

MERI: Mapping existing research and identifying knowledge gaps concerning the situation of older women in Europe



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on the subject: *'What do we know about older women in Europe?'*
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The Meri project is a cooperative effort of research institutions in 12 European countries.

Background

A spectacular and unprecedented development in life expectancy has occurred over the last century, particularly for women, with approximately every fifth person in Europe now being a woman aged 50 years or older. These older women constitute 70 million of the 127.8 million people over 50 years of age in the 12 Member States participating in the MERI projects and make up 55% of this total population.

It is a remarkably heterogeneous group of women who are also members of different generations (Messelis, 2003).

Yet, MERI research has indicated, scientific studies and official statistics tend to neglect them as an independent target group (Stiehr & Huth, 2001).

The MERI project was a response to this situation but also a response to demands made by scientists, representatives of associations and national governments attending a European conference on 'Equal opportunities for Older Women' in 2001.

MERI objectives

The main objectives of the project are to increase the knowledge of the living conditions of older women, to improve the empirical basis for the work of NGO's, governments and researchers, to stimulate and set the agenda for future research on women and ageing and to raise public awareness about the living conditions of older women.

The method of analysis used was a mapping exercise procedure, whereby the spatial dissemination of existing studies was examined in order to identify "blind spots" in the landscapes of research and official statistics.

Definition

For the purposes of this project 'older women' were defined as those aged 50+. The research areas and themes examined included the following themes: health, education and qualifications, paid and unpaid work, income, social inclusion, violence and interest representation, while also respecting issues of ethnicity.

Methods

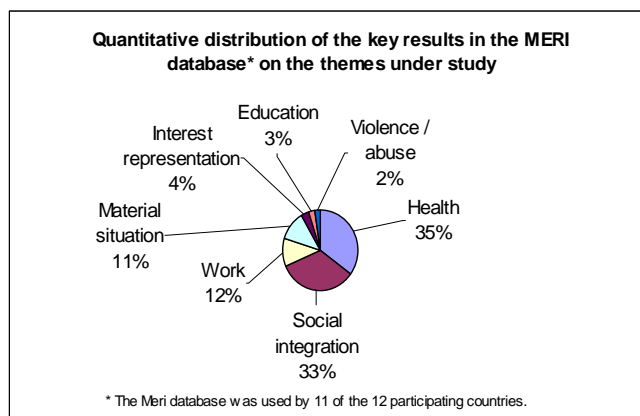
Research studies undertaken 1993-2002 were collated at national levels, using an agreed list of themes and sub-themes considered relevant. Subsequently, analysis was undertaken at national levels of publicly available data on the situation of older women available in *official statistics*, using the same list of themes and sub-themes.

Results

The MERI results have clearly shown that research on older women as an independent target group is still lacking. Only a minority of studies are focussing on women 50+ and those are focusing on individual groups among them, such as older gainfully employed women or very old women. More investigative work is needed to identify their situation within the vast amount of studies and surveys on older persons in general. Although there is no guarantee that all national findings were reviewed and reported by the MERI team members, the European distribution of available findings mirrored the situation in most of the countries.

The North-South divide emerged as regards the available knowledge in the different European countries under study. While there is a high coverage on older women's issues in research and statistics in the Scandinavian countries, the most severe lacks of knowledge are still found in Southern Europe. For example, in Greece, the situation of older women can be considered terra incognita.

The analysis at the European level showed that approximately one third of all research findings concerned the areas of 'Health' or 'Social integration'; every tenth finding related to the area of 'Work' or 'Material situation' while of minor importance overall as seen in the incidence of reportage were the areas 'Interest representation' (4% of all findings), 'Education' (3%) and 'Crime and Abuse' (2%).



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Identified needs for research on older women:

- health: care in institutions, healthy life-styles, self-care;
- interest representation and participation in formal and informal decision-making;
- vocational training and life-long learning;
- exit from the labour market in relation to employment sectors;
- the consumption of goods and services and its effect on their living conditions

- the intergenerational relations, sexuality, friendship, neighbourhood and community networks, volunteering, ageism and other kinds of discrimination in the context of social integration, participation and other social issues;
- violence, crime and abuse.

Identified needs to improve official statistics concerning older women 50+:

- special statistical editions on women and/or on older persons;
- special periodic publications on older people's living conditions with data disaggregated by gender;
- given increasing life expectancy, age categories should be in increments of 5 years and include age groups of 85 years and older where numbers are adequate;
- since age of retirement will become increasingly flexible, labour market statistics should include older age groups beyond the traditional and current retirement ages;
- more official statistics are needed for: life-long learning, ageism, crime, violence and abuse against older women, interest representation of older women; topics concerning special groups: older lesbians, older ethnic persons

Conclusions and recommendations

Some countries have inadequate data on older persons but especially on older women. Some EU statistics originating from national sources, could be sometimes dubious. Given the rise in life expectancy, data for older age groups will be increasingly useful. Official research and official statistics should present more often results broken down by gender and age; funding of projects should require gender aspects., statistics & research need to be made accessible to policy makers,...

Dissemination

The results of the MERI project were presented at a conference in Brussels in September 2004 and the invited seminar participants, representatives of governments, the European Commission and NGO's, made a number of interesting proposals and underlined the ways in which these results could be used.

The project findings were also made accessible to the general public on websites concerned with the exchange of information on issues related to older women: www.sophia-net.org and www.own-europe.org.

Sources

Messelis, E. (2003). A prospective study of variations of involvement in active social life of women over the age of 50 in Flanders. Paper presented at a MERI-meeting in Frankfurt am Mein, 2003.

Stiehr, K. & Huth, S. (2001). Webwitches and other older women, www.sophia-net.org. Exchanging information and discussing experience on the Internet. findings of a project in Austria, France and Germany, Verlag Peter Wiehl, Stuttgart, Marburg, Erfurt 2001.

* Article based on existing papers, written by the MERI partners

** Dra. Els Messelis (Belgium) gave a presentation about the MERI project on behalf of the whole MERI team.

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