

# LIVING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN 50+ IN AUSTRIA

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## *1. Objectives of the MERI project*

The main objectives of the European project MERI are to map available information (research results & statistical information) on the living situation of older women in Europe, to identify existing knowledge gaps and to strengthen the knowledge base on this specific population group.

## *2. Research methods*

### *2.1 Introductory remarks*

The national research in Austria was done in two phases: The first phase was an analysis of the state of research on the living situation of older women in Austria. Data was collected on themes (and their sub-themes) that had been identified as relevant issues concerning the situation of older women: Health, functional ability and services; education; work; financial situation; social integration, participation and other social issues; violence and abuse; interest representation. Studies carried out in the past 10 years were taken into account; the detailed references and short summaries of results (i.e. information on the living situation of older women in Austria) were entered into a database. The second phase was dedicated to statistical information on older women. Publicly available statistics on the MERI themes (see above) were collected and analysed. This article now brings together the results of these two research phases: On the one hand it provides a short overview of some of the main findings provided by research and statistical publications, on the other hand it discusses the available information on older women and some ideas on how to close existing knowledge gaps.

## 2.2 Phase 1: Searching for older women in research studies

For years, Austrian universities were the main actors in (social) gerontology. The researchers mainly focused on the development of theoretical concepts in the discipline. This situation has been changing during the last years: 1. Gerontological research is now also carried out by non-university research institutes. 2. In the 1980s, and even more pronounced in the 90s, the focus of research shifted from a more theoretical towards a more descriptive, practically and policy oriented approach. Trends in (social-)gerontological research also reflect general developments and discussions in Austria, one example being that the issues of older workers or pension systems have only gained attention approximately 20 years ago (Amann 2000b).

The first step of the search for studies on the living situation of older women in Austria comprised an enquiry in the main Austrian electronic library catalogue: the Austrian library network (*Verbund-OPAC*) and specifically that of the central library of the *University of Vienna (UB-OPAC)* and the catalogue of the *Austrian National Library (ÖNB)*, also including *Ariadne* (a special database on gender research). The bibliography *Sozial- und geisteswissenschaftliche Alter(n)sforschung in Österreich 1980 bis 1995* (Hoffer et al. 1994) including 496 database entries was also taken into account in this research phase, although the most recent publications in this documentation are from 1995. In addition, an extensive internet search was carried out, assuming that a wide variety of “grey” (i.e. not (yet) published) literature could be found on the websites of universities and other research institutes.

After these first steps it became clear that studies “on the living situation of older women” as such are quite rare in the Austrian context. In the last few years (from 1999 onwards) only a few studies on this issue have been carried out. Some of these had not been published at the time of the literature research (September-December 2003) and were only available in the form of executive summaries. We collected 34 publications or articles that were published between 1994 and 2003. In many of the publications the main focus was not specifically on older women but on older people. Generally spoken, much of the information had to be searched for carefully in these more general publications, which did not systematically break down data according to gender. For this research we also took publications at the provincial level (*Länder*) into account, because large-scale national studies are very rare and some provinces (e.g. Vienna) commissioned very interesting in-depth studies. One study that was commissioned by the Upper Austrian (*Oberösterreich*) provincial government was actually published after the first MERI research phase and thus could not be taken into account for the report (Hauch 2003).

After the WWW and library research, the available studies were skimmed to elicit information on the situation of older women in Austria. The key results were collected, translated, entered into the MERI database and summarized in a preliminary research report.

## 2.3 Phase 2: Searching for older women in official statistics

In Austria, statistics are produced and/or published by the national statistics office (*Statistik Austria*), government (ministries) and research institutes. For the MERI project, we only searched for statistics that were easily accessible to the general public and chose the *Statistik Austria* as the main source for statistical information on older women. We stayed in the time frame of ten years as agreed upon by the MERI consortium and concentrated on the most recent statistical information available.

Generally, it can be said that a great amount of statistical data is published in Austria. Many of the publications can be downloaded from the internet or ordered from governmental bodies for free. The most recent publications are not only issued in print but also on CD, which facilitates accessibility.

The focus of our research was on publications, which are main sources of statistical information for Austria and are published on a regular basis by Statistics Austria: *Statistisches Jahr-*

*buch Österreichs 2004* (Statistik Austria 2003), *Statistische Nachrichten 1994-2004* (Statistik Austria 1994-2004) and the *Mikrozensus* (Statistik Austria 2003). Three other publications were identified as very much relevant to the situation of older women in Austria: A special edition on *gender-specific disparities* (BMSG 2002), one on the *living situation of older people* (Statistik Austria 2000) and a *special edition on physical disorders/disabilities* (Statistik Austria 1998). Furthermore, we included publications that are easily and freely available to the public because they can be downloaded from the website of Statistik Austria ([www.statistik.at](http://www.statistik.at)) or that of the Ministry of Social Security and Generations ([www.bmsg.gv.at](http://www.bmsg.gv.at)).

During the research process we identified 256 tables containing statistical information on older women in Austria.

### 3. Overview on findings concerning the living conditions of older women in Austria

#### 3.1 Introductory remarks

Older women (i.e. women 50+) in Austria are a large population group. In 2001, about one fifth (18.6%) of the total population were women aged 50+. In absolute numbers, in 2001, 8,032,926 people were living in Austria, of which 1,493,665 persons were women of the age 50+ (Statistik Austria 2002c).

These numbers show very clearly that older women are an important population group at present and – given demographic developments in an “ageing society” – will be in the future, although it can be expected that the ratio older women/older men will change in favour of the male population (Kytir 2000).

The amount of information and knowledge on older women differs considerably from this population group's importance in numbers, thus obviously posing an obstacle to sound and needs-based social planning. There is not only the need for a thorough knowledge base concerning “older women” in general, but it has to be considered that the group of women 50+ is a highly heterogeneous group, which includes e.g. women aged 50 still active in the labour market and very old women for whom other issues (e.g. care) might be of higher relevance.

#### 3.2 Health, functional ability and services

Almost parallel to demographic developments and medical progress, older people of today tend to feel much healthier than they did 20 or more years ago. Whereas in 1978, 46.6% of women aged 80-84 reported a bad or very bad health status, this number was reduced to 25.4% in 1998 (Kytir 2003). **Self-reported health status** is very much dependent on the age of the respondents and their socio-economic status: Older women report themselves as being less healthy and more affected by (multiple) physical and/or psychological disorders than younger cohorts, women in higher positions are healthier than those in lower positions (Kytir 2003; Schleicher/Hlava 2003; Statistik Austria 2000). With regard to self-reported health status, gender specific differences can be observed. Several authors indicate that older women are more likely to report themselves as being less healthy than older men (Kytir et al. 2000; Wukonig 2003). There are similar patterns among **older migrants** living in Austria: The self-reported health status of older migrant women is lower than that of older migrant men (Reinprecht 1999). Interestingly enough, more (numbers are only available for the age group 45-59) older Austrian women report physical disabilities and chronic diseases than older women with non-Austrian citizenship – with the exception of mobility restrictions (Statistik Austria 1998).

(Older) women are slightly more likely to see the doctor than (older) men and the percentage of older women to take up **medical treatment** (prescribed medicine) is higher than that of older men (Kytir et al. 2000). When asked about their trust in medical treatment, however, older women report themselves to be more sceptical about it than older men (Gross-

mann/Kocher 1999) and older women are less likely to be satisfied with the Austrian health system than men of the same age group (Wukonig 2003). Older women are not only more likely to take prescribed drugs than older men (with the exception of the age group 85+), they also take a higher number of different medicines on average (Statistik Austria 2002a).

There are gender- and as well as age-specific differences in the **types of illnesses and/or disabilities** older women and older men report (Kytir 1995; Kytir et al. 2000; Rieder 2003; Statistik Austria 1998). Just to give a few examples: Whereas older women aged 50-69 are less likely to suffer from hearing impairments than men of the respective age group (17.7% vs. 22.4%), the ratio changes considerably for the age groups 70-79 and 80+ (e.g. women/men 80+ suffering from hearing impairments: 30.2% vs. 14.5%) (Statistik Austria 1998). As regards defects of the spinal column, younger women are less affected than younger men, but at the age of 55, the respective illness rates of women are higher than those of men (Frauenbüro 1996). Depression follows a similar pattern: Whereas men are more likely to suffer from depression symptoms at a younger age (up to 60 years), women 60+ are more likely to be affected than men of the same age group (Kytir et al. 2000). As for women aged 60+, the most commonly reported diseases are: Varicose veins, thrombosis, phlebitis, rheumatism, slipped discs and osteoporosis (Pfeiffer et al. 1999). The incidence rates for osteoporosis are 351/10,000 for women aged 85+ and 110/10,000 for men aged 85+. Although women have a higher life expectancy, their quality of life is often restricted by impairments: 62% of men aged 75+ can expect a life free of a disability compared to only 49% of women of the same age group (Kytir et al. 2000).

When we come to a gender perspective on **healthy lifestyles**, the picture is a differentiated one: There is indication that there is hardly any difference concerning the participation in preventive medical check-ups between older men and older women. (Older) women are less likely to smoke and are more conscious of healthy nutrition than (older) men, whereas (older) men are more likely to take part in physical activities (Statistik Austria 2002b). Again, socio-economic factors have to be considered: (Older) women in higher positions are more likely to lead a healthy life than (older) women in lower positions (Schleicher/Hlava 2003).

Given the demographic developments of an ageing society, the issue of **care** is becoming more and more important. In Austria, there has been a division of medical and social care: Health care is mainly regulated by federal government whereas social care is dealt with by the provincial governments. The Bundespflegegeldgesetz of 1993 (Care Allowance Act) is one of the first attempts to shift the responsibility to the federal level.

Care is predominantly provided by private households: Less than one third of women in need of support and care are being cared for in an institution (Hochleitner 1999). Because of their higher life expectancy (combined with one or more disabilities), older women are 1. more likely to be in need of care than older men (2/3 of all Austrians in need of support and care are women (Kytir 1995) and 2. they are more likely to be cared for by their children (in law) or other persons than by their partners: In case of a longer lasting illness, 55.9% of older men (60+) but only 22.8% of women are cared for by their partners. Consequently, much more older women than older men perceive their children as main sources of support, similar patterns are visible for other family members and neighbours (Wukonig 2003). Older women (60+) are more likely to be not supported at all (in case of a longer lasting illness) than men of the same age group (Badelt/Leichsenring 2000). In Austria, care is still predominantly provided by (older) female care givers: 41.2% of all care givers are women between 41-60 years, 25.9% are women aged 60+ (Badelt et al. 1997).

### 3.3 Education

Generally spoken, older women have a lower **level of educational attainment** than older men. As for the age groups 45-59 and 60+, women are most likely to have finished compulsory education (*Pflichtschule*), only 2.1% of women 60+ have a university degree compared

to 6.4% of men 60+. The same gender specific pattern is visible for older migrants living in Vienna: 25% of older Turkish women (compared to 13% of older Turkish men) and 8% of older women from ex-Yugoslavia (compared to 4% of older men from ex-Yugoslavia) lack any formal education (Reinprecht 1999). As in all other European countries the tendency is that older cohorts now are increasingly comprised of more better-educated women (BMSG 2002; Majce 2000).

As for **professional training**, more older men than older women had the possibility to undergo some sort of professional training: Only 32.2% of women aged 45-59 (51.0% of men) and 18.3% of women 60+ (41.4% of men) have completed professional training (*Lehre*) (BMSG 2002). In the case of older migrants: 81% of older Turkish women (compared to 67% of older Turkish men) and 70% of older women from ex-Yugoslavia (compared to 55% of older men from ex-Yugoslavia) lack any formal professional training (Reinprecht 1999). Concerning the reason for (further) professional training of those already in gainful employment, there are considerable differences between men and women: Whereas women 50+ are more likely to receive introductory training-on-the-job (*Einschulung am Arbeitsplatz*), men 55+ are more likely to receive training (i.e. courses) provided and paid for by the Austrian Labour Market Service (BMSG 2002).

In spite of the considerable gender specific differences concerning the levels of education, older women and older men are equally interested in **life-long learning**, no differences can be observed here (Kolland 1996). Older women are as likely to participate in education as third age university students as older men (Filla/Vater 2000). One study carried out in 1999 indicates that studying has a positive effect on the self-reported quality of life (*satisfaction*) and that older women (55+) perceive this effect even more strongly than older men do. Older women are also much more likely to expand their social networks by studying at a university than older men (Kolland 2003).

**ICT** is an important part of today's world and thus the use of these technologies a crucial factor of life-long learning. A qualitative (non representative) study carried out in Vienna indicates that older women mainly use the internet to stay in contact with family and friends and to collect information, but hardly use it e.g. for online shopping (Voglmayr 2000). This study also discusses the main barriers for older women to use the internet: Physical restrictions (e.g. visual impairments, restricted mobility of hands and fingers), specific "IT language" and the costly infrastructure combined with older women's low incomes (Voglmayr 2000). The main reason for older women to have no internet connection at home is that they think it is of no use to them. Another important reason is their self-perceived lack of IT skills. There are less older female than older male computer and internet users. For example, in the age group 65-74 only 4.5% of women (compared to 13.2% of men) use a computer and only 1.6% of women (compared to 8.4% of men) are internet users (time frame: 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2003) (Statistik Austria 2003a).

### 3.4 Work

In an international comparison, the **activity rate** of older people as well as the average pension entry age in Austria is relatively low. With regard to the high pressures on pension schemes (e.g. number of "insured" years needed for pension entitlement), labour market participation is a crucial factor in securing economic well-being in the "inactive" years. The activity rate of older women is still lower than that of older men (e.g. in 1995 women 50-55: 55.4%, men 50-55: 80.6%). For women between 50 and 55 the activity rate has been rising during the last years (comparing the years 1985 and 1995), while it has been decreasing for men 50+ as well as for women 55+. In Austria, the average age of women leaving the labour market is 56.7, the average age of men is 58.3 years. Taking into account the "regular" pension age (65 for men and 60 for women), women stay on the labour market relatively longer than men (Amann 2000a).

With regard to labour force participation rates, older women are not a homogenous group – the rate differs according to age, citizenship and level of education. Just to give one example: In 2001, the labour force participation rate of women (age group: 60-64) with Austrian citizenship was 8.5% whereas that of women with ex-Yugoslavian citizenship was 19.6% (Statistik Austria 2003b).

In the last years, it has become more and more difficult for older people to find a job. One indicator for that is the number of “unemployed days” that has risen considerably: While in 1990, the average period of unemployment for women aged 50-60 was 168 days (men: 160), it was 209 days in 2000 (men: 223) (BMSG 2002). There is an indication that health related issues are the main reasons that older women do not participate in the labour market (results for the age group 45-59) (BMSG 2002). Qualitative studies show that older people in general have a high risk of ‘disintegration’ on the labour market. Especially older women have to face negative attitudes in companies: they are made redundant more easily than men (i.e. with less conflicts) and find themselves reduced to the role of the “housewife” or “pensioner”. (Amann 2000). Also, it seems that older men and women suffer from different types of stress (“burdens”) at the workplace: Whereas older women feel much more burdened by the combination of paid work and (unpaid) work in the family (household, childcare, care for other family members), they feel less burdened by time pressure, physical work or social problems at the workplace. For the age group 65+ some of these gender specific differences are not as big (Statistik Austria 2002b). A qualitative study indicates that male pensioners find it more difficult to structure their time than female pensioners (Lang 2003), which might be the reason why older women feel slightly more positive about their **exit from the labour market** than older men (Kolland 2000; Simon/Haring 1999).

It has to be acknowledged that older women invest much of their time into **unpaid work in the family and in social networks** and thus contribute a lot to intergenerational relationships and society in general. Older women support their children and grandchildren more regularly and to a higher extent than their male peers, e.g. 21.6% of women aged 60-64 provide daily support to their (grand-)children (compared to 14.8% of men, same age group). This support is given in various fields, ranging from childcare to working in family owned companies. Compared to men of the same age group, older women are more likely to provide regular (i.e. daily or weekly) support with childcare, housework and care for (adult) family members, whereas older men are more willing to invest their time into family owned companies (Statistik Austria 2000). This statistical evidence for gender specific differences concerning unpaid work (e.g. in the household) is supported by other, research-based results: 95.9% of female pensioners but only 61.7% of male pensioners work in the household on a daily basis (Wukonig 2003).

### 3.5 Financial situation and its effect on living conditions

Since the Austrian pension system is closely linked to employment, the labour market performance (i.e. duration of employment = “insured years” and levels of income) of Austrian men and women is highly relevant for their income after retirement. The gender gap in pay is far from being closed or even reduced in Austria, which performs not very well in comparison to other European countries and was recently criticized for that by the European Commission. The gap in pay between men and women in Austria is more than 30% and is thus one of the largest in the European Union (DieStandard.at 2004). Statistics show that there are considerable differences in the **income** of gainfully employed older men and women. Just to provide one example: Considering the gross yearly income of employed persons aged 50+ (year 2001), the average income of women 50-54 was 22,881 €, whereas men had an income of 37,709 €, which makes up for a difference of almost 40% (Statistik Austria 2003c). Concerning income, older women with non-Austrian citizenship have a double disadvantage: They do not only earn less than older migrant men, they also have lower income than Austrian women of the same age group (Reinprecht 1999).

Women receive lower **pensions** than their male peers (Oppitz 2000; Prinz et al. 1999; Statistik Austria 2003c). This is a consequence of career breaks due to the distribution of labour in society (e.g. women being “responsible” for child care or care for other family members), the fact that they more often work part-time, the gender segregation of the labour market and the income discrimination of women (Sorger/Willsberger 2001). Women, especially those who had to care for children and were thus unable to work for at least some time, are very much at a disadvantage in the Austrian pension system (Oppitz 2000).

The general income differences between men and women throughout all age groups become worse after terminating work, e.g. while male pensioners receive in average 81% of their previous income, this percentage is reduced to 74% for female pensioners. Three quarters of all pensioners receiving “Ausgleichszulage” (to top up pensions which are below a certain level) are women. This ratio has not changed in the last years (König 1994; Sorger/Willsberger 2001). Only one group of women almost reach the pension levels of their male colleagues, those women previously employed in the civil service (Oppitz 2000).

It has to be considered that a considerable number of older women are not covered by the Austrian pension system at all: 40% of those aged 60+ do not have a pension of their own, 15% of those aged 60+ do not get a pension at all. Many older women, who left the labour market for some time in order to care for children or other family members, have to rely on the incomes of their husbands or – in case of widowhood – their widower’s pension (Sorger/Willsberger 2001).

Given these facts, it does not come as a surprise that older women are less likely to trust in the social protection system than older men. Quantitative research (at the provincial level) shows that 28.5% of older men but only 18.4% of older women think that they will be able to “live on their pension” (Wukonig 2003).

As a consequence of the unequal distribution of resources, there are also gender specific differences in the **consumption of goods and services**. Statistics on one-person households show that female pensioners in comparison to male pensioners use a higher percentage of their monthly expenditures for basic consumption such as food and rent, electricity and heating, male pensioners (compared to female pensioners) spend more money on alcoholic drinks, mobility and in pubs and restaurants (BMSG 2002). With regard to the question of housing conditions, older men are better off than older women – one indicator for that being that 11% of older women live in so-called “Substandard-Wohnungen” (substandard apartments) compared to 7% of older men (Oppitz 2000). For older people, who have already left the labour market and are often restricted in their mobility, housing conditions are a central element of their quality of life – especially if they are in need of care and would like to be supported and cared for in their own homes. In Vienna, for example, 27% of older women and 18% of older men do not have a bathroom in their apartments (Sorger/Willsberger 2001). One-person households of male pensioners are more likely to be equipped with technical devices such as mobile phones, computers, video recorders, video cameras, hi-fi equipment. Female pensioners are more likely to have a telephone or a washing machine of their own. Because of lower incomes older women are less willing or able to spend as much money as older men on entertainment. Older women are also more dependent on public transport: Only 22 out of 100 female pensioners (compared to 45 male pensioners) are car owners (BMSG 2002). Since 43% of older women living alone use public buses or trains regularly, they should be considered as a very relevant user group when it comes to planning and developing public transport.

The sources taken into account in this research do reveal at least some information on the transfer of funds from the older to the younger generation. One study (Majce 2000) shows that financial support is mainly given by people in the same or in an older generation (than the person receiving support) and that there are more female than male supporters. The extent of financial support given by older women to family members might be an aspect worth looking at in further research.

### 3.6 Social integration, participation and other social issues

Given the wide scope of this theme, including sub-themes such as household structure, partnership and intergenerational relations, kinship and social networks, mobility, leisure and volunteering, the sources taken into account for the MERI research provided a relatively large amount of information.

Women have a higher life expectancy than men (5-6 years) and are usually younger than their partners (2-3 years on average). One consequence of these factors is that older women face a higher risk of losing their partners than older men do. 21% of women aged 60-64 are widows (compared to 5% of widowers). In Vienna, 44% of men aged 75 are widowers, compared to almost 80% of women in this age group. This of course has an effect on the **household structures** older people live in: More older women than older men live in single households. Single households of older women are most common in urban areas, e.g. in Vienna 53% of women 60+ and two thirds of women 75+ live alone. In rural areas, older people are more likely to live in households with different generations (43% of women, 46% of men) (Hörl/Kytir 2000). While men under the age of 50 are more likely to live alone than women of this age group, this ratio is reversed for people over 50. However, it is predicted that this trend will slightly change in the years to come.

As a consequence of the above mentioned factors, older women are more likely than older men to be living and cared for not in private households but in homes for older people, e.g. 17.1% of women 85+ live in an institution, compared to 9.5% of men 85+. These ratios have hardly changed over the last years (BMSG 2002). However, the majority of older men and women do not live in an institution: 98% of men and 96% of women aged 60+ live in private households (Hörl/Kytir 2000). As for women with a non-Austrian citizenship, the marital status differs from that of their Austrian peers, e.g. a very high percentage (91%) of Turkish women aged 60+ is still married (Reinprecht 1999). It has to be mentioned that rising divorce rates and low birth rates will probably lead to a higher number of older people living alone in the future (Sorger/Willsberger 2001).

As expected, statistical information on **sexuality** of older women is not available. Also, there is hardly any research being done on this issue. In addition to two articles (Roth 2001, Maierhofer 2001), which are mainly based on theoretical considerations and international research results, only one master's thesis (Schrittwieser 2000) dealing with this topic has been identified. Based on empirical findings, the author suggests that age is not the most relevant category with regard to sexual (in-)activity. Factors such as health status, opportunities (=a partner) and biographical factors are regarded to be more important in this context.

Older women are regarded to have stronger **social & family networks** than older men, but they are by no means "passive receivers" within these networks – they play an active part in them and actively stay in contact (via telephone or visits) with family members and friends (Hörl/Kytir 2000; Statistik Austria 2000). This is very relevant because older women are more dependent on well functioning family and social networks: Whereas in case of illness and/or dependency older men may rely on their wives/partners, older women have to find other resource persons. There are of course gender specific patterns in the field of support and care for older people: From the perspective of households providing support for older people, mainly mothers (in law) are supported (by 60.9% of respondents). 27.2% of households support their fathers (in law). Statistics indicate that daughters (in law) are the main supporters. However, older women – compared to their male peers – are also more likely to be dependent on services alone and thus are an important user group of social service providers (Statistik Austria 2000).

**Mobility** is a crucial issue for being able to network with family and friends and to actively take part in society. A lower level of education and self-reported bad health status correlate with restricted mobility. As a consequence of that, older women who fulfil these criteria are more likely to network within their direct neighbourhood (Volk 1999). Generally, it can be said

that the mobility of older women is more restricted than that of older men – at least if you compare car ownership and the average daily distance travelled by men and women: A quantitative study at provincial level shows that older women (aged 55-64) travel on average 31 km per day while men travel an average of 46 km per day. This is a consequence of the fact that older women are less likely to have a driving licence and own a car than older men (Sammer/Röschl 1999). The importance of public transport for older women already discussed above (see also section on *Consumption of goods and services*, p. 9) is also supported by research on social interaction and life satisfaction of older women: Older women, who have the opportunity to use public transport to visit family and friends, tend to feel less lonely than older women lacking this possibility (Volk 1999).

Quantitative information on **leisure and cultural activities** of older women (and older people in general) is available in statistics as well as in research. Older women like to spend their free time by taking part in cultural activities (museums, theatres, concerts) and going shopping, whereas older men prefer sports events, gardening and going to cafés and restaurants. Obviously, the frequency of all these activities is very much dependent on the health status of the respondents (Hansely 1994; Statistik Austria 2000). Older women also spend more time visiting friends. They are regarded as more “active” than older men (Wukonig 2003). A quantitative study on the time use of older people carried out in 1996 shows that older women are more active in church activities than older men (37% of older women go to church at least once a week, in comparison to 23% of older men). Reading and media consumption habits of older men and women differ: Whereas older women read more books than older men, they spend less time on newspapers and watch less TV than older men (Kolland 1996).

**Volunteering** is another way of leading an active life and taking part in political decision-making processes, especially at the local level. Quantitative information on the extent of the involvement of older women in voluntary organisation is not available. However, when looking at the positions older women take in voluntary organisations, research indicates that they are less likely to be represented in higher positions than older men and that there are gender-specific patterns concerning the fields of volunteering work: Whereas older men tend to get involved in political positions (e.g. in steering committees), women are more likely to turn to social work (Leichsenring/Strümpel 2000). The gender specific distribution of labour on the open labour market is thus also very relevant for voluntary work. Generally, it can be said, that in Austria men 55+ are more active in volunteering than women of the same age group. Research suggests that a very traditional allocation of gender roles – women working in the house and for the family and men being active outside the household – is the reason for this (Strümpel et al. 1999).

Two interesting details concerning **socio-psychological aspects** in the lives of older women should be mentioned here: One is that older women (aged 70+) seem to be less satisfied with their life and the successes they had than older men, or are more willing to be open about certain aspects of dissatisfaction (41% of men are satisfied compared to 26% of the female respondents) (Kolland 2000). The other piece of information concerns one specific group of older women: Less older migrant women (i.e. women with a non-Austrian citizenship, countries of origin: Turkey, ex-Yugoslavia) than older migrant men want to return to their countries of origin: 24% of male but 41% of female respondents would like to stay in Austria (Reinprecht 1999).

### 3.7 Violence

Neither research nor statistical information was found on the issue of violence against older women. Already in 1996, a lack of knowledge on this theme had been identified (Frauenbüro der Stadt Wien 1996). The *Gewaltbericht 2001* (BMSG 2001) includes a chapter on violence against older people which provides only general information on this issue, specific information for the Austrian situation and specifically on older women is not given. Research results

on the very complex issue of violence – like various kinds (e.g. physical, psychological) and in different settings (e.g. in public environments, in the family, in health care and homes) against older women and older people in general – are still missing in Austria.

### 3.8 Interest representation

No statistical information on this theme and its sub-themes (political participation, representation in interest groups and lobby groups, participation in formal and informal decision-making processes) was identified. A qualitative study discusses among other issues, that although two thirds of the members of the large Austrian interest groups for older people are women, older women are hardly represented in these organisations' leading positions (Bahr/Leichsenring/Strümpel 1996) Another qualitative study at provincial level (Kurz 1999) comes to the same conclusion.

## 4. Knowledge and knowledge gaps: Conclusions & recommendations

Our research experience and that of other authors (Hoffer 1994) indicates that research on older women is very scarce in Austria. Generally spoken, the knowledge base concerning the living situation of older women is not very solid. There are only a few examples of specific research on this population group and much of the most recent research on older women has been carried out at the provincial level, there is hardly any publication dealing with the theme from a more general, i.e. national, perspective. Much of the information collected for this article had to be extracted from publications on older people in general. These publications only partially break down data by age and gender. Thus, at present it is very difficult to receive a comprehensive picture of the living situation of older women in Austria, because information has to be collected bit by bit from various sources.

A first and very basic step to close existing knowledge gaps with regard to the lives of older women would be to systematically present future research results **broken down by age and gender**.

Concerning age, it would be most helpful and appropriate to give **visibility to the heterogeneity** of this population group, which encompasses women of 50 who are perhaps still active in the labour market and women of 90 for whom other issues will be of relevance.

Another element of a sound knowledge base concerning older women would of course be to carry out **research specifically on older women** – many issues which can only be touched in a more general publication on older people could be dealt with more thoroughly in specific publications.

A publication on the **living situation of older women in Austria** – although it might be very difficult to provide detailed information – would shift the focus from the provincial levels to the national level and give importance to the theme in general.

The **MERI themes and sub-themes** would provide a very useful guideline about which aspects in the lives of older women would be worth being looked at by Austrian researchers. Research (and a publication) on older women in Austria based on these themes and sub-themes would give a very comprehensive overview on the topic.

With regard to the MERI themes and sub-themes, the existing knowledge gaps within research and statistics are quite obvious. There are **themes** that are not or hardly covered by the publications under consideration for this article: The issue of **violence** against older women (and all its sub-themes) is not discussed at all, neither in research nor in statistics. Also, the issue of **interest representation** of older women (and all its sub-themes) is also almost missing on the research agenda.

The following **sub-themes** were also hardly or not at all represented in research publications and statistics:

- Mental disorders and disabilities (Theme: Health, functional ability and services).
- Financial support given to family members (Theme: Material situation and its effect on living conditions).
- Ageism and other kinds of discrimination (Theme: Social integration, participation and other social issues).
- Socio-psychological aspects (Theme: Social integration, participation and other social issues).

Of course, these are only the obvious knowledge gaps concerning the living situation of older women in Austria. Many other issues – or the **combination of several elements** – are often discussed only briefly but not in detail. Just to give one example: The question of labour market participation and the exit from the labour market in relation to education and/or ageism/other forms of discrimination would be worth looking at more closely.

The impression that some of the sub-themes are well covered – at least by statistics – should not cloud the fact that in some cases only individual aspects are made visible in statistical tables. Take for example the sub-theme working areas, conditions and attitudes towards older workers: There is some information available on working contracts or “obstacles” to female labour market participation, but there is hardly any data on working conditions (e.g. positions within companies) or on attitudes towards older workers. It should be discussed thoroughly if these are issues that are (or should be) of relevance (see also above).

The situation is quite similar for research and statistics. This seems to reflect a “paradigm” of knowledge production: Most of the knowledge is produced in fields which are – at least to some extent – already covered, whereas some themes remain untapped. Given the demographic changes to be expected for the next years, themes such as violence against or interest representation of older people/women will be of high relevance to social policy, not only in Austria.

Generally spoken, statistical knowledge on “younger” older women (50-54, 55-59) and “older” older women (75-79, 80-84, 85-89 ...) is relatively scarce. The main statistical publication on the living situation of older people in Austria (Statistik Austria 2000) structures the variable “age” mainly in two different ways (60-64, 65-74, 75+ or 60+). Given the fact that this is a special publication on older people, these age groups seem to be too large to cover the phenomenon “age” adequately. Future statistical publications in Austria, especially those specifically dedicated to the living situation of older people, should take into account the **heterogeneity of such a large population group** by using smaller age groups (e.g. 50-54, 55-59 ... 80-84, 85-90, 90+ or 50-59, 60-69 ... depending on the issues to be covered).

As for the question on how to publish statistical information, the edition on *Genderspezifische Disparitäten* (BMSG 2002) is a good-practice model on how to present statistical material in a way that even non-experts may find easily accessible. The general issue of gender-specific disparities is covered in its many aspects and facets, a lot of different fields (education, working life, income, leisure, health, households etc.) are presented and the publication is available for free. A similar publication on older people would be useful in order to increase the general knowledge on the living situation of this population group.

The living situation of different “sub-groups” of older people, especially that of **female and male migrants**, remains – with few exceptions (e.g. Reinprecht 1999) – somehow “invisible” throughout most of the material. A closer look at these various groups who are and will be gaining importance in numbers would help to get a “completer” picture of the living situation of all (or at least most) older men and women in Austria. It is quite problematic that official statistics take “citizenship” as the only criterion – which is only a weak indicator of migration and the specific questions related to it. Additional information, such as country of birth or year of immigration, would be helpful to tackle more accurately the living situation of those who decided to take up Austrian citizenship but who nevertheless have a migrant background.

To put a very general thought at the end of this text: An ideal research and publication policy would of course identify the most “problematic” or pressing issues concerning the life of older women in order to allow for most realistic and needs oriented social planning. However, it should not be forgotten that older women have contributed and still contribute a lot to our society. They are not only “poor” or “unhealthy” old women – but they very often share their resources (in terms of experience, time and money) with other generations. The positive aspects of ageing and an holistic approach to these issues (taking into account the life span of the individuals and their differentiated coping strategies in life) should not be forgotten.

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