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Paper by Mone Spindler:

‘Gender’, ‘age’ and ‘migration’ in official statistics – The availability and the explanatory power of official data on older BME women

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Against the backdrop of the discussion on demographic changes also issues of migration are started to be addressed with view to age related inequalities. Among others, the living conditions of older black minority ethnic (BME) women and the cumulation of disadvantages related to age, gender and migration in their situation is newly addressed by researchers and interest groups, often with a view to bringing the marginal situation of older BME women on the political agenda. In this process of knowledge production it is ascribed high importance to representative data from official statistics, being an important data source for the planning, administration and evaluation of policies.

This paper is aimed at giving an overview on the availability and the explanatory power of official statistics on the socio-economic situation of older BME women in Austria, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands¹. For a moment the certainly wide differences of the statistical systems of Austria, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands will be blinded out in order to focus on the manifold structural difficulties which persist – more or less – with official statistics on older BME women in all the four countries under study.

Each of the three categories ‘age’, ‘gender’ and ‘migration’ which come together in data on minority older women have different histories in official statistics, which reflect different societal discourses. In the following for each category its history in official statistic and the specific problems with surveying and tabulating will be delineated in order to systematize the manifold problems with official data on older BME women. Finally the specific problems of the few tables in which the variables ‘age’, ‘sex’ and ‘citizenship’ are listed together will be described.

Gender: The well introduced concept ‘engendering statistics’

The demand for a systematic introduction of the category ‘gender’ in official statistics was first raised against the backdrop of the feminist movement. At the UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 women’s organisations were designated to start to store and to present statistics on women only in their countries in order to oppose the patriarchal system of official statistics. In the 1990s the political awareness for gender issues was raised to a degree that a mainstreamed concept was introduced, the concept of ‘engendering’ official statistics.

‘Engendering’ official statistics means the introduction of the variable ‘sex’ as a structural category throughout official statistics. This does not only mean to ensure that the variable ‘sex’ is consequently surveyed and tabulated in official statistics. ‘Engendering’ also means a revision of the whole process of data production with regard to the potential reproduction of gender inequalities in the surveyed data. A feminist revision of the data production is an extensive and challenging task, since statistical systems in many ways are based on gender-biased ideas such as the standard male occupational biography or patriarchal family models. E.g. the choice of the language of a questionnaire is an important issue of ‘engendering statistics’. Studies show that activity rates of women vary if it is asked for ‘work’, ‘job’ or ‘main activity’ in a questionnaire.

Meanwhile many countries have taken steps to improve their statistical systems to the effect that they better reflect gender issues. Of course there are still data gaps and the ‘engendering’

¹ The paper is an outcome of the research carried out within the European project Age + Gender + Ethnicity (AGE+) (Re-)integration of older migrant women into the labour market (see: <http://www.npoe.nl/projecten/ageplus.html>).

of the data production is an everlasting task, but generally speaking gendered data is easily accessible in Europe.

Age: The unknown concept 'enaging statistics'

A similar process as for 'gender' is actually starting for the category 'age'. Against the backdrop of the discussion on demographic changes the argument is being put forward that the 'enaging' of official statistics is necessary in order to reflect differences between age groups and to get prepared for future data needs. The European Advisory Committee on Statistical Information (CEIES) raised this concern for what they call "Active Ageing Statistics" in a conference 2002 (see: Eurostat 2002). As for the category 'gender' about two decades ago the concept 'enaging statistics' calls for new practices of the survey and tabulation of data with regard to 'age'.

A focal aspect of 'enaging' survey practices is the systematic inclusion of older persons in surveys. E.g. very old persons are clearly underrepresented in official statistics and persons living in institutions such as nursing homes are normally not included in household based surveys. The inclusion of these groups would afford major changes in survey methods and instruments. It is not only asked for changed survey and processing practices but also for the survey of new items. Detailed thematic research agendas are given, especially in the fields of health (e.g. on the question of how is care divided between state, family and market) and employment (e.g. on the transition from work to retirement). Also the need for longitudinal studies is stressed which are capable of documenting age related transition processes like the transition from work to retirement or between states of health. Longitudinal studies are also important in order to distinguish between effects of chronological age and effects of age cohorts with their particular historic backgrounds. This distinction is important in order to avoid an overestimation of the influence of chronological age, since 'the elderly' are a complex, ever changing population, whose living conditions cannot be explained by chronological age only. It is therefore argued that surveys should also take into account other variables except for 'age'.

The tabulation of the variable 'age' is more complicated than that of the variable 'sex'. In statistics 'sex' is a binary variable, while the variable 'age' consists of about 100 or more chronological ages and usually only age groups are tabulated. This makes the choice of age groups listed in a table a focal concern of 'enaging statistics'. Normally the age groups chosen are quite small (5 or 10 years steps) until the age of 65. Persons older than 65 are frequently summarized in the age group 65plus, which does not allow for detailed age related differentiations. In order to reflect the enormous heterogeneity of the older population it is therefore called for smaller age groups up to high ages.

The discussion on 'enaging' official statistics has just begun and is mainly taking place at European level. At national level this concept seems to be more or less unknown. The German Statistical Office e.g. is very concerned about demographic changes. They see their task in the reinforcement of population projections, which is indeed necessary. However, new practices of survey and tabulation with regard to 'age' are not discussed. Most of the demands in this context therefore sound rather utopian.

Generally speaking the availability of detailed age related official statistics is partly difficult. There are comprehensive, quite differentiated data for the age group 0 to 65 years. In contrast

for the age group 65plus the differentiation for age is poor, whereas representative data on very old persons and older persons living in institutions are almost inexistent.

Migration: Problems with the indicator, the data quality and the international comparability

In many cases the quality and the comparability of official statistics on international migration have scarcely kept pace with the increase of movements in connection with what is called globalisation and the accordingly heightened policy interest in this area. Existing official statistics on international migration pose a wide range of problems for users:

A first problem is that it is difficult to find indicators which adequately reflect the issue of international migration and which can at the same time be more or less easily surveyed. In most countries 'citizenship' is chosen as the indicator for a migration background of a person. The problem with defining all 'non-citizens' as migrants is that certain groups of persons are not included in this definition. E.g. persons who adopted the citizenship of the receiving country (naturalisations) as well as stateless persons are not visible in migration statistics. In the case of Germany also the group of German resettlers from Eastern Europe who have German citizenship and migrated to Germany are not included in a definition of migration based on citizenship. In few countries such as the United Kingdom or the Netherlands apart from citizenship also other migration related indicators are surveyed in official statistics such as 'place of birth', 'mother tongue' or 'ethnicity'. But these indicators are controversial in other countries. In Finland e.g. the survey of the indicator 'ethnicity' is forbidden for data protection reasons. It is important to stress that all these indicators are only approximations to the complex phenomenon of migration.

Second, there are several problems of data quality in migration statistics. A well known problem is that in many countries immigration statistics are generated from a population registers at municipal level. Usually these population registers are not very accurate and often out of date and additional interesting items (e.g. purpose of stay) are often not registered. There are also problems with the data collation. E.g. survey questions are often not given in foreign languages. Therefore persons not in command of the language of the receiving country are put at a disadvantage. A frequent problem with the tabulation of data is that the heterogeneous group of 'non-citizens' is not further subdivided, e.g. in EU-citizens and non-EU-citizens, Western and Non-Western, 1st and 2nd generation or in single citizenships. The catch-all category 'foreigners' makes an in-depth analysis of the heterogeneous group of migrants almost impossible.

A third well known problem is lack of comparability of national migration statistics. Almost each country has a different concept of what is regarded an international migrant in its statistical system. These concepts are designed to satisfy the internal administrative purposes of each nation state. Organisations like the United Nations, the OECD and Eurostat, working on international migration statistics, are having a hard time trying to harmonise this variety of concepts. Major definitional differences are:

- There are different **definitions of citizenship** such as 'country of origin' or 'nationality' and even these terms have different definitions across countries.
- As regards data from population registers the **entry criteria to population registers** are very different across countries. I.e. the minimum period of intended stay necessary to be registered in the population register is 1 week in Germany, 3 months in Belgium,

1 year in Sweden and some countries have no entry criteria to their population register at all.

- As regards data from residence permit systems the **duration threshold** that identifies which non-citizen is to be considered a migrant in statistical estimates varies from country to country. Also the permit durations for the same type of migration often differs across countries.
- There are different **definitions of geographical regions** across countries. E.g. Europe can be defined as all EU countries, the EEA and EFTA countries can be included or not. Turkey is treated sometimes as a country belonging to Europe and sometimes not. Similar, even bigger problems occur with other continents.

Little progress has been achieved in the harmonisation of national migration statistics over the previous twenty years. The situation does not point to prospects of significant progress in the near future. In many cases it appears extremely difficult to adapt or change national statistical systems. Besides there are many practical difficulties in the transfer of data from national level to Eurostat, such as technical problems and competition between national statistical offices and Eurostat.

Against the backdrop of the mentioned problems, the available data on migration have to be treated with caution. They give indications on the phenomenon of migration but they are in many cases far from mirroring the complex realities of today's migration movements such as short term movements (e.g. seasonal workers, circular migration) and illegal migration². Also issues such as irregular work, which are crucial for the socio-economic situation of older BME women, are not reflected in official statistics. All in all the availability of national statistics on stocks of foreigners is good, whereas official statistics on their living conditions are scarce. The availability of international data, however is poor.

Age + Gender + Migration: Cumulation of statistical problems

In official statistics on older BME women, where the three variables 'age', 'gender' and 'migration' have to be tabulated together, the particular difficulties of each category add together. But apart from the problems with the equal inclusion of older persons, women and BME persons in surveys, apart from the difficulty of finding data well differentiated for 'age' and apart from the insufficiency of the meaningfulness, the accuracy and the comparability of data on 'foreigners', also new problems occur.

First of all the number of tables in which the items 'sex', 'age' and 'nationality' are listed together is very small. Additionally the explanatory power of these few tables is frequently limited in two respects: First, these tables often only give basic information on the stock of certain population groups (e.g. foreigners, employees, unemployed). Additional interesting items (e.g. duration of stay of a foreigner, profession of an employee, reasons for unemployment) are listed separately. It seems that one reason for this is that listing the items 'age', 'sex' and 'nationality' in one table simply gets to the spatial limits of two-dimensional tables. It is hardly space for tabulating additional, especially multivariate items. A second limitation is that the group of older female foreigners in all countries is comparably small. Therefore in sample surveys (e.g. micro-census, labour force surveys) the absolute numbers for older female foreigners are often very low and accordingly the sampling errors for them

² In some countries 'illegal migrants' are included in official figures. Numbers of 'illegal migrants' published or circulated are often police estimates which should be treated with caution.

are very high. Therefore in many tables no values are listed for older female foreigners or this combination of variables is excluded from the survey on from the beginning.

All in all the restrictions of the explanatory power of representative official data on the living conditions of older BME women are severe. It is in many cases not possible to gain anything more than an informed estimate of the numbers and very general characteristics of the situation of older foreign women. The broad information gaps are in sharp contrast to the extensive data needs put forward by researchers, associations and politicians, who call for coherent sets of cross-sectional, multi-aspect data, in which quantitative and qualitative information as well as micro and macro level analysis are complemented. The awareness for the difficulties with official statistics on the situation of older BME women is largely missing. However, realistic solutions to these problems are out of sight. This raises the question if other data sources such as 'non-official' quantitative or qualitative analyses are a more appropriate basis for scientific and political engagement in the situation of older BME women.

Due to the focus on structural statistical difficulties with official data on older BME women the analysis lost sight of the certainly persisting national differences deriving from differences in political and statistical systems. The research in Austria, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands again confirmed that in The Netherlands the availability of official statistics on older BME women is clearly better than in the other countries. In several cases the Netherlands can serve as a model in tackling the discussed structural difficulties.

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