

Summary MERI report

The MERI Project, a transnational project involving twelve countries – Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, United Kingdom and Sweden – was established following work and reviews already carried out in Germany, France and Austria, in which the problematic of older women emerged as a neglected area, both at the level of research and with respect to aging and old age policies.

Certainly in the Portuguese context, the interest of the scientific community in gender and aging is not a prominent one and the problematic has no place on the political agenda.

The situation is even more paradoxical when the markedly positive difference in women's life expectancy establishes them as the majority group, especially at older ages.

It is important to mention that the origin of this project was a proposal presented by scientists, representatives from associations and national governments participating in the European Conference on "Equal Opportunities for Older Women", whose work revealed inequalities in the treatment of older men and women e.g. in Sweden the poorer quality of healthcare services provided to older women.

It is obvious that since deficiencies in knowledge negatively affect the implementation of policies and consequently the ability to take action at all levels, the objectives and methodology outlined for this project aimed at:

- Increasing knowledge concerning the differences in aging by gender, focusing on the problematic of women, and the relationship with their living conditions.
- Promoting an empirical basis to support work concerning older women, at the level of national and European associations, of government and social policy makers, and with respect to research projects on the living conditions of older women.
- Promoting the dissemination of information to the general public on the situation of older women.

The first conclusion of the research work at the MERI project is that the issue of aging in a gender perspective is virtually absent from the Portuguese research agenda, as well as from those institutions and organizations responsible in the sphere of decision processes, namely political decisions.

It should be noted that in the initial stage of the project, there were no replies from any of the 11 trades union and political party associations contacted, which can well be interpreted as revealing that female aging is not a political priority to organizations involved in decision making processes.

On the other hand, the results obtained from those institutions responding, mainly organizations within the social sphere of action, where the target group is chiefly composed by women aged over 65 years old, reveals the deficiencies and lack of knowledge in this field. The areas considered useful for their future work are those relating to health, life long education, volunteering, work and preparation for retirement, living conditions and poverty and, finally, matters relating to age discrimination and a larger participation in decision-

taking. These fundamental areas would sustain any proposed interventions to help extend and improve adult life, and confirmed by their explicit interest in the development of studies, new policies and projects for social intervention.

The scarcity of studies and research projects in this field in Portugal, confirmed in bibliographical research, contributes to the aforementioned deficiencies which is also associated with the general deficit in studies on aging, even though in the last decade there has been some increase in interest with respect to some areas of knowledge on the subject.

Within this context, research on the statistical information relevant to the analyses of older women's living conditions revealed some central deficiencies in statistical information in Portugal. It can be stated that, apart from demographic studies, available published statistical information in the several chosen areas shows many inadequacies, such that an adequate in depth understanding of older women's condition is not possible. This also relates to a deficit overall in studies and research, the source of a non-virtuous spiral between research deficit and statistical information deficit.

Specifically one can confirm the absence of information concerning certain themes – sexuality, macro-intergenerational relations, psycho-sociological aspects, ageism and types of discrimination, institutional violence, representation and participation in decision taking. Added to these “absences” are deficits in published statistical information, broken down by age and gender, all of which contribute to inadequate knowledge on what ageing in Portugal is like and how aging is experienced by women.

Simultaneously, available data analysis reveals a strong and negative differentiation concerning material situation among older women generations, namely in terms of income and housing conditions, more disadvantages to mobility, overrepresentation in incapacity situations, more consumption of health services and a clearly negative evaluation of their health condition. So, women can expect to live longer and in same way to have a lesser life expectancy without incapacity. The association of these problems with life course, namely, to lower level education, lower professional skills, lesser accessibility to qualified work and correspondent salary, reveals the mainly importance of these factors in access to social protection, income and material situation in general. People 65 years old and over are a risk group with respect to poverty, and women are overrepresented in poverty according to income level and to multiple dimensions of poverty. Anyway, data analysis concerning 50-64 age group reveals a positive evolution in education level, work skills and access to more advantageous social protection schemes. But, women are continuing to be more affected by unemployment, are overrepresented in lower qualified professions and they got lower salaries, which is associated with retirement before 65 years old, more expressive among women than among men, which also concerns work conditions, worst health situation and family duties.

Family duties relate to family networks roles. Family networks providing support to the older population, with and without formal support, are composed of immediate relatives, particularly feminine members (daughters and spouses) who provides care to the older, as well as to children and members with special needs. In this context it is also relevant the fact that loneliness is a major risk among older women due to rarefaction of social and family relations, associated to their longer life. Otherwise, we must consider that even if social and family

networks are very important support sources, they can also become violence sources. Data from APAV (Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima), last decade, indicates that older women are more exposed than older men to domestic violence, even if domestic violence towards women occurs more often among younger women.

In general, and considering data revealing positive life conditions evolution, we can say of being expectable that next older women generations will be better provided to face later life. On the other hand, the discrimination tendencies identified, are an indicator of persistent older women negative differentiation towards older men. The understanding and systematical evaluation of these process demands further, more statistical information and improving knowledge.

A recent work from the INE (Instituto Nacional de Estatística) indicates a very positive tendency, particularly evident since the International Year of Older People (2001). However, there is still a need for a coherent statistical plan to integrate issues relating to aging, based on available knowledge concerning the most influential factors that have impacts on the quality of aging by gender. This relates to the need for investment in research in this field and to a prioritization of this field in the research agenda of research entities as well as the development of an interdisciplinary environment, fundamental to the construction of knowledge. The construction of a rational basis for political decision-making and intervention is directly linked to investment in research and statistical production that will lead to a knowledge base that will allowed better and more effective action.