

Swiss Retirees as “Active Agers”: A Critical Look at this New Social Role

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Abstract Similar to other countries in the European Union, contemporary Switzerland faces concerns about an ageing population, and the policy framework of active ageing is one response. Today’s retirees are asked to actively participate in society in ways that are recognized as social contributions. We argue, however, that the redefinition of the role of retiree to be an “active ager” rests upon gender inequalities, among others. As a result, this framework can reinforce the exploitation of elders, especially old women. To illustrate our argument, we draw on interviews conducted among Swiss retirees to demonstrate the ways that active ageing ignores that work in which they are engaged already, while it also rests upon and reshapes gender inequalities in later life.

Keywords Gender relations · Unpaid work · Ageism

Introduction

In this paper, we focus on the most dominant policy designation of “active ageing,” the “economistic” or productivist version (Walker and Maltby 2012; Foster and Walker 2015), to examine if, and in what ways, Swiss retirees experience pressure to adopt the “new role” of “active ager”—someone who, upon leaving the labour force, engages in unpaid work. We argue that this role is not new, and the exhortation therefore demands greater or more visible work. By looking at the unpaid labour performed over the life

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course and into retirement, we find that older women are especially pressured by this mandate and unrecognized by it for much of the work they already do. A focus on gender relations reveals that the gender division of labour carries into retirement such that men's free time rests on women's continued domestic labour; the latter are freed only from paid work, as they continue their reproductive work.

Background: The Swiss Retirement Context

As in other post-industrial societies, a discourse emerged in Switzerland in the 1970s warning of the impacts of the so-called demographic “bomb” of population ageing (Mullan 2000) in a context of economic recession and rise of neoliberalism (Leimgruber 2008; Obinger et al. 2010). Since then, federal authorities' discussions have revolved around the assumed necessity to control public expenditures and to contain the social and economic risks linked to ageing. Among the approaches that they have taken, two warrant discussion here.

First, since the 1990s, the rhetoric of gender equality became an avenue for justifying several proposed reforms that have sought to raise the pensionable age for women. The latter was raised first from 62 to 64 with the 10th revision of the old age insurance,¹ and the current reform (Federal Department of Home Affairs 2013), plans to raise it to 65, the same age as for men. Despite the egalitarian rhetoric, this mechanism serves to reduce pension expenditures while increasing inflow to federal coffers. Second, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, keeping men and women in the labour market longer—the so-called “4th pillar” of Swiss retirement planning, a complement to the 3 pillars of social insurance (Rudaz and Donini 2005)—has become a central goal to increase revenues and reduce pension outlays. Thus, the current reform plan proposes: “first to get the average age of the exit of the labour market to 65 [for both women and men] ... and, for the ones who can and want, over this age. (...) In order to make it possible for people to work up to this age ... [by making] retirement conditions more flexible” (Federal Social Insurance Office 2013, p. 42). So, for the last 20 years at least, Swiss elders increasingly have been invited to take part in limiting public expenditures, such as the costs of Old Age Insurance, by maintaining their labour market activity.

The appeals for men and women to work longer draw on the discourses of gender equality but also fit the model of “active ageing” widespread throughout the European Union. Below, we discuss briefly the active ageing policy approach, particularly the predominant, economic version, and show its relevance to Switzerland. Next, we discuss some of the research findings related to active ageing goals, to provide context

¹ Implemented in 1948, Switzerland's old age pension policy is comprised of Old Age Insurance (AVS), a pay-as-you-go system that provides limited protection for a category of people considered to be old enough to have the right to basic social protection. Contributions to this insurance are based on earnings, and benefits vary between 1175 and 2350 Swiss francs a month in 2017. Since its implementation, the AVS has been revised 10 times. During the 1980s, this “first pillar” protection was complemented by two other old age policies (“second” and “third pillars”). One is an occupation-based insurance, to which both employers and employees must contribute once an annual income level is met (21,150 Swiss francs in 2017); benefits are based on earnings. The other is a voluntary savings plan that, if used, gives contributors some tax relief (Insurance Office nd). Again, the ability to contribute to this savings is based on earnings, as are eventual benefits.

for our study. Unless otherwise noted, Switzerland is not included in such research, as scholars often draw on EU data or other surveys in which Switzerland is not represented.

Active Ageing Policies

In part, the call for active ageing is based on arguments that elders do not contribute enough to social and economic life, and they also wish to be more involved (Timonen 2016). As Swiss federal authorities express it, elders have experienced increased life expectancy in good health and thus should become “more conscious of their responsibility towards their own health and their work capacity” (Groupe directeur mixte DFE/DFI 2005 p. 41).

As a “policy concept” or “paradigm of public action” (Timonen 2016 p. 35; Guillemard 2013, p. 20), active ageing emerged in the 1990s in transnational organizations like the World Bank, the OECD, and the European Union. These groups addressed concerns about changing dependency ratios, especially the ageing of the work force (and subsequent loss of paid workers) and the simultaneous need to address pension costs (Foster and Walker 2015; Timonen 2016). Thus, at the broadest level, and emphasizing the link between activity and health, the more comprehensive formulation refers to “continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual, and civic affairs” (WHO 2002: 12), going beyond simply being physically active or employed. In practice, a range of meanings have been attached to active ageing, and a more economic or productivist approach dominates, such that the policy emphasis tends to be on activity that has an economic referent (Boudiny 2013; Walker and Maltby 2012). Thus, in addition to encouraging workers to stay in the labour market beyond pensionable age (Walker and Maltby 2012 p. S119; Foster and Walker 2015), active ageing policies also encourage economic contributions that can be made through unpaid work, once people have retired from the labour market (Jensen and Principi 2014; Clarke and Warren 2007; Foster and Walker 2013). The aim is to

make a better use of the potential that the new generations of ageing people represent (...) with good health, numerous competencies and abilities that they can use to serve the economy and the society (Guillemard 2013, p. 21).

Thus, encouraging elders to engage in formal volunteering has received increased emphasis (Jensen and Principi 2014).

The Swiss Context

While Switzerland’s approach to active ageing is both productivist and more holistic (Keaser and Zufferey 2015), the policy emphasis and rhetoric have tended to reflect more the economic approach, especially in terms of the most recent project of reforms on old age and retirement policies (Federal Department of Home Affairs 2013). This thrust of active ageing for Swiss retirees is evident in official federal documents, particularly a 2012 (Federal Statistical Office 2012a) publication devoted to the topic. It opens with the statement,

Longer healthy life expectancy combined with the ageing of new generations of men and women has resulted in a new vision for retirement. ... While ageing used to be passively accepted, it is now regarded as a factor that can be influenced, and the image of a slow-paced life after retirement is increasingly giving way to (achievement-oriented) visions of an active phase of life after retirement. (p. 2)

The shape that this life in retirement should take is apparent in later reference to “productive ageing,” followed by the assertion that “people beyond retirement age can (or must) also make valuable contributions to society ... In terms of social policy, the model of productive ageing is behind calls to raise the retirement age or reinforce volunteering by the elderly.” (p.3).

Among the lessons to be drawn from these statements, of significance here is, first, the implication that previous generations of retirees were passive, non-contributing members of society. Second, they dictate that, to age actively, one should be “productive,” as shown by making valuable contributions to society, by engaging in paid labour longer, or by volunteering more in retirement. The ideology is clear: elders are not contributors unless pressed to be, and those activities of value are, first, paid labour; and, second, unpaid volunteer work. As we will argue, ageism and gender relations underlie these ideas.

Challenges to Active Ageing

Barriers to this economic vision have been noted, and in some instances, policy makers have sought to alleviate these. For instance, scholars show that maintaining productivity is not a simple matter of providing incentives (such as raising the age of pension access) to individuals to do so. Ageism inhibits the possibility of extending work life, by pushing older workers out of jobs, and by deterring recruitment and training of older workers (Walker and Maltby 2012, p. S121). Displaced older workers take much longer to find new employment; for instance, in 2009 in the U.S., almost half of older men were still unemployed after 27 weeks, compared to one-third of younger men (Johnson 2009). Even more, when older workers do find new employment, this generally is in less lucrative jobs than the ones that they previously held (Phillipson 2015; Roscigno 2010).

In Switzerland, federal authorities emphasize the need to transform workplace culture. In this respect, the State Secretariat for Economy Affairs (2016) recommends that employers “maintain capacity and motivation [of their employees] in the long term” and to recruit old workers. However, there is no law against age discrimination in hiring practices and in the public sector, there are age-based mandatory retirement policies (these vary between cantons and sectors). Despite these issues, when compared to many European countries, “Switzerland is considered to be an excellent performer in terms of active ageing” because of its relatively high employment rate of older workers, and the rising age at retirement (66 years of age for men, 64 for women) (Madero-Cabib and Kaeser 2016, p. 35). However, quantitative analyses by Madero-Cabib and Kaeser (2016) show that reasons for later retirement are varied, such that members of higher classes, such as professionals who may have high job satisfaction, choose to work longer. By contrast, those who have been unable to contribute significantly to

occupational pensions (the second pillar), maintain their employment involuntarily, seemingly driven by economic necessity. Thus, inequalities underlie these seemingly positive numbers.

Also, as Le Feuvre et al. (2015) argue, in the Swiss context, an underlying gender bias prevails in the active ageing dictate to remain in the labour force until full retirement age, as this is most relevant to those whose work histories are intermittent, part-time, or low-paid. Given the gender division of labour, women are disproportionately represented in this group. Madero-Cabib's (2016) analysis corroborates this argument. He finds that, because of women's discontinuous work histories and their less advantaged positions in the labour market compared to men, and because the Swiss pension system's reliance on labour and private pension schemes, women are less able to choose to take early retirement. They must continue to work for financial reasons, while men's higher retirement incomes give them more choices as to when they might retire.

As in Switzerland, women of many other European countries have labour force participation patterns, including higher rates of part-time employment, that differ from those of men (Foster and Walker 2013). Women face barriers to employment and higher wages over the life course, including in later life, due in part to their responsibility for domestic labour (Foster and Walker 2013; Botti et al. 2011; Ilinca et al. 2016; Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010). Women are often seen to age more quickly than men do, such that attempts to counter age discrimination in the workplace must take this into account (Foster and Walker 2013).

How one is to be an “active ager” in retirement has also received increasing attention of late. In line with European Union recommendations (Timonen 2016, p. 72), retirees are encouraged to engage in unpaid work, especially formal volunteerism; the same is true in Switzerland (Federal Council 2007). Beyond individuals' desires to volunteer, organizations themselves need to be welcoming to older participants. Welfare states and their policies also play a role in facilitating such activity (Jensen and Principi 2014).

As with paid employment, however, elders are not an homogenous group, and such factors as education and class can influence both the kinds and frequency of volunteering in which they might engage (Ilinca et al. 2016; Jensen and Principi 2014). A survey of more than 30 European countries finds that those of higher class tend to engage in more formal voluntary activities and politics (Ilinca et al. 2016). Gender differences accrue to volunteer work as well (Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010), though variations across studies in terms of age groups explored make drawing conclusions difficult. In general, researchers have used survey data collected on those aged 50 or 55 and older, and do not differentiate further by age. For instance, research using SHARE data on those aged 50 and over finds that men engage in more formal volunteerism than do women (Zaidi and Zolyomi 2011), leading to calls for active ageing policies to encourage greater engagement by women so as to decrease potential isolation (Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010; Foster and Walker 2013). As well, research finds that older men and women volunteer in different spheres; men are more likely than women to serve in civic and higher status, more visible volunteer roles, whereas women's rates and types of volunteer activities are more influenced by domestic labour (Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010; Foster and Walker 2013). Of note, when all unpaid activities (formal volunteer work, as well as childcare and other informal help) are

included, research on 14 EU countries finds no major gender differences in overall rates of unpaid work. However, women perform more informal care (Ilinca et al. 2016).

How these patterns might play out in retirement, when people have more available time, is not a given, nor is their meaning. As helpful as survey data are in revealing patterns, they are less able to help us understand the ways in which people experience active ageing, the outcomes of such policies for them. For instance, the active ageing model assumes that productive activities have a positive impact on elders themselves (Boudiny 2013), but qualitative research in England found that while some participants wanted to replace lost roles, others sought to cast them off (Clarke and Warren 2007). In some instances, retreating from activities might well be a better means for increasing quality of life. Thus, the call for women to engage in more formal volunteering may not promote their well-being. Related to this is the hierarchy that is implicitly placed upon the kinds of activities that are “best” such that being a worker or a volunteer is weighted more highly in the Active Ageing Index than are care work activities (Vidovićová 2017), evaluations that themselves reflect gender differences in what might be seen as productive. This dovetails with some scholars’ suggestion that most active ageing policies are instead based on men’s experiences, especially in relation to work and retirement (Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010; Botti et al. 2011; Ilinca et al. 2016).

In this paper, we address these gendered outcomes and contribute to literature on active ageing in retirement by exploring how Swiss retirees experience the call to engage in active ageing, and how this might be shaped by gender. Using qualitative analysis of interviews conducted among Swiss retirees, we ask to what extent Swiss retirees believe that they need to be active; how they experience retirement in relation to active ageing; and whether this differs by gender. We suggest that without understanding gender relations, active ageing dictates can miss much of the productive activity in which old men and women engage and can also be oppressive to women.

We explore this mandate for retirees to demonstrate their value and worthiness as citizens by engaging in paid and unpaid work. Using Swiss retirees as an example, we argue that, by embedding gender inequalities, this ostensibly new social role of “active ager” reinforces the disadvantages faced by old people, particularly old women, whose unpaid labour is especially exploited and invisible. To show this, we first engage in a brief discussion of gender relations, and how these shape the life course. We then use qualitative analysis of interviews of Swiss retirees to show that, first, they are engaged already in unpaid, productive labour. However, this is shaped by gender such that men are likely to be engaged in unpaid work in the public sphere and therefore visible while women’s labour tends to be in the less visible, private sphere. Second, retired women typically never ceased working, but the less visible work that retired women do in particular tends to be ignored in the active ageing mandates such that the role of “active ager” is especially problematic for women in retirement as they can experience the demand for additional, more visible work oppressive.

Gender Relations

Gender is a dynamic construction, based on social agreement concerning ideals of masculinity and femininity thought to be rooted in biological sex, ideals toward which people gear their behaviours, and others hold them accountable (West and Zimmerman

1987). The concept of gender relations encompasses the ways in which societies are organized on the basis of assignments to dichotomized categories, men and women, such that those groups (at the very least) gain identities and power in relation to one another, with varying impacts on life chances (Glenn 1999). That is, labour is divided and rewarded differentially based on understandings of what is masculine and feminine, and this has consequences for power and life chances. Because these identities and power exist in relation to one another, the experiences of men and women as groups are inextricably tied; the situation of one cannot be understood without reference to the other. Men’s privilege is thus rooted in women’s disadvantage (Calasanti 2009).

Gender relations are embedded in social institutions, such as the way in which we do family, or produce and distribute goods and services. As such, they are relatively invisible and unquestioned, and do not rely on the workings of individuals but instead, the usual operation of these institutions (Calasanti 2009). Thus, young girls might be given appropriate toys, such as dolls, and expected to be nurturing, and rewarded for doing so; young boys will be directed to develop leadership or competitive skills and evaluated accordingly. When we look at families, then, it would seem “natural” that women would be caregivers and perform more unpaid domestic labour, even if they also work for pay as well. Likewise, we see that men’s ability to achieve power and income in the world of paid labour depends upon women’s responsibility for domestic labour in the home, a kind of work that garners no pay and little status. In turn, these divisions of labour responsibilities can become embedded in national retirement schemes such that men’s breadwinning serves as the basis for pensions in ways that seem “natural” as it is based on the taken-for-granted gender division of labour (Grady 2015).

Critical to our paper is that what men do—paid labour, in the visible, public sphere—is what is most valued, which will influence retirement and what is valued by active ageing policies. The preferred mode of active ageing is to stay employed beyond the age of retirement; after labour force withdrawal, focus on the public sphere is important when we turn to unpaid work (Walker and Maltby 2012; Vidovičová 2017). This has repercussions for elders who engage in unpaid work, especially for women. It means that a portion of the unpaid labour that all elders do goes unrecognized, particularly care work and other domestic labour in the home.

Gender Division of Labour in Switzerland

To understand our argument concerning gender relations and active ageing for Swiss retirees, we need first to examine gender division of labour prior to retirement in Switzerland. That women perform the vast majority of the domestic labour is apparent in 2010 data (Federal Statistical Office 2013) that show that more than three-fourths of women in couple households with children have primary responsibility for housework, although there has been some movement toward sharing responsibility for some tasks since 1997 (between 16 and 18% of tasks are now shared, depending on the age of children). Even among dual-earner couples, but especially those with children, men’s paid labour takes priority over women’s, and women continue to take primary responsibility for housework and child care.

National data from 2013 (Federal Statistical Office 2016a) on hours spent in different kinds of work activity illustrate the present situation. The unequal division

of labour by gender is apparent in the finding that, when looking at all ages, men and women engage in approximately the same amount of work overall (about 50 h per week), but the distribution of types of labour varies extensively. Even though women are engaged in paid work more than in the past, men primarily participate in paid activities (33 h per week) whereas women spend more of their time in domestic and family work (29 h a week), regardless of their family situations. Gender relations are reflected in the shifts in composition of different kinds of labour as family situations change. While men and women who live alone are fairly similar in time spent on professional and domestic labour, once partnered, men's overall time spent in professional activities stays the same, or increases with the presence of children (even though they spend somewhat more time in family work with the arrival of children, an amount that decreases as children become older). For women, the picture is quite different; their domestic labour increases as soon as they become a member of a two-person household, while they retain their paid work activity. The arrival of children exacerbates this inequality as women decrease their professional activity tremendously and increase domestic labour further. Having a partner does not relieve women with children all that much. In fact, focusing on unpaid work only, data from the 2013 Swiss Labour Force Survey indicates that having a partner does not necessarily decrease women's domestic and family workload. Among those women whose youngest child is under 15 years old, lone mothers spend 45 h a week in such labour, while mothers with partners spend more time—51 h per week (Federal Statistical Office 2014). These findings are significant given that previous cohorts of Swiss, including contemporary retirees, had even more traditional divisions of labour.

This unequal division of labour is critical to understanding retirement and active ageing, as retirement implies a withdrawal from work, which active ageing decries in its push for economic contribution in retirement. In other words, the active ageing model assumes retirees cease economic activities when they withdraw from the labour force, and that therefore they need to be encouraged or “empowered” to contribute economically to the large social good. Thus, we go beyond those studies that point to gender differences in active ageing in Switzerland, analyzing the reasons for these variations and their oppressive nature. We argue that the unpaid economic contributions retirees already make are not considered; but even more, the gender inequalities that are incorporated into this dictate are not taken into account. Economistic views of active ageing assume that men and women were already in positions of equality in retirement; that they are free and able to invest time and effort equally in unpaid labour activities. However, this is not so. Below, we present evidence that gender has an impact on the Swiss retirees' experiences, and that the active ageing mandate is even more oppressive to women.

Methods

To demonstrate this, we use qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews of 30 Swiss retirees, 17 women and 13 men; basic demographics can be seen in Table 1. The interviews were conducted in 2010 and 2011, in a study that sought to examine the extent to which pensioners incorporate active ageing discourse into their identities. The sample was gathered using a snowball technique. Initial interviewees were identified in

a variety of ways: by contacting the second author’s acquaintances and asking for referrals; through an organization of retirees; and through Pro Senectute, a Swiss foundation that provides financial and social support to retirees, who then contacted clients. Respondents then referred the author to others to interview. All respondents resided in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and received benefits from Old Age Insurance. Some garnered other financial resources from occupation-based insurance and voluntary savings, whereas some relied on a complementary assistance funding for poor people over 64 and 65 years old –supplementary benefits (Federal Social Insurance Office *n.d.*). Ages ranged from 62 to 84 (mean = 70); twenty-two were in couples, and 8 were single.

Table 1 Sample demographics

Respondent	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Class
1 Jeanne	84	F	Divorced	High
2 Sarah	64	F	Divorced	Middle
3 Marc	63	M	Partnered	Middle
4 Julien	66	M	Partnered	High
5 Antoine	62	M	Partnered	Middle
6 Fred	65	M	Partnered	Middle
7 Jean	66	M	Partnered	Middle
8 Laure	67	F	Partnered	Middle
9 Pierrette	66	F	Partnered	High
10 Janine	67	F	Widowed	High
11 Roger	66	M	Partnered	Middle
12 Béatrice	66	F	Partnered	Middle
13 Emilie	69	F	Divorced	Middle
14 Justine	66	F	Widowed	Middle
15 Lise	80	F	Partnered	Middle
16 Brigitte	67	F	Widowed	Low
17 Sophie	72	F	Partnered	Middle
18 Pascal	77	M	Divorced	Low
19 Henri	67	M	Partnered	High
20 Maude	72	F	Never married	Middle
21 Claude	71	M	Partnered	High
22 Viviane	80	F	Never married	High
23 Marie	68	F	Divorced	Low
24 Gilles	67	M	Divorced	Low
25 Francine	67	F	Partnered	High
26 Charles	81	M	Never married	Low
27 Mario	80	M	Widowed	Low
28 Luc	73	M	Partnered	Middle
29 Romane	69	F	Divorced	Middle
30 Antoinette	79	F	Widowed	Low

The interviews were conducted in French, lasted between one and two hours, and were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Respondents chose where interviews occurred; most often, this was in their homes, but sometimes they selected a public location. They were semi-structured such that respondents were asked open-ended questions concerning how they would describe themselves, as well as more directed questions concerning, for example, how they saw themselves and their roles as retirees, and how they felt others perceived them. Interview topics also included respondents' reactions to current political debates concerning the future of retirement policies in Switzerland.

We conducted a thematic analysis, reading the interviews over several times to understand their own logic and then comparing across them to find common themes. We then compared groups by gender to assess similarities and differences to their identities as retirees and their attitudes concerning active ageing, and its representation. The themes were constructed based on the literature on the construction of the identity in retirement (Caradec 2004) and also on their recurrence in the respondents' discourses. These themes were pertinent to talk about their identity as retirees especially, but also of active agers.

In the analysis, several dimensions related to the way that our respondents supported their families and people were discussed. We identified the attitudes of "active agers" of our respondents in terms of support and solidarity, namely how they concretely contributed to their society. For this, we distinguished between paid and unpaid activities as well as activities of care or domestic work on one hand and other kinds of contributions such as those of political or educational nature on the other. We also analyzed their perspectives on "being an active ager," specifically, how they viewed the social discourse on active ageing and the extent to which they adopted it. We distinguish between what they were saying about their own contributions and to what extent they wished to be active – or more active, and how they viewed other retirees. Finally, we examined to what extent they were aware of the political debates about active ageing in Switzerland.

Findings

Retirement, Freedom, and Domestic Labour

We begin our analysis by discussing the extent to which Swiss retirees are equally able to undertake unpaid labour, in the sense of having much leisure time to spend, and thus must be encouraged to engage in active ageing. First, the interviews do show that retired men and women see themselves as free from the constraints that they felt from their labour market participation:

“There is not this stress anymore because you need to be at work no matter how you are feeling and how your last night was, and no matter what your mood is ... This feeling [of stress], I don't have it anymore. And this is much better so ... It is a big relief. It is much [more] freedom of action and much less stress.” (Sarah, 64, partnered)

“What makes me feel like I am retired is that I have kind of jumped ship. And that was a relief, no stress anymore from the entire hierarchy that weighs on you, etc.

Now, I take it easy and [am] relaxed ... Before, you had a boss who would come and tell you what needed to be done ... I have more freedom [now].” (Claude, 71, partnered)

This feeling of retirement being a time of freedom was consistent across interviews (Repetti and Calasanti 2017).

That said, respondents also clearly aligned themselves with the dictates of active ageing insofar as they expressed a belief that they needed to be active (Repetti 2015). In interviews, they made a point of discussing the number of activities in which they engaged now that they have this newfound freedom. To be sure, some of these are leisure activities:

“There are a lot of things to do when you are retired. I read. I read a lot. I devour books. And I do a lot of physical activities, always. Mountain treks. And swimming, currently [I swim] twice a week.” (Luc, 73, partnered)

But many of their activities have an economic referent: they are either paid, or are unpaid tasks that would need to be paid if these elders did not do them. In terms of paid activities, several interviewees engaged in political activities on a local or regional level, especially men. For instance, Jean had a political career, and although he’s retired from his major engagements, he still participates in several paid activities in the political arena where he used to be employed:

“I still have an agenda but it does not worry me too much anymore. Though, I still need to keep an eye on it when week starts! In order to know what is going to structure my week and what my [political] obligations are. In this sense, I see these activities as obligations even though I am retired.”

Similarly, other kinds of paid work are linked to previous jobs that retirees have continued on a part-time or as needed basis. Roger (partnered), for example, retired from his job as engineer and continued to work freelance for the same company from home. Some women also maintain partial employment activity, like Sara who works as a replacement nurse when needed in the hospital where she used to work. Such employment is reflected in recent Swiss data that finds that, in 2015, employment among those aged 65–74 stood at 18.1%, a 3.4% increase from 2010 (FSO 2016b). But, in contrast to Roger, Sarah (64, partnered) engages in this paid activity in addition to the domestic work that she accomplishes for her partner and as well as for her children and grandchildren:

“With my son, we have organised one day per week where I look after the two children and we have changed the day this year because of my [work as a replacement hospital nurse].”

Given the data that shows that the gender division of labour persists and even worsens with children despite the presence of a partner, it is not surprising to find that it also influences men’s and women’s experiences of retirement. In this sense, the purportedly new role of “active ager” is stratified by gender. This is evident, first, in the way that

retirees discuss the relationship between their new-found freedom and their leisure activities. Men say that they benefit from this freedom by being able to take time for their hobbies.

“When I retired, I felt that it was totally right because I had worked enough. And I had other organized activities. Leisure activities.” (Luc, 73, partnered)

In contrast, women emphasize the flexibility that their freedom gives them in organizing their domestic work, which they compare to their more stressful days when they needed to add it to their work in the labour market.

“Since I retired, I can take things as they come. For example, concerning the laundry. I have never had a washing day. But now, I can suddenly think ‘now, I have washing to do, I’m going to do it’. (...) When I have a moment of freedom, I do what needs to be done [around the house].” (Pierrette, 66, partnered).

There are obvious differences in the ways that Luc and Pierrette talk about their “free time.” For Luc, his withdrawal from the labour force means he can engage in leisure, without constraint. For Pierrette, it means that she can be leisurely in performing her domestic labour. The key here is the reality that, for Pierrette, retirement does not mean she has withdrawn from all labour but instead, only that which is paid. While her domestic labour may be unpaid, it is still economic activity that she feels compelled to do. As we have shown elsewhere, such gendered experiences of freedom in retirement accrue even when shaped by class (2017).

Unpaid Labour and Gender Relations

The discussion of domestic labour makes clear that the notion that women retirees cease work when they retire is inaccurate. But of course, unpaid work includes more than domestic labour; and here again, gender relations matter. Federal data on gender and unpaid work make clear that the volume of unpaid work in which men and women of all ages engage has changed little from 1997 to 2010, and that women perform disproportionate amount of this unpaid work throughout their lives. Specifically, over this 13-year span, women have consistently spent more than 5 billion hours per year on unpaid work, compared to 3 billion (at most) for men (Federal Statistical Office 2012b). These data certainly relate to the differences expressed in our interviews concerning how much more constrained women’s “free time” is relative to men’s. And while these data are not age-differentiated, they suggest that the overall amount of unpaid work has not risen as a result of active ageing policies, as an increase in the older age group should push up the overall amounts.

The data include three kinds of unpaid work, and when we examine these more closely we find that women did more care work and far more housework than men, but that men and women performed approximately equal amounts of volunteer work over time, again suggesting that active ageing policies have not changed these amounts. But gender differences also emerge when we look at the kinds of volunteerism in which men and women engage, with men’s activities more likely to be in the public realm, which is both more apparent and garners more status. However, these variations are not

reflected in active ageing policies. Again, when we look at age-undifferentiated data, we find that, in line with what Ilinca et al. (2016) found in terms of life course trends, including retirement, in other European nations, Swiss men and women differ in amounts and types of formal and informal volunteer activity. Specifically, Swiss men engage in more formal voluntary work than do women, and their participation tends to be higher than women’s in more visible, higher status organizations, such as sports associations, political groups, public service, and political parties. Swiss women’s formal volunteer participation is relegated more to such organizations as churches and charities. As well, women predominate in informal unpaid work: caring for others (relatives, both children and adults, as well as for friends) and providing other services to friends (Federal Statistical Office, nd). In comparison to formal volunteering, such work is less visible, often unrecognized and unrewarded.

Such gender inequalities were evident in the unpaid volunteer work in which both male and female retirees in our study engaged. Men were involved in more formal, public kinds of activities, that are both more visible and higher status, and women are engaged in more informal volunteering, in addition to domestic labour and caring for other people.

“Since I retired, I have begun to work [for free] for the tourist train in the vineyard, (...) and I am in charge of the finances of the association of seniors of my municipality.” (Claude, 71, partnered)

“Every two weeks, I welcome 5 children of the area for midday meal. These are children that cannot go back home for the midday break. I do this with a girlfriend. (...) And I also give French lessons for free in an association. This is every week.” (Romane, 69, single)

In addition to quality of life, the differences between these are important in relation to the push for retirees to engage in active ageing, as the kinds of informal work in which women perform tend to be in the private sphere and not publically visible and thus, not counted. And yet, it is precisely because women do this work that men are able to engage in the kinds of public active ageing activity for which they receive at least some status.

This is not to say that men never do informal unpaid work and women never do formal unpaid work. Romane’s statement above shows that she is also involved giving lessons for an organization. Similarly, Fred (64, partnered) explained that he doesn’t do more volunteer work because he, along with his wife, are already involved in helping his mother and mother-in-law with their homes. But the reality is that gender differences accrue to kinds of volunteer work in retirement. National data from 2010 (Federal Statistical Office 2012a, p. 11) show that among those men aged 65–74, nearly one-fourth engage in formal voluntary work, in contrast to 18% of women. These numbers diminish in the 75+ age group (though exactly when is unclear, as data are not broken down further), at a point which health might begin to be an issue (9% of men, 7% of women).

In the informal work sphere, more of those aged 64/65–74 engage in this kind of work than any other age group. That said, almost one-third of women in this age group perform such labour, more than any other gender or age group; 18.% of men

that age do. As with formal unpaid work, a drop off occurs after age 75, though interestingly, 11% of both women and men in this age group say they engage in informal voluntary work (Federal Statistical Office 2012a). Other data show that, when looking at unpaid work for those not residing in one's home, older women spent between 18 and 20 h a month on such work; by contrast, older men typically did not engage in such work (Federal Statistical Office 2010). Such unpaid work inside the home is, for the most part, not seen, and in fact limits data on informal labour.

Unpaid labour also might be undertaken as a grandparent. Research finds that in European contexts where mothers need to work and there are inadequate social policies for public childcare, grandparents are asked to provide childcare, often on a daily basis (Bordone et al. 2017). Contemporary family policy in Switzerland is such that families likewise must organize private strategies (Obinger et al. 2010), and grandparents thus play a role, providing an average of 1.5 days of care per week (Federal Statistical Office 2008; Le Goff et al. 2011). Our respondents' comments—both men and women—reflect their work in this regard, but women provide more of this care than do men. In addition to Sarah, whom we cited above, many others noted their care work for grandchildren:

“Now that I am retired, I don't have to wake up early, except when I have to bring my grandchildren to school [several days a week].” (Laure, 67, partnered)

“I go and visit my daughter (on Fridays). I do some ironing for her. We chat, we prepare the lunch for the children who come back from school at midday.” (Janine, 67, single)

“I have the chance to share moments with my grandchildren but I don't do it regularly. I have not accepted the mission to look after them on a fixed rhythm. My daughter-in-law tried to ask my help but I have not accepted. I don't do that.” (Marc, 63, partnered)

In the first two quotes, the women take regular responsibility for caring for grandchildren. By contrast, Marc makes clear that he enjoys spending time with his grandchildren, but avoids doing it regularly; it appears to be more on an as-needed basis.

Finally, as many of the previous quotes make clear, being an “active ager” is not a new concept to these retirees. In fact, some of our interviewees expressed their belief that the unpaid work that they were doing already was important, and that they felt that the social demand that they should contribute more was not legitimate:

“I believe that retirees contribute already [through unpaid work]!... Most of them do. Some carry meals to other old people ... Some couples that I know take their car once a week to distribute meals to others who cannot move ...But, oh! There are many of them who contribute! And I think of those who organise things for associations. They give their time to organise, send programs, and the like.” (Jeanne, 84, divorced)

“I see that there are incentives to retirees to make them engage into unpaid work. But I am not at all willing to volunteer. I don’t see myself go to any charity or to do any visits in care homes and go for walk with old people. Because I’ve got my own old people, my parents, to take care of and that’s enough for me.” (Marc, 63, partnered)

“As a retiree, I can help out when needed. And I am not sure that this is recognised. But if one would tell me, ‘you must do this, you must do that,’ I would rebel because at least I am at peace after having worked all my life and I want to decide what I want to do. I don’t want that as retirees, we [should feel like we] have to work in work houses.” (Sarah, 64, partnered)

They are aware of social expectations but clearly feel they have met these already, and are irritated by or even resentful of perceptions that they are not contributing already.

Discussion

Premised on what is thought to be good for the larger society and for elders themselves (Timonen 2016), active ageing encourages older adults to maintain engagement in paid work, but also social, cultural, and civic life. In policies, the predominant focus has been on paid work and, when retired, to engage in activities that have an economic referent (Walker and Maltby 2012). As with EU nations, these latter values are reflected in Swiss policies. At the same time, scholars have pointed to differences amongst elders based on education, class and gender, noting how these can influence opportunities—and motivations—for extending work life. In retirement, such differences have also emerged in participation in formal volunteer work. Given the preferred status accorded such unpaid work relative to others for assessing active ageing (Vidovičová 2017), those who do not participate as frequently—women—can be viewed as not contributing, or as vulnerable to lower quality of life. This in turn results in calls for their greater participation, under the assumption that this will result in greater social integration for older women (Foster and Walker 2013; Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010). However, such gender differences are based on survey data; what such volunteerism, or activities in general, mean to elders or women in particular are not clear. Given qualitative research that suggests that some elders would like to relinquish more roles rather than take on new ones (Clarke and Warren 2007), it is unclear if older women should in fact be encouraged to do more formal volunteering, or even if they need greater integration.

Our study focused on these latter issues in the Swiss context: retirees’ experiences of active ageing and productive activities, and how these might be shaped by gender. Our gender relations framework leads us to examine how gender influences labour across the life course as a way of understanding unpaid labour in retirement. As well, it leads us to question the impact of active ageing policies that have been developed based on men’s experiences (Corsi and Samek Lodovici 2010; Botti et al. 2011; Ilinca et al. 2016), including the hierarchy of unpaid work that accords greater value to those activities in which men engage.

Our qualitative data, bolstered by national statistics and the results of studies in other European countries, challenge some of the premises of Swiss active ageing policy in

particular, and the general thrust of active ageing, on several grounds. First, they make clear that these Swiss retirees, at least, do not need to be encouraged to be active in later life; they already are quite active and take pains to point this out, perhaps in efforts to align themselves with this discourse, to show that they are still valued members of society. That said, the active ageing discourse does not seem to have changed the level of unpaid work in which elders engage in retirement, as shown by national data trends on the population at large.

Second, the representation of retirement as “full of free time” takes on very different meanings in the experience of men and women, variances that are shaped by the unequal division of work across the whole life course. Women continue their domestic labour in retirement, which means that they have left only one job, that which is paid. Further, they may in fact increase their unpaid work in retirement.

In light of these findings, we argue that asking old people to be “active” by engaging in productive activities ignores two things. First, in addition to their increased labour force participation after retirement age, older men and women are already involved in formal and informal unpaid labour, and this has been true for some time, a reality acknowledged already (Groupe directeur mixte DFE/DFI 2005; Federal Council 2007; Federal Statistical Office 2016b). Older men and women engage in a fair amount of formal and informal volunteer work as well as help care for grandchildren, aiding mothers who work for pay. Yet, federal authorities argue that “people beyond retirement age can (or must) also make valuable contributions to society” (Federal Statistical Office 2012a). We suggest that an implicit ageism underlies this call, as it appears that, while policymakers acknowledge the economic value of unpaid work, retirees are still somehow seen to need encouragement to be “productive.” As well, the implicit youth bias in what counts as productive activity (Boudiny 2013) excludes leisure activities that can add to quality of life, including “passive” forms (Boudiny 2013), such as Luc’s reading.

Second, the notion that elders are unproductive rests on a system of gender inequality as well. Active-ageing policy sometimes tout unpaid labour but see it as less valuable as paid labour, and further values unpaid labour done within the public realm more than care work (Vidovićová 2017) and certainly more than housework. That women maintain their domestic labour, whether or not they perform other forms of unpaid work, goes ignored.

As well, our study makes clear that the informal work that older women do is extensive even if generally unrecognized. They engage in a variety of informal, unpaid activities that tend to be unseen as they are likely to occur in their homes, or in the homes of others; they are involved in less public forms of unpaid work than are men, including less formal volunteer work. But as our respondents made clear, retired women give up only one job, paid labour; they retain their domestic labour. This latter point is crucial as it is omitted from discussions of active ageing in general, and in Swiss discourse in particular.

Finally, the economic approach to active ageing has the greatest consequences for the oldest old as they are the group most likely to be experiencing health issues that would exclude them from valued activities. In this regard, old women might be seen to be especially disadvantaged. That is, Swiss women are overrepresented among those aged 80 and over: 263,690 of those over age 80 are women versus 153,177 men (Federal Statistical Office 2016c). At the same time, the kinds of labour in which they would most likely engage—domestic labour, including care work—is overlooked.

We argue that the new social role that Swiss retirees are being encouraged to assume is neither new nor necessarily positive, despite the belief by all parties in the importance of being active. In addition to ignoring the economic contributions already being accomplished by retirees, this active ageing push is oppressive on several grounds. First, it assumes that old people are not engaged (or engaged enough) in productive, if unpaid, work, despite the fact that Swiss society relies on their labour. Second, it ignores the domestic labour in which retired women already engage and then demands even more labour in retirement in order to prove that they are valuable citizens. The implicit assumption that retirees must be active in public, visible work and thus demonstrate their value to the larger society demands that retired women do additional work at a point in their lives where they might finally feel able to reduce their workload.

In conclusion, we urge scholars and policy makers to attend to gender relations, and to the roles male and female retirees already fill. Asking old people to be “active” makes unequal and additional demands on women. We argue that economic active ageing policies tend to accept prevalent constructions of productivity that are rooted in gender and age relations; and encouraging retirees to be productive and thus worthwhile citizens reinforces exploitation of these elders, especially old women, as it demands continued and additional labour to demonstrate one’s value to society.

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