

Gertrud M. Backes · Vera Lasch · Katja Reimann (Eds.)

Gender, Health and Ageing

# Alter(n) und Gesellschaft

## Band 13

Herausgegeben von

Gertrud M. Backes

Wolfgang Clemens

Gertrud M. Backes  
Vera Lasch  
Katja Reimann (Eds.)

# Gender, Health and Ageing

European Perspectives on  
Life Course, Health Issues  
and Social Challenges



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This volume emerges as result of two European research workshops: “Ageing, Health, and Gender” 29.-30.04.2005 and “Networking for Women’s Health across Regional Diversity in Europe: Experiences, Concepts and Strategies” 8./10.10.2004, both have taken place in Kassel, Germany.

The focus of the workshops has been on gender-specific conditions and possible strategies for managing resources and strains, and their effects on health and life-situations in old age. Thus the emphasis has been on strategies promoting “successful” coping with the changes brought on by old age, but also the roles of gender, gender-relations and social environments in old age. The objectives of the workshops have been the cross-border exchange of information on models, best practice and conducive conditions, and the question of how to possibly implement such models and strategies. Two volumes<sup>1</sup> now emerge as a result of the workshops, which examine in several articles different aspects of the topic from various national contexts. A main point of interest has particularly been to strengthen the East-West dialogue as well as the co-operation with researcher from the new EU member states.

We thank the Hessen’s Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts (Hessischen Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kunst), and the Group on Gender Research (Interdisziplinäre Arbeitsgruppe Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung) at the University of Kassel, Germany for funding. Without their support neither the workshop nor the books would have been realised. We want to thank also Bärbel Sauer, Verena Koslowsky, Simone Happel and Bettina Hegemann for their exceptional assistance in organisation and Stefani Ross for her excellent and patiently translation work.

Kassel, Juli 2006

Katja Reimann, Vera Lasch & Gertrud M. Backes

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1 The 2nd one is: Lasch, Vera; Freitag, Walburga;, Sonntag, Ute (Ed.): Gender, Health, and Cultures. Networking for a better Future for Women within an enlarged Europe. Kassel university press, 2006.

# Table of Content

<i>Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello</i> Foreword.....	9
<i>Vera Lasch, Katja Reimann &amp; Gertrud M. Backes</i> Gender, Health, and Ageing: An Introduction .....	11
<b>I. Gender Impacts on the Life Course and Old-age Health</b>	
<i>Gertrud M. Backes, Ludwig Amrhein, Vera Lasch &amp; Katja Reimann</i> Gendered Life Course and Ageing – Implications on „Lebenslagen“ of Ageing Women and Men .....	29
<i>Katja Reimann &amp; Gertrud M. Backes</i> Men in Later Life: Perspectives on Gender, Health, and Embodiment .....	57
<i>Birgitta Lindencrona &amp; Barbro Westerholm</i> Mapping Existing Research and Identifying Knowledge Gaps Concerning the Situation of Older Women in Europe (MERI). From the Swedish National Report .....	71
<b>II. Issues of Health Research in the Context of Gender and Old-age</b>	
<i>Friederike Kendel &amp; Monika Sieverding</i> The Impact of Gender and Age on Cardiovascular Health in Germany .....	105
<i>Csilla T. Csoboth</i> Health of Ageing Women in Hungary.....	125
<i>Beata Tobiasz-Adamczyk</i> Social Resources and Health Status in Older Polish Women .....	139
<i>Majda Pahor, Barbara Domajnko &amp; Valentina Hlebec</i> Double Vulnerability: Older Women and Health in Slovenia.....	157

*Mónika Erika Kovács*

Quality of Life and Health of Ageing Women in Hungary:  
Characteristics and Bio-Psycho-social Background Factors ..... 175

*Bridget Penhale*

Elder Abuse, Older Women and Considerations of Mental Health ..... 203

### **III. Challenges of Care – Gender and Health Perspectives**

*Vera Lasch & Katja Reimann*

Ageing and Demographic Change: European Research Resources ..... 227

*Hildegard Theobald*

Care Resources and Social Exclusion: A European Comparison ..... 241

*Gabriele Doblhammer & Uta Ziegler*

Future Elderly Living Conditions In Europe: Demographic Insights ..... 267

*Gabriele Kreutzner*

Care for Old People Between Gender Relations, Gender Roles,  
and Gender Constructs ..... 293

Notes on Contributors ..... 317

# Foreword

*Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello*

Certain books are eagerly anticipated and long overdue. „Gender, health, and ageing“ is such a book. Its topic is relevant in many different ways. The demographic and societal changes of the past decades, such as longevity and improvement of public health, have definitely created new and often very distinct realities for men and women. However, these diversities have only marginally and fragmentally been the topic of research endeavours. There is, for example, a general growing awareness for the societal phenomenon of „feminization of old age“, yet the topic and its psychosocial and health-related consequences haven't attracted the scientific interest they would have deserved. It is noteworthy, that still until a few decades ago, the majority of geriatric and gerontological studies were oriented towards male standards without considering gender effects. Even though subsequent studies increasingly began to focus on differences between women and men, they referred mainly to the biological sex of a person and not to their gender belonging. Due to these scientific neglects and limitations, the state of the art in the field of gender, health and ageing is sketchy and often enough contradictory (Perrig-Chiello & Höpflinger, 2004). Do older women really have more physical and mental health problems than older men, or are these findings influenced by a gender bias, due to a different awareness and understanding of health and illness? Is there truly a higher incidence for Alzheimer's dementia for women than for men, or is the apparently higher incidence simply the consequence of women's higher life expectancy? What are the physical and mental health costs of being the main caregiver of spouses, in-laws and partners, considering that this is a role many women have to fill from middle-age on? It's impossible to find satisfactory answers to all these questions without considering the cultural and social living context of the subjects studied, and without adopting a life course perspective (Perrig-Chiello & Höpflinger, 2003). The inclusion of gender as a social reality in the broadest sense is therefore an absolute prerequisite for gaining valid information.

Gender is not only a neglected, but also a highly complex construct, which cannot be allotted to one single discipline and thus demands a multi- or even an interdisciplinary approach. In view of the complexity of the issue it is furthermore frustrating to see that a large majority of scientific work done so far was not only mono-disciplinary but also to a large extent purely descriptive and the-

ory-poor. As a consequence, we are faced with the impossibility to grasp the underlying complex causes and mechanisms of gender, health, and ageing. However, in order to enable optimal age- and gender-appropriate assessment, prevention, and intervention in-depth, multi-causal, and innovative approaches are needed.

Based on what has been stated so far, the book „Gender, health, and ageing“ is of particular significance. Its editors, Gertrud Backes, Vera Lasch, and Katja Reimann, did not balk at tackling such a complex and demanding issue. They have compiled a reader that identifies the research gaps already mentioned and proposes a multidisciplinary view of the topic. In addition, the international lineup of authors permits a comparative, European perspective of the issue. The authors manage to reveal in an impressive manner the necessity of a gender perspective in aging and health research, as well as the necessity of an age and health-related perspective in gender research. Various contributions adopt a life course approach and include further aspects of body, physicalness and identity, which have previously been neglected by the social sciences. In a society in which „anti-ageing“ has become a buzzword, scientific analyses of ageism – which is not infrequently paired with sexism – form a crucial basis for a differentiated understanding of the constituents of illness and health in old age (Perrig-Chiello, 2005).

All things considered, this book contains a wealth of data integrated in a coherent theoretical framework, thus yielding vital elements for a gender and age-appropriate health practice.

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