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“*Vieni da Nonna Tua, Vieni!*” A commentary on the social construction of grandmothers and its impact on older women’s lives

Dear Editor,

Grandmother represents a biological denomination and a social construct with important implications in the everyday life of individuals worldwide. This concept is particularly important in occidental communities, with considerable emphasis on African, and South European and American countries, while it seems to have a lower, but not irrelevant, influence in North American communities [1]. The role grandmothers exert is multifactorial and involves multiple spheres of societies’ organization.

The relevance of Grandmother likely comes from the paleolithic and neolithic eras, where they hold the knowledge of care, rituals, secrets of nature, and behaviors that could only being orally transmitted [2]. They were also likely linked to metaphysical forces by having passed through catastrophes and wars [2]. In modern times, grandmothers are expected to devote their abundant knowledge, time, and energy to the care of their grandchildren [1,3]. This scenario occurs primarily in situations when family’s structure is at risk or collapsed, in function of divorce, desertion, migration, or death [1,3]. In these circumstances, they assume a key role as stabilizers, becoming stepmothers and adopting the place of the non-existent or non-functioning mother [1,3].

There is no formal education to get a B.S.C. in Grandma Sciences or a Granny’s degree. As a matter of fact, the common grandmother’s behavior is culturally inherited from familiar, historical, and fictional figures, and is commonly determined by social expectations [1,3]. Such scenario has led some authors to define the role of grandmothers in the family nucleus and society as a *state of mind* instead of a functional activity [3].

Notably, grandmothers commonly describe themselves with psychosocial, and even physical, characteristics distinct from those that, according to them, should be present in the prototypical character, which involves being old, supportive, maternal, kind, available to take care of their grandchildren, and provide comfort, security, and happiness [3].

An illustration of this archetypal might be clearly seen in the cinema of the Italian director and screenwriter Carlo Verdone (Rome, 1950). The figure of a classical Italian grandmother interpreted by Elena Fabrizi (Rome, 1915–1993), the Sora Lella, is present in two of his movies. In *Bianco, Rosso e Verdone* (1981), the grandmother is portrayed as highly dependent, suffering from mobility and cardiovascular problems. Her grandson, Mimmo, lives with her and takes care of her needs. He is very supportive and protective, acting almost like her guardian. Their close relationship allows for sincere and open conversations—sometimes slightly offensive, but always rooted in affection. They discuss topics such as life, death, and even past romantic or sexual experiences, often teasing each other in a humorous way. Occasionally, the grandmother administers mild physical reprimands, reflecting a traditional, though

outdated, form of discipline.

Vieni da nonna tua, vieni! (“Come to your grandma, come!”) is the touching phrase she says at the beginning of the film when they reunite after being apart for the summer. She then adds, *Sapessi quanto mi hai fatto sta’ in pena!* (“If you only knew how much you made me worry!”), a line that highlights the deep affection and close bond between them.

In *Acqua e sapone* (1983), the grandmother serves as a source of wisdom and emotional support, offering guidance to the protagonist throughout his adventures. At the same time, she also turns to him when she needs help—specifically, to interpret her medical test results—showing a reciprocal relationship based on trust and mutual reliance.

The problem with this scenario is that family structures in the 21st century have changed in response to economic needs. Indeed, international migration rates show that only 12 % of migrants are older adults, with even lower rates observed among those coming from low- and middle-income regions (e.g., Latin America at 7.6 %, Africa at 4.7 %) [4]. A similar pattern has been observed with regard to domestic migration. For example, a study conducted in North American communities found that older adults are less likely to move than younger individuals [5]. When they do move, it is typically over shorter rather than longer distances [5].

This shift has led to the emergence of the concept of the *left behind*—referring to older adults who remain in their home country or place of residence while one or more of their biological or adopted children emigrate [6]. Additionally, the *empty nest* phenomenon occurs when a household consists solely of older adults after children leave the home [6].

This demographic transition could lead to challenges across various spheres, including psychological, social, economic, and health-related aspects, particularly in the context of grandmothers’ identities [6]. Some grandmothers have reported in interviews that *The grandchildren are my reason for living* and *They give me a new lease on life* [3], which suggests that these women have embraced a significant role and may expect to continue fulfilling it for the rest of their lives. However, the possibility that this may not happen does exist, and the question arises: Are they prepared for this eventuality? If not, they could experience a lack of purpose, potentially leading to numerous associated problems.

Indeed, existing literature provides compelling evidence suggesting that this scenario may pose significant risks to older adults. Cheung et al [7] conducted a comprehensive study to examine quality of life and loneliness among Chinese older adults, comparing those who remain in their country of birth with those who have migrated to the Netherlands. Authors found that older adults living in the Netherlands reported a lower quality of life and a higher prevalence of loneliness compared to those living in China. These results were expanded by Heald et al [8] who noted higher prevalence of frailty among Asian and Asian British

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ethnicities (i.e., India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), when compared to White British. Among Indian older adults [9], a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms was observed among migrants. Furthermore, authors observed a higher risk of depression among those who migrated at age 60 or older.

These premises deserve concern and emphasize the significance of education in aging and the need for strategies to improve intergenerational communication.

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Declaration of competing interest


The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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