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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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# A future of shared living: women's visions of ageing and care work beyond the couple

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## ABSTRACT

Single women are at the forefront of a growing movement towards cohousing as a socially innovative response to ageing, promising mutual support and challenging the limitations of family- and market-based care. Drawing on a participatory study in northern Italy (2020–2022) with women aged 50–80 who live outside of a couple, this article explores their aspirations to a future of shared living. The findings show that shared living is commonly perceived as a compromise between family obligations and institutional care, focusing on the preservation of autonomy while enabling elective sociality and mutual aid. The article interprets them through the lens of feminist materialist perspectives, which have inspired projects of shared living while also producing a critical understanding of these experiences as contested terrains between commoning and commodification, where the organization of care work emerges as a key, yet unresolved issue. These perspectives therefore prove useful in making sense of women's silences surrounding caregiving arrangements within cohousing in the event of intensifying care needs. This highlights the need for greater attention to be given to labour relations in research on the gendered implications of new housing and relational arrangements for ageing people.

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## Introduction

Cohousing has garnered increasing attention in both policy discourse and academic debate as a potentially cost-effective and socially innovative response to population ageing. It is presented as a housing arrangement that ensures autonomy, choice, and agency through resident self-management and more efficient care provision, thereby addressing the shortcomings of both family-based and market-based in-home care, as well as the depersonalizing and disempowering characteristics of institutional long-term care.

Ageing women, and particularly those living outside the couple, are leading participants in the movement towards cohousing (Labit, 2015), because of their growing demographic importance, cohort experiences of profound changes in women's identity, and the specificity of their needs, including vulnerabilities related to economic insecurity,

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care overload and unmet care needs, also linked to the thinning and erosion of inter-generational support networks. The combination of these factors exposes them to risks of economic and relational poverty and affects the sustainability of care in old age, making a focus on their imagined ageing futures particularly significant. In Italy, which has one of the oldest populations in Europe, less than a third of women over 75 live in couples (Istat, 2020a). Other data show that people over 75 living alone, especially if they have a low income, make up a significant proportion of the population who do not receive enough help with their care needs and are therefore more at risk of being institutionalized (Istat, 2020b). Yet these women are often viewed simply as either care providers or bearers of vulnerabilities and needs.

Drawing on a participatory study with women aged 50–80 living outside of a couple in northern Italy, this article explores how these women envision their housing and care futures as they grow older, focusing in particular on aspirations to forms of shared living arrangements where sociality and care transcend conventional family ties. The choice of excluding women over eighty from the age range was aimed at reaching women at earlier phases of the ageing process while envisioning their ageing futures. While the study did not begin with a focus on shared living, this theme proved central to participants' accounts. The article explores how the growing public discourse on cohousing shapes these women's imaginaries, while also showing how they go beyond it in their conception of alternative arrangements for sociality and shared care. Furthermore, the gap between their aspirations and the actual possibilities of realizing them enables us to identify, from an external perspective, key obstacles to accessing cohousing that have been studied in terms of their exclusionary implications. Overall, the depictions of shared living futures by these women highlight some critical issues discussed in studies of cohousing experiences and feminist perspectives on them: in particular, the privatization of care services and the invisibility of labour relations implied by intensive care requiring paid assistance. The specificity of the Italian context, with its substantial informal care market sustained by migrant women's labour, makes them particularly urgent issues.

### Communitising ageing: the promises and downsides of cohousing

A growing debate on rethinking housing for older people revolves around the issue of living arrangements that combine private spaces with shared spaces for daily activities, and that envisage community life based on solidarity and mutual assistance. Cohousing is a key term in this debate: inspired by the Danish *bofællesskab* and other similar experiences, in most definitions it includes management from below, through residents' co-responsibility and democratic decision-making processes (Czischke et al., 2020). Tummers and MacGregor (2019, p. 63) define cohousing as 'common dwelling clusters that are created and/or managed collaboratively by residents' associations'. Griffith et al. (2024) understand 'collaborative housing' as a broader umbrella term encompassing different forms of collective property and management arrangements, while 'cohousing' designates a more specific subset characterized by self-organization, the combination of private dwellings with shared spaces, and an explicit commitment to community life. However, cohousing has also become a buzzword with multiple meanings covering a variety of real-life situations (Griffith et al., 2024), and its boundaries with related notions such as collaborative housing, intentional communities, and shared housing remain

blurred. Following this common usage, we refer to cohousing as an encompassing term, referring to the practice of sharing part of one's everyday living space, including but not limited to formalized cohousing. We will refer to other related notions like collaborative housing when discussing the literature in which they are used.

This choice reflects the empirical material we work with: the women interviewed engage with the broad meaning that cohousing has acquired in Italian public discourse, rather than with the more specific definitions used in the academic literature, when talking about their aspirations to shared living.

A growing interest in the development of cohousing solutions, especially but not only for the older population (Bianchi & Costa, 2024), can also be found in Italy, although the cohousing experience has much weaker institutional support compared to, for example, Spain. The policies developed in this direction by local administrations are still fragmented and have uncertain results (Pennestri et al., 2022).

Prevailing narratives, in the media and among academics, practitioners and policy-makers, overwhelmingly assign a positive value to cohousing, associating it with social solidarity in an atomized world and environmental sustainability (Bianchi & Costa, 2024). It is also linked to a broader politics of commoning (Dardot & Laval, 2014), which sees the collective reappropriation of resource management as a prefigurative practice for a post-capitalist society. Its strategic importance for ageing people lies in its identification as an efficient and cost-effective solution to both social isolation and intensive care needs (Carrera, 2024; Durrett, 2009; Cummings and Krops 2019), preserving quality of life in older age (Puplampu et al., 2020) and sustaining self-determination and empowerment (Perino & Resta, 2019). It can be an answer to the need to overcome the binary between a persistent attachment of older people to ageing in place and nursing homes as the institutionalized response to their long-term care needs (Melchiorre et al., 2022).

On the other hand, critical assessments of actually implemented cohousing experiences see these views as mostly wishful thinking (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019). One line of criticism addresses the risk of cohousing legitimizing processes of privatization, with a transfer of responsibility for housing and welfare provision from the public to individuals and the promotion of disguised forms of outsourcing (Keller-Garganté & Colom, 2024). Butzlaff et al. (2024) argue that, 'Taking market principles and urban entrepreneurialism as a point of entry, facilitating self-organization and autonomous housing among citizens appropriates the notion of citizen participation for a top-down control and a profit- and marketing-oriented politics of the city'. This critique, however, does not apply to all cohousing models. State-supported or de commodified initiatives, including those rooted in cooperative tenure, public-common partnerships, or community land trusts, complicate the picture: rather than displacing public responsibility, they can constitute terrains where collective and public provision are articulated together (Milburn & Russell, 2020), as research on cases such as La Borda in Barcelona has shown (Del Río, 2025; see also Fernández Arrigoitia et al., 2023). The critical question, therefore, concerns less cohousing as such than the institutional and political conditions under which collaborative housing is enabled and the relations of property and care it sustains.

Chiodelli and Baglione (2014) read the popularity of cohousing as part of the expansion of private residential areas such as gated or retirement communities (McHugh & Larson-Keagy, 2005). Alongside economic accessibility, they highlight recurrent features: the self-selection of residents, which produces social and ideological homogeneity, and an

'introverted' spatial organisation – that is, a layout oriented to building community ties inside the cohousing while retreating from neighbourhood and society – thereby failing to disrupt the binary between the privatized family and the market. They therefore argue that these experiences can also be viewed as 'a neocommunitarian reaction deepening the fragmentation of the urban context, both socially and spatially' (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014, p. 27).

Other critical issues concern the reproduction of gender inequalities within cohousing life. Tummers and MacGregor (2019) argue that the sharing of care tasks does not entail their fairer gender redistribution. Cohousing initiatives, notably those designed for older adults, frequently resort to remunerated services and care work without adequately interrogating the feminized and racialized low-waged labour that prevails within these contexts. In senior cohousing, where care needs can intensify with disabling health conditions, the organization of care work becomes particularly crucial: Izuhara et al (2024) show that mutual support, including informal care provision, promotes agency in age-related transitions, while more intensive long-term care is still left to individual arrangements that rely on feminized labour, whether unpaid or hired (López Gómez et al., 2020).

Critical analyses are also developed through perspectives on queer experiences that outline heteronormative dynamics. A UK study of LGBT older people living in housing with care schemes (Willis et al., 2023) highlights the failure to deliver on the promise of an inclusive community, with many residents experiencing a complex insider/outsider status that can lead to social disconnection. These dynamics have led to specific cohousing projects being developed by queer communities (Marocco, 2023), which in turn raises issues of intersectional inequalities (Westwood, 2017).

These cautionary perspectives evoke the risks that cohousing experiences may reproduce the limits of an idea of stable family domesticity characterized by the confluence of sociality, care, and time sharing: what Ariès (1960) identified as the basis of the modern sentiment of family, built on a desire for homogeneity expressing the secession of the bourgeoisie from the promiscuity of the pre-capitalist social world and reinforcing modern hierarchies of class, gender and race.

## Feminist perspectives on shared living

Feminist perspectives have developed critical understandings of the interplay between the modern family model, the construction of a domestic sphere separate from the public one, and the shaping of hierarchical social relations. They have also been a key driving force in developing visions and experiences of relationships based on affection, care and support that extend beyond the confines of couples and biological reproductive ties.

Feminist materialist analyses read care as reproductive labour (Bhattacharya et al., 2022) and discuss how modern constructions of family and domesticity have been the primary means through which this work has been privatized, feminized, and devalued (Federici, 2004; Fraser, 2022). These analyses also identify the need to overcome the logic of privatizing care work and confining it to the domestic sphere. There is a rich feminist history of subverting bourgeois domesticity (Cossutta, 2023; Hayden, 1982), showing that cohousing's very form has been shaped by feminist debates on collectivization of housework and its more equal distribution between women and men (Vestbro & Horelli, 2012).

Drawing on this history, contemporary feminist perspectives view collaborative housing as a collective political endeavour that moves towards developing what Federici (2012) terms the commons of reproduction: a collective approach through which care becomes an infrastructure of political action (Brunori & Musso, 2023), challenging both commodification and the naturalization of women's labour (Fernández Arrigoitia et al., 2023; Keller Garganté & Ezquerro Samper, 2021), and promoting socio-ecological change (Logan & Martire, 2025).

At the same time, these perspectives make clear that modern constructions of domesticity have an element of necessity – namely, the availability of low-cost reproductive labour – that cannot be removed by encouraging people to make different choices. Rather, overcoming this necessity requires a social reorganization of labour that breaks down the separation between production and reproduction, and between the modern public and private spheres on which capitalism is based. Experiences of feminist urban commons emerging from public-common partnerships such as *Plaza Las Pioneras* in Montevideo, where municipal administration and feminist movements co-produce shared space, strive for this disruption (Brunori & Musso, 2023; Levy & Belingardi, 2025).

This is also the direction taken by literature on family abolition, engaging in a critique of the modern family model for producing an individualistic personality structure and promoting a privatized conception of relationships (Weeks, 2023). It argues that the concept of the family home as a privileged, if not exclusive, space for emotional life, caregiving, and the fulfilment of other personal needs leads to the impoverishment of communal social ties. Strengthening community solidarity therefore requires undermining the privatizing logic of family ties; a commitment to a deep transformation towards different, more collective, shared and variable ways of meeting personal needs for relational, emotional and material support should be an integral part of anti-capitalist social struggles (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982). Hester and Srnicek (2023) argue that this transformation should involve liberating time from reproductive work through changes in relational arrangements and collective infrastructures.

Recent contributions to this abolitionist horizon (Lewis, 2022; O'Brien, 2023) situate their reflections in the current crisis of care, in which responsibilities of care and support assumed by the welfare state revert to unpaid family work or low-paid domestic work, while the long working hours needed to earn a living wage consume people's time and energy. This gives rise to cautious reflections about the cohousing trend and more generally about the flexibility and differentiation of family and housing forms. Under increasingly precarious living conditions, these forms can also be read as adaptive strategies that contribute to the resilience of social reproduction without necessarily challenging the privatizing logic of its current social organization.

Empirical feminist research on shared living reveals that the organization of care work is a key and unresolved issue. Studies show how the unequal gender distribution of care work can be rendered invisible and normalized both through narratives of mutual aid, and through an uncritical reliance on feminized professional care work (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019). Feminist projects strive to address this issue openly by recognizing the work women do, including community-building activities, redefining its meaning (Del Río, 2025) and negotiating its distribution (Fernández Arrigoitia et al., 2023; Keller Garganté & Ezquerro Samper, 2021). However, a key tension emerges, particularly in senior co-housing: while the main motivation for

moving to a collaborative housing context is often the desire to avoid facing increased care needs alone, the provision of personal care, which tends to become more pressing with age, remains outside the scope of formalized collective organization (Del Río, 2025; West et al., 2024). Research on a women's senior co-housing project in the UK shows the outcomes of organizing communal chores based on the principles of fair distribution and respect for differences, as well as the limitations of work socialization: boundaries are established between mutual aid, which is encouraged, and intensive care, which is expected to be provided by paid caregivers. The latter arrangement makes differences in socio-economic status more evident in relation to the kind of care support women can afford (Fernández Arrigoitia & West, 2021).

Overall, research on experiences of communitising care and support shows that, rather than representing absolute alternatives to the family and the current organization of reproductive labour, they reveal the co-presence of subsumption and transgression with respect to the logics of capital accumulation. Gago (2014) develops this point in her study on popular economies in Argentina, arguing that experiences of community organization of resources and care are not exempt from the colonization of capital in search of new spaces of valorization, while at the same time including practices that exceed these logics. They can thus be seen as terrains of conflict, internal and at once potentially subversive to the dynamics of exploitation and oppression. This prevents the romanticization of community as an insulated refuge and redirects attention to the labour, whether paid and unpaid, emotional and material, needed to sustain it, and to the institutional relations that organize that work (Bertone, 2024; Smith, 1987).

## Researching aspirations for shared living by women living outside the couple

The analysis presented here is based on data from the study, which aimed to identify practices and aspirations for sociality and care beyond conventional family ties among women over 55 who do not live with a partner, and to outline possible legal protections and policy implications (Bertone & Nessi, 2023).<sup>1</sup> In the study's broad inquiry into women's relational and care arrangements, shared living did not emerge under the form of actual experience, but of an aspiration (Appadurai, 2004) expressed by many of them in relation to how they imagined their ageing housing futures.

The study integrates research that has explored the implications of living outside the couple among young and adult women with an attention to experiences and visions of ageing (Acquistapace A/L, 2022; Gusmano, 2022; Roseneil, 2007), thereby also contributing to queering ageing futures (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017).

The research was conducted between 2020 and 2022 in a province of a medium-size city in the Piedmont region. This province is characterized by a particularly high concentration of ageing population (2.73 people over 65 for every person under 14, the 13<sup>th</sup> highest among all Italian provinces in 2023) (Istat, 2025). The provincial economy has long been depressed, with difficulties in financing local welfare exacerbated by the financial collapse of the capital city's municipal administration in 2012. Two-thirds of the women interviewed live in medium-small towns within this province, while one-third live in

villages or rural settings, a distribution shaping the kinds of shared living that are imagined as feasible.

The research adopted a participatory design inspired by Community-Based Participatory Research, with the explicit aim of opening the production of knowledge about ageing women living outside the couple to those whose lives the research concerns. The research team consisted of three sociologists, two legal scholars and eight co-researchers (women over 55 not living with a partner). The co-researchers were recruited through the project's stakeholder network and meetings held in the city. They joined the project for an interest in self-reflection, but especially in the potential impact of the study, both in terms of social recognition of the experiences of women ageing outside the couple, and in terms of promotion of institutional support to forms of care and mutual support in old age outside conventional family ties. The research group collaborated closely to refine the general objectives of the project, develop the semi-structured interview guide and recruit the interviewees ( $n = 44$ ) through stakeholders and personal networks. A semi-structured interview guide was chosen as a form that would allow the co-researchers to conduct the interview themselves; the structure was inspired by the most relevant Italian inquiry on forms of intimacy and care outside the couple (Acquistapace A/ L, 2022).

Regular meetings were held at least once a month, and more frequently during the most intense research periods, including during the pandemic lockdowns. The co-researchers were provided with a tablet and supported in developing highly appreciated new skills for holding online meetings and working with digitalized research material. The research group also collaborated to develop interview skills and ensure compliance with ethical standards. The co-researchers conducted the interviews, which were then analysed by the entire research group through discussion sessions, where the group discussed two interviews proposed by the co-researchers in relation to analytical dimensions that had been previously identified. This kind of analysis was integrated with code-based descriptive analysis with NVivo whose results were then discussed in the research group. The process of co-interpretation resulted in a collective online report (Project Report 2022). A day-long meeting to discuss preliminary results included two focus groups comprising some of the interviewees and the co-researchers. The whole research team also carried out public presentations of the results, and a photo exhibition was one of the project's outcomes.

Both the co-researchers and the respondents were recruited based on their self-definition as women living 'outside of a couple'; not cohabiting with someone who could be considered a partner was the key criterion. Of the 44 interviewees, 23 were under 65, 15 were aged 65–74, and six were aged 75–80. Nineteen had never married, six were widowed, eighteen were separated or divorced, and one was still married. Almost half (21) had children. Most described heterosexual and cisgender lives, but the co-researcher group and the interviewees also included non-heterosexual and trans experiences and identities. With a few exceptions of women with migrant background, they were of Italian origin and appeared as white; a small number had migration backgrounds. In terms of socio-economic conditions, the interviewees reflected the heterogeneity of the local population: a minority were in stable middle-class positions with secure incomes, while the majority faced varying degrees of economic precarity. Among the older interviewees, most were retired on relatively low pensions (some at the threshold of poverty);

among the younger ones, several had discontinuous employment trajectories, often shaped by separation, caregiving responsibilities, or migration. The research team discussed difficulties in reaching some populations, including homeless older women, women with limited Italian-language proficiency, and racialized migrant women employed in domestic work, as a limitation of the project, which therefore underrepresents the most marginalized positions in the local social landscape.

Reflecting the Italian context, where homeownership rates exceed 70% (Eurostat, 2023), most owned the home in which they lived, but for several this was a precarious form of security, given their limited liquidity to face increasing care or housing-related costs. All interviewees lived alone, except for seven who lived with their children or other relatives. None of them relied on daily care support at the time of interview.

### Changing experiences of ageing

The women involved in the research belong to particular cohorts that are approaching or experiencing old age in new ways. They lived through the 1960s and especially the 1970s as young girls or women in a context of profound changes in the meaning of the couple, with new demands for women's autonomy. This is particularly true in Italy (Facchini and Rampazi 2006; Civenti, 2015), where major turning points (including the 1974 referendum on divorce and the 1975 family reform that established equal rights in marriage), together with a particularly massive feminist movement and a new cohort of young women entering the labour market, made the seventies a decade of profound revolution in women's experience and self-perception.

Research on Italy and other Western countries has shown that these cohorts of women are increasingly experiencing the condition of not living with a partner not so much or only as a deficit or a destiny of loneliness, but as a decentring of the couple (Roseneil et al., 2020) in their own lives and imagined futures. The experience of widows is also invested in this transformation (Cappellato et al., 2021; Davidson, 2006): research shows a growing tendency to prefer non-cohabitation with potential partners, in order to avoid expectations of domestic work, maintain autonomy and prioritize friendship networks (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Blieszner et al., 2019). At the same time, these are cohorts coping with an increasingly precarious present and future in terms of income and access to services (Facchini & Rampazi, 2006). They mostly receive, or will receive, a low pension, as a consequence of a looser relationship with the labour market during their life course and of the gender pay gap: on average, in Italy women's pensions are one-third lower than men's (Istat, 2022).

Their worries about the future are also linked to the limitations of the Italian welfare system, in which the response to the care needs of the older population is largely delegated to family responsibilities. The limited and territorially fragmented public support essentially takes the form of institutionalization in nursing homes, which is covered to a lower extent than the European average. Cash benefits are provided to support family caregivers or paid domestic workers (Cappellato et al., 2021), mainly in the form of a universalistic, unconditional cash-for-care scheme. This corresponds to a paucity of in-kind services (Arlotti et al., 2020). Consequently, a defining feature of the Italian context is the substantial informal private care market, where families hire migrant workers to provide long-term care in the homes of older people. Such arrangements exacerbate

socio-economic inequalities among older people, as well as labour market stratification along racialized and gendered lines, trapping racialized women in exploitative employment (Marchetti et al., 2021). It is in relation to this specific care regime that the women's imaginaries of shared living must be situated.

Women's life courses have diversified since the 1960s–70s, and these differences shape ageing imaginaries. For women whose biographies are tightly woven into intergenerational obligations, shared living is often imagined as a way to remain autonomous without 'abandoning' family responsibilities. Lifelong single women, by contrast, more often emphasize independence sustained by friendship and community ties, and see shared living as a continuation of elective support. However, most of the life courses we encountered are less linear, marked by biographical discontinuities, with women often struggling to rebuild supportive friendship networks after investing in couple life. Many of them are at a loss to envisage acceptable solutions for their ageing futures in case of increasing care needs.

Life courses, more than age, differentiate women's visions of the future. Yet an important difference emerges between younger interviewees, who tend to be more imaginative about their shared living arrangements, and older participants – especially those over 75 – who tend to be more pragmatic about the actual options available to them.

### Desired futures of shared living

The empirical analysis presented in this and the following section focuses on how women narrate their imagined housing and care futures, with particular attention to the place that shared living occupies in these narratives.

In exploring women's aspirations, one of the aims of the research was to uncover visions of desirable futures of sociality beyond the alternative of couple/family life and loneliness. As part of this exploration, women were explicitly asked about shared living at a certain point in the interview, but many of them had already raised this possibility spontaneously before being prompted.<sup>2</sup> It was discussed extensively in around half of the interviews, in the participatory analysis sessions and in the focus groups. Women who distanced themselves from this possibility were those with family-centred life courses, who tended to envision their futures with some forms of family support, and those who did not want to give up their independent living. The visions of shared living in some cases drew on examples of cohousing that the women have heard about; some concrete cases in nearby areas, but most coming from media narratives, often about other countries.

Women aspiring to 'rebuilding an everyday life with others' beyond conventional family ties, often involving the sharing of domestic spaces, present it as a way of avoiding the isolation associated with living alone, and position it in relation to the marginalization of three other possibilities. The first is the couple. Some of the interviewees are currently in a relationship, and half of them see it as a future possibility (in the interviews partners are predominantly thought of as men). Corresponding to what the literature has outlined about changes in the cohorts who are currently in older age, with a few exceptions, they prioritize preserving their autonomy by maintaining their own living space ('each in our own home' is a recurring expression). As Vanda (aged 56) a single, retired teacher, living

alone in the city in the family house she owns, puts it: 'I would prefer to live with my friends or even new friends, but not with a boyfriend in my home'.

The second possibility is being cared for by one's children. While this is very present among many of the women with a life course embedded in family obligations and is often a reason for excluding aspirations to shared living, even some of them, as well as all other women with children, reject the idea of relying on their offspring, either because it is not feasible or because they do not want to be a burden, and seek for them a break from their own careers as family carers. Research on women living in co-housing has identified this as one of the main motivations for that choice (Riccò et al 2025).

The third one is the public provision of long-term care arrangements. Nursing homes are often mentioned as a dreaded future to be avoided, as they are associated with a loss of autonomy and control over one's life. Some also consider them unaffordable.

Shared living emerges as an alternative way, offering a middle ground between family obligations and institutionalization, that allows one to maintain autonomy as care needs increase. The wish to avoid both family dependence and institutionalization corresponds to the key motivations identified by research on women who have joined forms of cohousing (Fernández Arrigoitia & West, 2021; Riccò et al., 2024). What our research allows to highlight, by investigating aspirations of women living outside of these arrangements, is the key issue of accessibility that comes to the fore in shaping the way these women talk about the very possibility of realizing their aspirations. Economic resources make a crucial difference in a context where women expect little substantive support from public institutions and are concerned about their declining purchasing power. On the one hand, we find women like Anita (aged 64, separated, employed, lives in the outskirts of the city, tenant) who believes she will be able to afford the substantial costs of what is depicted as a retirement community (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014) ensuring comfortable living, privacy and quality care:

I think I will leave [part of] the severance pay, when I get it, for a retirement home (...) I will never, ever want to burden my children and so I would like to have some money for the nursing home and make do on my own as long as I can. (...) What do I dream about? Ah ... in [Italian city] this could be a solution, I don't know what it's called, it's something innovative, it's micro-housing for older people, where you pay I think 900 euros a month? I don't remember, there is a figure that seems quite high to me, however you have everything (...) the laundry, the cleaning service, the doctor, the nurse, but you live in your own flat and you can also take your pet with you.

On the other hand, we find women who 'prefer not to think too much' about an uncertain and possibly bleak future, and who relegate desired visions of shared living to the realm of dreams, 'the unrealised'. Among women with life courses already characterized by experiences of strong sharing and support among friends, there is a desire to transform these experiences into a concrete prospect of cohabitation, which, however, appears to be an arduous undertaking in the absence of public support, both organizational and economic.

With some friends we say to each other that we could sell everything and go to those communal houses, maybe for now we still laugh about it, for the rest I see [my future] with a lot of sadness, because I am here alone. As long as you're autonomous you like to stay in your house, I rebuilt it the way I wanted, for now it's fine like this, when the time comes to consolidate this thing maybe we won't have the strength to do it (...). Perhaps the state

should think about encouraging these realities, the birth of these realities, alternatives to nursing homes, but then it takes strength on the part of the individual, taking that step there is not easy, it should be prepared, the input should come from the institutions, because alone it is difficult' (*Marianna, aged 66, divorced, employed, lives alone in a village, owner of the flat she has just finished paying for*)

The very imaginary of 'selling everything' to start a communal house captures the shift from public to individual responsibility in setting up housing arrangements that can meet women's aspirations (Keller-Garganté & Colom, 2024).

Despite the distance between aspirations and realistic projects, the descriptions proposed for these forms of living are often extensive and detailed: perhaps it is precisely this distance that makes it possible to broaden one's aspirations by sketching utopian visions of how it might be. As Susanna (aged 55, divorced, farmer, lives in a rural village, homeowner) says, although 'I do not know how I could live in the future not alone', 'if we must dream, let us dream big'. These imaginaries of communitarian ageing both uphold and exceed prevailing narratives on cohousing, as well as the specific models known to the women themselves.

The imagined sharing of everyday life is mainly based on elective relationships, inspired by the logic of friendship. These relationships, based on the principle of choice, are opposed both to family obligations and to the medicalizing, disciplinary and depersonalizing logic that most women see as characteristic of nursing homes. Women's central aspiration remains the preservation of their hard-won autonomy, not only in terms of a space for themselves, but also in terms of self-determination of their living conditions. This logic translates into very different levels of institutionalization, from a house shared with friends to organizing in a cooperative for a self-managed nursing home.

I would grow old with my friends. In fact, we talk about it from time to time, saying that if one of us is not independent, we'll get the other one to help, we'll make a retirement home, a terraced house where someone cooks, someone looks after the garden, the vegetable garden, a sharing of space with friends as old people (*Vanda, aged 56*)

Another possible hypothesis, which I had discussed with friends, was to create a sort of commune (...) a self-managed nursing home, like, I don't know, everyone sells their house, buys this farmhouse, this hotel, whatever you want, everyone would have their own room, their own bathroom, and then they would share the expenses. There are those who do the gardening, those who do the vegetable garden, those who do one thing, those who do another, to be self-managed (...) we should legally study a form of society, or a cooperative. (*Rosetta, aged 56, separated, employed, lives alone in the city, owner of the flat on which she is still paying the mortgage*)

For some of the women, these practices of sharing extend beyond friendships to include 'the people that life puts next to you' (*Ines, aged 66, single, retired, lives alone in a small town, homeowner*), 'pleasant people with whom to share the life we are living' (*Irma, aged 76, single, retired, lives alone in the city, homeowner*). When moving to these looser relationships, the levels of imagined sharing become very variable: from the mere availability of common spaces for social events to daily meals and a common fund. At the same time, a tension emerges in the same accounts between the features of stability and routine that cohabitation implies and the potential volatility associated with the elective, chosen character of imagined relationships with other residents.

a cohousing, if you can call it cohousing, of people living together, each sharing a bit of their own piece of life, nothing is ever fixed, everything changes all the time, one dies, one is born, one arrives, the other leaves, that's the freaky way (Ines, aged 66, lives in the city)

This tension echoes a key theme in feminist analyses of collaborative housing: the question of how to combine commitment with non-coercive forms of belonging (Fernández Arrigoitia & West, 2021). Our interviewees engage with this tension at the level of imagination, often without resolving it, but their accounts make visible the relational work that would be required to sustain shared living over time.

A distinct but intertwined dimension in how shared living is imagined can be traced back to a nostalgia for community (Wilkinson, 2022), for those intense neighbourly relationships associated with village life or 'the old farmhouse' that some of the women involved have experienced earlier in their lives. The yearning for community contrasts with the current experience, exacerbated by the pandemic, of an increasingly atomized social life ('the way they build houses now is all about isolation'). Aspirations for community life include valuing intergenerational relationships and support, bringing back elements of caring responsibilities beyond choice, albeit outside conventional family ties.

These aspirations are expressed by Susanna (aged 55, divorced, lives in a rural village):

In the context where I live, I could see houses being proposed by the municipality, because there are so many uninhabited municipalities, with houses that are falling apart; so it would be nice if the municipality, for example, fixed up these houses and if they were inhabited by these people who want to stay together, so it would be a bit of a repopulation of these marginalised areas (...). Since this community includes several generations, it's obvious that the healthier population takes care of the less healthy generation, it's obvious that if I see the older person as sick, I see him/her included in the community where you take turns caring for this person, so he/she is not isolated in an anonymous context as a nursing home can be

Susanna's communitarian utopia, rather than representing a privatizing, reactionary escape (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014), is combined with a public-common articulation, in which the municipality's role is to enable community-based arrangements.

The combination of different logics characterizes the account by Olga (aged 65) a retired farmer living alone in the countryside, in litigation with her ex-husband over the house where she lives. She evokes the experience of the communes of the 1970s that she knew in her youth, then refers to current experiences of cohousing, 'beautiful, comfortable, eco-sustainable structures', as inspiration for describing her own idea of a 'living situation with common spaces'. She then concludes:

This place is missing an appendix, the appendix of the grandchildren (...) it must be a place (...) that does not close in on itself, but that makes a great effort to create links with the younger generation, to exchange, to transmit what once was, that is, what was told in the courtyards, where children listened to their grandmothers' stories while they were weaving garlic and onions and making a basket

Through intergenerational care, Olga imagines a permeability that resists the introverted spatiality that literature discusses as a frequent feature of cohousing experiences (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2014).

## Inequalities and labour relations

A common feature of these imagined living arrangements is a substantial silence on issues of power, conflict and exclusion, except for the issue of economic accessibility. The shared domestic space is imagined as an area of horizontal solidarity and reciprocity, contributing to a wider regeneration of social ties. There are, however, elements in the women's accounts that go beyond and problematize this image, in directions that both critiques of dominant cohousing narratives and feminist materialist perspectives can help us to identify.

One aspect concerns the division between public and private spaces and the risk of an introverted community life that concentrates affective, social and care investments inwards, reproducing the anti-social logic of the family (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982).

The imagined sociality in women's accounts tends, by contrast, to extend beyond the boundaries of shared domestic space. It includes a desire for older people-friendly public spaces with accessible places to socialize, both in terms of proximity and affordability. There is also a clear sense of the importance of nearby and affordable services for maintaining autonomy and quality of life: primarily local health services, but also local shops and public transport. The perception of public disinvestment in these services, which provokes fear and anger in the women's accounts, shows that shared living does not eliminate conflicts over health and social policies. In their accounts, shared living is less a disguised form of privatization of welfare provision than an arrangement that depends on robust public support.

Focusing on care as work exposes tensions in women's images of shared life that correspond to those highlighted in discussions on the gendered implications of cohousing and on the dilemmas faced by feminist experiences (Fernández Arrigoitia & West, 2021; López Gómez et al., 2020). Mutual aid is often evoked, but few accounts address who would provide intensive care, how burdens would be distributed, or how paid services would be financed. At the same time, shared living is often seen as a response to situations in which living autonomously becomes impossible, as an alternative to nursing homes or to unaffordable, paid private care, which is the main solution for long-term care for older people in the Italian welfare system. Paid domestic and care work is therefore a key component of these visions: it is usually assumed, but sometimes openly discussed. Olga (aged 65, lives in the countryside) outlines the tension between the principle of choice and the dimension of domestic work fatigue:

I had a clear idea, which was to have a living situation with common spaces, I don't know, the kitchen and the living room-library, a person who prepares our lunch with a weekly menu, and then also each of us, I don't know, can decide: I'll do it today, I cook and we decide together what to cook, but to have this situation of not committing to prepare (...) at least the main lunch. Because it doesn't look like it, but it takes up a lot of energy and time

In other accounts, the desired sharing does not concern daily life, but paid care, which makes it clear that the sharing is about the affordability of the cost of care. Questioned about her attitudes towards shared living, Virginia gives this interpretation, together with the reason why she does not see even this solution as feasible in her context:

I see it as valid in cities, where blocks have been created where there is a person, let's call her a [the most common term in Italy for a paid domestic carer for older people], even if I don't

like this term, who takes care of several people, everyone lives in their own house and this person in turn visits and keeps the houses in order, if they need shopping, but this can be done where there are now blocks of flats where out of 20 people living, 10 are elderly, but not here in our case, in the village' (Virginia, aged 77, widow, retired, lives alone in a rural village, homeowner)

The discomfort with the term *badante* (literally, 'the one who looks after') points to the racialized and gendered hierarchies that organize paid care work in Italy, where the term is overwhelmingly associated with migrant women employed in highly informal and underpaid arrangements (Marchetti et al., 2021). Virginia's hesitation registers an unease with the word, though without naming these structural conditions explicitly – a silence that runs through most of the women's accounts. Across the interviews, in fact, issues of exploitation and the reproduction of social and racialized hierarchies through which paid domestic care is currently organized in Italy are consistently absent, and labour conflict as an aspect of cohousing is kept out of the picture.

## Conclusions

The forms of shared living described by the women involved in the research respond to some of their key needs and aspirations. For many of them, autonomy is a cherished conquest, the result of life courses and processes of subjectivation that are in many ways specific to their cohorts. The preservation of their personal space, a room of their own, is often prioritized over the prospect of cohabiting with a partner. At the same time, sharing care resources is seen as a way of preserving forms of autonomy even as self-sufficiency is reduced; autonomy that would otherwise be compromised both by institutionalization in nursing homes and by dependence on family care.

The value of autonomy also translates into visions of sociality that go beyond family ties, valuing friendships and the principle of choice, sometimes combined with a rediscovered community life. Preserving this sociality in old age is a major concern in the face of a perceived increasingly atomized and isolating social context, a perception reinforced by the pandemic.

These visions reveal the kinds of housing and care arrangements that women living outside the couple desire but cannot, on their own, realize. They thereby point to the institutional supports that would be required for ageing futures of shared living to become more broadly accessible. In the absence of such supports and of the public–common partnerships (Milburn & Russell, 2020) that could underpin them, these aspirations remain vulnerable to being absorbed into commodified, exclusionary models of housing.

The actual accessibility of a future of shared living is highly unequal in the context of this research, linked to personal economic resources under conditions of weak public support. In the distance between aspirations and projects, however, we also find space for imaginaries that exceed their possibility of translation into a given housing model.

Feminist perspectives can help us to explore this excess, which has the potential to challenge normative visions of ageing futures, both heteronormative images of the good life that prioritize the couple and cohabitation, and meanings of domesticity that some forms of cohousing tend to reproduce, assuming that the satisfaction of one's needs is to be found in the private space of the home, shared by long-term relationships. 'Escaping domestication' is, in fact, a key feminist issue (Cossutta,

2023, p. 204), not in terms of denying the importance of the home as a context of sociality and care, but in terms of recognizing it as a terrain of conflict, a 'promiscuous territory', inseparable from broader labour relations and the dynamics of capital accumulation.

The issue of care work arrangements is often addressed by the respondents by pointing to the need to maintain and expand public health and care services. At the same time, an essential silence runs through women's narratives of shared living, concerning the potential for labour conflict in relation to the provision of paid care work, and concerning the racialized hierarchies through which it is currently organized in Italy. Indeed, as the literature on cohousing has pointed out, some of the housing arrangements imagined by women may imply a shift from public local health and care services to outsourced, privately organized services. This question needs to be addressed more deeply in studies on women's experiences and aspirations of shared living in old age. Doing so would involve relating cohousing arrangements to current tendencies in the privatization of health services, while recognizing them as terrains of conflict over reproductive labour that lie between commoning and commodification. It would also require integrating the perspectives of care workers into research on senior cohousing.

## Notes

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2. The exact prompt, used after a broader exploration of relational and care arrangements, was: 'There are now experiences such as cohousing – sharing living spaces among people of similar age, as an alternative to nursing homes – and other forms of sharing such as solidarity-based purchasing groups, car-pooling, and so on. Have you ever thought about these possibilities? What aspects of your life would you like to share, and with whom?'

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