

## **Enacting the *babushka*: older Russian women ‘doing’ age, gender and class by accepting the role of a stoic carer**

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### **Abstract**

This article contributes to the debates about age-based practices of distinction that produce stable notions about the subjectivities of members of social categories and the social consequences of such categorisations for the subject. In Russia, a strong expectation that grandmothers will prioritise helping their adult daughters with childcare and housework over their careers and personal lives shaped the social position of the *babushka*, an unpaid family carer dependent on the state and her children. When women can no longer maintain meaningful post-pension-age employment, they see the *babushka* figure as the dominant option to model their identities on. Drawing on 20 biographical interviews with women aged 60 and over, the article explores their tactics of performing their ‘gendered age’ in various classed ways. The *babushka* identity encompasses two broad strategies of self-presentation – taking control over one’s life by emphasising that it is one’s deliberate choice to live as a post-professional and post-sexual subject, and downplaying one’s own needs while contributing to the wellbeing of others. The article shows that for older Russian women who face sexism, ageism and the stigmatisation of poverty, denying their vulnerability to systemic marginalisation is a familiar way of seeking recognition and maintaining their sense of self-worth. It advances the empirical

exploration of the agentic component of vulnerability by revealing how the denial of (inter)dependence is presupposed by the conditions of subject-formation.

**Keywords:** ageism, *babushka*, care, doing gender, gendered age, identity, older women, vulnerability

### **The social production of women's ageing identities**

What does it mean to be an older individual in a society that fosters dependence on the state in later life but promotes autonomy as the defining feature of a worthy subject? How do older women maintain their sense of self-worth, given that care for others is naturalised as the central duty of a woman's life, whereas the interests of older people are generally considered unimportant? Research acknowledges the impact of welfare design on the distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men (Lewis 1997). Age difference has also been discussed as a factor that can produce a power imbalance between women; for instance, in Russian families where the extensive contribution of grandmothers to childcare and housework is often taken for granted by their adult daughters (Utrata 2011, 2015).

While individuals are held accountable for performing their membership in social categories, such as gender, age and race (Moore 2001; West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Zimmerman 2009), when applying practices of distinction, people often internalise the qualities ascribed to the categories they associate themselves with (Krekula 2009: 12, 21). Building on the intersectional perspective that addresses how gender and age are 'done' to and by individuals in various classed ways (Krekula 2007; Moore 2001; Utrata 2011), I introduce 'the *babushka* identity' offered to older Russian women by social policies and culture as the dominant age-appropriate model of self-presentation. I discuss the impact of this identity on older women's

understanding of themselves and their strategies to maintain social relations as self-sufficient individuals.

In Russia women of pensionable age are commonly called *babushki*, the plural of *babushka*, which translates into English as ‘grandmother’. Apart from this family status, the term *babushka* also signifies an old woman whose life is restricted to domesticity. To be seen as a *babushka* a woman needs neither to have grandchildren, nor to be of an advanced age. Rather, it is a specific performance of gender, age and class through which women manifest that they have adopted the position of socially old members of society.

When used to emphasise older age and its social consequences, the term *babushka* is associated with the loss of the ability to engage in economic productivity and living as a post-sexual subject. Comparing younger women to the *babushka* figure is often meant as an insult and serves as an ideological tool to encourage them to present themselves as sexual and professional subjects, a strategy that ultimately aims to maintain the procreative and employment norms. For many women of pensionable age, however, the social position of the *babushka* is an inevitable outcome of what Lewis (1997: 169) calls a ‘caring regime’, a combination of policies and social norms that constitute women’s unpaid work.

The social position of the *babushka* reflects the expectation, shaped during the Soviet era, that once they become grandmothers, women will abandon their professional careers and personal lives to help their daughters combine motherhood with paid work. The power imbalance, which Utrata (2011) defines as ‘youth privilege’, is institutionalised by women’s pensionable age of 55 years<sup>1</sup> and paternalistic old age policies. Since 2015 the Russian state has shifted towards the ‘active ageing’ policy framework, encouraging third age education and volunteering (Hoļavins, 2020: 47). However, the declared task to turn ‘clients of social service into civil society activists’ fails as activities offered to individuals of pensionable age outside the job

market reinforce the position of recipients of social benefits rather than autonomous partners of the state (Dmitrieva 2018: 41). The paternalist approach also prevails in state-supported elder care practices (Hoļavins 2020).

Kulmala and Tarasenko (2016) emphasise that older people prefer the paternalist principles of social provision and play an active role in constraining liberalisation of the welfare system. For many older individuals, the idea of autonomy associated with the free market has no value, as opposed to the idea of protection associated with resource distribution through policy. Trained for the Soviet planned economy, this group simply does not have the resources to exercise autonomy through competition in the new capitalist job market.

Dependent on the state, older people are also potentially dependent on their daughters as family support is the primary culturally accepted system of old age care in Russia (Harris 2011: 83). Although there has been an increase in feminist initiatives in Russia since the 1990s, under Vladimir Putin's regime gender issues have become highly politicised and policed (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2014: 262). Russia's neoconservative ideology and pronatalist policies have recycled traditionalist notions about gender roles (Rivkin-Fish 2010), inherited from the Soviet gender politics and characterised by high levels of female employment and low levels of men's participation in domestic and care work (Ashwin et al. 2013: 397).

The traditional Russian mode of childrearing with mothers and grandmothers in the centre of family life is also maintained by men's significantly shorter lifespan (United Nations 2018: 603) and a high divorce rate (United Nations 2017: 845). Covering for many men's failure to share family responsibilities with their children's mothers, the contribution of grandmothers to the wellbeing of many families goes unrecognised in the formal economy (Utrata 2011, 2015).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, some middle-class Russian families have started to limit the involvement of grandmothers in favour of professional experts and helpers (Sivak

2018; Utrats 2015; Zdravomyslova 2010). However, with the post-Soviet elimination of free housing, guaranteed employment and accessible childcare, for many less privileged Russian families the help of grandmothers has become even more important than before (Utrata 2015: 6, 128). The norm of grandmothers' extensive help justifies a rapid drop in women's opportunities in the labour market (Kozina and Zangieva 2018: 13).

In Russia the state delegates to private employers the authority to shape the hiring and firing policy. Within this model, those people of pensionable age who are deemed 'capable' are expected to compete for jobs, while those who are 'incapable' are entitled to a guaranteed old age pension and a limited package of social benefits (Kozina and Zangieva 2018: 12-5). Although there is no mandatory retirement in Russia and paid work after pensionable age is common, age discrimination in the labour market starts to target professionals from their early forties (Kozina and Zangieva, 2018: 9), leaving jobs in cleaning and catering as often the only options available to women pensioners. Realising that their chances in the job and marriage markets are declining, less privileged women see the *babushka* figure as a marginal but predominant option on which to model their identity in later life.

The importance of the contribution of grandmothers to Russian informal welfare has been discussed in academic literature (Rotkitch 2000; Sivak 2018; Tchernina and Tchernin, 2002; Tiaynen 2013; Utrata 2011, 2015; Zdravomyslova 2010). This article explores how the role offered to older women by the Russian 'caring regime' affects their sense of themselves. Drawing on interviews with women aged 60 and over, I explore their performances of socially old women in accordance with gender, age and class norms.

Paradoxically, while grandmothers are often associated with care, love and wisdom (Tiaynen 2013: 2), *babushki* as a social group are often portrayed in mainstream culture as backward, idle and hostile towards children and people of working age.<sup>2</sup> This 'symbolic violence'

(Bourdieu and Passeron [1970] 1977) towards retired women reflects the stigmatisation of poverty and the naturalisation of privilege that emerged in response to the establishment of the new merit-based system of social inequality in Russia (Salmenniemi 2012: 3). The process of post-Soviet class formation has been accompanied by the phenomenon described by Rose (1996) and Cruikshank (1996) in the Western context – the individualisation of inequalities and the promotion of a self-sufficient subject able to survive the marketisation of welfare (Salmenniemi 2012: 3; Utrata, 2015: 94).

My study illustrates how in the aspiration to disidentify themselves from the ostracized dependence associated with the *babushka* figure many of my interviewees denied their own vulnerability and presented others as the vulnerable ones in need of care. For women I interviewed, the invulnerability they foregrounded was a synonym for a worthy female ageing subject still capable of contributing to society. As their worthiness is undermined by the lack of recognition of their reproductive labour, the participants in my study reclaimed their sense of self-worth through available means. While the social position of a post-professional and post-sexual domestic carer is an inevitable outcome of Russia's 'caring regime' for less privileged older women, they insisted on their autonomy in accepting this position, framing it as a responsible choice. They also emphasised that they do everything possible to avoid becoming a burden to their significant others as their contribution to the common good.

In this article I shall show that, as opposed to the masculinist notion of the self-centred subject who does not acknowledge their dependence on others (Butler 2016: 21), the self-sufficiency that older Russian women exhibit can be defined as gender- and age-informed altruism – the denial of their own vulnerability out of concern for the wellbeing of others. Facing sexism, ageism and the stigmatisation of poverty, many older women in my study take on the role of what I shall call a 'stoic carer' who denies her vulnerability to maintain social relations in accordance with age, gender and class norms.

## **Theorising gendered ways of ageing**

West and Zimmerman (1987) and Butler (1990) have argued that gender is not a property of individuals; rather it comes into being at institutional and interpersonal levels through the routinised repetition of words and actions. West and Zimmerman (1987: 127) posit that gender involves situated conduct in accordance with the normative conceptions of attitudes and activities considered appropriate for one's sex category. Drawing on an insight from the symbolic-interactionist perspective of Cooley (1902) and Goffman (1959), Moore (2001: 836-7) explains that individuals perform and negotiate their membership in social categories by imagining how others see them, and then use these imaginary assessments to guide their actions. The survival of those without the ability to change the conditions of subject-formation depends on terms that they do not choose; to maintain social relations individuals must emerge as subjects recognised and validated by others (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 78-9).

Earlier gender-theoretical work emphasised women's collective identity. More recently, gender has been explained as produced simultaneously with the production of membership in other categories (Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995). This understanding has directed attention onto the differences among women (Krekula 2007: 157). Moore (2001), Krekula (2009) and Utrata (2011) have suggested studying the intersection of gender and age in theorising the experiences and inequalities this intersection produces for women. Focusing on their family roles as mother and grandmother which shape age identities and performances, Utrata (2011: 619) calls this intersection 'gendered age' and explains it as a set of practices directed at producing distinction among women of different generations.

Building on Utrata's (2011) concept of 'youth privilege', I focus on the identity strategies that mark women's acceptance of the position in which they are perceived as socially old and therefore are expected to prioritise the interests of others. The participants in Utrata's (2011:

617) study explain the contribution of grandmothers to childcare and housework in terms of a lack of choice; whereas mothers need assistance to keep their families afloat, grandmothers' family labour is naturalised as an expression of maternal love. Not questioning that the norm of 'youth privilege' is maintained by the lack of choice since women cannot avoid doing 'gendered age', I employ the concept of choice from another angle.

Lewis and Moon (1997) and Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor (2007) have discussed the strategies of single women to account for their relationship status. They have found that while some women emphasise that it is their choice to be single, others explain their status as resulting from circumstances they cannot control. From this perspective, choice can be seen not as an act of preferring one option over another but as a rhetorical device used by individuals to present themselves as taking on the responsibility for their lives. Similarly, I see the emphasis on choice in the narratives of my interviewees, when they discuss their role in social relations, as a means to present themselves as having control over their lives.

As I explore the experiences of women sharing the Soviet past, the Soviet class divide is crucial for my analysis. Salmenniemi (2012: 5) suggests that Bourdieu's (1986) metaphor of capital is particularly useful for understanding the structuring principle of social inequality in the Soviet Union. She explains that due to the state ownership of property and fairly even income distribution, class divisions were derived from the mobilisation of cultural, political and social forms of capital. In the Soviet Union cultural capital separated off the officially recognised classes of workers and peasants from the 'social stratum' of the intelligentsia – members of the educated white-collar occupations. Educated individuals were seen as socially more significant, which provided the intelligentsia with access to benefits that working-class employees did not enjoy (Rivkin-Fish 2009: 83). With the introduction of individual rights to private property and the privatisation of enterprises after the demise of the USSR, a small number of the most



privileged individuals were able to convert their cultural, social and political capital into economic capital that became the primary class division.

## **Data and method**

In summer 2016, I conducted 23 in-depth interviews with women aged 60 and over based in a medium-sized city situated in South-Eastern Russia. Of these, twenty were selected for an analysis based on the following common elements – all the participants were widowed, divorced or separated at the time of the interview (see Table 1). While I did not ask the interviewees about sexual orientation, all of them only mentioned their previous relationships with men. The interviewees were recruited via a snowball technique with interviewees introducing the researcher to other potential participants (Noy 2008: 330), an advertisement published in a city online magazine, a public lecture delivered by me at an educational centre and through my online social media. The sample ranged in socio-economic and ethnic background, family size and living arrangements.

As Soviet higher education was state-funded, it was fairly accessible to urban women. Half of the participants had a university degree, three of those – a Soviet equivalent of a Ph.D. degree (*stepen' kandidata nauk*). With the cultural capital as the main class divide in the Soviet Union, former Soviet women with and without a university degree live in the same apartment blocks that were provided to them by the Soviet state and which they were allowed to privatise for free after 1991. The lingering impact of the Soviet system of social inequality informed participant recruitment in my project as earlier recruited women often introduced me to their neighbours from a different 'social stratum'.

The participants signed a written consent and were free to withdraw at any time. Interviews, varied in length between 120 and 240 minutes, were conducted at the participants' homes,

audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Russian; later, selected excerpts were translated into English by me. The participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms; any biographical data which could identify them were changed.

Through information sheets the participants were introduced to the aim of the study - to investigate former Soviet women's experiences of ageing in Russia. In order to gather biographical data and to explore women's identity strategies as a relational process that takes place in conversation between women of different generations (the interviewees and myself, aged 20-40 years younger), the interviews comprised a biographical monologue by the participant followed by a dialogue between the interviewee and myself. During the first stage the participants' narratives were produced in response to a single question 'Can you tell me the story of your life?', borrowed from the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (Wengraf 2001).

The second stage consisted of 'a conversation-like exchange' (Mann 2016: 97) and would start with me collecting standard demographic data from the participants. Further, as a strategy of reciprocity and to equalise the power imbalance in a research setting, suggested by Oakley (1981), I invited my interviewees to ask me about anything, should they have any questions. Most of the participants were interested to hear about my matrimonial and reproductive plans, career prospects and the life situation of my widowed mother. For many of my interviewees, my insider/outsider status (Soviet born, pursuing a Ph.D. in the United Kingdom) triggered reflections on their position within the post-Soviet and global systems of social inequality. My single and childless status also often provoked discussion of my broader biographical context to mitigate the interactional tension caused by the stigma of my not having children, to use Goffman's (1963) terms.

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used; patterns across the data and within each case were sought. The software NVivo was used to generate first-step codes under which excerpts of the interviews containing specific themes were arranged, which led to second-step coding under four categories, i.e., ‘care practices’, ‘livelihood strategies’, ‘leisure activities’, and ‘personal life’. By linking common patterns of individual motivations with the social contexts, I developed the category of the *babushka* identity which symbolises the dominant model of older women’s self-presentation in Russia. Next, I formulated the following theoretical argument: as they grow older, Russian women model themselves in relation to the *babushka* figure by distancing themselves from it for as long as they are able to or by adopting this identity but still seeking ways to mitigate the effects of its low social capital.

A few better educated women in my study in their 60s and early 70s were able to retain their skilled jobs in higher education, the IT-sector and business. Their more secure economic position allowed them to distance themselves from the *babushka* identity and orient more toward the consumption-based standard of ‘successful ageing’. However, in the following sections, I shall focus on the identity strategies of women who have adopted the *babushka* identity. To reclaim their autonomy, these women present themselves as post-sexual and post-professional by choice when discussing their retirement decisions, appearance and leisure practices. While not all of them used the category of *babushka* to refer to themselves, their gendered age performance would be likely recognised as such by competent members of Russian culture. I shall also explore these women’s emphasis on their emotional, financial and practical self-reliance made out of concern for the wellbeing of others.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

## **Taking Responsibility for one's life**

*Retirement decisions: 'Even I felt it was too much for me'*

Most of my interviewees stated that they had wanted to remain employed after reaching pensionable age. However, the availability of options to continue working in later life is conditioned by class-related advantages accumulated throughout the life course, as well as by the design of pension systems (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017: 117). Only two of my interviewees managed to access re-training for participating in a market economy and escaped the ageist dynamics of the job market by becoming self-employed. A few better-established participants relied on their informal connections to retain their better-paid pre-pension-age jobs, while others retired at 55 or soon after and either took on low-paid, precarious jobs or sought some extra income through informal economic activities.

The decision to retire was often explained by the participants' self-categorization as 'older workers', the strategy defined by Desmette and Gaillard (2008) as resulting from the social construction of age in organisations, which negatively affects employees' own attitudes towards work. For example, Arina, 88, a retired factory worker, explains her decreasing confidence at the workplace as the outcome of reaching pensionable age:

I retired [at 55], but half a year later I went back to work for another two months. [...]

When the factory was about to produce a new product, a delegation came to me - they didn't know how to operate all these devices and templates...I never thought it'd be hard for me to work again, but after that half-year I felt completely lost. Somehow, I managed to work those two months, and then even I felt it was too much for me.

Arina's case illustrates how the notion of 'older workers' is produced and internalised in response to social norms and expectations. The difficulties with performing her duties that Arina refers to may have stemmed from the temporary condition of her return to work. After

her retirement, while she was still considered an expert, her expertise was only expected to be used to train employees of working age. Her conclusion 'even I felt it was too much for me' reflects what Goffman (1959) defined as 'the front region', explaining it as an imaginary stage the actor performs on, adhering to the expectations of the audience. Perhaps, it was to avoid a potential confrontation with her professional networks and family, who expected her to retire, that Arina willingly accepted the identity of a post-professional subject. Even the narratives of the interviewees who had resources to retain their pre-pension-age jobs reflected the pressure of the 'youth privilege' norm coming from their retired peers, families and professional circles, and the need to check with them tacitly and repeatedly whether it was still acceptable to violate the norm and remain employed.

While by withdrawing from work on the grounds of allegedly increasing age-related incompetence Arina adheres to the expectations of her social circles, this strategy of maintaining social relations is also jeopardising her sense of self-worth, as her professional expertise and achievements were among the main themes in her interview. To restore her sense of being a subject in control of her life, Arina presents her retirement as the outcome of a deliberate and reasonable choice on her part. Ultimately, Arina's case illustrates Krekula's (2009: 26) argument that when age is used as a satisfactory explanation for discrimination, the responsibility for the social conditions of ageing is placed upon the individual, which prevents the potential for change.

Another common explanation of the decision to retire was informed by the tradition of grandmothers' extensive involvement in childcare. Muza, 88, a factory engineer, who was made redundant in the 1990s but soon after became a director in a firm established by her son, explains her decision to retire at the age of 60 by the fact that her daughter-in-law needed her help with childcare. However, unlike many other interviewees, Muza's contribution to

childcare was not a matter of the family's survival; later in her interview she mentions that her son's wife was a stay-at-home mother with a paid nanny.

For some of my less privileged interviewees the norm of grandmothers' extensive involvement with childcare served as a reason to leave an unsatisfactory job. However, Zdravomyslova (1996) notes that women who came of age during the Soviet epoch find it difficult to leave paid work completely, in contrast to younger generations who have access to a broader repertoire of identities than the Soviet standard of mother-worker. In her interview Muza supports this argument by saying that 'work is life, there is nothing better than to be a part of a professional collective'. Like many other of my interviewees who valued their careers, she refers to the norm of grandmothers' help as a legitimate explanation of her decision to retire. This identity strategy presents a woman as making responsible, morally informed choices, shifting attention away from her vulnerability to the institutional arrangements and social norms that push her out from the labour market.

*Appearance practices: 'I'd hate to be 'good looking' like those women'*

Once my participants had completely retired or had taken on low-paid post-pension-age jobs, they often changed their appearance practices to adopt the identity of a post-professional and post-sexual subject. The shift to the *babushka* look is noticeable: a youthful feminine look that was designed to amplify a woman's chances in the scarce marriage market of the post-war period remained a beauty standard for younger women until the end of the Soviet era (Gradskova 2007: 187-8). After the demise of the USSR the sexualised and beautified female body acquired a social value independent of reproduction (Davidenko 2018: 1). For middle-aged, middle-class women from Moscow, Davidenko (2019: 616) has found, regular work on

maintaining a youthful appearance became an important resource to increase their competitiveness in the labour market.

By contrast, the decreasing investment of my older participants from the provincial city in their beautification practices was related to their vanishing chances in the job market. The end of their professional careers also seemed to affect their self-perception as sexual subjects. While a stable job did not necessarily warrant the presentation of oneself as a sexual subject, most of the women who expressed an interest in new romantic relationships were still employed. Perhaps this association can be explained by the expectation that upon finishing their professional careers women will prioritise the interests of their adult daughters over their personal lives.

Discussing the change in their appearance practices, the participants presented themselves as agents making their own choices. Some of them explained that their age was a socially acceptable reason to liberate themselves from a lifelong obligation to comply with heteronormative beauty standards. For others, presenting themselves as deliberately post-sexual was a means to avoid ostracization in a culture that stigmatises older women's (hetero)sexual desire, in accordance with the expectation that their post-reproductive years will be primarily dedicated to grandmothering.

The social regulation of age-related appearance practices emerged in the narratives through references to peer pressure and self-management. Ludmila, 62, a retired engineer, tells me that she stopped wearing clothes considered appropriate for younger women, following her mother's and aunt's similar practices. Like many other participants, Ludmila presents her choice as reasonable in contrast to other women's performances considered inappropriate for their age in her social group:

Those women celebrities [of pensionable age]...I'd hate to be 'good looking' like them. This excessive makeup and plastic surgery are just pathetic. No, a headscarf tied under the chin is way better...I think modesty is the best thing once one is older.

Krekula (2009: 17) argues that practices of distinction can simultaneously marginalise individuals and provide resources in the form of acceptance by other people. Proving this argument, most of my retired interviewees applied the marginal *babushka* look to avoid ostracization. To legitimise their appearance practices, they often presented other women's alternative performances as inappropriate. To reclaim their sense of self-worth these women also emphasised that the change in their appearance practices was driven by their own deliberate choice.

Zinaida, 70, a retired worker, who proudly told me about using rejuvenating facial injections and other 'anti-ageing' products, exemplifies an exception to this convention. For Zinaida this work on her appearance was a way to engage in shared practices within a consumption-based network of younger people at a wellness club, which she could afford due to her more secure financial situation. As evident from her interview, Zinaida prevented a possible ostracization for this 'age coding', commonly perceived as inappropriate for retired women by emphasising that she was not applying the 'anti-ageing' procedures out of her interest in new relationships with men. Instead, she framed her attempts to look younger as a responsible attitude towards her health. While this strategy of self-presentation challenges the conventional notions about the age-appropriate appearance practices of older women, Clarke (2010: 74) finds that the medicalisation of signs of biological ageing replaces concerns about structural inequality in later life with one's moral obligation to consume 'anti-ageing' products and services.



*Group leisure activities: 'It's nice to have the company'*

In Russian culture, older urban women as a social group are commonly portrayed as socialising on *lavochki* (benches). Traditional gatherings of *babushki* on *lavochki* in the shared courtyards of Soviet-style apartment buildings constitute the most noticeable distinction between working-class women pensioners and older women with a university education, who tend to distance themselves from this type of leisure activity because of its low cultural capital. However, for many less privileged women pensioners *lavochki* are an accessible way of socialising and sharing practical and moral support with peer neighbours. Sofia, 83, a retired accountant, explains that *lavochki* provide her with a sense of belonging. In her narrative Sofia explains that since her husband and son died prematurely, she has had various health problems that make her feel less valued in the home that she shares with her adult daughter and two grandchildren:

With other women I go to *lavochki* to chat, it's nice to have the company... What upsets me most is when my daughter gets annoyed with me. She might say to me: 'What's the point in telling you anything if you forget it all the time?' Well, I might forget stuff, yes. But that's insulting, isn't it? I remember when my mom was 97. She still wanted to be useful. She'd sit by the tap to turn it on and off as we watered the plants in our garden. My husband wanted her to rest, but I'd say: 'Please let her do this. She's doing something, like she still takes part. And it makes her so happy'.

By evoking the case of her mother, Sofia is emphasising that the engagement with meaningful activities in later life maintains the sense of self-worth fuelled by other people's appreciation. At the same time, she is highlighting the importance of collective effort in creating participatory opportunities for older individuals who are structurally deprived of them. By contrast with her mother's experience, Sofia says that she feels unappreciated at home, which encourages her to

seek validation and containment among her peers on *lavochki*, despite the negative public image of these spontaneous outdoor gatherings.

Another type of group leisure activity available to pensioners in Russia – dance and singing classes, craft and computer literacy workshops are provided free of charge by social service centres and local administrations. These classes are mostly attended by working-class people, as members of the educated class see little symbolic value in activities unrelated to advanced cultural consumption and professional validation. Maria, 68, a part-time cleaner, explains her reasons for attending such classes:

...So, they [her son and daughter-in-law] got married and stayed on living in my apartment. But it isn't nice living with young people. They're probably waiting for me to pop my clogs, aren't they? They keep their doors closed and my granddaughter's always in front of her computer. I'm by myself all the time. So, I go to my choir, or I go dancing. I get there, smile, laugh, sing songs. I like it.

Like Sofia, Maria explains that she feels isolated in her own home, even though she is giving her son's family a roof over their heads, for which she would expect more recognition and appreciation. Maria also does not feel that helping her adult daughter, who lives separately, with childcare and paying off her mortgage is valued appropriately. As her family role of grandmother does not provide her with the expected gratification, Maria seeks fulfilment at a local cultural centre. By attending her classes, she adopts the marginalised identity of a recipient of social benefits. But to reclaim her sense of self-worth, she emphasises her agency in choosing to engage in pleasurable activities shared with other people, outside of the role of an unpaid caregiver. For my interviewees who had hardly any options to maintain social relations other than internalising the *babushka* identity, an accessible means to maintain their

sense of self-worth was related to presenting themselves as agents making their own retirement decisions, appearance and leisure choices.

### **Emphasising one's autonomy out of concern for the wellbeing of others**

*Emotional self-reliance: 'I make people feel better'*

Once women have adopted the *babushka* identity, they may attempt to destabilise the negative image of this role by downplaying their dependence on others, and presenting others as more vulnerable and requiring assistance. I identified three main references to self-sufficiency aimed at resisting the stigmatised dependence of the position of the *babushka* - by foregrounding one's emotional, financial and practical autonomy through the presentation of oneself as an agent of care.

The theme of not having a family of her own that would provide her with the status of grandmother appears as the main source of vulnerability in the narrative of Elizaveta, 78, a retired factory engineer; but she turns it into a source of a positive self-presentation. Elizaveta portrays herself as able to support other women who are overwhelmed by their grandparental duties. Here, she tells me about a conversation she had with a woman of her age in a park:

I say to her: 'You should be happy that you live with your children and grandchildren. It's children and grandchildren that brings you joy ...When you're poorly, your granddaughter will bring you a glass of water, feed you. But who will bring me one?'.  
So I talk to people and make them feel better. [Laughs].

In Goffman's (1963) terms, Elizaveta manages the stigma associated with not having grandchildren by subverting her vulnerability into a position from which she is able to provide support to vulnerable others. The glass of water Elizaveta refers to is a recognisable trope that

is widely used in Russian mainstream culture to encourage younger women to become mothers by evoking anxiety: 'Who will bring you a glass of water on your deathbed if you don't have children?'. However, in Elizaveta's narrative, the metaphor of the glass of water, which reflects the social reproduction of motherhood and Russia's 'caring regime', both reveals her vulnerability and also serves as a source of performing self-sufficiency.

Not having children and grandchildren to support her, Elizaveta must mobilise all her resources to take care of herself. This is featured in another episode she brings up. Elizaveta says that one night she felt extremely unwell but did not want to disturb her neighbours or call the ambulance. Instead, she unlocked the front door to her apartment so that, if she were to die, her neighbours would not have to break it down. While in this episode Elizaveta presents herself as capable of self-sufficiency in moments of acute distress, this part of her narrative also emphasises the importance of her connections with her neighbours, which she maintains by downplaying her vulnerability as an act of care for them.

*Financial self-reliance: 'I send money, they call me 'Granny''*

Elizaveta refers to her family situation once again to emphasise her financial self-reliance. She explains that because she does not have other family members to share her old-age pension with, she feels more secure financially than many other pensioners, who do have children and grandchildren. Later in her narrative, however, Elizaveta says that she has found a way to build a network of care exchange that resembles women's multigenerational support systems in the conventional Russian family - she has become the 'adoptive grandmother' to a former colleague's children, who live in another city. According to Elizaveta, she sends sums of money to her 'adopted grandchildren' as birthday gifts, while they express their affection to her in return by calling her 'Granny' (*babulya*). This reference allows Elizaveta to present herself as

a financially self-reliant individual able to share her resources with significant others although earlier she mentions that the norm of sharing puts her peers in a vulnerable position.

Monetary help given to children and grandchildren was mentioned by half of my interviewees and it was framed as a source of pride, especially for those participants who were fully retired. This theme was also accompanied by frequent complaints about insufficient pensions and the high prices of medicine and consumer goods. However, stories about being in need of receiving financial help from children were usually told with less enthusiasm. While for Soviet women financial independence was an organising principle of life, few of them were able to maintain the same level of economic and symbolic security as they had before the collapse of the USSR. Perhaps, with neoliberal discourses of choice and responsibility replacing the Soviet language of social justice (Salmenniemi 2012: 10), my interviewees found controlling their images to be the most accessible way of exercising control over a rapidly changing social reality.

*Practical self-reliance: 'It's difficult for me, but I do it for them'*

In Russia mothers are expected to look after grandmothers should they not be able to perform their daily tasks due to a chronic illness or disability. Being aware of this norm, older women often insist on their autonomy and deny their need for help, out of concern for the welfare of others. Lidia, 74, a retired computer programmer, complains that after eye surgery she is unable to read or use a mobile phone or laptop: 'I don't read, it's bad for my eyes. My neighbour, who is 57, tells me what she's read on the internet. I could afford a laptop, but I'm okay with the radio and the TV'. After revealing her vulnerability related to her sight impairment and mentioning that her growing concerns about not keeping up with the rapidly changing IT sphere had affected her decision to retire earlier than she would have preferred to, Lidia reclaims her autonomy by stating that she will do everything in her power to protect her children from the

burden of looking after her when she is older. She goes on to present herself as a stoic carer who endures physical hardship performing her role of grandmother: 'When my grandchildren are ill and can't go to the kindergarten, I have them. When they're at my place, I read to them a lot. It's difficult for me, but I do it for them'.

Although earlier Lidia has said that she cannot read for herself, relying on her neighbour's reports of the news, she re-establishes the image of an autonomous individual by evoking the experience of challenging her own physical state to perform childcare. Her selfless autonomy comes into play once again when she discusses the possibility that her health might deteriorate. While she mentions that her children would not abandon her should she need assistance on a regular basis, she also says that she would rather have a paid carer. Lidia, who had cared for her terminally ill elderly father, tells me that she will not let her children repeat that difficult experience. The emphasis on autonomy and care makes my interlocutor sound like a responsible and caring matriarch rather than a *babushka*. As in many other narratives, overcoming her vulnerability serves Lidia as an important strategy of self-presentation.

Discussing political protests, Butler (2020: 201) finds that exposing vulnerability, as opposed to the aspiration to invulnerability, carries a potential for solidarity and transformational alliances. Whereas I agree with this point, I also see how the denial of vulnerability is inscribed in the social production of ageing, gender and class.

Segal (2013: 102) explains that because independence is associated with youth, the reluctance of older people to admit their vulnerability and need for help can be explained as the desire to be seen as not 'too old' yet, and thus still having something to offer to society. In her study of Russian single mothers Utrata (2015: 95) shows that for many women who are expected to comply with the standards of 'good mother' and 'good professional', diminishing material difficulties simultaneously serves as a coping mechanism and a strategy to maintain a socially

approved image. Finally, a vulnerable class position requires certain practices of self-presentation to maintain the sense of self-worth in a competitive environment. According to the Russian Academy of Science (2013: 30-1), the increasing stigmatisation of poverty in the country and the availability of consumer loans have resulted in the growth of 'compensatory consumption' among the less privileged groups that exacerbates their financial insecurity. Purchasing expensive smartphones, for example, in this context is explained as an available way to demonstrate one's belonging to economically productive groups and thus maintain one's dignity.

To sum up, while challenging the status quo is a long-term endeavour with an unpredictable outcome, the familiar means of selfless care offers the less privileged older Russian women in my study an immediate way of seeking recognition and maintaining their sense of self-worth.

### **Conclusion: ageing as a stoic carer**

Ageing populations, persisting inequality and women's care burden are critical problems to scholars worldwide. With many welfare systems encouraging extended working lives (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017: 179), and an increase in grandparents' involvement with childcare due to the growing workload of parents (Buchanan and Rotkirch 2018: 132), the urgent question is how greater longevity will reshape 'age relations' within and beyond families. The case of Russia illustrates how the norm of grandmothers helping their daughters extensively to combine childrearing with paid work shaped the social position of the *babushka*, an unpaid family carer who is expected to abandon her career and personal life in the interests of the younger generations. This arrangement is maintained by the ageism of the job market, paternalist old age policies and the gender ideology that spares men from care work.

The intersection of gender, age and class norms produces stable notions about older women's subjectivity and their role in society. Adopting the *babushka* as the dominant model of self-presentation, less privileged older women who do not have resources to resist the ageism of the job market seek appreciation through the familiar means of care. In accordance with the ideal of sacrificial maternal love and the capitalist norm of self-sufficiency, for many women who have adopted the *babushka* identity, the opportunities to maintain a sense of self-worth are limited to taking on the role of a stoic carer who denies her vulnerability and emphasises her self-sufficiency out of concern for the wellbeing of others. As a result, internalising the norm of 'youth privilege' many older women come to believe that their problems are unimportant and are reluctant to seek help even when they need it.

The asymmetrical 'age relations' between mothers and grandmothers reflect Russia's 'caring regime', which distributes unpaid care work unevenly among members of age, gender and class categories. While the extensive involvement of fathers in childcare has started to appear among educated Russian men, most women still spend two or three times as much time on family work than men (Rimashevskaya et al. 2016: 28). With a labour market that limits the options of post-pension-age employment to low-paid, unskilled jobs (Kozina and Zangieva 2018), those who do not have the resources to compete for jobs are expected to accept the position of a receiver of social benefits. This approach renders many older women dependent on the state and potentially on their daughters in a society that stigmatises dependence.

While my study shows that access to skilled post-pension-age employment helps women postpone identifying with the marginal *babushka* figure, the imperative to work longer that has been promoted in most Western countries is not necessarily a panacea for age-related discrimination. Drawing on the concept of 'active ageing' which presents later stages of life as an opportunity to re-engage in meaningful activities and promotes the distinctive lifestyles of affluent older people as standard, this approach does not consider inequality that often increases



with age (Biggs 2012: 93). Since pensionable age is on the rise in Russia, further research is required to investigate how the shift towards longer careers will affect the Russian ‘caring regime’ and the wellbeing of those involved in family care.

Utrata (2011: 637) argues convincingly that it is difficult to reduce age and gender hierarchies without changing institutional arrangements and increasing men’s contribution to care work. My study demonstrates that while the strategies available to older Russian women to maintain their membership in society do not challenge the status quo, the performance of the *babushka* identity reveals women’s mutual vulnerability and interdependence across the whole life course. This means that combating the marginalisation of older women is a matter of intergenerational solidarity. We should continue making women’s unpaid work visible in research and outside academia, question the conventional notions about individual experience ascribed to age, gender and class categories and discuss the conditions of ageing in different contexts.

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## **Declaration of contribution of authors**

The article was written solely by the author.

## **Statement of conflict of interest**

There is no conflict of interest present in the study.

## **Notes**

1. In 2018, the Russian government announced that, over a fifteen-year period, the retirement age would be increased from 60 to 65 years of age for men and from 55 to 63 for women (Federal Law N1032-1).

2. Older women are portrayed as not using their allegedly excessive free time ‘productively’ in numerous products of Russian pop-culture. For instance, in the pop-song ‘Babushki Starushki’ (Osiashvili, 1989) and the contents of typical ‘*babushki on lavochki*’ internet memes <<https://fishki.net/1260501-babushki-na-lavochke.html>> [Accessed 08.11.21].

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