



Original Article

Gendered social participation in later-life ageing

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Abstract

This contribution, based on a critical review of international literature, examines active ageing from a gender perspective, exploring how life-course inequalities shape opportunities for social participation in later life. Social participation slows cognitive decline and supports subjective well-being, health, autonomy, and survival (Carr et al. 2015; Gottlieb and Gillespie 2008), offering older adults opportunities for learning, physical activity, and meaningful social engagement. Within this framework, we assume that gender disparities in participation are widespread across European contexts and generally disadvantage women, that these differences partly reflect unequal life-course trajectories in health and socioeconomic resources, and that gender gaps tend to be smaller in countries with higher levels of women's political empowerment. Building on these assumptions, the research question asks how gender, in interaction with welfare regimes, shapes the forms, meanings and opportunities for social participation in later life. The aim is to synthesise recent evidence showing that participation in older age is a dynamic process shaped by biographical transitions, while emphasising the relevance of a gender-sensitive perspective capable of identifying both persistent asymmetries, and emerging patterns among baby-boomer women, who often display higher levels of education, work experience, and autonomy. Evidence also suggests that these transitions can generate differentiated risks for men's and women's social relationships (Cotterell, Buffel and Phillipson 2018). The contribution argues for the integration of gender analysis and welfare models to design active-ageing policies that reduce relational exclusion and acknowledge the diversity of later-life trajectories.

Keywords: *gender inequalities; participation; transitions; exclusion; active ageing; engagement.*

1. Introduction

In the European context, there is currently growing interest, both at the political and scientific levels, in promoting active social lives in later adulthood and in addressing the risks of social isolation and loneliness that may accompany ageing. This concern is clearly

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reflected in recent European policy frameworks, such as the *Green Paper on Ageing* (European Commission 2021), which highlights that relational risks do not emerge suddenly in old age but rather accumulate across the life course.

At the same time, research on active ageing has produced well-established evidence on the central role of social participation in supporting well-being in later life. Accordingly, a substantial body of recent studies has examined patterns, correlates, and consequences of active ageing (Tanskanen et al. 2024; Arpino and Solé-Auró 2023; Boerio, Garavaglia and Gaia 2023; Kantachote and Wiroonsri 2023; Arpino and Bellani 2022; Ates, Bordone and Arpino 2022; Bordone and Arpino 2022; Rojo-Perez et al. 2022;). Moreover, social participation has been shown to slow cognitive decline and to positively affect subjective well-being, health, autonomy, and survival (Carr et al. 2015; Di Gessa and Grundy 2014; Han et al. 2017; Gottlieb and Gillespie 2008). In fact, beyond these outcomes, participation in social activities may also expand social networks and provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Thoits 2012). According to Hersch (1991), recreational activities can become increasingly important after retirement, as they offer a way to structure free time and maintain engagement. Social participation provides retirees with opportunities to remain physically active, to socialize, and to acquire new skills. Empirical evidence suggests that such engagement is particularly relevant for predicting life satisfaction among retirees (Harlow and Cantor 1996) and for maintaining good cognitive functioning (Lee, Chi and Palinkas 2019). More specifically, this review focuses on gender inequalities in social participation in post-retirement age. Gender has long shaped life-course trajectories, particularly through differential participation in the labour market, a pattern that is especially pronounced among older cohorts (Van Dijk and Van der Lippe 2001). These gendered employment histories are likely to influence not only overall levels of participation after retirement but also the gender gap across different forms of social activity (Avital 2017). Consequently, gender inequalities observed in later-life social participation may partly reflect cumulative disadvantages rooted in pre-retirement labour market experiences. Despite this, relatively few studies have explicitly addressed gender differences in social participation in older age, and existing evidence remains fragmented (Avital 2017).

The aim of this review is to synthesise recent evidence on social participation in later life by adopting a gender-sensitive and life-course perspective. In doing so, it seeks to conceptualise participation in older age as a dynamic process shaped by biographical transitions, such as retirement, and by institutional contexts. Particular attention is paid to how gender interacts with welfare regimes in shaping opportunities, meanings, and forms of participation, while also accounting for generational change. This perspective allows the identification of both persistent gender asymmetries and emerging participation patterns, especially among baby-boomer women, who often display higher levels of education, longer work histories, and greater autonomy compared to previous cohorts. Accordingly, the guiding research question of this review is: how does gender, in interaction with different welfare regimes, shape social participation in later life in terms of forms, meanings, and opportunities?

To address this question, the article adopts a targeted narrative review approach with a dual objective: to synthesise comparative empirical evidence and to interpret it through feminist theoretical perspectives. The latter does not constitute a separate theoretical

contribution but provides an interpretative framework through which the empirical evidence is contextualized.

2. Theoretical background

Given the central role of social participation in later life, a key analytical question concerns who is able to participate, in what ways, and under which conditions. Work, family, and caregiving trajectories have historically been deeply gendered, particularly among cohorts currently in older age, and these differences continue to produce long-lasting effects well into later life. Participation in the labour market, access to economic resources, health conditions, and the structure and availability of social networks are all dimensions strongly shaped by gender and together, these factors directly influence opportunities for social participation in older age, contributing to differentiated risks of social exclusion among older men and women.

Drawing on the multidimensional framework of old-age exclusion proposed by Walsh, Scharf, and Keating (2016), this study adopts a relational and life-course-oriented understanding of social participation in later life. This framework conceptualises exclusion as the outcome of interconnected domains ranging from material and financial resources to social relations, civic participation, and neighbourhood and community contexts shaped by interacting processes operating at multiple levels. Importantly, it emphasises that risks of exclusion are not solely rooted in individual circumstances but emerge through the interplay between micro-level life experiences, meso-level social arrangements, and macro-level institutional and cultural structures (Walsh, Scharf and Keating 2016).

In line with the broader literature on gender inequalities in active ageing, this review examines gender disparities in social participation by building on a set of well-established assumptions. First, gender differences in social participation can be traced to mechanisms operating at multiple levels: micro (individual characteristics and resources), meso (family dynamics and social roles), and macro (institutional and societal contexts).

In many societies, women, particularly among older cohorts, have experienced lower levels of education, income, and labour market participation as a consequence of traditional caregiving roles. These gendered life-course patterns have been shown to increase the risk of economic disadvantage and poorer health in later life (Cambois, Solé-Auró and Robine 2016), both of which are key determinants of social participation. Consistent with findings by Bukov, Maas and Lampert (2002) for Germany, we therefore expect gender differences in social participation to be partly explained by gender gaps in socioeconomic status (e.g. education) and health conditions. At the same time, country-specific historical contexts must be taken into account, for instance, in Southern European countries such as Spain, the legacy of the Francoist period has had long-lasting implications for women's labour market participation and social roles, which may continue to shape participation patterns in older age. Overall, this implies that gender inequalities in social participation tend to diminish once gender differences in socioeconomic and health-related resources are accounted for, although they may not disappear entirely.

Following Hank and Jürges (2007) and Fuwa (2004), who examined gender inequalities in domestic labour, this study conceptualises women's empowerment as a key indicator of contextual gender equality. To capture this dimension, we draw on the Women's Political Empowerment Index (WPEI), which provides comparable information across a wide range of countries and historical periods. A major advantage of the WPEI is that it allows us to account for the level of contextual gender (in)equality experienced by individuals across their life course, rather than limiting the analysis to conditions observed

at the time of the survey. This is particularly relevant given that gender inequalities in older age are likely to reflect long-term processes of socialisation into gender norms during childhood and adulthood. As emphasised by Foster and Walker (2013), a life-course perspective recognises that life experiences, inevitably structured by social relationships and social contexts, strongly influence how people age. Moreover, the WPEI has been shown to be highly correlated with other widely used indices of gender equality, when available (Kolk 2019). Within the WPEI framework, women's political empowerment is defined as a process of increasing women's capabilities, leading to greater freedom of choice, agency, and participation in social decision-making (Sundström et al. 2017). This concept extends beyond formal legal rights to encompass informal cultural constraints that may confine women to family roles and limit their freedom of movement. It also captures women's access to and control over resources that can facilitate participation in social and civic activities, such as clubs or associations. Higher levels of empowerment may also imply a reconfiguration of gender roles, encouraging men to engage in traditionally female activities (e.g. caregiving) and women to participate in traditionally male-dominated social spheres. Overall, women living in countries with higher WPEI scores are expected to enjoy greater decision-making power, wider freedom of choice, and easier access to social participation opportunities. Accordingly, we expect gender inequalities in social participation in later life to be smaller in contexts characterised by higher levels of women's political empowerment.

Finally, research highlights the central role of life-course transitions as potential sources of social exclusion in older age (Cotterell, Buffel, and Phillipson 2018). Transitions such as retirement, widowhood, the onset of illness, or residential relocation can represent critical turning points in individuals' social connectivity, challenging existing routines and disrupting social resources (Almeida and Wong 2009). Empirical studies have consistently documented associations between major life events and the loss of intimate relationships, weakened social networks, insufficient social support, and reduced social opportunities (Dupuis-Blanchard, Neufeld and Strang 2009; Guiaux, Van Tilburg and Broese Van Groenou 2007). Importantly, the meanings attributed to these transitions and the ways in which individuals and societies manage their consequences underscore the combined influence of subjective experiences and broader social structures on later-life outcomes (Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Walsh and Urbaniak 2023). Despite this growing body of research, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding how gender shapes socialisation into social participation across the life course, and how these processes unfold in older age, in this respect his respect, recent contributions integrating life-course and intersectionality approaches (Holman and Walker 2021) highlight the need to account for multiple, overlapping axes of inequality.

3. Methods

This study adopts a targeted narrative literature review design, also referred to as a focused or non-systematic literature review (Huelin et al. 2015), in fact it does not aim to meet the formal criteria of a systematic review; rather, it follows a targeted and theory-driven narrative approach, where the selection and interpretation of studies are guided by the analytical framework and research hypotheses. Building on the theoretical background outlined above, the review aims to explore how gender inequalities in social participation in later life vary across countries and institutional contexts, with particular attention to the role of socioeconomic resources, health, and women's political empowerment. This approach is especially appropriate for the present study, given the multidimensional and context-

dependent nature of social participation and old-age exclusion, as well as the diversity of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches in the field.

The review is guided by three exploratory hypotheses derived from the gendered life-course and old-age exclusion frameworks discussed above. These hypotheses are not tested statistically but are used as analytical lenses to structure the synthesis of existing evidence.

H1: Gender inequalities in social participation are observed across all countries, although their magnitude varies by national context. More specifically, older women tend to participate less than older men in social activities.

H2: Gender inequalities in social participation are partly explained by gender differences in socioeconomic status and health.

H3: Gender inequalities in social participation are smaller in countries characterised by higher levels of women's political empowerment.

The literature included in the review was selected based on its relevance to these hypotheses and its contribution to understanding gendered patterns of social participation in older age. Priority was given to peer-reviewed empirical studies and comparative research focusing on older populations in different welfare and institutional contexts. Through this targeted narrative approach, the review aims to synthesise existing evidence, highlight converging and diverging findings, and identify areas where further research is needed.

4. Synthesis of findings

This narrative literature review was based on the selection of studies published between 2006 and 2021, identified through a structured search conducted across twelve bibliographic databases using twelve predefined keywords. The initial cut-off point (2006) was selected to capture the period in which the concept of active ageing became increasingly institutionalised in European policy and research debates, while the final cut-off (2021) reflects the last year for which a complete and consistent search strategy was conducted. Studies published after 2021 (e.g. Walsh and Urbaniak 2023; Tanskanen et al. 2024) are included as supplementary references to support the discussion but were not part of the reviewed corpus.

The initial search yielded a total of 9171 records. Following the screening and eligibility assessment, 64 studies were included in the final review. Of these, 29 were qualitative studies (45.3%), 42 were published after 2014 (65.6%), and 36 originated from North America (56.3%). This reveals a geographical imbalance in the reviewed corpus, with a predominance of North American studies. While this partly reflects data availability and database coverage, it also represents a limitation of the review, particularly given its focus on European welfare regimes.

The synthesis of the selected literature revealed the emergence of three overarching thematic areas, which capture recurring patterns in how social participation in later life is conceptualised, experienced, and shaped by gender and broader institutional contexts. These themes provide an organising framework for understanding the heterogeneity of participation trajectories among older adults and for highlighting key gaps and convergences within the existing body of research.

First of all, existing research shows that, even when focusing on relational outcomes, studies often fail to provide a nuanced understanding of how older men and women interpret and experience different forms of social participation within the domain of social relationships (Burholt et al. 2020; Ejlskov et al. 2020). Consequently, the meanings individuals attribute to changes in social relationships, as well as to relational experiences associated with life-course transitions, remain only partially understood.

Secondly, critically, while quantitative studies have long examined the role of gender in experiences of isolation in later life (Cohen-Mansfield et al. 2016), the lived, gendered experiences of social participation within social relationships have received far less attention (Barnes and Parry 2004; Calasanti and Bowen 2006; Holman and Walker 2021). This gap in the literature limits our ability to assess how the type, timing, and nature of social participation may influence social relationships differently for older men and women and constrains efforts to address persistent gender inequalities in ageing.

Thirdly, despite the centrality of social participation in policy and practice aimed at strengthening social connections in ageing European societies, insufficient attention has been paid to the lived experiences of how life-course transitions affect social relationships among older men and women across different European contexts. As a result, the capacity to identify which forms of social participation generate shared and meaningful relational outcomes and which may be effectively supported through European and national policy interventions remains limited.

As a first step toward addressing these combined gaps, recent research by Clemente (2026) highlights how gender shapes the (re)interpretation of personal experiences of social participation across four welfare regimes: Southern, Bismarckian, Social Democratic, and Liberal. By moving beyond models based exclusively on age or life stage, this work contributes to the literature by foregrounding gendered experiences of participation and by reintroducing explicit attention to life-course transitions, a dimension that has been central in earlier research by the same author. Cross-national differences in gendered patterns of social participation further underscore the importance of cultural and institutional contexts in shaping opportunities for active ageing.

Building on this body of work, the literature reviewed here deepens the analysis of how social participation is lived and experienced in later life, particularly in relation to gender. Empirical evidence (Clemente, 2026) adds depth and contextual specificity to existing knowledge, enhancing understanding of the complex and multidimensional processes through which participation is enabled or constrained.

For older adults, transitions such as the onset of poor health, bereavement, retirement, and residential relocation have been shown to translate into multidimensional experiences of exclusion from social relationships, affecting both men and women. These experiences may limit access to social networks, social support, intimate relationships, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. Although no single definition of social relationships exists, some scholars emphasising direct interpersonal connections and others highlighting a broader social realm shaped by the allocation of vital social resources (Crossley 2013). Research consistently suggests that life-course transitions have important implications for social networks, social interactions, and social identity (Alwin 2012; Bengtson, Elder Jr and Putney 2012; Dannefer and Settersten 2010). Quantitative studies further indicate that later-life transitions such as retirement (Shin et al., 2020), widowhood (Štípková 2021), and the onset of health problems (Hilberink, van der Slot and Klem 2017) can disrupt social ties and reduce both the quantity and quality of social contacts in older age. Despite longstanding scholarly interest in social relationships and disadvantage in later life, understanding of lived experiences of exclusion from social relationships remains limited (Litwin, Levinsky and Schwartz 2020). Following Aartsen et al. (2021), social exclusion from social relationships is understood here as a condition in which older individuals are socially and emotionally disconnected from adequate levels of intimate relationships, social networks, social support, and/or social opportunities.

Finally, the literature reviewed and interpretation of data from Clemente's work (2026) focuses on the lived experiences of men and women aged 55-64 and 65-74 in European countries including Italy, Spain, Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom since these countries represent distinct welfare regimes and illustrate the complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors through which experiences of social participation and their outcomes are shaped (Orloff 1993). Together, they encompass a wide range of European welfare state models, including Mediterranean, conservative, social democratic, and liberal regimes which differ substantially in their levels of formal support and reflect historically specific welfare arrangements that continue to structure opportunities for participation in later life (Esping-Andersen 1990).

5. Discussion

The feminist critique discussed in this section should be read in light of the empirical patterns identified in Section 4. In particular, the observed gender differences in forms, meanings, and constraints of participation provide a concrete basis for reassessing preference-based explanations.

Gender constitutes a central theoretical and conceptual innovation of feminist scholarship, including research focused on welfare states and systems of social regulation. However, recurrent domesticating intellectual and political tendencies continue to risk diluting the critical insights of gender analysis. For this reason, it is important to reassert what makes gender analysis particularly destabilising for conventional policy approaches, including those concerned with social protection, by explicitly contrasting feminist perspectives with more traditional interpretations.

Mainstream social policy analysts have increasingly incorporated selected aspects of gender relations into their analyses, stimulated both by earlier waves of feminist scholarship and by observable gender transformations in labour markets, families, and political institutions. Nevertheless, much of this work remains centred on individual-level "differences" between women and men, particularly in terms of preferences, life-course employment patterns, and associated social rights (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002; Gilbert 2008; Hakim 1995, 2000). Under the rubric of "preference theory", Catherine Hakim has assembled empirical evidence on the heterogeneity of women's "lifestyle preferences", arguing that women can be grouped according to their orientation towards work and family as home-centred, adaptive, or work-centred. While home-centred and work-centred women are assumed to pursue their preferences largely independently of policy context, social policies are seen as particularly influential for the majority group of *adaptive* women.

The findings reviewed suggest that preferences are not exogenous, but are shaped by gendered life-course trajectories and institutional contexts, thereby supporting feminist critiques of preference theory.

This perspective has significantly shaped European policy debates on work-family reconciliation, as policymakers have sought to activate the *adaptive* group without fundamentally challenging the gendered division of labour implicitly assumed by the preference framework. Hakim and other scholars (e.g. Gilbert 2008) explicitly contrast their approach with feminism, which they characterise as presuming that women would behave like men if only appropriate institutional supports - such as universal childcare - were available. However, much feminist scholarship explicitly rejects male-centred life-course models (Fraser 1994; Gornick and Meyers, 2003) and instead emphasises that women's normative preferences, gendered moral rationalities, and commitments to an ethic of care

actively shape how they negotiate paid work and caregiving (Duncan and Edwards 1997; Williams 2000).

Claims regarding the explanatory power of preferences advanced by Hakim, Esping-Andersen, and mainstream economists have been challenged on at least three grounds. First, these approaches conceptualise gender primarily as an individual attribute, thereby neglecting its fundamentally relational character. Second, substantial empirical evidence demonstrates that gender hierarchies and inequalities continue to structure the preferences, practices, and opportunities of both women and men. Third, and perhaps most critically, these approaches fail to interrogate the origins of preferences themselves. Feminist scholars have instead contributed to a rich body of literature in which agency - including preferences, desires, and identities - and structure are understood as mutually constitutive. This relationship is more accurately captured through concepts of structuration and historical process than through fixed or static outcomes (Biernacki 2005; Rubin 1975; Sewell 1992). From this perspective, knowledge, subjectivity, and political action are simultaneously constrained and enabled by existing social categories, including gender (Butler 1990; Clemens 2005; Zerilli 2005). Gender identities and practices, including orientations towards work and family, are therefore not pre-political or natural. Rather, welfare states, alongside other political and social institutions, actively contribute to shaping gendered divisions of labour and the preferences, needs, and desires that sustain them (Fraser 1989; Haney 2002; Lewis 1997; Morgan 2006).

Through their engagement with diverse strands of social and political theory, feminist scholars have developed analytical frameworks that directly challenge sexual hierarchies, and this constitutes a fundamental distinction between feminist and non-critical gender approaches. For feminist analyses, gender is not limited to observable differences, as emphasised in preference-based accounts, but encompasses the processes through which such differences are constructed, reproduced, and contested within systems of power, one of which is the welfare state itself. These power dynamics do not necessarily operate exclusively in a masculine direction, as in Bourdieu's (1998) account of masculine domination, but may also involve local reversals (Connell 1987), processes of gender undoing (Butler 2004), or the emergence of radically new political forms (Zerilli 2005).

Finally, the role of the states represents a central stake in struggles over gendered power relations, given its monopoly over the collective means of coercion and its authority in constituting and regulating gendered categories of political participation and citizenship rights (Connell 1987, 1995, 2002; Ferree 2009; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999). From this perspective, welfare regimes are not merely passive contexts within which gendered preferences are expressed, but active institutional actors that shape the conditions under which gendered inequalities in social participation and life-course trajectories are produced and contested. Despite this, an integrated understanding of their participation expectations remains limited, constraining the development of innovative interventions tailored to their specific needs and aspirations.

Against this backdrop, it is useful to reflect on the three overarching thematic areas that emerged from the analysis. First, regarding generational characteristics, the literature consistently emphasises the importance of situating baby boomers within their specific socio-historical context and recognising how this context has shaped their motivations, interests, and orientations towards social participation. As the first cohorts to benefit from major advances in social and civil rights, baby boomers are reaching later life in comparatively better health conditions, with higher levels of education and stronger labour market attachment than previous generations. At the same time, they increasingly demand

recognition of new, more meaningful, and self-determined forms of social engagement. These findings support the idea that social participation in later life cannot be understood without accounting for generational positioning, and they provide an important interpretative framework for the gendered patterns observed across countries.

Second, concerning forms of participation, the evidence points to a growing demand for more active, flexible, and impactful modes of engagement, particularly those enabling older adults to contribute meaningfully to their communities. This demand challenges traditional, often passive models of participation offered through institutionalised services for older people and aligns with calls to rethink participation as a dynamic and negotiated process

Third, in relation to organisations and services for older people, the literature underscores the need to move beyond viewing baby boomers merely as service users and to recognise them as potential agents of change actively involved in shaping policies and programmes.

At the same time, it is important to avoid treating baby boomer women as a homogeneous group. Differences in class, education, migration background, and territorial contexts (e.g. urban vs rural areas) generate substantial heterogeneity in life-course trajectories and participation opportunities. It is within this institutional and political framework that the findings of the present review should be interpreted. This review has highlighted the need to rethink social participation in later life by placing both gender and generation at the centre of analysis. A first, overarching question emerging from the findings concerns the social positioning of individuals aged from 55 to 64, particularly among the baby boomer cohorts, and the ways in which gender continues to shape their expectations, practices, and opportunities for participation. Owing to substantial advances in social and civil rights, baby boomers are reaching older age in better health conditions and with higher levels of education and labour market attachment than previous cohorts. At the same time, they increasingly demand recognition of new, more meaningful forms of social participation. A second key issue emerging from the review concerns the persistent gendered nature of social participation in later life. While 6 of the 64 analysed studies focused exclusively on women's experiences, none examined men's experiences alone, pointing to a significant imbalance in the literature. The evidence shows that gender shapes not only levels of participation but also motivations, meanings, and barriers. For example, women who perceived volunteering as undervalued or as unpaid labour substituting for welfare services were more likely to disengage, questioning gendered expectations that frame care and self-sacrifice as inherently "feminine" attributes (Marchand and Tremblay 2021). As the first cohort to experience widespread access to higher education and paid employment, baby boomer women increasingly seek to define retirement on their own terms, challenging traditional gender inequalities and asserting autonomy over how and where they participate (Brown and Rohlinger, 2016). Consistently with these findings, baby boomer women expressed a strong need to remain connected to social reality, linking their own lives to those of others through flexible forms of engagement oriented towards freedom, self-expression, and social commitment (Seaman 2012). Many have also acted as activists, using participation as a means to address issues such as ageism. At the same time, significant barriers to social participation persist, including reluctance to participate alone due to fear of rejection, transportation difficulties, and economic insecurity, constraints that are themselves highly gendered and reflect the feminisation of poverty in later life (Martinez et al. 2011).

From the perspective of subjectivities, these findings raise a broader question about who the typologies of women are who are ageing today. Much as women currently in their seventies distanced themselves from their mothers' experiences already in their fifties, they continue to do so in later life. In many respects, they remain "women of the first time": more educated, largely engaged in paid work over their life course, exposed to biographical discontinuities, and deeply shaped by the major social and political reforms of the 1970s. It would be difficult to imagine that these experiences do not resonate in their approach to ageing. Today, women aged 65 and over represent around one quarter of the female population. Ageing in an age-friendly society therefore requires recognising their social value and personhood, countering both cultural ageism and the risk of invisibility. Many maintain active social lives, engage in cultural consumption, travel, and wellbeing activities, and have challenged multiple invisible barriers throughout their lives.

Taken together, these findings underscore the analytical and substantive value of a gender perspective in the study of social participation in later life. Although beliefs and behaviours are rarely uniform within cohorts, a gendered approach remains essential, as critical historical events are likely to generate a "sense of rupture with the past" (Wohl 1979), fostering the formation of gendered and generational identities characterised by shared attitudes and worldviews rooted in a common socio-historical context (Paunovic, Müller and Deimel 2023; Li, Li and Hudson 2013). Within this framework, the three hypotheses are not only broadly supported but also refined, revealing the complex, context-dependent, and meaning-laden nature of gender inequalities in social participation among older adults.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings point to several directions for future research with important implications for improving societal well-being when addressing gender inequalities in later life. First, future studies could usefully seek to identify the micro- and macro-level factors that contribute to gender gaps in social participation and to their heterogeneity across countries, particularly in relation to differences in public social policies and welfare regimes. Second, further research should examine how these gender disparities have evolved over time, adopting a life-course and longitudinal perspective. Finally, recent evidence suggests that educational inequalities can partly explain differences in levels of active ageing (Arpino and Solé-Auró 2019). In a similar vein, ageing research could productively explore how the gender inequalities in active ageing documented in this review translate into gender disparities in health and well-being in later life.

The findings also carry important implications for policymakers seeking to promote active participation among older adults. Given the well-documented benefits of social participation for health and well-being, and the substantial gender disparities identified in this review, gender inequalities in social participation should be systematically monitored and assessed alongside inequalities in other life domains. Moreover, while in most countries men are more likely than women to participate in social activities, the opposite pattern is observed in some contexts. This highlights the importance of situating gender differences within their specific institutional and cultural settings. Accordingly, in some countries policy interventions should prioritise increasing women's participation in social activities, whereas in others such efforts may be unnecessary or may even need to focus on promoting greater participation among men.

7. Limitations

While this review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the temporal scope of the analysis (2006-2021), although theoretically grounded, implies that more recent contributions are not systematically included in the reviewed corpus. Second, the geographical imbalance of the literature, with a predominance of North American studies, may limit the generalisability of the findings to European contexts. Third, the narrative nature of the review implies a degree of interpretative selectivity. Finally, the analysis of baby boomer women may risk some degree of oversimplification, and future research should further explore intersectional differences within this cohort.

Authors' Contributions

The Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion are to be attributed jointly to Cersosimo and Landolfi. The Theoretical background is to be attributed to Cersosimo, while the Methods and the Synthesis of findings are to be attributed to Landolfi.

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