



Grandparenting and Retirement: Re-thinking Roles, Reciprocity, and Responsibility in Milan and Yaoundé

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Abstract

In this article we comparatively explore experiences and notions of retirement in two ethnographic sites of Milan, Italy, and Yaoundé, Cameroon, by paying attention to how grandparenting is perceived and practiced in relation to kinship roles and responsibilities. The paper draws on comparative insights from the ASSA project and focuses on Walton's research in Milan and Awondo's in Yaoundé, carried out between 2018–2019. The paper explores how both retirement and grandparenting can be embedded in social and moral narratives, gendered distinctions, and various idealisations, while also reflecting individual positionalities and economic roles and responsibilities. Our discussion moves beyond the family context as a unit for analysis, considering how grandparents enact care in urban communities and related online environments such as WhatsApp groups. After a brief introduction to the two field sites, the first section of the paper addresses retirement in Milan and Yaoundé, before turning to consider how grandparenting and retirement is linked to wider conceptions of obligation and freedom in these two different urban neighbourhood contexts.

Keywords: Retirement; Grandparenting; Reciprocity; Kinship; Milan; Yaoundé; Online Communities

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New Beginnings: Being Retired and Becoming a Grandparent in Milan and Yaoundé

Milan and Yaoundé are two of the ten field sites of the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project. Awondo lived for 16 months in Yaoundé (pop. 4 million), the capital city of Cameroon in west Central Africa. He mainly worked in a district called Mfandena, a location where a large number of middle-class civil servants live.¹ Gaining entry to the field was primarily carried out through periodic encounters in the city via friends and other acquaintances. The youngest person Awondo spoke to was 45 years, with the majority of his participants being around 60-65 years. In this city of civil servants, turning 60 marks the age of retirement for certain occupations, such as medical specialists and those who have worked in the military sector. From an institutional point of view, therefore, there is a clear dividing line for retirement age. From the perspective of local norms, practices, and imaginations of seniority, the mark of retirement for some of the workers in the country's formal sector thus also becomes a symbolic dividing line. This is relevant to our study because in narratives of ageing, retirement was often regarded as a new beginning. The dominant discourses could be described by the fact that "the new retired want to have a place on their own if possible, but they also want to be close to those with whom they are related (their parents, siblings and children)" (Elber 2018, 78).

Walton spent 16 months living in a mixed-income inner-city neighbourhood in Milan that since around 2016 has been popularly termed NoLo ('North of Loreto,' referring to the area north of Piazzale Loreto). The area has a diverse urban landscape and population having undergone dramatic development in the second half of the twentieth century, before which the northeastern districts of the city were heavily industrial. In the years following WWII, NoLo became a hub for people from outside Milan who came to work and live in the area, first from other parts of Italy and later from abroad. Until the 1970s, NoLo was predominantly a working-class neighbourhood, with a mix of recent migrants and settled communities including different kinds of labourers (Agustoni and Alietti 2014). In more recent years the area has undergone slow but significant gentrification with an increasing middle-class presence. Participants in Walton's research were from a range of backgrounds and socio-economic contexts from across Italy, including Sicily and Apulia in the south, and from countries including Egypt, Peru, the Philippines and Afghanistan. The majority of the research participants had been living in Milan specifically or Italy generally for approximately ten years and had acquired residency or citizenship. The age range in the Milan research was between 40 and 85, based on the range of people Walton came to know across the neighbourhood during the course of fieldwork. Due to the diversity in age and background of research participants, Walton's research focused more broadly on existential questions. These questions concerned topics such as the life course, how people were all variously navigating questions of social and economic roles and responsibilities, and their sense of place and belonging, particularly where people had migrated to the city or the country in recent years. In both the sites discussed in this article, the city-backdrop and its

digital iterations in terms of online communities formed a central focal point of the study. Specifically, we examine how both grandparenting and retirement played out in these field sites while interweaving relevant insights from the other ASSA field sites throughout the discussion. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.

Specifically, in Yaoundé, there is a lack of scholarship regarding social class and several questions that have implications for the changing nature of the family, and shifting expectations of being a social elder, have remained unaddressed. In an attempt to understand retirement, questions on the changing meaning of a social elder remain. As will be discussed later with regards to the theme of reciprocity in grandparenting in Yaoundé, many middle-class retirees still struggle to access services and have to rely on many people who live around them and who continue to engage in reciprocity for many purposes. This is particularly expressed in the tasks undertaken by grandparents which reflect several families' activities such as caring about grandchildren to support their working child. Similar observations also relate to Milan, where retired grandparents can take on significant amounts of childcare duties in later life, and which may be the only feasible option their adult children have for childcare if they are to continue participating in the paid labour force (Sarti 2010; Facchini 2016; Zamberletti, Cavrini, and Tomassini 2018).

The theoretical framework for this paper lies within the comparative anthropology of ageing and the life course (Sokolovsky 2020), and specifically the global, cross-disciplinary scholarship on ageing, care and grandparenting within the social sciences. This paper builds on themes including shifting socio-economic circumstances that affect access to pensions during retirement (and the notion of retirement itself), informal caregiving, trans-regional and transnational movement and mobility, and the uptake of internet communication technologies (ICTs) for transnational care and communication (Ahlin 2018; Pype 2016). A main factor affecting the practice and experience of grandparenting globally today relates to longer life expectancy, where many regions are experiencing a "golden age of grandparenting" (Miller and Garvey 2022, 979). As with the study of ageing, global research on grandparenting has increasingly looked to comparative research insights in attending to the significance of cultural context (Arber and Timonen 2012; Schwalb and Hossein 2017; Timonen 2018). Dominant themes within scholarship on grandparenting include childcare support provided by grandparents to adult children (Miller and Garvey 2022), the movement of grandparents to cities to help with childcare, and the kinds of practical and sometimes financial support (in the form of meeting education expenses) provided by grandparents (Bruckermann 2017). The global literature on grandparenting therefore highlights the grounding of grandparenting in long-standing family traditions and intergenerational family support (Sokolovsky 1997; Fry 2000; Lamb 2009). Contemporary scholarship also notes how these practices are being reconfigured in light of social, economic and technological changes including Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Miller and Madianou 2012; McKay 2016; Ahlin 2018). In this context, the notion of "care transcending distance" (Miller et al 2021),² a continuation of the idea of "care at a distance" (Pols 2012) through digital communications finds particular prominence across the ASSA field sites, as we shall go on to discuss later in the article.

The core question in contemporary grandparenting of who is undertaking the 'caring' and who is 'being cared for' involves complex and shifting expectations between older adults and their children. Factors such as the presence or absence of grandchildren, and the physical and mental health, and frailty of the grandparents, play significant roles in configuring global notions of the 'protectors' and the 'protected.' Concepts such as the "sandwich generation" (Chisholm 1999) have long spoken to these issues, referring to the complex flows of care by persons in midlife living between or 'sandwiched' between ageing parents and younger children, simultaneously. Research on this phenomenon in the US and Europe has highlighted associated health and socio-economic concerns with the sandwich generation, including anxiety and

depression linked to emotional strain, financial burdens, and conflict caused by multiple care roles (Chisholm 1999; Riley and Brown 2005; Rubin and White-Means 2009). This experience has been particularly heightened among women (Barnett, Marshall, and Singer 1992) whose role as primary caregivers often stem from entrenched societal and familial expectations.

Moreover, where grandparenting today becomes a transnational practice modulated by digital technologies, ideas of who is caring and being cared for become complicated further. Julia Pauli and Franziska Berdorf's (2018) research on retirement with Mexican migrants and their families in the US provides relevant theoretical insights on this theme with their notion of "kin-place," defined as the "spatial ordering of family transitions" (Pauli and Berdorf 2018, 50) Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's (1996) work on place, Pauli and Berdorf describe kin-place as the "reconfigurations of order and belonging of kin through place-making" (Pauli and Berdorf 2018, 50). This can be seen when grandparenting becomes a practice of staying connected with children and grandchildren, involving particular re-configurations of care labour such as keeping in touch as expressions of care. Tanja Ahlin's (2018) research amongst Indian transnational families relatedly highlights the cultural complexities of inter-generational care and communication practices, seen in how younger people keep in touch with elders within transnational family contexts. This theoretical mapping of care entanglements also reflects what Deirdre McKay (2016) conceptualises in her work with Filipino migrants as "archipelagos" of global care networks.

Turning to our two field sites of Yaoundé and Milan, we saw local complexities of these issues playing out in particular ways where existing models of care are transformed in light of socio-economic, demographic and technological changes. In Yaoundé, grandparenting was often described as a "family obligation" (*obligation familiale*), "helping children" (*aide aux enfants*) or as "parental duty" (*devoir de parent*). Some participants used the term "family work" (*travailler la famille*) to describe this. All of these expressions show, in part, the centrality of these expectations in the lives of the people Walton met, reflecting what has been called the "intergenerational contract" in the social sciences (Kakwani and Subbarao 2005). In Yaoundé, the tacit contract that obliges the elderly to take care of grandchildren follows several trajectories. There are those who have autonomy, property, a pension, and live in their homes. These grandparents typically take care of the grandchildren in their own houses on the weekends, rarely doing so during the week, except for exceptional situations such as their child's sickness. Then there is the case of people living between the city and the village, a scenario encountered much more frequently among women than men. In these cases, care duties are fulfilled in two ways: grandparents are either asked to "go up to the city" (*monter en ville*) to temporarily take care of the grandchildren or, depending on the standard of living of the children and the physical health of the grandparents, they can also live with the grandchildren while having direct custody over them. This is usually while the grandchildren's parents are at work, but older people can also perform care duties through supervised custody, meaning caring for the grandchildren is still their responsibility, but only indirectly, as it would be for a housekeeper or someone else delivering a service for a particular family (Pype 2016a). There were also other scenarios within families where all the members of a family had an income and had to organise care for their older parents. For example, some participants aged 40 and over who had stable social situations and sufficient income often found themselves having to rent a house to one of their (living) parents. This was described as "keeping him/her close to them in Yaoundé," an expression referring to the parents' health problems and the responsibility to take care of them (Maharaj 2012; Pype 2016b).

In the case of Italy, grandparenting is also embedded in family obligations, though regional distinctions and socio-economic changes associated with urbanisation and migration influence contemporary expectations around care. Where Walton's research with grandparents was undertaken predominantly

with women in Milan, the role of the grandmother will be particularly considered here. Images and idealisations of *nonna*, meaning grandmother in standard Italian, have different associations and connotations in different geographical and social contexts. A range of fields, from folklore traditions such as songs, poems, and lullabies, to memoirs, films, material culture, and souvenirs all illustrate how notions of *nonna* have been romanticised in nostalgic terms over time as a wise and caring maternal figure, as linked to childhood perceptions (Del Giudice 1988, 289). Today, older adult women across Italy with significant responsibilities in later life are balancing working lives, retirement, and childcare provision. Many grandparents who provide this kind of care to grandchildren are older today than in earlier decades because of later retirement and greater life expectancy, coupled with delayed childbearing of their adult children (Leopold and Skopek 2015).

In a country experiencing increased life expectancy coupled with one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe, grandparents have generally shown to provide significant practical, economic, and social support in family contexts across Italy. In the case of Milan, where over time many people have arrived from elsewhere to work in the city, this support takes the form of providing informal childcare (Sarti 2010; Zamberletti et al 2018). As sociologist Carla Facchini notes, “Sixty-year-olds are a central resource for children regarding the care of their grandchildren, contributing in a decisive way to the possibility for women to remain in the labour market after the birth of their children” (Facchini 2016). According to a 2018 sociological study of grandparenting in Italy (Zamberletti et al 2018), the most common age range for high involvement in childcare is 60–64 years. Grandparents have been found to be less likely to provide childcare over the age of 75 (Zamberletti et al 2018, 273). Previous studies have also stressed the prominence of women in caring roles in a variety of European countries including Italy, showing how gender distinctions play a significant part in the differing roles, expectations and desires that grandparents have with respect to care and family involvement (Di Gessa, Glaser, and Tinker 2016), a theme that will be explored throughout in this article. Overall, bringing grandparenting together with retirement in our article forms part of the comparative lens through which we seek to highlight a number of changes taking place across Africa and Europe respectively. In Africa, the emergence of retirement is a recent phenomenon mostly driven by the new middle class accessing a pension (see Melber 2016; Alber 2018, 2004; Alber, Häberlein, and Martin 2010; Mackinnon 2008). In turn, changes in life expectancy are changing ways of organizing care for the elderly (Alber 2018; Pype 2016b). In the European context, and in Italy specifically, which has the second oldest population after Japan, retirement has also been studied in relation to increased life expectancy (See Walton 2021).

Further to caring roles and responsibilities of family, the emerging ways people spend their free time in the cities after retirement (Miller et al. 2021; Maharaj 2012) are reproducing social class and economic inequalities in these transitional contexts. Erdmute Alber (2018) while writing on such societal changes in the West African context notes, “living old age as a retirement is, for the time being, only possible for those who are more or less well off financially and who are able to acquire the resources necessary to maintain themselves for a time after work” (67). Similarly in Milan, the question of who gets to retire on a state pension or otherwise remains heavily linked to social, economic, and political factors. In fact, Walton came to know a number of people in their fifties who had lost their jobs within the last sixteen months and were struggling amidst the looming global economic crisis of 2008. Retirement, for these research participants, was not something they could therefore necessarily envisage, eager as they were to find new employment and to carry on working well into their later years. Bringing these threads together in our comparative discussion below, we first consider the meaning and practices of retirement in both field sites, before linking this discussion to wider analyses of grandparenting based on our ethnographic material from Milan and Yaoundé.

Re-thinking Retirement in Milan

Across Europe today retired grandparents take on significant social support roles in contexts where the cost of living is high and where formal childcare may not be financially viable. In the European context, studies have noted an association between becoming a grandparent and taking early retirement, a phenomenon that is particularly common among women (between the ages of 55 and 60) given their expected social role in providing informal childcare (van Bavel and De Winter 2013). This is a theme that will be returned to later in the article when we look at the roles played by grandmothers in the Milan field site. More general discussions about retirement in Milan revealed a number of different attitudes and experiences, hopes, and anxieties (economic and social); and differing ideas about freedom. For example, some middle-class participants who had taken retirement earlier,³ (in their forties or fifties), had taken on second careers. For example, Roberto was in his mid-sixties, a retired engineer-turned-schoolteacher, and heavily involved with grandparenting while he was still working as well as in retirement. Others such as retired schoolteacher Ernestina who was in her early seventies was actively involved in community volunteering while playing a prominent role in her two young grandchildren's daily lives and routines, dropping them off and collecting them from nursery and school twice a day. And all the while participating three days a week at the local Multicultural Centre for Women. The Centre formed part of a local NGO geared around social support in the neighbourhood, where Ernestina was an active member of the women's sewing group.

Many middle-income research participants in their 60s and 70s in the neighbourhood of NoLo in Milan navigated the fluid boundaries of their own freedoms, similar to Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller's (2021) observations in the Irish context. As is also argued in relation to their research, these freedoms typify this generation's experiences as they break away, to various degrees, from their parents' more conservative molds, and navigate expectations concerning their identities, lifestyles, and choices, particularly if they are in a social and economic position to do so. Walton and Awondo came to learn how people with 'enough' economic stability invariably asked themselves: "what should I do with new-found freedoms and time?" This aspect of freedom and its relation to changing roles and responsibilities speaks to a key tension identified in Miller and Garvey's (2021) research in Ireland. The authors note a shift from a prescriptive model of kinship to "kinship as experience" (Miller and Garvey 2021), conceived of as a voluntary activity whereby the experience of being a grandparent becomes a way of modulating other intra-family relationships. We find resonance with this idea, and the notion of "kin-work" (Stack and Burton 1993, 157) in our research in Cameroon and Italy as individuals and families re-configure roles and responsibilities in later life to meet and adapt to the shifting demands of everyday life. Our findings about people developing new aspects of themselves and coming into their social life in retirement also aligns with earlier studies on retirement that highlight how individuals may develop new self-images and social lives in retirement, reshaping subjective experience through social life and participation in local communities (Luborsky 1994).⁴

For some of our middle-class older adult research participants in both Milan and Yaoundé, retirement in an urban environment offered opportunities for social participation that were deemed desirable. In Walton's research in Italy, a prominent aspiration among middle-class people who worked in or near Milan in the past was to leave the industrial cities to retire in the mountains, or by the sea. Today, investment in the city, its green spaces and its urban and social infrastructure makes retiring in inner-city neighbourhoods such as NoLo an attractive option for people who have invested over many years in literally growing a space to retire in. This space is also attractive to and enjoyed by younger generations and grandchildren.

Crucial to the appeal of the city was its status as a crucible of cross-generational mixing. As Mario, in his mid-sixties described it, “What good is being by the sea if you’re alone?!” Mario was single and did not have grandchildren. He had moved to central Italy to Milan as a child in the 1960s with his parents who had come there to work. He was retired and active in the community, particularly in the local allotments as he was passionate about developing green spaces in the city, to which he has devoted many weekends, holidays, and evenings over several years. Mario and others have been instrumental in restructuring and revitalising the image of the community allotments as an inter-generational social space, with a notably lively WhatsApp group that sees younger university student volunteers develop friendships with retired people from the neighbourhood. The allotment role was conceived of as a form of work to Mario, but a welcome, voluntary one that comfortably bridged the gap between working life and retirement. Retirement here was construed of, and able to be realised as, an opportunity to carry on being useful, doing things one cares about while serving the local community, including younger and older people.

Mario’s emphasis on the continuity between working life and retirement is common among research participants in NoLo, where being useful, engaged, and active is seen as a virtue and as part of a healthy and fulfilled later stage of life. Our research findings contrast research in other ASSA field sites, such as Marília Duque’s (2022) research in Brazil or Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller’s (2021) aforementioned research in Ireland where retirement leisure can be seen as the repudiation of previous work. Mario and other people involved in Walton’s research in Milan showed an attitude towards retirement that lay somewhere in the middle – between continuity and change. Unlike other friends of his, Mario’s relative lack of care responsibilities for either older parents or children was a factor in his personal sense of freedom at this stage of life, while he finds and builds community through his green activities that express his care for the neighbourhood, both ecologically and socially. However, for some lower-income research participants, retirement felt like a far-off dream. For example, Cristina in Milan was in her mid-fifties, separated, and lived with an adult son who had recently been laid off from work due to a company re-organisation. Retirement for her was something she could scarcely imagine. A number of research participants like Cristina talked with Walton’s about the devastating economic situation in Italy after the 2008 economic crash, which for many had made the idea of retiring seem nigh on impossible. Factors such as class, gender, and socio-economic context thus notably affected the ways in which older age was being envisaged among different research participants across the mixed income field site neighbourhood in Milan, and relatedly, such factors played significant roles in how retirement was being envisaged, (re)-configured, and, if possible, experienced. We turn now to the context of Yaoundé, where similarly social and economic status and aspirations also shaped how retirement was envisioned and practiced.

Retirement in Yaoundé

In Cameroon, the legal retirement age, understood to mean employment which includes a formal contract giving entitlement to a retirement pension, varies between 55 and 65 years for civil servants. Only 15 to 20 per cent of the population enjoy legal retirement status. Some categories of workers within the army, for example, or typical civil servants in the Ministry of Justice such as clerks, retire at 60. Teachers retire at 62, while senior civil servants and university professors retire at 65 and may extend their working life post-retirement for two to four years in certain circumstances, as defined by employment regulations. To be eligible for an old-age pension (i.e., a state pension), the applicant must be 60 years of age, have at least 20 years of coverage, and at least 180 months of contribution. Sixty of those months have to have been in the last 10 years. The applicant also needs to have ceased all paid activity. For early retirement, the age is reduced to 50 but with similar stipulations. The monthly old-age pension is equivalent to 30 per cent of the average monthly remuneration and a minimum of 50 per cent of the legal minimum wage, while the

maximum amount of pension is 80 per cent of the employee's average monthly remuneration (Présidence de la République du Cameroun 2020 Minfropra 1990).

However, due to the predominance of the informal sector in the Cameroonian economy, a large part of the population continues to work beyond these ages. Similarly, once they have reached retirement age, public or private sector pensioners generally return to agricultural activities. The major point in terms of retirement is that for former civil servants and ex-employees in the formal private sector, as well as para-public sector, access to pensions has changed their relationship to age and ageing. In this context, "returning to the village after retirement,"⁵ was a common expectation. Retirement in Yaoundé seems to be most positively experienced by people who are surrounded by families, mainly children, and who have worked in sectors that have enabled them to save money and, above all, to build houses or businesses that guarantee them some additional income. Single people with a limited professional career and with a small pension or no pension at all find this stage of life particularly difficult. However, in the village, the condition for living well is to accomplish the attributes of social notability through wealth and recognition. One has to own land, farm it, or assert oneself through social and community participation. This doesn't only express participants' relationship to their pension; it must be understood by linking it with broader transformations such as the emergence of a global middle class (Heiman and Liechty 2012; Spronk 2014), whose aspirations are regularly publicised through social media and expressed by the general shift to self-care that is materialised through sport and leisure. This group is also growing in terms of their descendants' access to better paid jobs and health insurance at a time when a multitude of initiatives to widen this access are being launched. This is also why a significant proportion of research participants' time is devoted to ensuring their children can access stable social positions through employment.

In this context several research participants pointed out that in the "new life" (*la nouvelle vie*) moment of retirement, being successful is measured by the number of people who take care of you, even if it complicates personal autonomy. According to Thomas, age 68 and a former schoolteacher, "Good old age would be the ability of those you've taken care of to literally take care of you even if you don't need it." That means that you need recognition from the people around you that you did well, and the more numerous they are, the more successful you appear. You should not need to ask for care or attention; it should be given. Having to ask shows that you have failed. The issue is also one of reciprocity, as will be shown later in the section on grandparenting. In the following discussion, we now consider how these ideas of status, freedom, and self-perception are both extended and clarified by juxtaposing how grandparenting in the two research contexts is perceived, positioned, and practiced.

Grandparenting in Italy: Learning More about *Nonna*

As earlier discussed in relation to the global literature on grandparenting, contemporary intra-family cross-generational care involves complex models of caregiving between older adults and their adult children. Where grandparents are involved in informal childcare, the presence and "social availability"⁶ (Walton 2021) of a grandparent who lives nearby to their adult children and grandchildren can constitute a significant form of practical support. As Marília Duque (2022) also found in her research in Bento, a middle-class neighbourhood in São Paulo as part of the ASSA project, this care work can be highly gendered, and grandmothers are particularly called upon by adult children for practical support when parents are working overtime, or a child is ill. Duque argues that this leads to blurred boundaries between grandparenting and babysitting (Duque 2022, 110-111).

The smartphone can be an important instrument in contemporary grandparenting, where social media apps such as WhatsApp, are used for arranging schedules and practical matters concerning grandchildren, for sharing photographs and memories among families and friends, and for pursuing individual interests and activities. In Milan, Nonna Lina, like Grandmother Luisa in São Paulo (Duque 2022, 111-112), for example, follow precise routines and schedules set by themselves and their adult children via digital communications regarding their active care times throughout the weeks. This reflects these grandmothers' desires to have some free time for themselves, even while frailty and health limit their caregiving availability. Everyday life for Nonna Lina at the age of 60 spanned public and private forms of social activity, from the home and the school in which she worked as a teacher, to the local community she variously volunteered and participated in. Aside from her full-time job, she collected her granddaughter every day from nursery and brought her home for a light afternoon snack until her mother returned from work. Sometimes Lina, her daughter, and granddaughter would eat together if her son-in-law was working out of town. Lina was an important figure in her granddaughter's life and was willingly on call for care, which mother and daughter organised through their WhatsApp chat. Lina was also actively involved in volunteering in a number of local community groups in the neighbourhood and online via social media. In conversation with Walton, she expressed how she prizes her role as grandmother above all else: "*Nonna è sempre Nonna!*" she exclaimed with pride ("*Nonna is always Nonna!*"). All the while, she maintained a number of cherished socially-facing commitments in the community, though she did not narrate these in quite the same moral register as her status as a grandmother. This links to the earlier discussion of how the figure of the grandmother is narrated and perceived in popular discourse and semantic forms such as images, songs, and stories, across Italy and the worldwide Italian diaspora.

Grandparenting today is also complicated by a number of factors including work and lifestyle changes and choices among families, as seen in Italy where many younger people have moved to and settled in northern cities such as Milan from the south and other regions in pursuit of employment. The resulting physical transregional or transnational distance, as studies have explored in the Italian context of emigration (Zontini 2007, 2015),⁷ as well as family ruptures such as separation or divorce, all impact the availability of grandparents to enact care roles and responsibilities. A number of the women Walton met in Milan, like Lina, had moved from different cities or regions to be near their adult children to provide support. This was more likely if the woman was divorced or widowed, as the care flow would be multi-directional. That is, they could be cared for by their family, including upwards and downwards care between generations, and inside and outside, between the home and the community. In other cases, grandparents would also visit from other regions when they could, but their physically active role in grandparenting would be reduced and be more formal. With Lina's Sicilian family, and other family contexts such as the Egyptian families Walton came to know, notions of inter-generational and reciprocal care were culturally significant. Family members' care practices also stretched, via digital means and social networks, across these geographical distances in a way that as referred to earlier, can be understood as "care transcending distance" (Miller et al 2021, 242). In such cases, shifting notions of generational reciprocity plays an important role in configuring ideas of kin roles and responsibilities. Noor, for instance, in her early fifties, from Alexandria in Egypt, who lives around the corner from Lina in NoLo, spoke of her future as being physically together with her two adult children and future grandchildren. At the same time, her older daughter Dina's aspirations for a transnationally mobile life, citing moving to Australia one day, called into question Noor's ideas for in-person reciprocal intra-family care in later life.

Returning to the imagined and designed kinship role of grandmothers in the Italian context, we might consider the relevance of what Stack and Burton (1993) in their research on ageing and the life course called "kin-scripts" and "kin-scription." They use these concepts to describe how certain kinship roles are

allocated and family members made responsible for certain kinds of care work or “kin-work,” at specific times during the life course, “kin-time.” Examples in Italy and across the Italian diaspora of ideal types of care work or “kin-scription”– can be seen through the “active recruitment and conscription of family members to take on kin-work” (Stack and Burton 1993, 157). For example, in an autobiographical memoir, *More Coffee with Nonna* (2005), Philadelphia-born author Vincent Iezzi reflects on his Italian Catholic grandmother’s migration to the US and her life in Philadelphia during the Second World War. The author describes her home as a “slice of Italy,” acknowledging and celebrating the impact his grandmother had on his childhood and life. The tone is one of adoration and idealisation, focusing on and celebrating Nonna’s faith, piety, and charity: “She followed the examples of her ancestors in sharing, caring, and loving others, always finding a bit of truth in everyone and in everything” (Iezzi 2005, 2). This author’s celebration of his Nonna is heightened by his family’s experience of emigration, where the loss of homeland, cultures, and traditions become manifest in the nostalgic sense of sacrifice, dignity, and purity with which Nonna’s virtues are endowed. This kind of adoration of a particular ideal type of older woman often takes on saintly connotations within the social Catholic imagination, evoking the paradigm of the Madonna (Del Giudice 1988).

Similar associations were witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a popular video went viral in early March 2020 that showed an Italian nonna giving advice on how to deal with the coronavirus and make the best of time spent at home under lockdown. Female older adult care here was linked with a sense of homely remedies for the crisis. In other examples, images of the nonna evoked national and global public imaginations, sometimes evoking the Italian nation state as *la famiglia* (the family) through memes, public art and visual culture. In sum, idealised notions of kinship roles such as the figure of the caring grandmother continue to impact social and political life in Italy and the Italian diaspora today. All the while, grandmothers play a crucial role in supporting family realities, such as the contemporary work patterns and commitments of their adult children. These themes have particular salience in Cameroon as well, which we will turn to now.

Working Grandparenting in Yaoundé

Most participants in Awondo’s research in Yaoundé spent a significant amount of time caring for grandchildren. Marie, 67 years, is a mother of eight. Widowed, she was a teacher in state primary school locally known as *école publique* (public school). The teachers who work in primary public schools are civil servants. In the 1980s, following the serious economic crisis that hit numerous African countries, Marie and her husband returned to their village. At the time, Cameroonian civil servants had lost half of their purchasing power. She explained that she and her husband, a high-school teacher, could no longer provide for their children in the city. Marie stayed with her children in a semi-rural district 70 kilometers from Yaoundé where part of the general population’s activity is agriculture. They all passed the baccalaureate exam and one by one, went to Yaoundé and Douala to pursue higher education. All but two of her children are currently independent. Marie’s husband died in 2010 after an illness. She was left alone, though she was surrounded by neighbours who acted as extended family. Two years after the death of her husband, Marie started suffering from several severe diseases, including a serious bout of malaria, which led to her children deciding they would bring her back to the city. She first lived with one of her daughters who was a medical doctor, and then spent time living with her son, a high school teacher. But Marie often felt cramped. Her other children decided to help her rent a small house in a southern suburb of Yaoundé. Marie, whose mobility is deteriorating, now lives with her youngest son. He has a daughter and two nephews and nieces, who arrived from the village, also live with them. Marie still receives her pension, which she uses mainly to help people in her extended family, who often ask for money, knowing that she

has 'successful' children. For her health and nutrition needs, Marie receives money and food from her children. She looks after her grandson on a daily basis and on weekends, she often gets a visit from her grandchildren who live in other parts of the city. Marie is "happy" to do "her job as a grandmother," she says. Sometimes, she has as many as ten grandchildren over in her flat for the weekend. She makes a point of preparing food for them herself. She is also tasked by her sons and daughters with speaking Ewondo, her native language, to the grandchildren, whose first language is predominantly French. This way, Marie ensures language transmission, something that is important to her, even if she does not define herself as a traditionalist at all. As analyzed by other researchers, grandparents are the guarantee for cultural continuity expressed here by local languages transmission in a context where official languages (English and French) are becoming dominant in everyday life (Pype 2016b).

While the discussion so far from Milan and Yaoundé has looked at how individuals position themselves vis-à-vis retirement, and how their lives as grandparents play out in family contexts, the last section of our article looks to the community context in both cities as a central character in our research, an integral part of the social fabric where retirement and grandparenting practices merge with broader forms of care in the community including digital forms of social participation.

Life Goes On(line) in the Community

In both Yaoundé and Milan, changes taking place during the period of retirement were linked to a propensity for leisure, a desire for continued work through forms of informal childcare, as well as to the centrality of smartphones and WhatsApp at the heart of contemporary social life. In Yaoundé, for example, there are many leisure groups, especially football clubs made up of retirees. These are locally known as *vétérans club*, with the *vétéran* referring to someone who has made a career in a particular area and has now retired but still practices their hobbies with ex colleagues. Sports and leisure associations that Yaoundéan retirees participate in have changed, however, thanks in part to the way WhatsApp mediates these groups. Whatsapp groups consolidate and prolong the relationships built in places like the *vétérans club*. Further, there are numerous self-help groups, locally known as *tontines*, that are now also managed via Whatsapp and smartphones. In the *tontines*, the basic principle is mutual support through rotating savings and support during happy events such as weddings and births, and unfortunate events such as deaths. The use of Whatsapp by veterans groups has made it possible to facilitate different moments of socialization and make the involvement of retirees who face mobility challenges in Yaoundé which lacks sufficient public transportation.

Beyond simplifying exchanges and communication between members in various kinds of social groups, WhatsApp offers the added value of play which is particularly notable among retired people in Yaoundé. Study participants in both Milan and Yaoundé spend much of their time sharing and watching videos and exchanging information on their smartphones. This activity has taken over the role of television in terms of time spent on devices and frames the development of a digital community public space. At the same time, participation is difficult for retirees who are hesitant to enter these digital spaces for the possibility of encountering unfamiliar people and ideas. Online communities permit participation across age groups and cultural inclinations. Some of the retirees in Yaoundé felt safer staying in communities consisting of members of the same age and cultural inclinations. Yet, as the current study argues, this use of Whatsapp in veteran groups is just one facet of the complex generational and kinship reconfigurations that influence different forms of interaction in which retired people are involved (Miller et al 2021).

In Milan, as Walton found through participating and volunteering in a number of community groups, opportunities for engaging in social activities in retirement are wide-ranging and can often be cross-generational in make-up. Activities from sewing groups to exercise and language classes, to choirs and horticultural groups are made of up individuals from various age groups. As in Yaoundé, WhatsApp also dominates these social groups, and neighbourhood social media pages serve as noticeboards for advertising activities and services, though often among groups of people in the neighbourhood already in the habit of connecting via social media and the Internet, and with the relevant social capital to be able to access particular kinds of activities on offer. Some social care enterprises and NGOs in the neighbourhood are aimed at specific groups, including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, older adults, the young, families, or individuals in need of social or medical support, as was discussed earlier in relation to Ernestina who volunteers with a number of these groups in her retirement. These kinds of social care initiatives are broadly realised through interactions between local city and regional institutions, non-governmental organisations, and networks of volunteers, making up what has been termed the “Milan model” (Bini and Gambazza 2019). The Milan model refers to the social history of the city of Milan as a centre of civil and religious charity sectors, and a care industry comprised of public and private institutions. Many institutions of social care and wellbeing are physically based in the NoLo neighbourhood, including Auser, a prominent nationwide NGO dedicated to ageing, and local NGOs that focus on social participation and support. Walton’s study found that retirees participated mostly in informal community groups that were more broadly linked to multi-generational social welfare and participation, while organisations that were specifically linked to ageing were, amongst research participants, less familiar and less well attended.

Within these contexts, however, tensions can be experienced. As anthropologist Cristiana Giordano (2014) has powerfully highlighted in her ethnographic research with Catholic nuns and women migrants in Turin. Here altruistic practices of volunteers hang upon a fine thread in contemporary Italy, as they are often unsupported and underfunded. This is particularly the case in the region of Lombardy, which has an active NGO sector that relies on the voluntary participation of individuals, including retired and younger people and, oftentimes, women who maintain these initiatives and groups. Social participation and togetherness should therefore not be romanticised as a feature of older adult life in the Italian context, nor should the policies, pragmatics, and practices that can underlie how people perform and experience different forms of being together in these spaces be overlooked. The power asymmetries, hierarchies, and forms of exclusion should all be recognised as multiple care logics within the wider volunteer industries intersect more broadly with neoliberalism (Muehlebach 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to tease out some of the particularities in the contemporary experience of retirement and grandparenting in Milan and Yaoundé as seen in the lives and practices of our research participants. Our research suggests continuation and a possible re-thinking of roles, responsibilities, and notions of reciprocity in both contexts. Through our comparative discussion of retirees and grandparents, we have highlighted how socio-economic factors, gender, and social class influence the ways in which grandparenting and retirement are experienced, imagined and practiced in both cities. A majority of intra-family care work in our Yaoundé and Milan field sites was found to be carried out by women, who were traditionally associated with caregiving, as discussed in the figure of the Italian Nonna as an idealized cultural idiom for female care. Yet the women we came to know were also variously negotiating the boundaries of their care duties and “social availability” (Walton 2021) in line with broader hobbies, interests, and desires explored via the Internet and social media. Retirement was also gendered, to a degree; while men and women pursued particular freedoms and desires in older age, a number of our male

research participants appeared to be exercising these freedoms in retirement to greater degrees if and where they were less bound by intra-family care commitments. Though many female research participants expressed desires for individual free time and novelty, they were nevertheless bound up with multiple, cross-generational care roles and responsibilities within the family and in the community well into the later years of their adult life.

The contemporary question of who gets to retire, on state pension or otherwise, remains closely linked to social, economic, and political factors, and digital communication practices that keep people variously connected to each other. As discussed, with many people currently facing social and economic precarity through casual work and living in temporary and shared accommodation, important questions remain about how social care and welfare will develop along socially inclusive lines. These issues are intimately connected to the rise of digital forms of social and economic participation through smartphones, mobile health, digital labour, and citizens' experiences of social, economic and digital inequalities as these significant features of contemporary adult life evolve alongside social, economic, and technological change across the world.

To conclude, our comparative research from Milan and Yaoundé, in conversation with colleagues working across the ASSA project's field sites, reveals points of intersections and departures around contemporary ideas and experiences of retirement and grandparenting. The issues highlighted in this article call for further discussion of these themes at multiple scales – within families, neighbourhoods, and in online and offline communities – through continued global comparative conversation of care roles, reciprocity, and responsibilities in contexts around the world.

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Notes

1. Awondo's study in Yaoundé focused on the ageing middle class where the notion of a middle class itself is relatively new. The middle class in Yaoundé is characterized by having a regular income, sufficiently high levels of education and stability of life which in turn enables them to access desired lifestyles. For instance, a civil servant who receives a government pension in their retirement does not only enjoy a level of distinction for receiving this benefit, but the income makes other matters such as family care and managing social relations much easier and more fluid.
2. For further discussion of the notion of care transcending distance, see Miller et al 2021, 241-244.
3. In the 1990s in Italy people could retire as early as 45, given the fact that many individuals began working as early as 16 in the 1960s. By 2003 the official retirement age was 60 for women and 65 for men, though the average age was around 57 since earlier legislation had guaranteed retirement

at 57 after 30 years of employment. The total expenditure on the pension system is currently the second highest in the EU, at 16.5 per cent of GDP (Biro 2018).

4. Mark Luborsky's (1994) research on the retirement process in the US talks about retirement as "making the person," charting a move from away from the self to social identity amongst retiring workers in the US in the 1990s. In this context, Luborsky found a pertinent move from households out to community which we find resonates with our research discussed in this article.
5. People moving back to their parent's home village and original cultural and geographic area after retirement.
6. In her book *Ageing with Smartphones in Urban Italy: Care and Community in Milan and Beyond*, Walton defines the concept of 'Social Availability' as the ways in which people make themselves variously socially available/unavailable to others, online and offline. See Walton 2021, Chapter 4.
7. Continued and increasing reliance on informal, flexible and low-cost in-family childcare remains an important theme in policymaking in the context of social research on families, labour patterns, gender distinctions, and health and well-being in Italy and Europe. See Zontini 2007; 2015.

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