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Is Women's Health Europe's Blind Spot?

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Audience: The institution responsible for health policies of the European Commission and EU member states.

Summary

Women's health is recognized as an important issue in terms of gender equality in the European Union (EU). However, problems continue to exist at points such as access to health services. This policy brief examines how effective the policies implemented by the European Union (EU) are in terms of women's health and why they are insufficient in the face of inequalities in the field of health. The main argument of the study is that although there are policies for women to lead a healthy life, they continue to lack early detection and access to services. When we examine the official reports, it draws attention to the fact that the importance of women's health should increase and research should be supported. In this direction, as a women's health policy researcher, programs can be developed that emphasize the importance of early diagnosis (cervical cancer screening should be mandatory and sanctioned for every woman), and I recommend that awareness should be increased by providing education about women's health.

KEY POINTS*

1- **Women's health**; In addition to factors such as menstrual period, menopause and pregnancy, these are the physical and psycho-logical problems they face throughout their lives.

2- Women face serious problems such as **late diagnosis** of certain diseases and **inequalities** in accessing healthcare services.

3- Although the EU has implemented policies aimed at women's health, **deficiencies in access** to health services still continue today.



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1. Women's Health Beyond Reproductive Issues

Women's health is often explained in terms of topics such as childbirth, pregnancy, and menopause. However, women's health encompasses much broader issues than reproductive problems like menopause and pregnancy. It encompasses all the physical and psychological problems that women experience from adolescence until they reach old age. Cardiovascular diseases and psychological disorders, which we call mental health conditions, are also considered an important part of women's health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that women's health covers the entire life they live and that women's health needs are completely influenced by physical and social factors (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). Of course, the problems affecting the health status of women are not so limited. The distribution of difficulties such as gender roles, economic difficulties and financial opportunities, as well as access to health services are also the main problems. For example, women who take on the responsibility of household chores may neglect their own health check-ups because they spend so much time at home. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), inequality caused by women's responsibilities and financial situations has negative effects on both physical and psychological health of women (WHO n.d.). Women undergo changes at different stages of their lives therefore healthcare services must also take these into account. Women should first receive accurate information about menstrual health during adolescence, receive support for reproductive health and diseases that may occur in adulthood, and be informed about health risks during the progressive aging - menopause periods. Therefore, my suggestion as a women's health policy researcher should focus on issues such as pregnancy and childbirth, but also target policies that take into account the health risks that women will face throughout their lives.

2. Late Diagnosis and Inequalities in Healthcare Services

One of the main problems in women's health is the delays experienced in diagnosing certain diseases and the inequalities in access to health services. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that the bias between men and women observed in health research and medical practice can lead to late diagnosis and inadequate treatment. The main reason for this is that medical events in history have focused more on the male body. For this reason, the health problems experienced by women may not be taken into account enough (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). As an example of this problem, we can show endometriosis. This disease can cause severe menstrual pain and long-term pain in the lower abdomen. But the fact that the symptoms differ for each woman can make it difficult to diagnose the disease. According to WHO, the diagnosis of endometriosis can be delayed by an average of 4 to 12 years worldwide. A different example is breast cancer, which is commonly seen in women; early detection of the disease is very important in terms of the treatment process at which it is at what stage. For this reason, it is important for women to have access to mammography screenings and that they are free of charge.

According to Eurostat reports, by 2024, the rate of women between the ages of 50 and 69 having mammograms in the last two years has been recorded as 82.1% in Denmark Dec, 82% in Sweden and 27.2% in Hungary. These example countries show us that participation in breast cancer screenings varies among EU countries. Although the data I have reviewed do not measure late diagnosis rates, it shows that there are disparities between countries in the use of early diagnosis services (Eurost Dec, 2026).

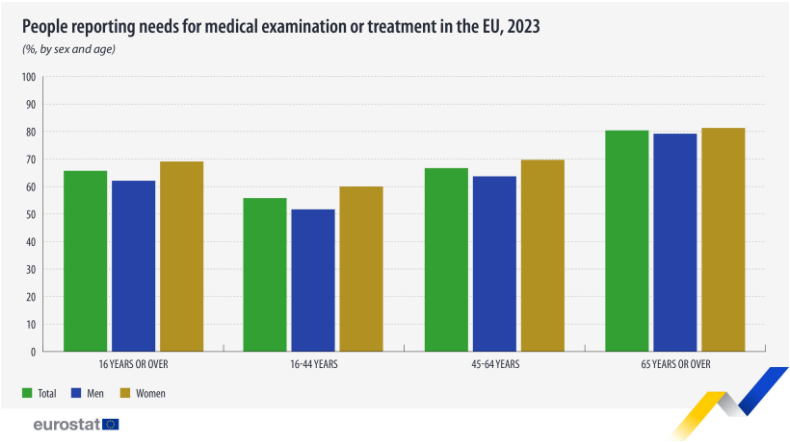
Women may also have difficulty accessing healthcare services due to high medical costs or difficulties in reaching healthcare facilities. According to the reports I have researched, the proportion of women who reported that the need for an examination was not met in the European Union in 2024 was 4.2% (Eurostat, 2026). In order to reduce these problems, it is important for us that women's health complaints are taken seriously, that they can reach the correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment in a timely manner. Additionally, a solution must be found and economic barriers that make accessing healthcare difficult must be reduced. For this reason, EU policies should be evaluated not only on the measures taken, but also on whether women can actually access the health services they need.



3. Continuing Shortcomings in Access to Health Services Despite EU Policies

The European Union (EU) has developed various policies in women's health to support women's rights and gender equality. The European Commission's A Roadmap for Women's Rights emphasizes women's right to health and the importance of considering gender differences in access to services. This strategy aims to ensure that women's health needs receive greater consideration in early diagnosis procedures and treatments (European Commission, 2025).

The EU also funds research on women's health. According to the European Commission, more than 2 billion euros of financial support has been provided to more than 1,000 projects related to women's health. These projects cover different topics such as cancer screenings, heart diseases, reproductive health and maternal and child health. However, this amount of research alone is insufficient to explain that women have equal and timely access to health services. The policies of member states regarding access to healthcare services are also important.



According to the Council of the European Union, the regulation of health services falls within the purview of member states. The EU plays a supportive and complementary role in this area, supporting the policies of member states. For this reason, the extent to which the goals set at the EU level are related to health services is closely related to the practices of member states (Council of the European Union, n.d.). Additionally, the inadequacy of healthcare access continues to be a problem. We observe in reports that 4.2% of women and 3.4% of men aged 16 and over in the EU will not be able to meet the need for a medical examination in 2024. In non-urban areas, this rate increased to 4.8% for women and 4.0% for men (Eurostat, 2026). These data show us that factors such as economic conditions and the region of residence are important in terms of access to healthcare services. As a result, the EU's development of policies for women's health and support for research are important steps. However, it is also important for us that these policies create positive results in women's daily life. It is very important for women to be able to access the necessary health services on time, to diagnose diseases adequately and to reduce the differences in access between countries in this regard.

4-My Recommendations for Improving Women's Health

1- Improving Access to Health Services: In order to prevent women from experiencing difficulties in accessing health services due to their economic situation or where they live, health services should be provided free of charge or affordable to their budgets.

2- Awareness and Education Can be Increased: In order to raise awareness about women's health, educational programs about physical and mental health should be organized in schools and community centers.

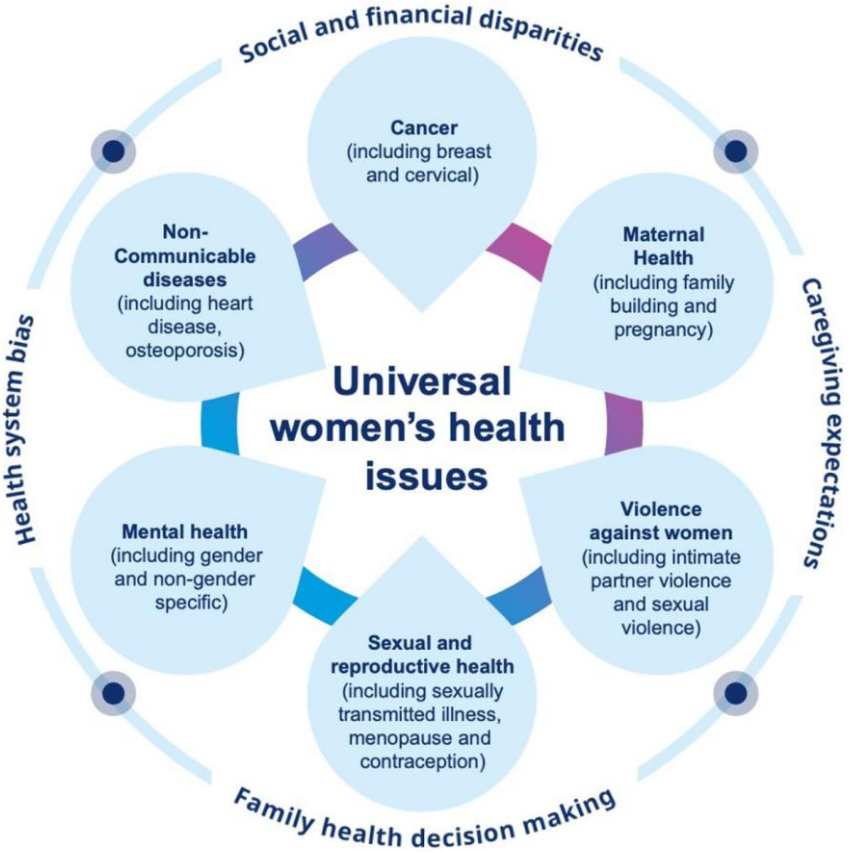
3- Gender Inequality Should Be Reduced: Gender inequality should be tackled in order to prevent women's health needs from being ignored and women's needs should be taken into account in health policies.

4- Psychological Support should be Provided for Women: Psychological counseling services should be supported by the state in order for women to cope with problems such as stress and anxiety.

5- Women Struggling with Financial Difficulties Should Be Supported: Free health screenings and affordable treatment opportunities for low-income women should be developed.

6- Decoupling International Cooperation: The World Health Organization (WHO) and other international organizations should contribute to the improvement of health services by increasing their policies among countries.

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FOOTNOTES

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The content of this policy brief lies entirely with the author. It does not reflect the official opinion of Çağ University.