

MERI - Mapping existing research and identifying knowledge gaps concerning the situation of older women in Europe - Summary of the findings in Finland

With 11 other Member States, Finland has been involved in the EU's MERI project, which focuses on women over 50. The main objective of the project is to increase knowledge of the living conditions of older women and to identify knowledge gaps.

Findings concerning the living conditions of older women

Finland is among the EU countries whose population is ageing fastest and in recent years special attention has been paid to the ageing workforce. There are three processes that describe most Finnish women's old age: the transition from employment to retirement, transition from marriage to widowhood and the transition from caring to being cared for.

Areas on which very little research has been done include the everyday lives of elderly women (and men), intergenerational help and support (including economic support), friendship, neighborhood and community networks as well as unpaid work in the family and in social networks, and political participation.

Research on specific groups of older women, in particular the very old, disabled and immigrants should also be encouraged.

Health, functional ability and service

According to the national surveys many elderly men and women rate their own health as average and in spite of diseases and symptoms of ill-health elderly people are generally satisfied with their lives. Studies also indicate that the functional capacity of the elderly has clearly improved during the past 20 years.

In general, however, symptoms of ill health are more commonly found in women than in men. The proportion of women using medicines prescribed by a doctor is higher than that of men, and this is especially noticeable at the age of 65 and above. Coronary heart disease is still the principal cause of death among Finns, figures being similar for both women and men. Also, although women generally live longer than men, the quality of life can be less than satisfactory: women's greater longevity often means a longer life with disability.

Health science research is a sector with most studies on aging women. One central research topic is menopause and the question of the benefits of hormone replacement therapy. The usage is quite common, but some researchers have voiced concerns about the lack of evidence on the benefits of hormone replacement therapy. Hysterectomy is also very common: in the late 1980s one-fifth of Finnish women aged 45-64 had undergone a hysterectomy.

In Finland, about 90% of services for older people are provided by the public sector. Women make up to three-fourths of clients in regular services for older people: they use all services more than men, the proportion of women increasing the older the age group is. One third of over 60s receive some sort of assistance with daily tasks and help is usually given by a spouse or own child. However, over 60s also look after their relatives in many ways.

Education

In Finland, women under 55 years of age are better educated than men. Women also participate more in adult education and their activity does not decline with age the same way men's does. About 12% of those aged 65-79 participated in adult education. Most serious barriers in this age group were health problems and lack of interest. Elderly women reported tiredness and the fear of failure as obstacles more often than men.

Information technology has become a part of everyday life and work for an increasing number of adults, although usage decreases with advancing age. A third of those aged 55-65 had used a computer in the last year and about one in five of those aged 65-79 has used a computer in some point in their lives. Elderly people used the computer mainly for text editing and for searching information and services on the web.

Work and material situation

Finnish women have a very long and strong tradition of labour market participation and today most Finnish women work outside home, however, there is not enough full-time work and many have to settle for part-time positions. Unemployment rates in Finland are still significantly higher than in the other Nordic countries. Women account for 45 % of all long-term unemployed and for the majority of long term unemployed aged 55+. Approximately 10 % of wage earners have noticed age discrimination in their workplace.

In Finland, basic pension system guarantees an independent pension income also for those who have been out of the labour market due to, for example, child bearing responsibilities. Older women are seldom poor and the majority of all 60-year-olds consider their financial situation secure, although compared to other groups their incomes are smaller and the elderly fear their pensions will be reduced.

There have been signs that differences in consumer behaviour between younger and older persons are narrowing. Consumption among aging people is increasingly regarded as part of age identity and lifestyle.

Social integration, participation and other social issues

A national study on the opinions and living conditions of over 60-year-olds showed, that compared to 1994, in 1998 more time was spent on social relationships, and the popularity of pleasures outside the home had grown. The elderly also participate more in the activities of interest groups, voluntary work and parish activities; they enjoy the company of their peers' best and contacts with younger people had diminished.

A study on the mobility of elderly people showed that elderly men mainly drove in their own cars, while older women frequently travelled as passengers in cars or walked. Older women are more dependent on other person's help. However, older women would be keen to move about more, if it was easier and the services and their environment more accessible.

A study of the media portrayal of older women found that old age was referred to as a problem, and a complex social threat facing young people. "Grannyfying", which either underrates or subjugates an old woman, and which may be considered amusing from some point of view, was found in newspapers.

Women who have a loving relationship with a significant partner enjoy better mental health than other women of the same age without such partner. Surveys on sexuality issues with respondents up to 81 years of age indicated that aging affects the relationships and sex lives of men and women very differently: women are more often without a partner in later life and they also become widowed at a younger age.

Violence and abuse

Partner violence and violence against women are clearly underrepresented in statistics concerned with crimes reported to the police. Domestic violence affecting elderly people has received relatively little attention in Finland. Elderly victims may have suffered violence at home for many decades and a strong mutual dependency has also been observed between the perpetrator and the victim. Older women are often invisible victims. Violent men typically have drinking or mental health problems; older women reported feelings of fear and helplessness in such a situation and felt that they were responsible for the sick family member. But older women may be violent too, though men may be more reluctant than women to seek help in such situations. "Neglect of care" is a special form of violence that older women may use against a male partner who is dependent of care.

Interest representation

Elderly people have become more socially involved as shown by the increase in participation in the activities of interest groups, voluntary work and parish activities. However, there is a gender difference in the participation, when men more often than women take part in interest group activities and women in voluntary and parish activities.

The characteristic that best explains both membership and the level of activity is certain affluence, the key variables being a high level of education and professional status. It is also noteworthy that a large number of women are entering fields that were previously considered male.

Conclusions

Most surveys on elderly people do not specify the gender of their subjects. Important gender distinctions do exist, however, and thus the gender of the subjects should always be specified in research. Very little research has been done on the everyday lives of elderly women, the changing circumstances of everyday life, intergenerational help and support, friendships, neighbourhood and community networks as well as unpaid work in the family and in social network and political participation.

In Finland, gender information is published and analysed every year and the availability of statistics is generally quite good. However, as the retirement age will be more flexible in the future, labour statistics will have to take into account persons older than 64. Also annual health behaviour and health survey should include those over the age of 64.

Most MERI issues are covered by Finnish research, but the questions that should be asked is how this information is used in decision making.