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"I need time to recuperate, I really understand that:" benefits and constraints faced by older women in formal volunteer roles

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ABSTRACT

Older volunteers fulfill many social and cultural needs that strengthen social cohesion. Volunteering within an organization can provide adults new roles in later life, which can offer certain benefits. However, volunteering is unequally distributed in society, and older men and women do not play equal roles within organizations. Particularly, as compared to older men, older women perform more informal volunteering and are less likely to occupy managerial positions in formal volunteering. In this study, we draw on qualitative data on older people engaged in formal volunteering in French-speaking Switzerland to better understand how gender shapes volunteering in later life, paying particular attention to older female experiences of volunteering. We illustrate the gendered tensions between feeling responsible for carrying out informal volunteering while simultaneously searching for means of personal fulfillment and time to relax and rest. This study underlines the importance of better understanding the gendered constraints and opportunities that older women face in volunteering, as well as the implications for volunteer organizations and welfare policies in Switzerland and beyond.

KEYWORDS

older women; social roles; gender; care

Introduction

In many countries, older adults perform a significant part of volunteer work in an array of organizations. This *formal* engagement often accompanies *informal* contributions within families and communities (Andersen et al., 2022). Through these unpaid commitments, older adults actively contribute to social cohesion and to the shaping of "the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). At the same time, volunteering in an organization can allow people to maintain or create new roles while aging (Guillemard, 2002; Warburton & Winterton, 2010). It can reinforce their agency by providing them with a "sense of belonging (…) and feeling [to be] recognized as members of [the] community" (Jensen, 1998, p.5), which can contribute to limiting the risk of social isolation (Riley & Riley, 1991).

The distribution of volunteering is profoundly structured by intersecting systems of inequality. For instance, informal volunteer work in local communities is mostly performed by older women, while older men are primarily involved in formal volunteering in organizations where they more

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often occupy managerial positions (Calasanti, 2020; Join-Lambert et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2024). These inequities in the distribution of volunteer roles in later life are often overlooked, policy makers and scholars being likely to consider older adults as a homogeneous group, and to take a hypothetical model of male being as the norm, a stereotypical representation "which bears little resemblance to the realities of life for many older adults" (Stewart et al., 2024, p. 2059). In this context, the complexities and inequalities in older adults' lives and their commitment to society remain ignored. Thus, more attention to gender in volunteering in later life is needed to better understand volunteer practices in later life and "render visible the invisible work performed by older adults" (Stewart et al., 2024, p. 2059).

This article draws on a qualitative study of older people engaged in formal volunteering in French-speaking Switzerland to better understand how gender shapes volunteering in later life. We begin with a literature review on volunteering and gender in later life and then situate older adults' volunteering in the Swiss context. We then explain the methodology and sample before examining the narratives of the older volunteers. We illustrate the gendered tensions among older women between feeling responsible for carrying out informal volunteering while simultaneously searching for means of personal fulfillment and time to relax and rest. Finally, we underline the importance of a better understanding of the gendered constraints and opportunities that older women face in volunteering, as well as the implications for volunteer organizations and welfare policies in Switzerland and beyond.

Volunteering, choice and obligation

Volunteering ranges "on a continuum from [informal] mutual aid and occasional voluntary acts (…) to civic service and structured, formal volunteerism tied to institutions and organizations" (Martinez et al., 2011, pp. 25–26). These different forms of engagement create an uneven sense of choice and obligation. While informal volunteering, often related to care, may be associated with a sense of "normative obligation" (Tanigusci, 2006, p. 88), engagement in formal volunteering reflects a stronger notion of choice.

For decades, experts have been concerned with a decline in volunteering engagements, perceived to be a result of cultural and structural transformations—such as growing individualism and increased rates of women active in the labor market—and less availability for unpaid forms of contributions (Tanigushi, 2006). However, some feminist scholars stress that volunteer activities and roles, as well as the symbolic value they carry, are embedded in more complex cultural and gender structures. For instance, Taniguchi has highlighted that individuals' opportunities to engage in formal volunteering "are likely to be constrained by family care responsibilities" (2006:87), which continue to be predominantly assigned to women.

Similar trends are visible later in life. Older adults may have more time to choose formal volunteering, engage in new roles in the community, reinforce their agency and social integration, and challenge the vision of an age without a role (Guillemard, 2002; Warburton & Winterton, 2010). Simultaneously, gendered care obligations can continue to shape engagement, as discussed below.

The gendered dimensions of volunteering and care

Studies have highlighted continuation in gendered structures before and after retirement. Older women are typically more involved than men in both formal and informal personal care roles; they are also less likely to receive specific social recognition for these engagements, as the latter are considered "natural" for them and are in continuity with their former engagements. Conversely, older men's unpaid, formal, and informal commitments tend to be more symbolically and materially valued, for example when they hold elective positions in sports and politics, which is less frequent among older women (Einolf, 2011; Join-Lambert et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2024; Strauss, 2021).

In addition, reflecting the gendered division of work, older women's levels of formal volunteering are more likely than those of men to depend on other care obligations within households and families, as those are socially assigned to women (Kobayashi et al., 2019; Strauss, 2021; Taniguchi, 2006). Although intense caregiving can be emotionally draining for both men and women (e.g., Ugalde et al., 2012), the existing literature highlights that approaches to these informal commitments are gendered. For instance, Zygouri et al. highlight that men are more likely to "pragmatically perform this caring role as if executing a set of tasks keeping emotional aspects of care in the background" (2021, p. 8). Women, on their ends, are more likely to experience care with "sentimentality and emotions" (Zygouri et al., 2021, p. 8), to feel guilty for not responding to their caregiving responsibilities (Zygouri et al., 2021), and to have "a personal sense of obligation to others" (Andersen et al., 2022, p. 43).

In addition, the social pressure on older women that they should "attend primarily to the needs of their kin" (Taniguchi, 2006, p. 88), described by Andersen et al. (2022, p. 39) as a form of gendered "imposed" informal volunteering, "may constrain their efforts to help others" (Taniguchi, 2006, p. 88) through other forms of more formal engagement.

Therefore, care work plays a central role in the gendered distribution of volunteer engagements. Yet, while care is critical for making our world function (Fisher & Tronto, 1990) and often involves "potentially draining" (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2020, p. 1098) emotional and physical work, it remains "invisible and undervalued by the public" (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2020, p. 1890; see also Anchisi, 2008; Twigg, 2000). Faced with these emotional and physical pressures, women often try to manage through focusing "on the self" and "cultivating personal growth" (Zygouri et al., 2021, p. 9). Engaging in formal volunteering can thus be a form of "relief from care-giving responsibilities" (Stauss, 2021, p. 1566; Taniguchi, 2006). Below, we provide an overview of the roles played by volunteers in Switzerland and their gendered distribution in later life.

The swiss context: an overview

Volunteering plays a major role in Switzerland, with political institutions relying on the significant contributions of families and associations to ensure social cohesion as well as on elected officials' willingness to perform their mandates for free (Bonoli & Häusermann, 2011; Obinger et al., 2010; Paugam et al., 2020). Consequently, the levels of both formal and informal volunteering are high compared to other European countries, including in later life (Strauss, 2021).

However, as in other countries, volunteer roles in Switzerland are deeply gendered. For instance, Lamprecht et al. (2020) find that older women are more likely to engage in formal volunteering with low symbolic value, such as hands-on care or service delivery, in social and community organizations. In contrast, men are mostly active in what Lamprecht et al. call "masculine bastions" (2020, p.55), such as boards of trustees and cooperatives, where formal volunteer roles carry higher symbolic capital, such as elective positions (see also Federal Statistical Office, 2021b). At the same time, less visible and less valued informal volunteering within families and communities, such as grandparenting and caring for dependent people, is predominantly carried out by older women rather than older men (Lamprecht et al., 2020). Older women additionally continue to ensure a major part of domestic work in Switzerland (Federal Statistical Office, 2025).

In this paper, we investigate the interplay between gender and engagement in formal and informal volunteer roles, including care engagement, in later life in Switzerland. Specifically, we ask "how does the gendered division of care responsibilities shape the experiences of older formal volunteers in Switzerland, particularly women?"

Data and methods

This study draws on a research project investigating volunteer retirement in two urban and rural regions of French-speaking Switzerland between December 2019 and December 2022 (Fassa et al.,

2025). We collected qualitative data through 23 focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015) involving 103 older adults, 39 of whom participated in individual semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015). Most participants filled out a life-history calendar (Morselli & Berchtold, 2023) wherein they indicated important dates and events about their volunteering and family histories, allowing us to identify interactions between these spheres. Through focus groups, we collected information on participants' opinions on volunteering. We used an interview guide with questions about the advantages and disadvantages––as well as on the social recognition––of formal volunteering. Participants could talk freely and discuss the topics that mattered to them, and we used follow-up questions to deepen the themes addressed (e.g., the lack of recognition of older people's contributions or the role of volunteering in preventing social isolation in later life). Semi-structured interviews took place after the focus groups and lasted between one and three hours. We used an interview guide with topics such as motivations and experiences of volunteering, as well as our interviewees' life history calendars, to go deeper into conversations about their formal and informal volunteer roles, the types of activities they performed in these contexts, links with their family relations, and so on.

As the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, we reorganized our research timeline according to national measures (e.g., lockdowns), reduced the number of participants in the focus groups, and ensured that all focus group and interview participants had access to healthcare protection. Therefore, some focus groups and interviews were conducted online.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted in French, recorded, and transcribed, and the data were anonymized. To ensure participants' informed consent (Miller & Bell, 2002), we solicited their oral and written formal consent to participate in the study at different stages of the research process.

All participants volunteered regularly for at least one organization and were between 53 and 88 years of age, with an average age of 72. Of the participants, 61 were female and 42 were male. Fifty-one participants were married, and the rest (mostly women) were divorced, separated, widowed, or single. All but two were Swiss and spoke French or another national language (German or Italian), but were comfortable expressing themselves in French.

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of funding and home institutions of the researchers. These institutions confirmed that our study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and that our methodology was commensurate. Pseudonyms were employed to ensure confidentiality, and modifications were made to safeguard interviewees' anonymity. Additionally, as explained below, interviewee participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals had the option to withdraw at any point.

We analyzed the data in two stages. First, we conducted an inductive analysis of the data by reading the transcripts and life history calendars several times and identifying redundant themes (e.g., starting or stopping a volunteer engagement in relation to specific family events). Second, we compared our datasets to identify dimensions that varied or were similar between participants and searched for factors that could explain these differences and similarities, such as gender (Estes, 2000). We focused on the role of care contributions in participants' experiences of volunteering (Andersen et al., 2022). Following research in feminist studies (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000; Sosulski et al., 2010), we systematically compared male and female interviews by focusing on the articulation of formal and informal volunteering, especially informal care responsibilities, which was a major theme in women's narratives, while men rarely addressed this question. Observing that a couple of women talked extensively about challenges in articulating formal and informal care, we focused on these women's narratives to better understand these complexities. In this article, we focus on women corresponding to this profile, who had filled in a life history calendar, participated in focus groups, and been interviewed individually. This allowed us to obtain sufficient data for an in-depth analysis.

Findings

At all stages of our study, the findings suggest an uneven impact of informal care responsibility on the experiences of older male and female volunteers. First, in the life-history calendars, most women (78%) and a minority of men (43%) indicated family care commitments. All women with grandchildren mentioned them as a source of care, whereas most men did not. Life-history calendars also reflect a continuity in the priority given to care responsibilities over formal volunteering among women before and after retirement. For instance, women tended to stop volunteering in organizations when they had new children or grandchildren. This trend was less visible among men in our sample.

Second, men generally felt it was legitimate to set boundaries in their formal and informal volunteering, and to keep time for leisure activities and relaxing. For instance, Charles intended to establish clear limits in his formal volunteering, saying that he did "not want to do more than one day per week," and that was "well enough." He had a similar approach to his grandparental role, stating that he had "always refused" to be available to take care of his grandchildren regularly: "No way! There is no way that I will be constantly available for my children." Most men had a similar approach or did not express concerns about managing their formal and informal engagements and personal time. In contrast, women talked significantly about the difficulties in managing formal volunteering with their informal engagements, especially care duties. They also expressed more complex emotional tensions than men between willing to take care of others, while simultaneously searching for ways to focus on their needs and have time to relax.

Below, we further analyze how some women, especially those with heavy family care duties, talked about the influence of their informal care responsibilities on their formal volunteer roles and why they wanted to continue their formal volunteering despite their heavy care obligations.

Challenges in setting boundaries for informal care duties

Most female participants had experienced lifelong informal care commitments. Some played particularly intense roles in their families, managing care work for several generations and in various family settings. These commitments continued after retirement, leaving them with significant informal family obligations. For example, Annick was a 65-year-old widow with a partner who lived separately. Her professional and volunteer lives revolved around caregiving responsibilities. When she had her children, she was primarily responsible for caring for them and could not rely on her husband, who "worked day and night" and was seldom present at home. Later, she cared for her aging parents until death, as well as her husband, who had been sick for several years before he passed away. At the time of the study, she and her partner had grandchildren from their previous marriages. Reflecting on her life-long experience of care duty, she explained that she would prefer not to have more grandchildren because "I have done enough." Throughout her adult life, Annick formally engaged with several organizations involved in the cultural and social activities she enjoyed. During certain periods, she stopped these activities because she needed to save time and energy to take care for people around her. For instance, when her husband fell ill, she still had children to raise and her older parents needed support; thus, speaking of her previous formal commitments, she added: "It was clear that I could not do everything all the time."

Catherine, aged 71, was a former social worker. She lived with her husband, had adult children, and her grandchildren lived close by. Like Annick, Catherine's life history was shaped by care responsibilities, including for her grandchildren:

> I have frequently cared for my grandchildren, assisting them with outings during the week and on weekends. However, now that they are attending school, I no longer need to provide care for them during the weekdays.

Because of her daughter-in-law's working schedule (she did not mention her son's schedule), she kept looking after her grandchildren and adapted her organization of the week to their schooltime schedules:

> The children have Wednesday mornings off at school or Thursday mornings off for primary school children (…). This was a problem because my daughter-in-law works the same hours.

When her grandchildren grew up and did not need much care from her, she had spare time. However, her mother then started to increasingly need support, and she dedicated "quite a lot of time visiting her" until she died. While taking care of her mother, she visited her daily at the nursing home, which was an opportunity for her to interact with other people outside her household.

Unlike Catherine and most of the female participants, Patricia did not have grandchildren. However, she cared for her two parents when they were older, even though she had a full-time job and many other responsibilities. Since her parents died and retired, Patricia took care of several neighbors who needed support in their daily lives. Although she felt that providing such support was important, she also found it difficult to set boundaries for this type of role:

> Around me, there is a neighbor in the house I take care of daily. She is (…) absolutely alone. Twice, I found her on the floor in her home, and I had to call the ambulance to get her hospitalized. For months, I went every day to take care of her. I handle her payments, and I try to avoid doing her grocery shopping because it is becoming too much for me… it is heavy. It is a lot. Then, with my own health issues, I really had to slow down.

Francine was a 65-year-old single woman at the time of the interview and was active in an organization providing support to deprived people. She said that she first could not think of any volunteering apart from the informal care engagements she had and then realized the many care duties she had accumulated over time:

> Francine: "I (…) realized that I had still taken care of my mother. (…) And then, it is true that I helped my sister with the children too, when they were very little."
>
> Interviewer: "OK, so you did that? And then, how did you come to get involved with this organization? Is it a wish that resurfaced at that moment?"
>
> Francine: "No, I mean, it happened automatically. It just happened like that; life makes you… (…) I do not know how to explain. But what I mean is that life makes it so that suddenly you find yourself helping people, but I took care of these family members again a little later. (…) Because circumstances made it so, or life made it so… that is just how it is."

Christine was 76 years old and had retired a little over ten years earlier . She lived with her husband, a former local general practitioner who had worked most of his career in their village. She had children and grandchildren. Christine's life revolved around care and was available to others. Throughout her adult life, she had been involved in various unpaid engagements as a helper in her husband's professional duties, as a mother, and in her family and other circles. She explained that "in general, but especially in the countryside," being a doctor's wife often entailed social obligations, which she fulfilled well. Besides her formal volunteering, Christine's weeks were filled with providing care and support to people in her family and the neighborhood, describing herself as "a 'carer;' because, when there is a problem, I come to the rescue." She visited a close family member with mental health issues several times per week. She explained, "we phone each other almost every day." She also did grocery shopping for an older, isolated woman in her neighborhood who lived next to her son but did not get support from him: "He does not look after his mother" because of her "bad character." She also cared for her grandchildren every week according to her "daughter-in-law's working hours" (similarly to Catherine previously mentioned, Christine did not talk about her son's work schedule, suggesting that her daughter-in-law was the obvious person in charge of childcare in their household). Since "the children are older, I

just go and make their lunch." She also took them to school or sports activities, etc.: "And [when] my daughter-in-law (…) comes home (…) I can leave."

Colette, a 72-year-old woman, was a widowed and lived alone. She had children and grandchildren. Providing care to her family played a particularly large role in her life. She served as the main care provider for her children. She also took care of her husband, who had been ill for several decades. She had hoped that helping him as much as possible would make him happy. However, this approach did not work satisfactorily:

> He was afraid of everything, he wanted to have tests for everything, and he did not distance himself from his illness. Therefore, the reason that I wanted to do so did not work. So, there you go. And then he died.

The mental burden of being with her husband leading up to his death caused her to take a break from volunteering at an organization:

> I had to support him all the way; I mean, I had to be there for the appointments, and then I could not keep enough distance from the children, and everything weighed on me. I felt like crying all the time; it was just awful. So, I stopped [volunteering at one specific organization] and never went back. It was too complicated.

While her husband was sick, she also took care of her children and grandchildren: "I mainly looked after three of them." She had more than ten grandchildren around the same year and had to impose limits to her care work in order to have enough time for all of them, "because I cannot divide myself into [several persons]." Meanwhile, she took care of both her parents, who had long-term illnesses. After her mother passed away, she accompanied her father through his health problems right up to his death: "I started to look after my dad because he was all alone, so I went to see him every day at his home." Although she has a brother, she was the only one who supported her parents in their end of life because "my brother cannot stand hospitals." Being alone in this "was difficult," she said. "Between [my husband's] illness, the children to look after, and then my mum to visit, it was a lot. I was on the road all the time."

When she participated in our study, she volunteered weekly at an organization that cared for children while looking after her grandchildren. She described herself as a "volunteer commission agent; well, I have to do a lot of things; that is all." She hoped to do more formal volunteering and had recently been asked to organize meals for older adults in another organization , "and then I could also visit an older person once a week." While she wanted to respond positively, she struggled to find time for more engagement:

> My problem is that I have to be available to my children because they are always phoning me and asking, "can you do this?" And then I have to go on an errand for tomorrow evening, and then I have to go to the professional clothes shop to (…) order clothes [for my son who does not have time to shop for himself].

Below, we see that formal volunteering could be a space for our participants to develop their own interests, which is why they tried to maintain these activities despite the challenges of managing many engagements.

Formal volunteering to cultivate new roles

Women in our study often found in volunteering in an organization a mean to cultivate new roles in addition to their informal care duties; they often engaged with organizations providing social and community services to vulnerable groups. For instance, since her retirement, Annick had volunteered weekly at two organizations. One involved charity sale, and the other provided personal hands-on care for people in precarity. She received no material or economic compensation for her work but found substantial satisfaction with these engagements. It was a way for her to "value a new role," "discover new things," and meet people:

> I have always been interested in meeting other people, so once I had finished my work, (…) I continued my quest to meet people, and that is part of the reason I volunteer [in this organization]. I am completely fulfilled precisely because I interact with other people.

She explained in greater detail how formal volunteering allowed her to interact with others and discover new social realities, bringing her a sense of openness and self-fulfillment:

> I have always been driven by an interest in others and meeting people, so once my work was over, (…) I continued my quest to meet people, and that is part of it—the whole volunteering thing. I feel completely fulfilled because I interact with others.

Catherine expressed similar motivations for volunteering in an organization despite her limited time. Once her mother passed away, she had more time for herself but also felt lonelier, as she was used to interacting with care workers daily when visiting her mother at the nursing home. She now had fewer opportunities to interact with people outside the family:

> It made me feel a kind of… I had not imagined it before, but I lost contact with the staff I used to see three or four times a week. We would always chat. It created a kind of a break… from one thing to another. Well, I still have a husband at home, but I mean, there is still an activity that has disappeared.

She decided to take up a new formal volunteer role in the soup kitchen in her area, where she provided hands-on care and cooking. Like Annick, she felt this would provide her more opportunities to meet others:

> [After my mother passed away], I said to myself, 'well, now you get it; you have to go to the soup kitchen' [laughs softly]. It happened like that because I was available, and I also needed to see other people.

In addition to providing opportunities to make new contacts, volunteering in an organization was also a way for these women to perform their identity by putting their values into practice outside of family obligations, and feeling like their contributions were more recognized. When asked about her formal volunteering, Francine said that she felt engaging in an organization was bringing her something back, socially and symbolically, and that she realized that her contributions mattered to those she helped:

> It brings me a lot. Because there, at [the organization], you give, you receive—you receive. (…) You receive from the people who are there, from their characters, their personalities. It is not like a work exchange in which you offer something in return. (…) However, in return, I receive a lot. (…) And these are exchanges on both sides.

Christine found that her formal volunteer engagement allowed her to feel helpful and perform values that she always considered important. Since her children were small, she had been involved with all sorts of charities in her village church and felt that participating in the community through formal engagement was important:

> I sewed for the parish (…) They came looking for me. I did not mind it, because I have always had a practical side. I have always knitted and sewn, either for myself or for my children and so on, and in the end, I found it rather nice (…) and the money would be invested either for the parish or for an activity. (…) For children, for good causes.

After retiring, she got involved in weekly formal volunteer activities in several organizations and found that her rewards were "pleasure and recognition" as well as "knowing interesting new people." She also found that her role as a volunteer in an association gave the feeling of being useful to others, rather than being considered a "useless" old person:

> Let us say that [one aspect] is "making sense" and would be more of a social aspect. In my case, and I think for most retirees as well, meaning comes from feeling useful. Because very often, with age, there are situations of loneliness where contact with others and being able to do something for them—whether through institutional or family volunteering—give the impression of being useful. So, we do not feel like old wrecks left on the side of the road.

Patricia saw formal volunteering as an opportunity to maintain a role outside of her house and family after retirement, which she found rewarding; it made her feel good:

> I think that volunteering is still a continuation of a certain activity, even if it is not an intellectual activity. But it is a certain activity that gives (…) a lot of satisfaction.

Finally, Colette had little time to volunteer in organizations, because most of her time was consumed by family care obligations. While she maintained some formal engagement, she mostly talked about her hope of finding a more comfortable balance in her commitments and more control over her time. Below, we further explore how Colette, Patrica, and others talked about challenges of finding time for themselves, and the importance formal volunteering played in this regard.

Finding a time to breath

Women with particularly heavy care responsabilities in our research project expressed concerns about finding time to relax and rest from their mental and physical burden. Volunteering in an association could allow them to do so, if their roles were more practical than mental. Thus, formal engagements could help fight emotional and mental fatigue that accompanies informal care. For instance, Annick liked her formal commitment because her role in the organization involved executing things more than making decisions. She appreciated not having to worry about the people around her and avoiding the pressure that care responsibilities involve. Thus, volunteering in a formal setting was a way for her to relax while socializing. At the same time, Annick's life experience taught her that she had to manage her energy: "I do not know what life has in store for me (…). I need time to recuperate; I really understand that." She wanted to ensure to limit her formal engagements and to keep "recovery slots." Therefore, while she enjoyed her commitments, she did not want to add more, "so as not to have too many obligations."

Catherine found in her formal engagements a "breath of fresh air" in her daily routine, "a day out" of her household in activities that did not involve worrying about others. She liked doing "simple things" at the soup kitchen where she volunteered, where "they tell me what to do and I do it." She no longer wanted the "mental fatigue" that she had always experienced in her family responsibilities:

> And here [at the soup kitchen], there is nothing to complain about, and I am very happy. I obey; we try to obey. (…) We do simple things, which do not require any training, that is it!

Patricia also found a way of managing her time through formal volunteering. She noted that the organization where she volunteered allowed her great freedom in deciding the amount of time she wanted to invest, as opposed to her informal engagements, for which she found it much more difficult to set boundaries:

> With people in my private life—like my neighbor, for example—there are no limits. I struggle to set them myself. Because this lady lives in the same house, even when I do not go to see her, I feel guilty for not going. I tell myself that instead of sitting around doing nothing or watching TV, I can spend some time with her. I hate this feeling. However, eventually, it is about setting boundaries. I thought that being in this organization (…) could help. (…) There, feeling guilty is not a topic at all.

Throughout her life, Christine tried to save enough time for her family: "I [never] took too much, to keep a balance. I always (…) said, 'I will work and then bring up my children,' and that was my priority." She also learned that she had limited energy for formal engagements, in addition to family care duties. We have had three children, so you have to look after them too." Later in life, she found that maintaining balance among all her commitments continued to be challenging. For instance, she found that some of her formal roles were too demanding because organizations lack volunteers, and "it is really difficult." Therefore, she tried to say no to things that she did not like or did not have energy for but found it challenging.

Colette felt that she was constantly asked for help and struggled a great deal to find time for herself. Although she hoped to save time and energy, she felt that nobody else was available to help her family.

> I have many troubles, even with my second daughter. She has three daughters and is experiencing a complicated divorce. So, I am a "volunteer," so to speak (…). I am constantly being asked to do all sorts of things, and sometimes I struggle to find myself [laughs softly] and, to say, to move forward on my own path. Sometimes, I would like to go on a trip; on the last trip, I would go to Africa—I love Africa—and then I would stay there until I die one way or another (…). But I do not dare do that because of my daughters and granddaughters. I do not think it would be accepted. So, there you have it; it's complicated.

Her narrative of her family obligations reflects the complex feelings that other women experienced as well, at various levels. First, while she wanted to help her kin, she suffered because of lack of time to herself and social recognition of her efforts:

> I would like (…) from time to time, to be recognized for (…) what I want and not to be asked to do something. (…) I do not blame people because I am the one who made the choice, but it is not always easy.

Second, faced with this major help required in her family, she struggled to say no to requests, a difficulty that she linked to her own emotional vulnerabilities.

> I think that [feeling guilty] will always be my weakness. I do not feel that anyone can truly love me. (…) So, there you go.

Finally, Colette's significant family engagements also meant that she could not perform formal volunteering as much as she wanted because her care duties left her with limited time for herself.

Discussion

This study drew on a qualitative research project on volunteering in later life in Switzerland. It aimed to better understand the interplay of gender and formal and informal volunteer roles among older adults. We sought to examine how the gendered division of care responsibilities shapes the experiences of older formal volunteers, particularly women who, as visible in the literature, are more involved in informal volunteering than men (Taniguchi, 2006).

Our findings highlight that older women's experiences of formal volunteering are strongly shaped by the gendered division of care responsibilities. In particular, they often have significant care obligations within their household, family, and neighborhood and must adjust their other commitments to these informal engagements that they consider a priority. Additionally, managing these informal engagements can remain a source of emotional and physical struggle, with older women continuing to find it difficult to reject informal care demands. By doing so, they reflect what Andersen et al. (2022, p. 39) describe as "imposed volunteering," a type of constraint seldom observed among men.

At the same time, even when faced with heavy informal care loads, older women wish to maintain or start volunteer roles in organizations. They feel that this type of engagement may improve their well-being as it offers more visible participation in society (Dury et al., 2025). Formal volunteering can also serve as an opportunity to interact with people outside the household and family at large and foster a sense of openness and self-fulfillment. Through volunteering in organizations, older women additionnally find social recognition for contributions they consider socially important, but which often go unnoticed or unappreciated in other areas of life, such as in households, families, and neighborhoods.

Our findings also suggest that older women struggle to find time to relax or even rest as their informal care obligations demand substantial mental and physical efforts. They may find formal volunteer opportunities as a means of taking a break from informal care, especially when engaging in roles without high levels of responsibility and that do not impose a significant mental

burden. However, finding time outside of providing services to others can be a struggle, as illustrated by the case of Colette in our study. Colette stopped some of her formal volunteer engagements to support her children and grandchildren, who faced social and economic hardships and had no one else to rely on. Consequently, her family commitments drained her time and energy, leaving her unable to take a break, despite her hopes of doing so. Although she enjoyed volunteering in organizations, she could not engage at the level she wanted because she prioritized her family care needs. Colette's case clarifies that participating in society through volunteering can be a privilege. Women may value new roles and find freedom in these engagements. Nevertheless, their ability to do so can be constrained by other informal care engagements that they consider a priority, owing to a need to fulfill gender norms that ascribe them the burden of caring first for their family (Andersen et al., 2022; Dury et al., 2025).

Conclusion

In Switzerland, as in other countries, older adults play a major role in fostering social cohesion through volunteer engagement in organizations. At the same time, for them, it can be a way to participate in society and maintain social inclusion in retirement, when the risks of social isolation are greater (Fischer et al., 2025). However, older men and women occupy uneven volunteer roles, reflecting the complex impacts of gender inequalities in later life. This study has provided a means to better understand the social forces that explain this situation.

The gendered nature of care is a key factor in the inequal roles of older volunteers. Older women's time can be significantly filled with informal care engagements within the family, household, and neighborhood, which they often consider a priority over other activities. They continue to face more care demands than men, reflecting the persistence of the assignment of care work to women throughout later life (Calasanti, 2020).

Consequently, older women have less time available for formal volunteering than older men. Nevertheless, they sometimes want to maintain or start formal engagements, even if they have significant informal care commitments. For them, formal volunteering can represent a space to experience freedom from social obligations such as family care. They typically seek roles in organizations that do not require them to take responsibility for others, and do not involve greater mental burden. These engagements can also provide opportunities for enjoyment, socialization, and self-fulfillment.

At the same time, the fact that older women are more likely to occupy non-managerial roles in organizations suggests ways in which gender power relations continue to shape life after retirement: older women have fewer opportunities to take up managerial roles in organizations than men, who can count on networks they built before retirement (Viriot-Durandal & Reguer, 2011); in addition, older women have less time and mental availability than men to take on managerial roles. Thus, men, both pre- and post-retirement, not only have more opportunities to occupy roles with responsibilities in organizations but also have more free time and mental availability to do so. In volunteering, as in other social spheres, gender structures do not stop with aging; they continue to significantly shape the lives of men and women.

Our observations suggest that, while seeking more gender equality in recruiting older adults for managerial positions in volunteer organizations, finding older women for these roles may be challenging. Exploring ways to relieve women of some family responsibilities could help attract them to leadership positions, for instance, by offering them both formal volunteer opportunities and caregiving support. Developing such policies through collaboration between policymakers and organizational leaders could serve multiple purposes: enhancing older women's agency, expanding volunteer organizations' capacities to recruit participants, and recognizing the essential but unpaid contributions of older women. Policymakers and organizational leaders could thus help reduce gender inequalities later in life and reinforce their volunteering workforce resources.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not provide written consent for their data to be shared publicly; therefore, owing to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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