

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

### LIVING CONDITIONS OF OLDER WOMEN IN AUSTRIA

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#### 1. Objectives of the MERI project

The MERI consortium, consisting of researchers from 12 European countries, aimed to

- >> Compile available information (research results & official statistics) on older women in Europe,
- >> Map existing findings,
- >> Identify knowledge gaps, and
- >> Develop recommendations to strengthen the knowledge base on women 50+ in Europe.

Data was collected on themes (and their sub-themes) that had been identified as relevant issues in the lives of older women: *Health, functional ability and services; education; work; financial situation; social integration, participation and other social issues; violence and abuse; interest representation.*

#### 2. Research methods

In the first research phase, the task was to identify research on the living conditions of older women in Austria published between 1994 and 2003. To achieve this, electronic databases (e.g. library catalogues), and websites of NGOs and research institutes were searched systematically. In the second phase of MERI, when the aim was to find official statistical information on women 50+, we mainly consulted websites and publications of the National Statistical Office (*Statistik Austria*) and the Austrian ministries.

#### 3. Selected findings

- >> More older women than older men are in need of support and care; care is predominantly provided for by (older) female caregivers
- >> Older women have lower education levels than older men and younger women
- >> The labour market participation rate of older women is still lower than that of older men; women spend more time for unpaid work in the family and in social networks
- >> Older women receive lower pensions and thus are at a higher risk of poverty than older men
- >> Older women are more likely to live in single households than older men
- >> Older women are more restricted in their mobility than their male peers

#### 4. Knowledge gaps

Our experiences and that of other authors indicate that research on older women is generally very scarce in Austria. Generally spoken, there are only a few examples of specific research on this population group. Much of the most recent research on older women has been carried out at the provincial (Land) level, there is hardly any publication dealing with the subject from a national perspective.

With regard to the MERI themes (see above) the most obvious knowledge gaps were identified on the issues *violence and abuse* and *interest representation*. These themes, including their sub-themes, are not covered at all by research or official statistics. However, these are only the most obvious shortcomings concerning our knowledge on the living situation of women 50+ in Austria. The following sub-themes were also hardly or not at all represented in research publications and official statistics: *mental disorders and disabilities*;

*financial support given to family members; ageism and other kinds of discrimination; socio-psychological aspects.*

The impression that some of the MERI themes and sub-themes are well covered should not cloud the fact that in some cases only certain aspects of one issue are presented in research results or statistical tables. E.g. in the sub-theme *working areas, conditions and attitudes towards older workers* there is only 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.

Statistical knowledge on „younger“ and „older“ older women is relatively scarce, the age groups represented in official statistics are often quite large and thus do not provide a very detailed view on the living situation of older women (and men). For example: The main statistical publication on the living situation of older people in Austria (Statistik Austria 2000) structures the variable „age“ only in two different ways: 60-64, 65-74, 75+ or 60+.

The living situation older female (and male) migrants, remains – with very few exceptions – „invisible“ throughout research and statistics in Austria.

## **5. Recommendations**

A first and very basic step to close existing knowledge gaps with regard to the living situation of older women in Austria would be to systematically break down research results and official statistics by age and gender and ethnicity. At present, „citizenship“ is the – very weak – indicator for migration used in official statistics. Additional information, such as country of birth or year of immigration would be helpful to tackle more accurately the living situation of (older) migrants.

Generally spoken, all the MERI themes (and sub-themes) need more research and statistical information. In addition to the heavily under-researched themes *violence and abuse* and *interest representation*, the above mentioned sub-themes (mental disorders etc.) should be covered by research and official statistics.

Also, combinations of two or several MERI themes and sub-themes would be worth looking at (e.g. labour market participation & ageism/discrimination, education level & unpaid work).

Concerning the age variable in official statistics, it would be most appropriate to give visibility to the heterogeneity of the population group, by systematically using smaller age groups (e.g. 50-54, 55-59,..) and by expanding the age variable from 50 to 90+.

The range of different research approaches should be broadened, taking into account also individual biographical factors in the lives of older women, in order to increase and deepen our knowledge and understanding of the situation of women 50+ in Austria.

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Research report „Mapping existing research and identifying knowledge gaps concerning the situation of older women in Austria“ (2004) by: Yvonne Giedenbacher & Charlotte Strümpel, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research