions · Global South · Gender · COVID-19

Introduction
The socio-economic crisis provoked by COVID-19 has exacerbated the effects of the neoliberal policies that shaped the social contract between youth and the state over the last decades (Cuervo et al. 2022). Young people have seen their opportunities for autonomy and emancipation deteriorate, which has deepened situations of
vulnerability within the intersections of class and gender. In this article, we aim to contribute to the field of youth studies from a Global South standpoint and from a gender perspective in the development of youth policies (Roberts and Connell 2016). We seek to highlight the possibility of the development of socially just plural public interventions that can support positive transitions, the diversity of identities, and a robust sense of belonging among young people.

The effects of neoliberal policies on the living conditions of young people have been extensively documented. Indeed, research on the processes of individuation, fragmentation, and vulnerability in youth transitions has been central to the field of youth studies in both the Global North and Global South (Cuervo and Miranda 2019; Roberts 2020). In the first decades of the twenty-first century, many of these studies have documented processes of downward social mobility caused by labor vulnerability and difficulties in access to housing among the new generations (Standing 2011; Roberts 2021; Wyn et al. 2020). They have also highlighted the need for youth policies to support positive youth transitions with a plural integral strategy, from redistribution to recognition and participation, with the ultimate aim of promoting the full inclusion of youth in the different spheres of society (e.g., education, labor, relationships, wellbeing).

In the past two decades, Roberts (2021) has argued that new generations of youth have been neglected and that, for the first time, many young people believe that they will not be able to reach the standard of living of their parents (see also Keating and Melis 2022). Amidst this scenario, some scholars have called for the development of a political economy of youth to understand processes of inequality that affect young people. This involves questions around the notion of “proletarianization” of the youth (Côté 2014), including in relation to their vulnerable structural position vis-à-vis adults (see also Sukarieh and Tannock 2016). This “proletarianization” of youth calls for urgent actions on the part of governments and civil society, especially in those geographical areas with the most profound and deeply rooted social inequalities.

Furthermore, youth policies have had limited effect in addressing the growing problems of social inequality and polarization evident in youth transition trajectories. The so-called nuclear policies (education, training, employment) are still embedded in traditional models that respond to older generational patterns of life (Wyn et al. 2017). These policies are also inspired by a human capital perspective, which tends to fail young people by offering individualistic proposals, usually underpinned by notions of choice and merit in terms of social distribution of opportunities, even within a context of significant social deprivation (Morrow 2014).

Amidst this brief background, we continue our argument with our position in relation to the perspective of youth as a transition from a southern perspective. The “Generations and Identity in Youth Transition Processes” section sets out our reflections on youth transitions and the contributions of feminist theory. Then, in the section “The Grammars of Youth,” we examine the links between agency and structure. In the third section, we present the debates on the political economy of youth and the contributions of feminist economics. Based on these debates, the section “Transitions from Education to (Unpaid) Reproductive Work in the Global South” offers reflections on youth trajectories based on existing gender inequalities. The fifth section, “Youth Policies,” addresses the challenges of current youth policies for the post-pandemic period within the framework of the Argentine reality. It then discusses the articulation between the conceptual construction
of youth policies and the demands that emerge from this reality. The paper concludes with a conceptualization in which the demands for institutions that promote democratizing agendas require concentrating efforts on a redefinition of youth policies with a gender perspective and a plural social justice and participatory approach.

Generations and Identity in Youth Transition Processes

Our analysis of youth-as-transitions begins with a brief commentary on a new orthodoxy of youth studies: that is, studies focused on a social generation paradigm (Wyn and Woodman 2006; France and Roberts 2015). In seminal writings, widely circulated throughout Latin America, Mannheim proposed that a generation can be studied based on the subjective perspectives and the possibilities of social change of an era, where common cultural frameworks form the context that delimits shared experiences (Leccardi and Feixa 2011). In a thorough and foundational review of the movement of the history of age relations, Gillis noted that transformations among youth turn out to reflect situated historical conditions, within which access to and use of spaces and institutions are enabled, shaping milestones among people (Gillis 2017).

Proposing a plural view of the transitions, including discussion about generations and social time, Woodman and Leccardi (2015) comment on different temporalities that interconnect during youth: (i) those which correspond to daily life; (ii) those which are included in biographies; (iii) those which are acquired in a generation. Everyday life represents people’s everyday practices, making up agendas, subjectivities, and structures that can be observed through statistics. The biography symbolizes the construction of life courses in the form of trajectories, where everyday life is performed over time, which can be better captured and interpreted through longitudinal studies. The notion of generation alludes to the temporal universes in which people bestow meanings and identities to their life experiences (Woodman y Leccardi 2015: 61).

A central contribution to the critique of youth-as-transition that depicts the life course as a linear process is the conceptualization of social generations. In a nutshell, and at risk of simplifying their argument, Wyn and Woodman (2006) argue that placing the lens on the concept of social generation changes the focus from the “assumption of linear development in which youth is a phase towards adulthood, to locate young people within the political, economic and cultural processes that both frame and shape their generation” (p. 495). This means considering young people’s subjectivities, as well as their relationships to structures, institutions, and individuals that provide “meaning and experience of ‘youth’ in distinctive and enduring ways” (p. 495). It is important to point out that this social generation approach has been criticized for generating a new orthodoxy in youth studies, which some scholars argue is blind to inequalities to the interior of a generation (see France and Roberts 2015).

Together with approaches to social generations that seek to understand young people’s lives, there have been important contributions in the last decade corresponding to Bourdieusian perspectives, developed around the notion of belonging (see Habib and Ward 2019; Harris et al. 2021). This approach proposes the
integration of aspects of identity, place, rootedness, and affectivity as central notions for the analysis of youth transition processes. Here, young people’s connections to people and places that matter to them are viewed as a social process rather than an outcome. In this way, they provide a myriad of dimensions to the voices and meanings of the transitions, which up to then had only been defined by the hegemonic models of the Global North and in economistic terms (Cuervo and Wyn 2014).

Recently, the incorporation of Global South perspectives has brought about conceptual approaches to the perspective of transition anchored in theories of social justice. These theoretical standpoints are important for the study of inequality and social reproduction; and include approaches from redistribution to recognition theory. By integrating ideas that questioned the neutrality of youth as a category and showing situations of injustice that intersect social class, gender, race, and ethnicity, Cuervo and Miranda (2014, 2019) have developed a frame that incorporates pluralistic views on social justice from and about the Global South. Furthermore, in permanent debate with the work of Nancy Fraser, researchers from the Global South proposed to integrate the gender perspective in youth research, focusing on the notion of interdependence (Fraser 2009) and incorporating the tradition of the care economy (Strober 2004). In this way, these approaches aim to move beyond predominantly economic focuses on youth transitions to include other realms of young people’s lives. This also involves new discussions on a traditional debate within youth studies, that of structure and agency on youth trajectories.

The Grammars of Youth

Within the debate around structure and agency, we initiated elsewhere a pathway of conceptual work to read Mørch’s (1996) concept of “activity structure” (Bendit and Miranda 2017). We were interested in focusing on the activities that societies offer to young people in relation to education, work, neighborhood, and leisure in areas that convey a diverse youth population. Our goal was to appeal to the conceptualization of transitions, but at the same time incorporate subjective aspects and youth agencies, which we argued are of great importance for youth policymaking. In this way, we reviewed the structures of activity that societies of the Global South offer to young people; we advanced normative aspects raised by age (many of them enshrined in national and sub-national legal frameworks), as well as the value schemes that cross the different social groups, which included gender characteristics on the social place of men, women, and gender dissidents. We name these ideas the “grammars of youth,” focusing on a system of rules and interactions in which people were writing their biographical journey along the transitions towards adulthood (Bendit and Miranda 2017).

Utilizing the idea of these grammars of youth, we proposed to work on including a gender perspective and the study of transitions between people growing up in contexts where the sexual division of labor determines the outcome of their transitions. Based on the monitoring of different grammars, we interpreted structural and subjective aspects that accompanied transitions to adulthood, in situations where identities were constructed spatially and where inequality leaves its mark at early
ages (Miranda and Arancibia 2019). As a result, we were able to problematize our thinking about youth policies, addressing diverse spatial and youth worlds.

The Political Economy of Transitions and Gender

As it is well known in youth research, since the late 1990s, critiques of structuralist perspectives and the emergence of new risks have led youth studies—especially in Europe—to emphasize the processes of individuation in youth transitions. Navigation models and choice biographies were associated with modernized trajectories in Western societies, where the importance of social class in transitions was presumed to have diminished (Furlong 2013).

After the 2008 global financial crisis, there has been a shift towards a focus on the importance of the structural factors of capitalism in the generation of precarious employment, and its consequences on the processes of downward social mobility that particularly affect young people (Standing 2011). Notions like the “polarization” of youth and generational capital value were put at the center of arguments about the effects of economic concentration and the impact of major institutions on young people’s everyday aspirations and life trajectories (Côté 2014). For example, and especially in the Global North, significant research has focused on the generational effects that the crisis had on the housing market and among youth and young adults (Hoolachan et al. 2017). In the Global South, however, the consequences continued to be differentiated between different social and gender groups (Miranda and Arancibia 2019).

In epistemological terms, the designation of a political economy refers to a constellation of subjects, actors, and social institutions that intervene based on their interests and under moving temporalities. By definition, a political economy is opposed to the current trends that attempt to generally and arbitrarily define the actions and feelings of subjects, such as the neoclassical schools of economics—especially in dealing with social actors and their ways of intervening in social life. For this reason, a political economy of youth shifts away from viewpoints centered on individual actions to focus on how institutions and different societal actors shape young people’s lives. Furthermore, based on a vision that puts the focus on the structural characteristics of financial capitalism, it promotes the refocusing of transition studies on the base of a stratification grounded on social class, the sexual division of labor, and the study of exploitation in age relations (Côté 2016).

The new structural approach is innovative in its proposal of factors of great importance for youth policies which, as we mention below, aim to shape the cycle of social reproduction of contemporary capitalism. Among these, a few stand out: the indebtedness faced by young people, the crystallization of an opportunity structure, and the increased importance of family capitals in transition processes (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014). Dismissing this political economic approach to youth runs the risk of policies continuing to be inefficient; in so far, they do not attend to the impact of major social institutions, such as the labor market, and might only create temporary results, failing to modify vulnerable trajectories. Nevertheless, we are also aware that it is important to continue the study of how different social groups of
young people are affected by major institutions; that is, avoiding a homogenization of youth (see France and Threadgold 2016).

Prompting the debate between transitional and generational perspectives, Woodman has pointed out that both those who conceptualize youth as a new social class and those who observe the period of youth at the center of social reproduction have focused on the role of employment and transformations in work relations. Thus, he has pointed out that appeals to the emergence of a new social class of young people characterized by the difficulties of accessing stable work and housing, and greater educational demands for jobs without tangible benefits, have led towards studies of generational exploitation and capital value. However, this theory has said little about the temporal processing of inequalities within youth groups (Woodman 2020) and makes little progress on social justice as it is understood in pluralistic terms (see Cuervo and Miranda 2014).

In previous projects, while seeking to broaden our focus, we proposed the use of a feminist economic lens to study youth gender transitions and, more specifically, the education-work nexus (Miranda and Arancibia 2019). We argued that focusing solely on the spheres of remunerative employment generates an invisibility of those who do not have access to remunerative occupations, but who carry out care work; which is essential for the extended reproduction of life and sustains societal activities. This is relevant in economies where the responsibility for child-rearing is left to families, particularly women, without the intermediation of welfare benefits (Strober 2004). In this regard, different studies have provided evidence on the sexual division of labor and the assignment of roles tied to domestic life and household reproduction among women at an early age, which are among other social generic disparities that affect youth in the Global South.

Fieldwork conducted with young people in situations of extreme vulnerability led to the proposal to incorporate an intersectional lens, which resulted in a specific focus on gender inequalities. For instance, Black feminism has been an essential contribution to the intersection of class, gender, ethnic groups, and territorial belonging (Collins and Bilge 2020). The notion of intersectionality makes a crucial contribution to the analysis of processes of social inequality, especially in societies where the social gap is vast and where social benefits carry less weight in an individual’s life. These are inequalities which also mark the fate of many young men in places where violence and conflict are dominant (Iwilade 2019), and which make the development of universal, or standardized, youth policies almost nearly impossible. Furthermore, we believe that the design of well-situated youth policies must be through the incorporation of the feminist economy, the perspective of caregiving, and tendencies that propose an intersectional approach to youth studies. The place of care and tasks associated with family support is extremely important in the transitions of vulnerable youth, making evident the inequality in the structure of opportunities and the cycles of disadvantage (MacDonald et al. 2019) on which youth policies are intended to work.

Based on the consideration of the reproduction of gender inequalities, it is pertinent to reflect on how public policies can contribute to the construction of institutional spaces that contemplate caregiving tasks in an integral manner. The local governments have a very important role in the development of early
childhood caregiving offers, promotion of continuity and completion of education, and improvement of employment conditions (Corica and Scopinaro 2022). As a way of illustrating the relevance of care in youth and broader society’s life, we offer next a series of reflections on the place of state provision of social caregiving services and how these impact on the trajectories of young women living in deprived neighborhoods in Argentina.

Transitions from Education to (Unpaid) Reproductive Work in the Global South

In societies where the State’s provision of social services is basic, and where the model of care is based on the family organization, many women tend to assume reproductive work tasks from an early age. This is the case in Argentina, where countless young women do not enter the job market after high school, instead transitioning from school to unpaid labor. Amidst this scenario, over the last 2 years, we developed a research project centered on the use of time among young women who were mothers at an early age (between 15 and 25), with the support of FLACSO Costa Rica and the financing of the IDRC.1

Our starting point focused on the fact that the sexual division of labor causes young women to have limited access to jobs that generate the income necessary for their autonomy (which is understood as economic emancipation). In this context, “early” parenthood accentuates the disconnect with the world of labor among women, and intersects with processes of abandoning school, the assumption of domestic and reproductive chores, and a premature role of worker and breadwinner among young men. With the project having started in March 2020, the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic became an unavoidable topic. This situation created several phenomena that are important to the interpretation of the evidence gathered during fieldwork.

The first factor was associated with temporality and its effects on the organization of daily life, biographies, and generational identities. In effect, the pandemic modified daily routines as a disruption that created an environment in which existing social inequalities were accentuated. These, in turn, began to integrate into generational biographies and experiences as marks on the trajectories of young mothers. These marks were, above all else, related to the isolation within family environments, and to difficulties to continue formative and labor trajectories that allowed them to maintain their own projects. But they were also related to spaces of sociability and contact with peers. In this way, the situation of isolation product of the COVID-19 pandemic became a central part of the experience of motherhood among the women interviewed.

1 Project Young mothers: use of time and violence in contexts of vulnerability. An action-research project with the network of kindergartens of the Municipality of Avellaneda in Greater Buenos Aires, of the Vidas Sitiadas II initiative of FLACSO Costa Rica with support of the International Development Research Center (IDRC), and Project Social trajectory and labor insertion of young people in vulnerable situations: experiences and sustainability of productive projects in informal neighborhood collectives, PICT 2018-03544, National Agency for Scientific and Technological Research, Argentina.
Before getting pregnant I did go out a lot on weekends. When I became a mother all that got cut off, and it’s like sometimes I call her my mom, because being a mother condemned me to motherhood, how can I explain it… because, I don’t know how to explain it to you. When you’re a mother you can’t go out- I mean I don’t mean I’d be going out at night, or maybe you do deserve, I don’t know, to go out with a friend, she was pregnant, go get a drink with your friend, not to come home in a bad condition, but just to go out, i don’t know, to laugh, to cry, to jump, it’s like… and my mom never wanted to take care of her like that (Interviewee 14, 2021)

Several research projects have suggested the ongoing nature of youth gender trajectories such as the one we can see in the testimony of our interviewee. They have also pointed out the expansion of a naturalization or essentialization of motherhood and of the dedication to care work among young women—work that is often presented as “a personal choice.” The pandemic context seems to have deepened these tendencies, intercepting the trajectories of young women, who move from education to reproductive work without access to occupations and income that could allow them their own experiences, outside of the household routine.

I don’t have a relationship with the neighbors… No, just hello and goodbye with one of them, the ones next to my house moved here a little while ago. I don’t know if they bought it or they’re renting but we never… I don’t really interact with them… As soon as the pandemic started, I was pregnant, I couldn’t sleep because the kids would get together at the corner of my house to listen to music, and drink. No, the police didn’t even come, no… (Interviewee 4, 2021)

It is crucial to stress the importance of studying the use of time and the assumption of unpaid care work among young women from vulnerable sectors. The more accurate diagnoses that stem from this can work towards the efficiency of actions in the public and social sectors. This is the case of processes of school abandonment and of the move between education and productive and reproductive (unpaid) work, especially in Latin America, where many young people do not finish secondary education and, at an early age, become involved in paid and unpaid work within an informal economic context. Facing these trajectories, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic require efficient strategies to promote access to public and work life of youth in vulnerable situations. They are also particularly needed for women, among whom the consequences of “sticky floors” have meant a meager access to economic resources that allow for the construction of autonomy (Tabbush 2021).

**Youth Policies**

Youth policies encompass different institutional levels, from federal, state, and local governments, including actions with different epistemological approaches, to territorial youth work. In addition, there are international organizations with sectoral and thematic approaches, those expressing protection for the most vulnerable populations (e.g., refugees) and supranational organizations (e.g., the Council of Europe).
There are also civil society organizations and social activists with great influence on the daily lives of young people.

Focusing on the public sector, and in line with Casal (2002), at least two policy guidelines can be distinguished according to their orientation towards transition processes or the specific stage of youth: nuclear policies and peripheral policies. Nuclear policies aim to intervene in the lives of all young people, as they broaden or restrict their welfare opportunities, for example through capacity-building programs. Peripheral youth policies tend to focus on aspects related to leisure time, political and social participation, or youth consumption, and often appeal to young people from middle- and upper-class sectors in the Global South. Within this framework, programs to promote youth associationism target a profile of young people with middle or higher educational levels with social concerns and often function as a seedbed for new political generations (Merino and Miranda 2022).

Nuclear policies are generally designed and implemented by a set of sectoral specialists and express the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of each sector. At the level of youth health, for example, they are addressed by public health policy specialists. And education initiatives are designed by pedagogues and experts in educational programming. However, there are some examples of programs that aim at integrational work. These programs aim to act in the areas of education and employment, although they are often of limited duration. Two good examples are the Youth Guarantee Program developed by the European Union,2 or the Young People with More and Better Work Program in Argentina,3 where a comprehensive approach was developed, although far from youth institutions.

It is important to note that the so-called active employment policies have dominated a substantial portion of public youth programming, remaining at the center of the current core policies. The Youth Guarantee Program and the Young People with More and Better Work Program are part of these initiatives, which integrate packages aimed at the transition into the labor market. These are programs aimed at the activation and labor market insertion of young people, generally focused on qualification, vocational training, and job search assistance. They are normally aimed at vulnerable populations and involve benefits of no more than one year. It is also important to highlight that this type of program rests on conceptual bases that stand out from the idea of “labor activation” and mismatch between labor supply and demand, which often causes inefficiencies during periods of crisis and in the face of scarce job creation (Miranda and Alfredo 2018).

Indeed, although interventions aimed at labor transition are very important in the generation of second opportunities, especially in populations with vulnerable transitions, this does not exempt them from being designed with conceptual support in the neoclassical tendencies of labor economics. Moreover, active employment policies that

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2 The Youth Guarantee Program is the European assistance program for unemployed and uneducated young people managed by the employment authorities, but that in some territories had the collaboration of youth information services and youth centers.

3 The Young People with More and Better Work Program tended to generate articulations locally, which promoted integrated policies among the different departments. Although it was implemented by the Labor Department, it had a highly relevant place between 2007 and 2015.
focus on employability and the “lack of basic skills” ascribed to young people ignore contextual factors, especially those raised by the political economy of youth and structuralist trends. Few get involved when it comes to the barriers faced by young people in vulnerable situations, such as stigmatization or spatial segregation (Mora Salas and Pérez Sainz 2019). Additionally, hardly any have a gender approach integrating the care sector, the so-called informal sector, and extension of subsistence jobs among the poorest economies (Morrow 2014). Few integrate efficient training for the youth workers who act on a daily basis as mediators between young people and training and labor institutions. Nor do they work on the approach to the subjectivities, values, and interests of young people (Merino and Miranda 2022).

Faced with the scarcity of opportunities for young people with fewer economic resources, different proposals have highlighted the importance of developing strategies that integrate community actions and territorial support networks, especially in the Global South (Miranda et al. 2021). The importance of comprehensive policies that act on structural barriers and segregation processes associated with ethnic and gender factors has been emphasized in different spaces and geographies. In this direction, it has been argued that youth policies that interact in local environments that work on the basis of the recognition of the identity of young people and that attend to the participation and commitment of the subjects tend to have better results, based on the so-called Magical Triangle.

The Magical Triangle concept has been part of the European youth strategy since 2010 and has been widely discussed among scholars in the field of youth studies. It aims to represent the virtuous integration of the public sector in charge of designing and implementing youth policies, the production of universities whose mission is to generate knowledge, and civil society actors, both youth organizations and youth workers who interact with people on a daily basis (Chisholm et al. 2011).

Experiences point out that the Magic Triangle is a space strained by internal disputes over the meaning and content of youth. These tensions are the result of conflicts that arise when defining the contents, modes, and subjects that should be involved in policy. Resolutions to conflicts are found in the capacity for negotiation, learning, and network cooperation that institutions can develop (Bendit 2004), and which are necessary in any process of implementation of actions and programs. Youth workers are key actors in this process, since the direction taken by the concrete actions that were foreseen during the development of youth programs and policies depends on them. Williamson (2011), for instance, has argued that educators and social workers who interact daily with young people adapt to changing and dynamic realities, giving new meaning to objectives and practices in their daily work, being of great importance in the construction of active citizenship and the fight against social exclusion.

Debate: Current Challenges for Youth Policies in the Post-pandemic Context

The crisis unleashed by COVID-19 has had a great impact on young people, exacerbating the problems associated with the labor market and access to housing. For this reason, in addition to the existing challenges when it comes to health, there emerges
the challenge of building a common work agenda with young people, to generate opportunities for autonomy and wellbeing. Among the most urgent problems are the access to decent employment, good quality education, comprehensive healthcare, and affordable housing, which are all aggravated for young people from the most vulnerable income, gender, and ethnic groups (Arancibia et al. 2021).

The economic and social difficulties in the transition period call into question the traditional paths from youth to adult roles, even more so in the face of the crisis caused by the pandemic. That is why we argue that the challenges facing youth policy entering the third decade of the twenty-first century can be stratified into—at least—three levels that reclaim the spirit of the Magic Triangle. These challenges respond to the demand for clear and fluid methods of communication between empirical evidence, conceptualization, and youth praxis. The empowerment of each of these spaces will depend on the capacity to reach a consensus on plans that are coherent with the situations faced by young people in each of the spaces and territories in which they interact and negotiate their transitions.

The first of these challenges is associated with the diagnosis and conceptual construction of youth studies and policies. No action can be developed without solid foundations that integrate the knowledge of years of implementation of youth programs and policies. In this regard, Williamson (2020) has argued that there is a need for a conceptualization that puts in perspective the mechanisms, formats, and meanings that define youth and the work with them. In this way, the first challenge is defined through the development of youth policies that respond to a well-founded analytical construction situated to give a proper account of the problems of the new millennium. The class-gender-territory enclaves, for example, are essential for the definition of everyday life, and the construction of biography and generational milestones that define youth.

A second level is identified in the construction of policies and the incorporation of emerging realities. Tensions within the research-design-implementation triangle often refer to the fact that the lack of a common and fluid body of theoretical work (the primary challenge) causes the different expertise to clash. Being both the subject and object of an initiative brings into conflict experiences and traditions that hinder communications between the necessary participants in youth policies. In this regard, improvements in the professionalization of youth work respond to the need to find legitimate processes and mechanisms with recognized actors that can articulate sectoral demands as well as the detection, construction, and monitoring of initiatives (Williamson 2011).

Thirdly, we encounter a question about the very order of the construction of democratic and participatory societies. This question is based on the fact that youth participation exceeds their inclusion in sectoral roundtables for their generation. Hierarchization brings with it the acceptance of the work program with youth as a central issue insofar as they are political subjects. Assigning youth the category of political subject responds to the criterion of social justice, understanding them as necessary participants in discussions around the future of our societies and their own lives. The democratizing potential of youth as political actors responds to the incorporation of emerging agendas (feminist, environmental, among others) and to the recognition of their disadvantaged situation in the traditional issues of exploitation (generational
capital value, the reproduction of gender stereotypes of caretakers). Nevertheless, the political definition of youth arises as a field of ideological dispute that must be detached from romanticized figures.

Yet, what is the point of prescribing rights if it is not possible to exercise them in practice? The Global South perspective that guides us shows that it is still challenging to build autonomy and affirmation through quality jobs, continuous training, and social integration as the basis for the recognition of youth as a political subject. Our experience highlights the value of the bonds of interdependence between young people and their spaces and circles of belonging. Collective action within intermediary actors (social organizations, unions, student unions) is fertile ground for the referenced cumulative construction of experiences and meanings.

Conclusion

From a Southern and intersectional perspective, the paper aimed to contribute to the field of youth studies and to the construction of policies to support youth transitions, amidst the challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has left us with. Based on a review of the current debates on youth-as-transition, we raised three major challenges facing the actions aimed at generating welfare and supporting the autonomy of young people. The first challenge addressed the need for a revival of the theoretical debate within the field, and of its involvement in the design and implementation of youth policies. As a second challenge, we pointed out the importance of a greater capacity for institutional learning on the part of the actors involved in working with young people. The third challenge suggested the prioritization of youth as a political subject by broadening their participation and effectively guaranteeing their rights. These challenges point to a pluralization of socially just policies.

The text begins by asserting the historical dimension of youth, and the contrast between generational visions and the theory of transitions. As part of our epistemological stance, we focus on the debates of youth as a transition with a commitment to the construction of a political economy of transitions, through a feminist lens. The incorporation of a gender perspective in youth research is of great importance, especially in the countries of the Global South, where the sexual division of labor is constructed from childhood. In previous works, we have shown how the assignment of caregiving tasks among young women hinders their participation in paid work. In the research “Young Mothers,” we recorded the great dedication of young women to unpaid work tasks, which guarantee the reproduction of life.

In a proposal to historicize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we focused on the current problems of the generation that is currently traversing its youth in the context of a major crisis. Indeed, the transformations in the labor market have generated significant changes in family groups, social organizations, unions, and among other groups, particularly in the health system and social security. The generalization of precariousness and labor instability, digitalization (the Fourth Industrial Revolution), and its impact on the increasing polarization in labor qualification requirements set a background of greater individuation and vulnerability for youth transitions into adult life.
The scenario outlined above shows that the bricolage of possible trajectories reflects biographies under construction where individual responsibilities are weighed under changing temporalities and with high levels of uncertainty. Youth policies must act in the three temporalities that are dynamically interconnected: everyday life, biographies, and generations. At the level of everyday life, they must generate valid opportunities for different, territorially situated, social groups. These opportunities will have to support the creation of biographies that allow for the “accumulation” of experiences and assets, which will enable paths to autonomy and wellbeing; paths that will, then, allow for fairer and more democratic generational experiences.

From our point of view, the construction of associative and democratic youth policies entails multisectoral integration, through dialogue, participation, and recognition. Working with young people involves institutions, actors, and logic that must guarantee integration through social inclusion and civic participation. The participatory approach includes the full contribution of young people, civil society, and related organizations and institutions in the process of detecting problems and defining their solutions. Thus, confirming that the new generations are part of the solution, within growth strategies that are integrated and plural.

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