

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

Living conditions of women 50+ in the United Kingdom

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About the Project

MERI was a collaborative project involving 12 European Commission (EC) countries. The objectives of the project were:

- To compile research studies and official statistics concerning the living conditions of older women in Europe;
- To analyse the findings by mapping exercises in order to identify gaps or blind spots relating to older women in research and statistical reports;
- To agree measures for the creation of a future research, data collection and publication agenda as well as for socio-political action in favour of older women.

Methods

A systematic search of electronic databases was used to identify empirical studies concerning women aged 50+ published between 1993 and 2003. Non-governmental organisation websites were also consulted. Statistical information was gathered chiefly via the Internet from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) website and the Executive/ Government Departments' websites, as well as from the sites of government-linked organisations such as the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). Secondary searches were conducted using library-based resources including government reports and journals.

Living Conditions

Data on living conditions comparing older women with older men included the findings that older women:

- have more years in poor health than older men, despite living longer;
- have lower education levels than older men (and younger women);
- are more likely than men to experience discrimination in the workplace;
- are at higher risk of poverty than men, especially if from a minority ethnic group;
- spend more time than men on unpaid and caring work in the family;
- typically live alone and, if divorced or widowed, are less likely to remarry compared with divorced and widowed older men;
- appear more likely to be abused than older men;
- are less interested in politics than men but as, if not more, likely to use their vote.

Research Gaps and Shortfalls

In addition to the relative invisibility of minority ethnic older people in research and statistics, studies also privileged heterosexuality in method and focus. A common feature of many areas of statistical data was the use of limited age-bandings and the failure to disaggregate data by gender as well as ethnicity. Some surveys only covered people in private households, omitting those living in institutional and residential homes.

In terms of the seven specific MERI themes, knowledge gaps and shortfalls included:

Health: variation in statistical data across the four UK countries; a lack of demographic and socio-economic background data, and positive measures of health; an absence of research about factors affecting older women particularly, including falls, dementia, and other mental health problems; a relative lack of qualitative research approaches.

Education: a general failure to examine participation in education outside of the formal sector, reflecting a government focus on labour market issues.

Work: gaps in statistics on part-time and low-earning employees, and those working past state pension age; under-representation of the theme of unpaid work outside care and household activities; a lack of knowledge on motivations for, nature and conditions of employment post-state pension age.

Material situation: limited data on consumption and expenditure trends, housing, and inter-generational transfers; an absence of data on perceptions and patterns of money management; a need for comparisons of living standards between older women and men, as well as between different groups of women.

Social integration and participation: a lack of data on how gender and age mediate social integration and participation, the impact of divorce, the meaning of sexual behaviour, and older women's desires regarding partnership relations and remarriage; limited data on grandparenting, friendship and community networks, religious activities, and volunteering; a bias towards qualitative research on ageism and other kinds of discrimination.

Violence and abuse: a general dearth of statistics on older women as victims and as perpetrators of crime, and a combined lack of reporting and research on abuse.

Interest Representation: a lack of data on types and levels of, motivations for, and factors enabling participation by older women at both local and wider political levels.

Additional Recommendations

Alongside the need for statistics and research in the specific areas noted above, additional recommendations included:

- Addressing issues of language and literacy, illustrated for example, by surveys conducted in English only and the use of self-completion items.
- Questioning implicit benchmarking through, for example, the traditional survey focus on lifelong heterosexual marital relationships;
- Unpacking categorisations such as 'pensioner household';
- Increased the use of survey modules or trailers focussing on older women's lives.
- Increasing the range of research approaches used to seek understanding of older women's lives.

The full report, *Living conditions of women 50+ in the United Kingdom* by Lorna Warren, Sam Young and Joanne Cook, is available free from www.own-europe.org

Elaine Argyle, Elizabeth Birks and Peter Traynor were also involved in researching the report.