



The perception of his and her middle age in Europe

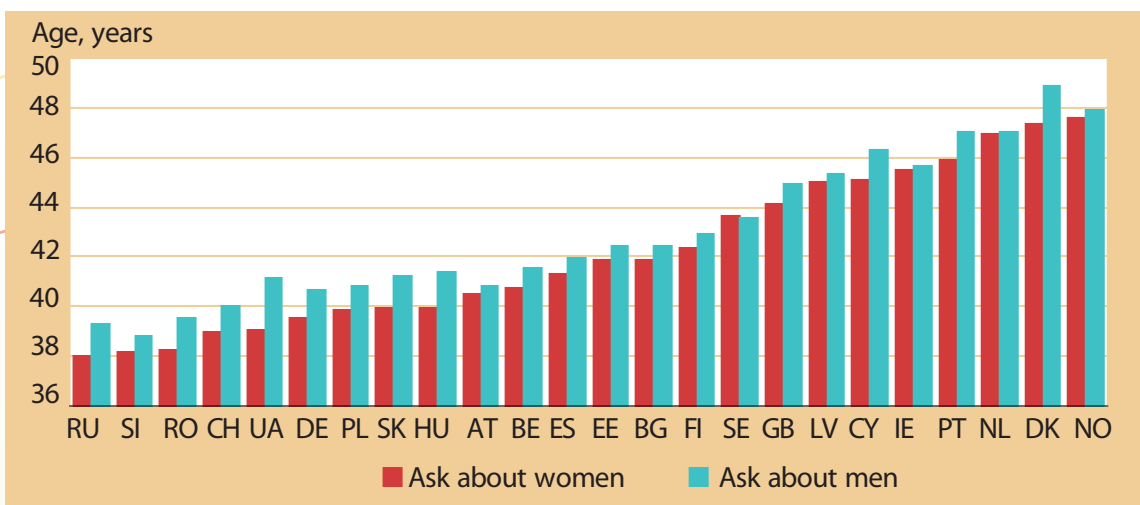
People divide the lifespan from birth to death into meaningful segments like childhood, adulthood, middle age and old age. The name, definition and length of these phases vary by person and society. "Middle age" is a fairly defined phase of life but its boundaries are less clear than those of reaching adulthood or becoming old. There is no consensus on the social markers that may signal the beginning and the end of middle age. Possibly important life transitions in middle age are grandparenthood, children leaving the parental home, reaching career goals, death of parents, emergence of health problems etc. Middle age can also be defined as a phase in between young adulthood and old age.

European Social Survey (2006) asked respondents at what age, approximately, they think women and men reach middle age. Results from 24 countries show that the mean age of becoming middle-aged varies to a great extent across Europe. It ranges from 38 to 49 years, with the average of 42 years. People think that middle age starts the earliest in Russia, Slovenia and Romania and the latest in the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. In Eastern and Central Eastern Europe people typically place the beginning of midlife at an earlier age than respondents from Northern and Southern Europe; however, there is no clear geographical pattern.

The comparison of responses about women and men indicates that the conception of middle age is gendered in most countries. People believe that men become middle aged later or at the same age but never earlier than women do. Views about his and her middle age are gender neutral in Sweden and the Netherlands and the most gendered in Ukraine (2.1 years difference), Denmark (1.5 years) and Hungary (1.4 years).

Both men and women think that it is women who become middle aged at a younger age than men do. However, this double standard is stronger among men. Women are in general more permissive: they believe that men reach midlife only slightly later than women do and they also think that middle age starts several years later for everyone than what men think.

The mean age of becoming middle-aged for women and men in 24 European countries



Source: author's calculations based on the European Social Survey 2006 (representative sample of the 18–85 year old population, N = 44,647);



LIFETIMING: The Timing of Life: Understanding Cross-National Differences in the Organization of the Life Course in Europe (European Science Foundation, HumVIB project; OTKA NN 76648)

Partner institutes: NIDI, Agder University College, Bocconi University, DRI-HCSO

<http://www.esf.org/activities/eurocores/running-programmes/humvib/humvib-projects/lifetiming.html>