

## **MERI: Mapping Existing Research and Identifying Knowledge Gaps Concerning the Situation of Older Women in Europe**

### **Living conditions of women 50+ in Spain**

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Although women constitute the major group of older people in Europe with their greater life expectancy, there is a paucity of scientific knowledge about their living conditions that often differ from those of older men. Additionally they face specific problems, many of them based on current social organisation. In face of these facts, a small research project, *Mapping existing research and identifying knowledge gaps concerning the situation of older women in Europe* (MERI) was undertaken with the overall objective of promoting research work on older women. The European Commission funded this project that involved twelve European countries<sup>1</sup>.

The objectives of the project included: 1. To gather studies and official statistics with regard to the living conditions of older women. 2. To analyse the findings by mapping exercises in order to identify unfilled areas in this subject. 3. To present the results, which will give the basis for future research as well as the practical measures, proposed for socio-political action.

The list of themes to cover were 1. Health, functional ability and services; 2. Education; 3. Work; 4. Material situation; 5. Social integration; 6. Violence and Abuse; 7. Interest representation.

The project encompassed research about older women published from 1992 to 2002. Different methods were used to try and locate studies, starting with an on line search of databases. In a second phase we visited university libraries, where we looked for books and journals, after that we went to specialised women's bookshops and finally, we visited the specialised library on older people from the Ministry of Social Affairs in Madrid. We also used some informal channels, interviewing experts on women and research colleagues working on women's issues. The official statistics under analysis come from three general sources published in online reference database mainly from the National Statistics Institute (INE). The national report on statistics "*The Elderly in Spain*", published by the Institute for Migration and Social Services (IMSERSO); from Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs; and online statistics published by National Institute for Women belonging to the same Ministry.

The results of the study realised in Spain show that the research about older women is very scarce. Nevertheless, the few findings can give us some idea about the living conditions of older women that in several themes correlates with all the countries involved in the Meri project. For example, the fact that women's longevity

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

makes them more likely to suffer from chronic diseases commonly associated with old age. The findings show how the combination of life-long conditions and socio-historical factors has an influence on women's health in older years. The inequalities between men and women are greater in many subjects, such as the level of education, material situation specially for the oldest women, living alone, and being abused. Also they spend more time than men on caring for the family.

In spite of this, comparing with older men, older women spend less time in hospitals, commit less suicide, smoke and drink less alcohol, feel less loneliness, participate and are more active in older people groups. But all this data needs more research.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

In general, this area of research may be characterised by the paucity of knowledge regarding older women's living conditions. The low number of total studies, the uniqueness of the many sub themes, the non existence of others, and the local level or specific group of women studied, currently prevents us from having a complete approach to the situation of older women in Spain. The main finding in this research is that older women in Spain are still hidden within the general category, of "adults", or as "older people". There are themes and sub-themes proposed by the MERI project that are not covered because of a lack of studies or statistics, and more a specifically lack of statistics by gender cross-tabulated with data on older people. The findings mainly stress the negative aspects in the living conditions of older women, with a description of present and future problems. Only glimpses are given on positive aspects in the lives of older women that need to be proved by empirical research.

As for the methodologies used in some studies, it is worth pointing out that it is questionable as to whether the recurrent use of data from surveys published many years ago can depict the situation in current society, given the very rapid changes occurring.

## **Research needs to cover the knowledge gaps**

- There is a lack of research about the role of psychological and socio-cultural factors, which impact on older women health behaviours. Not enough data was found on older women's health differences, which are more than pathologies related to the reproductive system. There has been no effort to analyse the essentials related to healthy and active ageing.
- There is no information about the social and psychological aspects of institutional life related to gender.
- There is neither data about professional and vocational training for older women nor their use of computers. More data and wider research are needed to identify the importance for older women in attending University Programmes and other long life learning courses.

- Research on the theme of crime and abuse is very sparse and nothing is available about people cared for in nursing homes and violence against them. Also nothing is known about how older women abuse their caregivers.
- More data are needed on time expenditure and participation in social activities, especially on membership association that can be used as an explanatory factor for the well being of older women.
- Very few data and no research are available about the consumption of goods and services by older women.
- Gaps exist in specific domains such as: early retirement, older women migrants, exit from the labour market and unpaid work in social networks.

The collection and organization of data about older women is still at an early stage, thus a lot of work still needs to be done. For example, the insufficiently combined cross tabulations between gender and age or the desegregation of age groups. We recommend more differentiated age group publications in order to bring the situation of older women into relief. The most important issue is to reconsider the way we think about older people as a unique category without gender. This is something that is very clearly seen in the data we have found. It is necessary to stress the gendered nature of ageing.