

WOMEN'S HEALTH IN EUROPE

Facts and Figures Across the European Union

**European Institute of Women's Health,
Dublin, Ireland**



About the European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH)

The European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH), launched in 1996, is a non-governmental organisation, with an extended network throughout Europe that has promoted gender equity in public health, research and social policy. The EIWH uses evidence-based arguments to influence the policy environment. It is working to make the improvement of health and well-being of women across the lifespan a priority for the European Union and Members States. We are governed by a Board of Directors. <http://www.eurohealth.ie/>

About the European Advisory Council (EAC)

Our European Advisory Council (EAC) is composed of organisations and individuals that contribute their multi-disciplinary expertise from across Europe. One of our Board member's organisations, the Institute of Medical Genetics, Cardiff University, has conducted the research and several Board and EAC members acted as advisors to the report.

About the Institute of Medical Genetics, Cardiff University

The Institute of Medical Genetics provides an environment in which scientists, researchers and clinical geneticists (including those with medical, psychological and social science backgrounds) work together on the inherited basis of human genetic disease, and the consequences for affected individuals, their families and for society in general. http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/medicine/medical_genetics/index.htm

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD COMMISSIONER KYPRIANOU	iv
FOREWORD AUSTRIAN MINISTER OF HEALTH AND WOMEN	v
ADVISORY COMMITTEE	vi
SUMMARY	vii
RECOMMENDATIONS	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRENDS	2
Older Women	2
Life Expectancy	2
Marriage and Divorce	4
Reproduction	5
Female-headed Households	6
Education	6
Employment	6
Carers	6
Death Rates	8
HEALTH ISSUES	9
A. Cardiovascular Diseases	9
B. Cancer	10
C. Lifestyle Disorders	14
D. Mobility Disorders	17
E. Mental Health	19
F. Sexual Health	20
G. Selected Chronic Disabling Disorders	22
H. Healthcare	25
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	27
Recommendations and Priorities	28
REFERENCES	29

FOREWORDS

Dear Reader,

This Facts and Figures booklet in your hand endeavours to capture the state of women's health across the EU, including for the first time the data from the ten new Member States.

Women are the foundation of our families and communities. They are carers and teachers and sources of inspiration. Women's health, their health beliefs and health behaviours have a broad impact on their families and on society as a whole.

Health is largely created by the circumstances people live and work and raise their children in. It is therefore highly welcome that this booklet also covers several vital socio-economic aspects related to women's health. It also clearly indicates the need to take account of health needs of women across their lifespan.

The report illustrates that considerable health inequalities exist across Member States. The loss of so many healthy life years from preventable causes is unacceptable. Governments have an essential role in providing leadership, setting the policy agenda, identifying resources and bringing parties together.

The European Commission is determined to play its part through economic, social and public health policies and through various supporting instruments. And there is much we can do to bridge health inequalities and improve women's health if we work together, involving all players in close partnerships.

I join the authors of this booklet in their hope that it will stimulate broader debate and will encourage looking deeper into inequalities related to gender.

*Commissioner Kyprianou
Health and Consumer Protection*



Markus Kyprianou.

Dear Reader,

By means of the “Facts and Figures Across Europe”, the European Institute of Women’s Health provides a summary of current topics and data concerning women’s health in the European Union including the ten new Member States.

As Austrian Minister for Health and Women, I am very pleased with this report, especially because Austria chose women’s health as a special focus of its Presidency and our second Austrian Report on Women’s Health was published.

“Facts and Figures” is oriented towards the central topics of women’s health such as demographic and socio-economic trends, prevalence of cardiovascular diseases, cancer or lifestyle-related diseases, sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, mental health as well as healthcare.

“Facts and Figures” gives an excellent overview on the status of women’s health in the European Union. It is, however, much smaller in size than the last Report on Women’s Health which was issued by the European Commission in 1997 and understandably cannot cover all fields. Issues like health promotion, preventive medical check-up, complementary medicine, gender-mainstreaming in healthcare or gender-based medicine and research also merit our full attention.

The enlargement of the European Union gives rise to new perspectives and needs in women’s health issues. The broad and multi-disciplinary area of women’ health enhances the necessity for a second extensive report on women’s health to be issued by the European Commission.

A modern healthcare system must aim at providing gender-sensitive care which fully meets the demands of women.



Maria Rauch-Kallat.

*Maria Rauch-Kallat
Federal Minister of Health and Women*

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The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of individual members of the Advisory Committee.

SUMMARY

Women's Health in Europe: Facts and Figures Across the European Union, was commissioned by the European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH) in 2005. The report represents the first attempt to capture the state of women's health across the newly enlarged European Union (EU) of 25 Member States. It is hoped that the report will stimulate debate, encourage policy development and guide further research that will take account of gender issues, differences and comparisons over time and between countries.

The report is presented in three sections. The first section – *Demographic and Socio-economic Trends* – deals with changing trends across the EU and outlines the subsequent changes that are taking place in the nature and structure of women's lives.

The second section – *Health Issues* – draws on specific, extensive research to document the current standing of women's health issues. This section is organised according to clusters of diseases which affect women or affect them differently from men. These are analysed and discussed in some detail.

The third section – *the Conclusions* – summarises the key findings of the study and outlines a series of recommendations for policy makers and health stakeholders on promoting women's health.

Key facts and findings that have a major impact on women and our society are:

- Europe has the highest proportion of older women in the world, with three women for every two men aged between 65–79, and twice as many women as men in the over-80 population.
- Demographic changes do not occur in a vacuum. Family lives, social attitudes and values, gender roles, working and caring arrangements are all changing too.
- Shifting demographics are also reflected in changing trends in respect of rates of marriage, divorce and reproduction, all of which have important consequences for women's health, their quality of life and society as a whole.
- Women generally live longer than men, but the quality of life and well-being they experience is not always satisfactory. The lowest life expectancy rates are to be found in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovakia.

In terms of policy development, the EIWH believes that the facts highlighted in this report must be a key consideration underpinning the formulation of future health policy.

The Conclusions offer clear policy recommendations and suggestions for future research. The report acknowledges that there is a growing understanding of gender as a key determinant of health, as well as an increased appreciation for the fact that gender is equally important as the social, economic or ethnic background of any individual in relation to that individual's health.

In essence, women's health is no longer viewed merely as reproductive health; it is now understood as the health of all women, across the lifespan.

However, despite considerable progress, gender inequalities in health remain in many areas across Europe. Policies and actions for promoting the health of women at Community level have not yet been introduced in any systematic way to the enlarged European Union.

Nor has a systematic analysis been undertaken in relation to how the healthcare sector could, or should, respond with greater sensitivity to the varying healthcare needs of women reflecting their changing role in society across all 25 Member States.

In short, major shifts in research, policy and service delivery are urgently required across the lifespan to take account of women's increasing longevity. Only then will women benefit from a truly gender-sensitive and equitable environment that translates into good health for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH), together with its European Advisory Council and network members, calls on all policy makers and health stakeholders to support the recommendations of this report, and urges all sectors concerned to take action in these critical areas of women's health.

The recommendations are as follows:

- Determine the causes of good health in women and acknowledge that health is not merely the absence of disease;
- Fund biomedical research and research into the socio-economic determinants of health across the lifespan of women;
- Examine health inequalities within and between Member States under the current Public Health programme and the new Health and Consumer Strategy and Action programme and suggest strategies to minimise these disparities;
- Introduce gender-sensitive strands in those programmes in relation to access to information, health education, prevention and screening programmes;
- Collect gender-specific data in Member States and set gendered health indicators at Community level;
- Target information and education campaigns about smoking specifically at young girls in all EU Member States;
- Encourage new Member States to make greater use of structural funds for investing in the health sector, such as supporting implementation of the Council Recommendation on Cancer Screening;
- Channel EU funds into conditions which have low prevalence but high levels of disability in women, under the EU Framework Research programmes;
- Allocate more EU research funds under the Framework Research Programmes to disorders which are of little interest to the pharmaceutical and health technology industry because of their poor financial performance;
- Encourage the Commission to include women's health groups in the EU Obesity Initiative as an acknowledgement that women play key roles as family nutritionists and care givers;
- Encourage the new European Gender Institute in collecting gender-specific socio-economic data;
- Call on the Commission on a regular basis to produce reports on the state of women's health across the EU that include comprehensive data from the Member States and Accession Countries.

