

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

## Summary

### Older women of 50 and over in France

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The life expectancy of women and men, both at birth and at an older age, increased to an extraordinary extent during the second half of the last century. As a result the population aged 50 and over has been steadily expanding, rising to 19.2 million at the last census (1999). Of these, 8.6 million are men and 10.6 million, or 55%, women. Though the life expectancy of women is higher than that of men, that proportion varies considerably with age: ranging from 50% in the 50-59 age group to 66% among people aged 80 years and more. Another consequence of male excess mortality is the proportion of widows, which also increases with age. Widowhood concerned 4 million people in 1999, 87% of whom were at least 60 years old and 84% women. Most of these live alone whereas most men remain married up to a much later age.

Clearly a population of nearly 20 million people spanning two generations can only be extraordinarily heterogeneous.

But who are these 10.6 million women aged 50 and over? What are their living conditions?

What do we know about them? These are the questions the European "MERI" project, conducted in twelve European Union member states<sup>1</sup>, set out to answer by researching knowledge gaps in surveys and studies and in official statistics.

Data were collated under a set list of headings and sub-headings, which were identical for all participating countries, covering material and social living conditions, health, work and retirement, levels of education and training, volunteering and leisure activities, sexuality, ill-treatment and discrimination, images of ageing and defence of interests. Findings provide a broad spectrum of existing knowledge and of knowledge gaps concerning the target population.

National findings and the preliminary European results have been discussed at a work seminary with representatives of the European Commission, national governments and European and national NGOs.

There is abundant data in France on women of 50 and over, especially in the main INSEE<sup>2</sup> surveys and in official statistics on the population as a whole or on the older population. Nonetheless, the concomitant breakdown of findings by age and gender is not always published, and age groups are at times crude. The field of demography contains by far the most data.

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<sup>1</sup> Austria – Belgium – Finland – France – Germany – Greece – Italy – Portugal – Spain – Sweden – The Netherlands – The United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Institut National de la Statistique et des Études économiques (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic studies)

Some of the gaps found concern men just as much. These include issues specific to both women and men of 50 and over, requiring research across several fields. Knowledge gaps on older women 50+ seem to be mostly sociological and socio-psychological:

- The specific needs of ageing and how these needs develop;
- The experience of ageing, of retirement and of the age old (mistaken, deeply rooted stereotypes abound);
- The experience of widowhood over its different stages;
- The experience of the menopause;
- Representations of older women and men;
- Mobility in the surrounding environment, factor and sign of social integration;
- Behaviour required to prevent and/or delay different kinds of dependency (in areas such as social networks, eating, smoking, drinking, medicine-taking, physical exercise, keeping the mind alert);
- Volunteering;
- The needs of informal carers and their acceptance of care;
- Power plays and submissive behaviour towards formal and informal health workers and carers both in the home and in residential settings;
- Ill-treatment and violence at home and in residential care.

Given the growth of the huge 50+group in the population as a whole, official statistics, both French and European, need to be improved. They should take greater account of social gerontology, which is why the time seems ripe to cast aside the over-crude age groups and publish more detailed age brackets, at least up to 85+, though data on centenarians is somewhat sparse. Much French census and main INSEE survey data provide such detail already though other sources do not do so systematically yet. Where detailed data do exist, it is to be regretted that they are not always directly accessible.

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English translation: Roisin Vidal