

MERI

The MERI project, involving twelve E.U. countries, was designed to increase knowledge about the specific living conditions and problems of older women, given that research data and information is often missing about older women (50 years and over) in the European Union. Improving the empirical basis should help support the work of national and European non governmental bodies and social policy makers while also raising awareness amongst the general public on the situation of older women.

Sextant Research Group at the National School of Public Health, undertook the research for Greece.

The Greek report, covering the study period 1993 – 2003, is based on the very limited research and statistical data available concerning older women. Women aged 50+ form a very heterogeneous and substantial population – of few of the richest and many of the poorest, those in paid work and retired, those in the prime of life and those whose are physically dependent or at the end of their life span. The lack of data and research on their socio-economic situation, health and well being is not unique to this population group since there is a general lack of data and research concerning Greek citizens and residents, partly explained by a very limited, discretionary Greek welfare state which has traditionally not required extensive assessments of their citizens. The increase in data gathering in the past five years is not in response to national policy makers, but mainly comes mainly from the demands of the European Union that, in seeking to help the development and convergence of Member States, requires base line data. Some Greek politicians, policy makers and administrators concerned with issues relating to socio-economic development, social inclusion and equity are becoming increasingly sensitive to the needs for data and research on many aspects of Greek society, including older women, since only in this manner can socio-economic policies be developed systematically and effectively.

The MERI research sought data and research findings in Greece and internationally, with a major source being published official statistics by the NSSG e.g. on housing, employment, marriage, mortality and morbidity, and the 2001 Census. The few research reports published since 1993 rely heavily on secondary analysis and not primary research. The lack of studies on older women is not a surprise given the absence of higher education studies in gerontology or geriatrics. An addition problem is that the few studies of relevance to older women are not readily accessible. Organizations, including the Greek government, libraries, research bodies and universities have only begun presenting themselves and data on-line in the past 3 years, and thus data and references are difficult to find. Data was drawn from Eurobarometer, the European Community Household Panel, the Labour Force Surveys, the Household Budget Survey and the Women in Science database. There are virtually no independent data on the situation of older women from local authorities.

What can we learn about older women from existing data and research?

Health data tends to be limited to morbidity and mortality figures and the use of hospitals, with inadequate official statistics on mental illness or disabilities by age and gender.

While women's levels of education have increased, those 45-64 and 65 years of age and over show that 8 out of 10 older women did not complete more than basic education while few are involved in life long learning.

Employment data is far more complete reflecting the demands of the EU for active labour market policies. Older women have amongst the lowest rates of labour market participation in Europe with family reasons being cited as the sole factor associated with inactivity. Older women still play a major role in agriculture, a fact often ignored by those involved in agricultural policy and its support.

While wage levels for women are lower than men's at all ages, wage differentials are highest for those aged 50 years and over. IKA data indicate that those women over 50 years of age earn only approximately 52% of average male earnings.

Self employment is the highest in Europe amongst older workers of both sexes (47% of those aged 55-64 and 75% of 60-64 year olds in 1998), with older women also more likely to be self-employed than younger women- 40% of women aged 45-64 were self employed in 1998.

The average age at which women and men take their pension differs; women 57,82 years V 60,76 years for men in 2001 . Yet for IKA women pensioners average retirement pensions were 30% less than men's in 2003 reflecting both the shorter number of years worked and the lower levels of wages.

Older women 65 years and over represent over 15% of the total female population, the largest part being widowed, in contrast to men, who more likely to be still married. Though the number of women in Greece, aged 65+, who live alone is lower and the numbers living with their children is higher than that in the "Northern" countries these figures may well reflect a lack of choices and poverty. Data indicates that the probability of women living alone rises with income.

Whether or not older women's political and social invisibility is the result of still prevalent patriarchal systems of protection, the reality of many older Greek women's lives is often harsh¹. Even the very limited data and research presented in the MERI report shows the accumulated and accumulating disadvantage of being a Greek older woman in economic terms – whether as a wage earner or a pensioner. Poverty data indicates that older women are particularly hard hit. In other areas of life almost nothing is known about what happens to older Greek citizens, and older women share in this general fate of ignorance concerning the life situations of older people.

What needs to be done to make older women less invisible?

- Investment in and reorganization of the statistical service including the training of central and regional planners and policy makers to gather and use statistics in an age and gender sensitive way.

¹ This is not to say that younger Greek women's lives are not also harsh as exemplified in their high levels of unemployment, the lack of services to support them e.g. in maternity.

- Local Authorities need to produce local statistics on those living in their areas, planned and supported by central government. Adequate statistics will need the cooperation and effort of many government services.
- Deeper analyses are needed of existing data broken down by age and gender and their production in an ever more readily available form.
- All social insurance funds need to publish their data reports by age and gender and make them available on line.
- The Ministry of Health and Welfare is reported as developing its own data base, and this should be made highly sensitive to age and gender, essential if patterns of health, disability and illness are to be better understood and the effects of social and health policies possible to measure.