

LIVING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN 50+ IN ITALY

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1. Introduction	1
2. Methodological proceedings	2
2.1 Studies under analysis	2
2.2 Official statistics under analysis	3
3. Overview on findings concerning the living conditions of older women in Italy	4
3.1 Health, functional ability and services	4
3.2 Education	7
3.3 Work	8
3.4 Material situation	9
3.5 Social integration, participation and other social issues	10
3.6 Violence and abuse	15
3.7 Interest representation	15
4. Conclusions and recommendations	16
4.1 Research needs to cover knowledge gaps concerning the living conditions of older women in Italy	16
4.2 Needs to improve the publication of official statistics concerning the living conditions of older women in Italy	18
5. References	19

1. Introduction

The main objective of the MERI project in Italy is well expressed by the title of the European project itself: "mapping the existing research and identifying knowledge gaps concerning the situation of older women". There is a general understanding that the older women now living in Italy:

- aren't at all an homogeneous group, going from very powerful to very poor and frail women,
- challenge all stereotypes on age and gender much more than men do,
- substantially differ from those of one, two or more decades ago,
- have developed cultural visions which are new from an anthropological point of view.

The impact of all this on the communities where they live, and on the society as a whole has, to a great extent, to be studied yet. Increasing the knowledge about the living conditions of older women today is basic for an effective policy for them in Italy.

At the Madrid World Congress on Aging in 2002 it was said that Italy has the highest percentage of people aged 65+ and the lowest percentage of people aged 15- in the world, and, as in many other Countries, there are more older women than older men.

According to the 2001 Census, the resident population in Italy was 56,995,744; people over 50 amounted to 37.34% while the over-sixties were about 25% of the total resident population. Women were 55.09% of the over-fifty, 58.16% of the over-sixty and about 64% of the over-seventy-fives.

Table 1: Resident population broken down by gender and age – Italy – Census 2001

Age groups	Men		Women		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
50-54	1,895,424	19.8	1,954,267	16.7	3,849,691	18.1
55-60	1,620,147	16.9	1,704,626	14.5	3,324,773	15.6
60-64	1,657,480	17.3	1,807,467	15.4	3,464,947	16.3
65-69	1,426,778	14.9	1,653,170	14.1	3,079,948	14.5
70-74	1,229,113	12.9	1,574,399	13.4	2,803,512	13.2
75-79	913,342	9.6	1,373,434	11.7	2,286,776	10.7
80-84	445,332	4.7	789,985	6.7	1,235,317	5.8
85-89	267,981	2.8	573,970	4.9	841,951	4.0
90-94	88,270	0.9	240,947	2.1	329,217	1.5
95-99	13,468	0.1	49,372	0.4	62,840	0.3
100+	1,080	0.0	5,233	0.0	6,313	0.0
Total	9,558,415	100.0	11,726,870	100.0	21,285,285	100.0

In the examined literature for the MERI project we have found that there are three age sub-groups of older people the researchers refer to, but no complete agreement as to which ages are comprised in which age group. So “Young older” can be found for the ages 60 to 69 or 65 to 74, “Older people” can either be found for the ages of 70 to 84 or 75 to 85, “great older” or “very old” are referred to as 85+ in general, but in the *Biennial Report to Parliament on the Living Conditions of the Elderly, 2000-2001* the very Older population refers to the 80+.

The results of the MERI project show that not all aspects of the living conditions of women aged 50+ have been investigated to the same extent in Italy. The gender approach and disaggregating data both by gender and age, also comparing them, is a recent need for the research and some data are not publicly available yet.

At the end of this text have been reported some recommendations for future research on older women. Many of them are shared by other European countries, partners in MERI, while others only refer to knowledge gaps which have emerged by the mapping work in Italy.

2. Methodological proceedings

2.1 Studies under analysis

Many primary and secondary sources of information about each of the themes studied by the MERI research have been drawn upon. Among the primary sources are those which aggregate national level data and studies provided by:

1. Italian Statistics Office (Istat).
2. Research Institute on Population and Social Policy (IRPPS) at the National Council of Research (CNR), whose data have formed the *Biennial Report to Parliament on the Living Conditions of the Elderly, 2000-2001*.
3. *Centro Maderna*, which acts as a consulting service to the Department for the Elderly at the Ministry of Labour and Welfare for the planning, the management and the evaluation of the social policy in favour of the older people, in addition it is a member of the Observatory on the situation of the Older population at the Economy and Labour National Council (CNEL).
4. Istituto di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico (INRCA).

5. European Commission ("The Life Of Women And Men In Europe, a statistical portrait"), and the European Institute of Women's Health ("Mid Life and Older Women's Health – Facts, Figures and Impacts") as far as Italian data were concerned.
6. various Institutes of Research as well as individual researchers, especially those who provide studies to the National Association of Gerontology, to the Sections of the Retired Persons at the three main Trade Unions in Italy, to the largest National Associations of Older people.

Some regional and local level researches, mainly qualitative researches, have also been included, following the suggestions and contributions of the Women's Sections Chair Women of the three main National Unions of Retired Persons (CGIL, CISL, UIL). It has been very useful knowing about them, especially where the subjects were not studied at national level.

Various Social and Psychological Departments of the Perugia, the Turin and the Rome Universities have been approached, but very little information were available on researches and studies on older women, a part from a few, interesting, graduation thesis.

2.2 Official statistics under analysis

ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) is the main source of the available official statistics.

Starting from December 1993, Istat publishes every two years researches on the main aspects of the daily life and on the level of satisfaction of the citizens about the quality of the public services.

The information gathered includes the following areas: education, domestic and extra-domestic job, mobility, leisure time and social share, style of life and health conditions, consumption of medicines and use of the health services, public services.

The unity of survey for ISTAT is the family, agreed as cohabitants tied by marriage or relationship, affinity, adoption, guardianship or affection.

Follows the list of the consulted publications, available on the site www.istat.it:

- Census 2001
- Culture, sociality and leisure – omnibus survey on families, "Aspects of daily life" December 2001 – March 2002 – ISBN 88-458-1067-4
- Families, housing and safety of citizens – omnibus survey on families, "Aspects of daily life" December 2001 – March 2002 – ISBN 88-458-1062-3
- Lifestyles and state of health – omnibus survey on families, "Aspects of daily life" Year 2000 – ISBN 88-458-0657-X
- State of health of the population – omnibus survey on families "Health conditions and recourse to health services" Years 1999-2000
- Residential care Centers – 1999 – ISBN 88-458-0675-8
- Health Service and health of the population, regional indicators Anno 2002 – Istat settore Sanità e Previdenza
- Readings and language – Omnibus survey on families "Citizens and leisure time" 2000
- Family, housing and area inhabited – Omnibus survey on families "Aspects of daily life". Anno 2002
- Family spending – Anno 2001, ISTAT
- Poverty in Italy in 2001 – Note rapide Year 7 numero 2 – Istat – 17 July 2002
- Kinship and solidarity networks – Omnibus survey on families "Family, social bodies and the state of children" – Year 1998
- Sexual harassment and abuse – Linda Laura Sabbadini, ISTAT 1998

In addition have been included data from the following main researches:

- Luciana Quattrocioni, Linda Laura Sabbadini and Roberta Vivio, *Older people in Italy*, 1997, Il Mulino – Istat, ISBN 88-15-05707-2
- INPS – CNEL Analysis of the Social Protection System in Italy, year 2001
- Biennial Report to Parliament on the Living Conditions of the Elderly, 2000-2001 www.welfare.gov.it/EaChannel/MenuIstituzionale/Sociale/anziani/documenti/default.htm

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

3.1 Health, functional ability and services

Official health statistics, surveys and studies supply a lot of information on the general health aspects of the Italian population. Available data are broken down by age and by gender but often these are not compared.

Important findings for the MERI project and regarding the health subject can be listed as follows:

- Older women do not suffer from the same diseases as older men.
- Women have a worse perception of their physical and psychological condition than men.
- Older women make more use of medical consultations and treatments in general than men.
- The number of older disabled women is almost double that of older disabled men.
- Family members, especially female, are an important source of support and care for older women.
- Women have a longer average life span, but suffer longer from limitations in their activity and confinement.
- For all age groups women present significantly higher rates of multiple chronic diseases, but they are less subject than men to serious chronic diseases, from age 35 on.
- Women suffer from depression much more than older men and in the next twenty years depression will move from fourth place to second place as a cause of disability.
- Women are more aware of healthy lifestyles than men but they engage less in physical exercises.

Diseases associated with old age are not the same for both sexes: while the percentages suffering from diabetes and ulcer is about the same, men suffer more frequently from chronic bronchitis and heart disease than women do, and women suffer more than men from arthritis, arthrosis, high blood pressure, allergies and psychological conditions. The almost complete absence of osteoporosis among men is also worthy of note. The ISTAT data referring to causes of death¹ shows that up to age 69 women are affected by tumours more than men, while men suffer more than women from cardiovascular diseases; from age 70 on, these tendencies are inverted. Men are more affected by respiratory diseases after 60.

Women have a worse *perception* of their *physical and psychological condition* than men, and the difference increases as people age; this is a result also of the greater prevalence of chronic diseases among older women. In the 55 to 64 years age group, 11.7% of women say they are “ill/very ill”, compared to 8.8% of men of the same age, and these percentages go up to 33.3% against 25.8% respectively for women and men over 75.

The ISTAT analyses show that the subjective perception of the state of one’s health is closely correlated to educational level, and therefore is appreciably worse in those with lower educational qualifications². In the 45 to 64 years age group among people with only primary school qualifications, or no qualifications at all, there are already 11.4% who complain of bad

1 ISTAT, “Causes of death”, 2000 (tables 3.4 and 3.10).

2 ISTAT, State of health of the population, Omnibus survey on families, “Health conditions and recourse to health services”, 1999-2000.

health, compared to 3.8% of those with higher qualifications, using the same system for own health evaluation.

A higher percentage of women than men report that they suffer from chronic diseases and also that they use more pharmaceutical products³; this tendency is accentuated from age 50 onwards. From the age of 25 the percentage of women who say they use pharmaceutical products is appreciably higher than that of men of the same age, while among the older 75 years and up there is not an appreciable difference.

A large number of *disabled* people are older people; there are slightly less than 900,000 men and more than 1,700,000 disabled women, they are more affected by chronic diseases than men. In the 65+ age group, 67.7% of disabled women state they suffer from at least 3 chronic diseases, compared to 39.5% of men. For the latter, however, serious chronic diseases are more frequent, in particular in advanced old age: among disabled older women 62.5% mentions the presence of at least one serious chronic disease and among men the rate goes up to 69.3%.⁴ For all types of disability, there are significant differences between the sexes: the psychological condition of disabled women is much more critical than that of men in the same situation.

The rate of depression among women is twice as high as that of men, disregarding age, and there is a tendency to increase. The Italian Gerontology and Geriatrics Association says that in the next twenty years depression will move from fourth place to second place as a cause of disability⁵; furthermore, many surveys show the impact it has on all causes of illness or death. Despite the increase in the disorder in advanced age, it is, generally, under-diagnosed and under-treated: this is why the Italian Gerontology and Geriatrics Association has decided to promote research into depression in older women. The aim of the research, besides portraying the older depressed patient from different perspectives and estimating any differences between the sexes, will have the aim of finding out whether a programme of awareness raising and training for geriatricians could improve diagnostic accuracy in the doctor's office.

In the European publication *Mid Life and Older Women's Health – Facts, Figures and Impacts* is said that no society treats its women as well as its men, as for the *health services* in Italy this has been confirmed by a qualitative research which has involved a group of young older (55-65), they claimed a lack of awareness and of professional interest for their identity and for their biography, in general by the health services team.

An interesting issue, in Italy now emerging, mainly among women of the age 50-65, is the *holistic approach to health*. There are several books on menopause written by women who tell about themselves or about other women's experiences facing successfully this physiological event through a holistic approach instead of or together with pharmacological treatments. This is an issue of great interest to the older women who demand a higher attention to the relationship, including that in which are involved carer and cared for, and much less pharmacological answers.

Injuries and falls are the events that more often cause *physical disorders* or *disabilities* to older women (42.7 per thousand people over 80). With increasing age the consequences of illness are more limiting. In particular, the older people who are most subject to illness, also present the highest average number of days of limitation or days in bed, and women generally show significantly higher prevalence of all diseases. 6.1 per thousand population suffer from a disability affecting their sight, and the number of women who suffer from blindness exceeds that of men (7.9 per thousand versus 4.2 per thousand). This distance increases as age increases. With regard to the incidence of deaf-muteness, it is estimated that 1.6 per thousand population (about 92,000 individuals) suffer from this impairment. It is mostly older

3 ISTAT, "Health Service and health of the population, Regional indicators", 2002, table 8.1.1.

4 ISTAT, State of health of the population, work cited, table 4.2.

5 Marchionni N., et al., *Giornale di gerontologia*, vol. 50, n. 5, 2002, pp. 346-354.

people aged 75+ who say they suffer from this kind of handicap and among them more men than women (3.5 per thousand versus 2.0 per thousand).

With regard to people affected by *mental deficiency*, the most common age of onset is 2-14 years and 75+ years. 26.2% of mentally deficient people state they were invalidated in very old age (75+). Because of the high incidence of the older among people with mental disability, chronic degenerative diseases and the degenerative processes of aging appear to be the main cause of this type of handicap (44.7%) especially for women from 45 years up.

In Italy the major part of the burden of *caring for the disabled* falls to the family, and disproportionately to the female components of it. There are about 2,400,000 families with at least one disabled person (11% of Italian families) and more than a quarter of these are made up of single person families. This situation is accompanied by disadvantaged socio-economic conditions and in general by hardship⁶.

The older people in *residential homes* represent 2.2% of the older population in Italy: this figure is diversified for geographical area, going from 3.3% in the north to 1.5% in the centre and 0.8% in the south. The data therefore show a greater concentration of cared for older people in the north, which may be attributed to attendant phenomena such as longer life expectancy, more female employment, less family networking than in the south.

On 31 December 1999 there were 7,505 residential centres in Italy with a total of 329,686 beds; the inmates amount to 291,239 and are made up for the most part of older people. Those over 65 constitute 76% of the inmates, among them there are more than three times as many women as men.

Compared to 1991 older residents have increased by 26.5%.

Women have a longer average life span, but they suffer longer from limitations in their activity: a woman of 65 can expect to live on average for another 20 years, but of these at least 5 will be lived in a condition of disability with little or no self-sufficiency; for men of 65, on the other hand, of the 16 years they can expect to live, only 2 will probably be lived with some form of disability.⁷

Detailed data are available on *healthy lifestyles*, especially on the dietary habits of the inhabitants, broken down by gender, age group and geographical location. These show that older women are less fat than men at all ages, drink less alcohol (beer and wine) during meals and at other times, moreover they smoke less (the percentage of women who smoke more than 20 cigarettes a day is a third of that of men between 45 and 64 years). The number of men over 60 who engage in sport regularly or occasionally is double the number of women of the same age; more than half of women over 60 say they do not engage in sporting activities⁸, even if the number of women of 65+ who do physical exercise is increasing.

Success in ageing depends on the ability to relate to others and on the capacity for closeness; it emerges that the affective sphere is very important in order to age well and it is well

6 ISTAT, State of health of the population, work cited, table 4.4.

IPAB oggi, "The caring burden of women who take care of older people who are not self-sufficient" (Il carico assistenziale delle donne che curano anziani non autosufficienti), by Mengani M., Balducci C., Mechiorre M.G., Quattrini S., Lamura G. Dipartimento Ricerche Gerontologiche – INRCA – Ancona, 2/2003.

INRCA, "Family care of the elderly: risk factors of the woman caregiver in post-menopause", by M.G. Melchiorre, S. Quattrini, C. Sirolla and G. Lamura, Dipartimento Ricerche Gerontologiche – INRCA – Ancona, October 2002.

7 ISTAT, "Health Service and health of the population, Regional indicators", 2002, table 2.2.

8 ISTAT, Culture, sociality and leisure – omnibus survey on families, "Aspects of daily life" December 2001 – March 2002, table 4.1.

developed among older women⁹. An older women's group aged 55-75 reports three important elements for effective self health care 1) the perception of the psychosomatic being, body and mind, 2) the relationship quality with oneself and with others, including the carer, especially in the case of dependency, 3) sexuality and falling in love¹⁰.

Older women cultivate and develop their creativity and professional qualities as a way to enhance general well-being and to avoid the depression caused by loneliness. There are interesting reports on experiences of older women who act in drama groups and they agree on the positive function of theatrical activity in improving social relations and one's relationship with oneself¹¹.

Data also indicate the presence of an educational, cultural and social factor in *prevention*: graduates make use of the Pap-test and mammography before symptoms or disorders appear more than twice as much as women with no qualifications. In each case, women of the north and centre of Italy make use of preventive services much more than women in the south, a third of women in the north and centre undergo check ups compared to less than a quarter of women in the south.

3.2 Education

Principal findings:

- Older women are less educated than older men.
- Cohorts of better educated older women are entering.
- Older women read more than men do.
- Older women use the computer and internet 3 to 5 times less than men of the same age.

The current population of people over 65 is made up, for the most part, of the generations that did not experience the education boom, and *the women have a lower level of education than the men*. 80% of women aged 65+ have no more than primary education, compared to 68.7% of men¹².

Nevertheless *older women read more than men do*, and the margin in their favour is greatest between the ages of 60 and 64, disappearing after age 75 (in this age group readers for both sexes are 25-26%)¹³.

Among the non readers there are some differences between the sexes: lack of interest and lack of time are the main reasons given by women who do not read, and, after age 55, the main reason is that of health problems. Health problems and reading difficulty due to insufficient education are almost the only reasons given for not reading by women over 75. The most frequent reason given by men is lack of interest in reading. As we saw in the section on health, education level has an effect on the perception of health and therefore on the perceived quality of life.

9 Livraghi Renata, "Older women in Italy: differences and heterogeneity in gender pathways" in "Oggidomani Anziani", FNP CISL Roma, 1996.

10 Marziali Maria Teresa, "A lifelong holistic approach to health" (Self-care and the holistic approach to health throughout life), Associazione Generazioni, Corciano PG, 2002.

11 Bevilacqua Silvia, "Theater: a journey of memory and creativity" in A.I.D.A. (Associazione Italiana Donne Anziane Attive), "Time and change", A.I.D.A. (Associazione Italiana Donne Anziane Attive), Perugia, 1996.

Marziali Maria Teresa, Silvia Bevilacqua et al., "Older Women's Acting", OWN, Europe, Via del Serraglio, 10 06073 Corciano – PG, 1997.

12 ISTAT, "Statistical yearbook", 2003, table 7.14.

13 ISTAT, "Readings and language", Omnibus survey on families. Citizens and leisure time, 2000, table 1.1.

There is a negligible percentage of older people who use a *computer and* who use the *internet*. Women, young and not so young, use new technologies less than men do and older women use it 3 to 5 times less than men of the same age¹⁴.

3.3 Work

Two main sources of findings on the work issue: ISTAT and INRCA, the latter has produced several studies on unpaid work as carers in family and in social networks.

All the tables in this chapter refer to the ISTAT publication Labour force, Serie, October 2003¹⁵.

Principal findings:

- The rate of male activity is significantly higher than that of female.
- Men over 50 work full time much more than women do.
- Older women working areas under study mainly concentrate on typical female professions.

Although there have been improvements in the latest surveys compared to those of the previous years, the unemployment rate for women is 12.2% compared to 7.0% for men. At all ages the rate of female unemployment is higher than the male. (fig. 13.2)

The rate of male activity is significantly higher than that of females: there were 13,690,000 males employed in 2003 and 996,000 looking for employment (of a resident population of about 27,952,000 males) compared to 8,365,000 females employed and 1,100,000 looking for employment (of a resident population of about 29,525,000 females) (2003 average). So 47.5% of males, of whom 17.7% are between 15 and 64, do not belong to the workforce (the population between ages 15 and 64) versus 67.9% of females, of whom 33.9% are between 15 and 64. At 3,922,000 units, males over 50 represent 14.9% of all the employed (men 50-69 who are employed are 47.2% of resident men in that age group); for women, compared to 1,649,000 units, equal to 7.5% of all the employed, the workforce of women 50-69 is 22.2% of resident women in that age group.

Data on the *working areas* show that, among males aged 50+, self employment is prevalent: 69.2% compared to 43.9% of women; 45.4% of male employees aged 50+ are workers or similar, versus 34.7% of women, while 53.2% of female employees aged 50+ are clerks or between clerk and worker, versus 36.5% of men (table 1.13). Table 1.11 shows that of the employed in general, 96.1% of males aged 50+ work full time while only 85.8% of females do; among employees, 95.2% of males aged 50+ have permanent employment compared to 93.9% of females. In general it can be said that older women's career development is often restricted by care obligations within their families.

While males in employment find work mainly in secondary industry (25.4% of employed males 2003 average), commerce (15.6%), construction and plant installation (12.4%), civil service, defence, compulsory social security (8.9%), women are present prevalently in education, health and welfare (23.3% of women employed), in secondary industry (18.1%), commerce (16.7%) and in services to businesses and other professional and business activities (8.6%).

The presence of people over 50 in the workplace is decreasing due to the establishment of social security systems and changes in the type of activity (from an agricultural economy to an industrial and service economy). Early retirement and dismissal of the older people because of recession, automation and competition from a younger and more educated generation can be seen. It is not so much age that determines the end of working life but the type of

14 ISTAT, "Culture, sociality and leisure", work cited, table 2.1.

15 ISTAT, "Labour force". Serie. October 2003.

job and the rules and welfare provisions governing exit from the labour market. Of 6,141,000 men aged 50+ who are not part of the workforce, those who have retired are no less than 5,708,000, compared to 9,871,000 women aged 50+ who are not part of the workforce and of whom 4,320,000 have retired and 4,823,000 are housewives (table 1.45).

Several studies and local researches, mainly carried out by Trade Unions and INRCA, show that older women never retire as they continue to work as carers and as housewives. ISTAT data show that 47.1% of women of 65-74 years do domestic work for over 30 hours per week, 56.6% of men do domestic work for less than 7 hours per week. Also outside of the family women carry the burden of care more than men do (24.5% against the 20.3% of the men); only from the age of 75 the men involved in caring tasks slightly outnumber that of the women; it has to be taken into account that, in those age group, women's health conditions are worse¹⁶. People that give help are mostly in the age group between the 55 and the 64 years (25.5% of the men and 32.3% of the women). In this age group the load of the children's care decreases, but it emerges the necessity to help older relatives and adult children.

Women caregivers aged 50 to 60 put forward some suggestions on how to reconcile care giving with employment: from financial contribution to the help of external caregivers to the possibility of temporary part time employment.

3.4 Material situation

The main sources of data for the material situation of older women are: the National Institute of Social Protection (INPS), the Economy and Labour National Council (CNEL) and ISTAT.

Main findings:

- Older women have a much lower income than men.
- Part of the social protection system have negative effects on the material situation of older women.
- The dwelling of older women is poorer and more often inadequate than that of other population groups.
- The relationship of the older women with technology encounters the barriers formed by the cost (poverty of the women), by the computer literacy necessary for owning a computer (educational qualifications, previous work experience, etc) and by their disability.

The INPS – CNEL Analysis of the *Italian Social Protection System*, year 2001, pinpoints that women, also being the 53% of the total pensioners, receive the 44% of total amount of pensions; in fact women generally have lower pensions than men: women receive in average 9,368.01 € per year in comparison to the 13,446.44 € received in average by men.

As for the age of males and females pensioners, it can be observed that women are constantly more numerous in comparison to the men from the age group 60+ years; such situation is mainly due to the following factors: longer life expectancy of the women, with a consequent longer permanence in the state of pensioner and more frequent entries in the condition of pensioner as widow, generally in correspondence of more elevated age. These factors determine, from a certain age in then, a scenario predominantly female, where the majority of pensioners are widows, who receive part of the pension of their husbands.

The pensions' distribution for class of gross monthly amount is concentrated, both for men and for women, in the lowest classes, but there is an important difference: in the distribution of the women's pensions we can see a particularly elevated peak of the frequency in the class with the lowest income from pensions (382.36-499.99 €) and a steep descent of the numerosness in the classes of more elevated income (over the 1,000.00 €). Such course is not repeated in the distribution of the men, that introduces a softer curve, below the distribu-

16 ISTAT, Kinship and solidarity networks, Omnibus survey on families "Family, social bodies and the state of children", 1998, Table 6.1.

tion of the women in the lowest classes to overcome them in the higher classes, over the 1,000.00 Euro.

The contained amount of pension of the women in comparison to the men can be explained because women in the average contributed for less work years and have lower retributive levels, as in average they do lower paid jobs. In fact, if we consider the school sector, where these two elements of differentiation are not present, it can be observed that the annual average pension nearly assumes the same values for men and women.

According to ISTAT in 2001 the average monthly spending of the Italian family was 2,178.31 euros; the family made up of one person aged 65+ spent 1,092.21 € compared to 1,653.36 € spent by a single person aged 35-64; a couple without children where the head of the family was aged 65+ spent 1,719.02 € compared to 2,536.00 € spent by a childless couple aged 35-64.¹⁷

It is evident that the reduction in the average spending of the family is the result of a different availability of income and of a different structure of consumption in later life: the older spend more than 21% on food, from 30% to 37% on housing and more than 5% on medical expenses; the Italian averages are, respectively, 18.9%, 23.3% and 3.7%. Spending on fuel and energy also is above the national average: the weight of commodities whose consumption is difficult to compress increases, while the weight of spending on transport, communication, entertainment and culture decreases.

In 2001 there were 2,663,000 resident families, 12% of the total, living below the poverty line, defined as families that spend half or less than half of the national average per head (814.55 € in 2001). The families most at risk of poverty are large families, families with older people (16.5% of couples in which the head of the family is over 64) and the older who live alone (13.5%). In particular, in the south of Italy single older women and one parent families are respectively 47% and 26% of poor families where the head of the family is a woman.

18.7% of families headed by a person with no educational qualifications or only primary school education fall within the category of poverty: in 66% of cases the person is older and in 65% retired.

The older women are the highest part of the 21% of all people living under the poverty level, caused by their past employment in unskilled and badly paid work, frequently associated with difficult insertion in the informal family support network. 15.8% of women aged 65+ are in a condition of poverty.

As for the goods consumption, as age increases, television tends to become the main source of information and contact. In second place we find video recorders, which are owned by about half the older people interviewed, considerable differences between men (58%) and women (43%) emerge and between different age groups. The effect of income is strong in this case: at high levels of income 91% of men own a video recorder and 86% of women, as is the effect of educational qualifications and professional status. The same correlation is present in the case of dishwashers (31% of older people overall) and microwave ovens (18% of older people). The relationship of the older people with technology encounters the barriers formed by the cost (poverty of the older people, especially women), by the computer literacy necessary for owning a computer (educational qualifications, previous work experience, etc) and by the disability of older people.

3.5 Social integration, participation and other social issues

The social integration and participation to society of older women emerge from the following sub themes: Household structure and marital status, Partnership relations (Intergenerational relations, sexuality, Kinship networks, Friendship, neighbourhood and community networks),

17 ISTAT, "The Family spending", 2001.

Mobility and accessibility, Leisure and cultural activities, Volunteering, Ageism and other kind of discrimination, Socio psychological aspects.

Principal findings:

- Older women are a very heterogeneous group.
- Women live prevalently alone while men continue to live with a partner, with or without children.
- The quota of grandparents living together with their children's family increases in a relevant way in some Italian regions.
- There is a generational segregation.
- Direct or indirect discrimination because of the age and/or gender, and stereotypes are strong elements of marginalisation for older women, i.e. the job of caring is conventionally seen as a woman's duty, even in later life.
- Sexual activity is an important element for a healthy life.

In Italy in 2001 there were the following situations as for *Household structure and marital status*:

- 29,408,762 women, of whom 11,726,870 were aged 50+, and of these more than 57% were married; 3,032,941 women aged 75+, of these more than 75% were widows and 11% were unmarried.
- 27,586,982 men in 2001, of whom 9,558,415 were aged 50+ and 1,729,473 aged 75+. 82% of men aged 50+ and 71% of those aged 75+ were married.
- 5,775,951 families with a female head of the family, versus 16,034,725 with a male head of the family; in 67.1% of cases the head of the family is in the 55+ age group and in 30.5% of cases in the 75+ age group; of the latter no less than 86% are widows; in general, however, more than 94% of these families have as head of the family an unmarried woman.

Essentially, men continue to live with a partner, with or without children (67.6% of males aged 75+), while women live prevalently alone (50% of females aged 75+), with a partner (21.3%), and then as part, in some cases, of the family of a son or daughter (11.9% of females aged 75+). Besides the greater tendency of men who find themselves alone to form a new family nucleus, women have a greater life expectancy and are on average a few years younger than their husbands: this explains why the proportion of males living with a partner is much greater than that of females at all stages of old age.

The *generational segregation* emerges, made worse by the absence of developed social relations: while couples with children predominate in families without older people, in the families of older people, single persons predominate.

As far as regards solitude, two thirds of the women who live alone are women aged 65+, while males aged 65+ who live alone are only one third of all males who live alone. This phenomenon is more pronounced in southern Italy and the islands and in towns with up to 2,000 inhabitants: it is possible that the young people have migrated to other regions to look for better jobs.

Studies show that the relationship between different generations of women have been difficult in the last few decades. They try to negotiate a new relationship between the transmission of competencies and capacities in the reproductive sphere, increasingly pertaining to the past, although they have not disappeared, and simultaneously a female identity no longer constrained by prejudices and social stereotypes. Efforts are made through studies and projects for improving the intergenerational relationship.

According to ISTAT¹⁸, in Italy grandparents are approx. 11 million, that is 33.4% of the 35+ year-old people. Such quota is higher among the women (37.9%, against the 28.3% of the men), because of the higher female life expectancy, and because women are in average younger than their partners and so they become grandmothers earlier.

The percentage of grandparents raises with the increase of the age. Only the 5.7% of people less than 55 years old have nephews; in the age group 55-64 the grandparents are 44.9%, in the age group 64+ they are 70.8%. It is quite unusual that grandfathers live together with their nephews, that is 7.7% of the families, and it is referred more to women than to men (9.1% against 5.5%)¹⁹.

It is interesting, nevertheless, to notice that in some Italian regions, where the tradition of cohabitation of more than two the generations is more rooted, the quota of grandparents living together with their children's family increases in a relevant way: i.e. in Umbria this is of 18%, and in Tuscany it is of 15.4%. Grandfathers and nephews often live very near: 15.9% of grandparents have at least a nephew that lives in the same block, 28.5% within 1 km and 24.6% in the rest of the commune (table 4.1). 53.5% of grandparents are retired from the job, the quota of housewives, equal to the 45.7% of the grandmothers. Over the three quarters of grandparents – almost 8 million and 400 thousand individuals – have a low level of education (primary school or no title); grandparents who went through the high school amount to 14.7%, while the grandparents who went through secondary school and university graduates reach together 9%. The relationships among grandparents and nephews that don't live together result rather continuous and very frequent are the telephone contacts. The percentage of grandparents who call at the phone their nephews at least once per week increases with the growth of the dimension of the commune of residence and, therefore, when decreases the opportunity to meet. The greatest part of grandparents contributes to the care of the nephews, even if not full time; only 14.3% of them declare to never deal with them (table 4.5). The grandmothers are more involved in comparison to grandfathers: 88.1% of them deal with their nephews, against 82.6% of the grandfathers²⁰.

The grandparents take care of their nephews mostly occasionally and in the working time of the parents; besides grandparents intervene in case of urgency or when the parents occasionally go out in the leisure time. Finally, a little over 8% of grandparents deal with their nephews when they are sick or during the holidays (table 4.5).

People, up to 69 years old, that have grandparents are approx. 19 million and 400,000, equal to 38.5%. The ratio of people with living grandparents is very high among the young people: it goes from 97.8% in the age group 0-15 years, to the 82.8% in the age group 15-24. In the following age group it is observed an abrupt diminution of the quota of people that have grandparents (45.4%), that is reduced to 5.1% beginning from the 35 years.

From a multiscope investigation²¹ we learn that 70% of the people 55-69 live in the same commune where their mother resides. 12% live together with their mother. With the ageing of their parents, it becomes more frequent than older parents live together with their children, even if the separate residence remains the dominant model. Meetings and phone calls between children and their parents appear to be very frequent: 37-38% of the older, males and females, meet their mother who is not living with them every day. The women use more the telephone to keep in contact with their mother, and do the same with their father. Women of the age group 55-64 have 3 living brothers or sisters, women 65+, instead, have 2.6 living brothers or sisters.

18 ISTAT, Kinship and solidarity networks, Omnibus survey on families "Family, social bodies and the state of children", 1998.

19 ISTAT, "Kinship and solidarity networks", work cited, table 4.1.

20 ISTAT, "Kinship and solidarity networks", work cited, table 4.5.

21 AAVV. ISTAT, Elderly in Italy, Il Mulino, 1997.

A third of the older people has at least a brother or sister living to a distance of 1 km or less. The proximity makes visits more possible: few more than the 51% of the women 55-64 meet a brother or sister at least once per week, 44.8% meet them more rarely, and only 3.8% never see them. With the ageing meeting becomes rarer: 43.6% of the women 65+ meet a brother or sister at least once per week. With ageing the number of parents living together with their children decreases, but almost 90% of parents 55+ live in the same commune where their children live.

Mothers of all ages meet on a daily basis their children not living together, they call them on the phone more often than fathers do. A higher level of education is accompanied by less frequent visits to the children, but there is a higher frequency of telephone calls.

Over 42% of the 14+ old people, that is 21 million and 100,000 individuals, has relatives on whom they can rely or that they care of, a part of parents, children, brothers, sisters, grandfathers and nephews (table 5.1). With ageing the percentages of those people who counts on relatives such as uncles or acquired uncles sensitively decreases. Because of the difference of age, they progressively disappear from the parental net.

The neighbourhood plays a relevant role when you are in need of help; women trust in their neighbours more than men. Men tend to help friends more than women do, while neighbours receive more help from women than from men. Again from the ISTAT research²² we see that the families where the head is a woman have received more help, generally speaking, than those with a male head; men have received economic help and assistance for children, while women have received more sanitary services, housework, company and accomplishment of bureaucratic necessities.

There is a very high percentage of older people over 75 years old who state that they do not have any *friends*, or that they never see them; for women over 75 the danger of isolation and withdrawal into their own family is much higher: 6.3% of women aged 75+ state that they have no friends and 16.9% that they never see their friends; only 3.2% of men of the same age say they have no friends and 11.9% that they never see them²³.

From several studies it emerges that older women have important qualities such as the capacity to organise themselves, to relate to and participate in various activities which make them able to use the resources offered by an area to improve the quality of their lives. Even in their free time women tend to be available for giving help to neighbours.

Entirely lacking are the surveys on *sexuality, sexual activity* and on *ageism and other kind of discrimination* but it has to be pointed out that sexual activity and falling in love is one of the three most important elements for a healthy life in the opinion of a women's group aged 55-75.²⁴

No much data are available as for the *mobility and accessibility*, but the 1995 research "Older people in Italy" showed that older people aged 60+ spend a lot of time at home, about 18 to 19 hours.

Women have more *leisure time* if they live alone; men take advantage of a wife's presence. For older women leisure time varies according to household duties, while men devote themselves to creative household tasks. A woman's day is centred around her household duties, nevertheless over half of women of 65+ years during their leisure time relax, look out of the window, daydream, meditate.

The percentage of older men and women aged 60+ who say they watch television regularly is higher than the average for the population. Listening to the radio is not very widespread. Men aged 60-74 read daily papers more than the average population aged 60+, even though

22 ISTAT, Family Ties and Solidarity Nets, work cited.

23 ISTAT, Family Ties and Solidarity Nets, work cited, table 5.1.

24 Marziali Maria Teresa, "A lifelong holistic approach to health", work cited.

interest in this type of reading falls drastically among those aged 75+. Women aged 60+ read daily papers less than men of the same age but listen to the radio and read books more than men do.

Men aged 60+ prefer watching sport, going to the cinema and museums and visiting archaeological sites, while women aged 60+ prefer the cinema, museums, going to the theatre or visiting archaeological sites; older people aged 75+ withdraw into their homes and, as age increases, take part less and less in recreation that takes them away from home; however males more than females say they participate²⁵. The older people aged 60+ go on holiday less often, for financial reasons and for family reasons, as well as for lack of habit; after age 75 and as age increases, the obstacles most often mentioned are health, old age and lack of habit; financial reasons are in fourth place only²⁶.

More regular attendance at religious practices by women is evident for all age groups. The highest percentage of regular attendees at places of worship can be found among housewives (48.8%) and among retired people (44.2%). For men and women aged 60+ involvement in religious activities increases up to 74 years, after which it decreases, more markedly for women²⁷.

On the whole 8.4% of the population aged 14+ carries out unpaid work for *volunteer* associations (8.9% men and 8% women); men aged 60-74 report that they have done volunteer work, attended meetings and paid money to an association more than women of the same age do, for the people aged 75+ there is a sharp reduction in the percentage of those who are involved²⁸.

Volunteer work seems to be the less well educated older person's response to the need to give a structure to the time after retirement. The choices for men are wider and go from gardening, supervision outside schools and museum guiding to civil defence work; for women it is a case of doing outside the home the same unpaid caring jobs they do within the family.

Several studies have been published in Italy on socio psychological aspects of the ageing process and on older people, substantially fewer are those on the older women's life.

A "neutral" finding is that the older people are reluctant to undertake new activities and discover new ways of living. Few are really prepared to change their habits even in part; these are generations for whom leisure time had negative connotations. It must be considered that, especially among former blue-collar workers, retirement is characterised by a condition of passivity and marginalisation. It seems probable that, with the increased educational level of the future older generation, having more time for social relations and opportunities for amusement and recreation will come to have a more positive meaning²⁹.

Findings from both qualitative and quantitative data outline an Italian older woman as being both free from stereotypes, which relegate her within the family, and as the housewife and the carer till a very old age: both coexist, as representations of older women's identity. In fact it can be said that the role of women, especially the older generations of women, in contemporary society remains unchanged, even if the family is no longer a system of restriction for women, following in this the Western model. On the other hand it is obvious that older women are a very heterogeneous group and their well-being depends on their personal characteristics, which interact with the family types and with the community organisation³⁰.

25 ISTAT, Family Ties and Solidarity Nets, work cited, table 9.1.

26 ISTAT, Culture, sociality and leisure, work cited, table 3.1.

27 ISTAT, Culture, sociality and leisure, work cited, tables 5.1 and 5.3.

28 ISTAT, Culture, sociality and leisure, work cited, table 6.1.

29 Research Institute on Population and Social Policy (IRPPS – CNR), "Biennial Report to Parliament on the Situation of the Elderly", 2000-2001.

30 Livraghi Renata, "Older women in Italy: differences and heterogeneity in gender pathways" in "Oggidomani Anziani", FNP CISL Roma, 1996.

Recently retired women miss the relationship with colleagues and with people much more than men do. They feel very old and useless more than men do and they feel alone to face the age related problems. In a way this has to do with stereotypes, as we follow the data of a monograph³¹ produced in the Abruzzo region and which has surveyed the main local newspapers which keep portraying older women as they used to be and do not take into account the change that is affecting social participation and life in general of older women. This monograph also shows positive experiences of women aged 64 to 84 who feel free to express themselves when they are unencumbered by a preconceived and conditioning mentality.

Direct or indirect discrimination because of the age and/or gender, and stereotypes are strong elements of marginalisation for older women, i.e. the job of caring is conventionally seen as a woman's duty, even in later life; older women often feel rejected by the outside world because the aged female body no longer meets the socially accepted idea of what is beautiful.

3.6 Violence and abuse

A publication produced by ISTAT³² in 1998 is the more meaningful statistic study at national level. It is referred to nuisances and sexual violences and has been realized through interviews to 20,064 women from 14 to 59 years old.

The study shows that criminal actions and sexual harassment outside the family and in public environment strike women of the age up to 45, while women from 45 to 59 experience these crimes mainly within the family.

Some studies have also been carried out at local level and they show that, among women 15+ who turn to help services, approx. a fifth to a sixth of them are more than 50 years old and, among these, from a third to a sixth are more than 60. Other indicators as the education, the professional and working condition, the marital status have not been compared.

An Italian research, which formed part of a European project within the Dafne programme, shows that the abuse of the older women often happens within their family or within its entourage. Moreover, the study points out that the older women are often complaining more about the loneliness than about the bad treatment they receive, especially when this is so frequent to be considered "normal" by them³³.

3.7 Interest representation

Few sources are available as for the theme of Interest representation, so data on the level of representation in interest groups and lobby groups, and on the participation in formal and informal decision-making processes of older women are missing.

As for political participation, the ISTAT research³⁴ shows that, in 2001, 33.8% of people aged 14+ stated that they talked about politics once or twice a week. People who never talked

31 Spedicato Eide, Gabriele Licia, "Telling others about oneself in old age. Thirty women talk about themselves amid prejudices and reweaving of life stories", in *Coordinamento donne FNP – CISL, Atti del XIV Congresso del Coordinamento donne FNP – CISL – Il tempo dell'impegno-*, FNP – CISL Roma 2001.

Spedicato Iengo, Elide Gabriele Licia, "Women, time, words for telling about oneself" in *"Oggi-domani anziani"* vol. 15 n.1, pp. 77-89, "Ed. Lavoro", Roma, 2001.

32 ISTAT, Linda Laura Sabbadini, "Sexual harassment and abuse" 1998.

33 Ratini Nicoletta, Costanzi Carla, Hugonot Robert, "Abuse of older women" in Ratini Nicoletta, Costanzi Carla, Hugonot Robert, "Sécucités, older women mistreated", pp. 14-15, FESU (Forum Européen pour la sécurité urbaine), Paris – France, 2003.

34 ISTAT, Culture, sociality and leisure, work cited.

about politics were 34.9%. Participation in politics is considerably differentiated on the basis of age and sex. Males talk about politics more often: only 23.6% never talk about politics compared to 45.4% of women, especially among the middle age groups, although the differences between the sexes are less among the younger generations. The adult population shows a more marked familiarity with politics as far as listening to political debates goes as well. More direct methods of participation, for example taking part in demonstrations, concerns the very young (14-19 years), both males and females (16-18% versus an average of 4.9%). Having a higher education qualification such as a degree coincides with a greater inclination to talk about politics (at least once a week: 58.4%) or to listen to debates (42.4%); these interests are much less widespread among people with only primary school education (19.7% and 13.5% respectively). There is greatest interest in political information among employed people, especially managers, entrepreneurs and the professions (58.9% take an interest every day), and minimum interest among housewives (39.4% never take an interest) (table 7.7).

While television is the prevalent means of information among all categories of citizens, men have more recourse to the daily newspapers (59% versus 44.3% women) (Fig. 7.5), in the middle age groups, among managers, the professions and entrepreneurs (74.2%). As far as informal channels of information go, among men the most prevalent are friends (26% versus 19.1% of women) and work colleagues (14.7% versus 9.9%), while women have recourse to relatives (20.2% versus 12.1%) (table 7.5).

If people who never take an interest in politics are considered (23.1%), the reason most commonly given is lack of interest (66%), a factor which has increased in recent years. The other most prevalent reason is distrust of politics (13.3%), which, however, over time is decreasing (table 7.7). On the whole there are not great differences between the sexes as far as the importance given to the various reasons goes, except that women say that politics is too complicated a subject more often than men do (12.7% versus 8.2%).

Findings on the older women's representation in interest groups and lobby groups have not been found, but the National Sections of Retired persons of the Trade Unions took as a starting point the needs expressed by the women members themselves. A percentage ranging from 20% to 40% of women has to be part in the Board.

Over 60% of women aged 65+ say they are not interested in politics, they do not speak or inform themselves about it, half of this percentage of men say the same.

5.2% of women 65-74 participate in meetings of their associations, 7.5% of men of the same age. Women and men of 75+ years participate half that much.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Research needs to cover knowledge gaps concerning the living conditions of older women in Italy

The examined literature highlights the high longevity of the Italian population, and in particular, the higher longevity of women and the impact of this phenomenon in Italy, the oldest Country in the world, in consequence of the drop of the birth rate and the increasing of the rate life span. Nevertheless *older women* are rarely explicitly mentioned as a specific target group of research.

Definitely the older women are mentioned mainly in relation to their family or to the family of their kinship network, especially as carers, even in old age.

On the other hand, nowadays, more women than men are members of Older People's National Organisations. The Trade Unions, at national and local level, register a larger number of retired members than worker members and, among them, the number of women is larger

than that of men, that is, retired women have a sound life outside their family, as members and as volunteers in NGOs.

Two aspects of the older women's life are the most agreed upon results of the research on older women in Italy:

- Older women today have a greater vitality and a higher participation to the social life, especially in unpaid work and voluntary work contexts, in comparison to the men of the same age and in comparison to the older women of a couple of decades ago, and
- older women continue to accumulate family roles: mother, mother in law, grandmother, and quite often daughter and daughter in law of old relatives.

These are some of the most studied aspects of the older women's living condition and they outline an older woman who seems to be free from stereotypes, which relegate her within the family, and, at the same time, depict her as the housewife and the carer till a very old age: in the Italian older woman coexist these two representations of her identities.

Women caregivers is an issue well studied in Italy, caring for older disabled relatives appearing to be a gender-specific issue. An interesting result of some Italian researches by the Istituto di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico (INRCA), which have been published in several European publications, is that care-giving can be the source of intense stress, and of physical and psychological problems for care-givers, especially for women in menopause and post menopause.

It is ascertained that although women continue to live long lives, significant disability because of chronic illnesses continues to be experienced by them, especially in their last few years. Members of the Italian Gerontology and Geriatrics Association confirm that medical research do not sufficiently acknowledge older women's health as an issue and the available research itself is scarce.

The holistic approach to health that, in qualitative surveys, adult and older women indicate as very important in their preparation for old age, is not sufficiently taken into account by preventive and curative medicine.

In the age group 50-65 are allocated many women who have participated in their youth to the emancipation processes and to the related main social changes, now their reflections are outlining an anthropological change which calls for a new relationship between the ageing process and the society, a relationship aware of the gender diversity, to be included among the quality measures of the social and health services.

A large number of monographs report general reflections on the ageing process and on changing sex roles. The authors are often women 50 to 60 years old, and the books are each a kind of case study; this is the case of Betty Friedan whose Italian version of the book "The Fountain of Age" (L'età da inventare), is very popular and mentioned at Conferences.

Some women researches use the methodology of the "scrittura di esperienza" (writing from experience), that is writing by passing through, and expressing, the corporeality. This is a way of making the gender diversity meaningful and inescapable. In the transition to the "older" social group the women are the ones who demand a rightful place for a concept of old age that does not exclude fulfilment of desires and the opening up of knowledge niches previously denied, especially to women.

During the mapping work for the MERI project it was perceived a need to introduce new concepts among the research indicators, especially among women researchers. Research into people's life situations, in the case of MERI, those of women over 50, and into each of the different aspects of life seems to need to be guided by conceptions enriched by new connotations. For example, the definitions of *age* and *gender*, with their old but still very influential social and cultural implications both in everyday life and in academic research, of *de facto family*, with all the substantially different types of family that are emerging, of *well-being*, which no longer coincides exactly with income level but is measured also by an increase in

personal growth, as women, in particular, assert and testify, yet the processes leading to well-being are not being sufficiently explored, and of an *holistic approach to health*. These and other terms need to be enriched with new connotations that take in and interpret personal and social experience; qualitative research is particularly useful to this end. The knowledge resulting from statistical and qualitative research conceived in this way would reflect more faithfully the changes taking place, making their nature and extent known and helping to better prepare the way for the prospective positive changes that can be envisioned for the future.

In statistical surveys, besides the usual distinctions of the resident population by age, gender, occupation, education, there are no further specifications for specific groups, such as older migrant women.

There is a lack of statistics broken down by gender and age on the issues of *Professional training* and *Vocational training and life-long learning*. The available statistics mainly concentrate on the number of hours of training for personnel and on the expenses met by the employers.

The negligible percentage of older people who use a computer or internet in Italy and older women use it 3 to 5 times less than men of the same age Ownership and usage.

Data are missing on the working conditions and attitudes towards older workers, including gender discrimination.

The statistic on crime and abuse focuses on sexual harassment and the age groups range from 14 to 59 years. Data on more advanced age groups and on different kind of abuse, such as neglect and financial abuse, are lacking.

It has to be said that systematic researches on older women are lacking, and definitely lacking are studies on specific groups of older women, in particular the very old, the disabled, the migrants, the lesbians, the abused, those living in rural areas.

The few studies on interest representation come from the Trade Unions organisations. The National Women's Co-ordinators at the Retired Persons Sections said that there is far insufficient research on the older women's living conditions, and the available researches are mainly at local level.

4.2 Needs to improve the publication of official statistics concerning the living conditions of older women in Italy

The recommendations towards an improved publication practice, from this research perspective, are basically the following:

- Publishing periodically updated "Anziani in Italia" (Older people in Italy) breaking down all data by gender and age groups and, in addition, decreasing the lowest age group to 50+ and increasing the highest age groups to 85+.
- Investigating on specific groups of older women, i.e. migrants, lesbians and very poor.
- Focusing on the themes of sexuality, crime and abuse, and their different types such as neglect and financial abuse, on professional training and on lifelong learning.

Something of the above is already part of the planning of future research by ISTAT, as they refer to very recent phenomenon in Italy, such as that regarding older migrants.

Finally surveys and studies from a geronto-sociology and geronto-psychology perspectives would be extremely useful for a gendered approach. This recommendation comes from the numerous qualitative researches where older women have been involved and had the chance to have their say.

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