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Gender Inequalities Across the Life Course: A Societal Perspective on Gender Differences in Dementia

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Introduction. Women are at increased risk of developing dementia, which can only partly be explained with differences in longevity, sex biology, or differences in detection/diagnosis. A promising approach at the population level is the systematic investigation of life course conditions for men and women across countries and cohorts in order to detect if schooling or work opportunities differ by gender. In the cognitive reserve framework, education and work reflect opportunities for cognitively stimulating activities, which increase cognitive reserve across the life course, and which could delay cognitive decline and the diagnosis of dementia.

Method. We develop a framework for systematizing gender inequalities across different life stages and life domains, with a focus on systematic disadvantages for women that could be relevant barriers to cognitive reserve development. For the empirical analysis, we gather individual information and performance on cognitive tests from several harmonized cross-national aging surveys, i.e. the U.S. Health and Retirement Study and sister studies (SHARE, ELSA, SAGE), separated by cohort. Historical figures on gender inequalities for countries and cohorts, and their relevant timings in the life course of the older respondents, e.g. during schooling, were gathered from different sources, and merged with the individual-level data.

Results. The new framework leads to testable hypotheses in both the Western and global context regarding life-course socialization and schooling and work opportunities that have been different for men and women. We will present preliminary evidence of how female (dis)advantages on different cognitive tests – memory, executive functioning – are mirroring societal gender inequalities.

Discussion. We need to better understand how different life-course opportunities for men and women can create gender differences in dementia at old ages in order to identify individuals at risk today and improve conditions for future generations.