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## **Older Women and the Media**

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*\* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations*

My comments will focus on television, where I have spent most of my adult life as a news correspondent, producer, news executive, and in recent years, narrator. My assignment has been to discuss older women and the media.

Most of my observations will be about entertainment television. What is produced by American television has a worldwide impact as TV programmes are sent into markets far and wide and influence how people in very different cultures from our own view older people.

If I were to speak only about the images of older women in television, this would be a very short presentation, since we are virtually invisible. Several studies have been made of programming and I base my observations on those studies and my own experience

First, some demographic facts: the 50 plus age group is the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population; the net worth of seniors is 5 times greater than that of other Americans; seniors control 48% of all discretionary spending.

And yet most US programming is directed at people between the ages of 18 and 49. Not only that, but with the distraction of video games, the internet, and special-interest cable stations, there has been a drastic falloff in the desirable age group's TV viewing. Still, programmes that attract young audiences are worth so much to advertisers, that they willingly pay more for commercials in those programmes. Shows attracting older audiences are cheaper to advertise on and are generally viewed with derision. One highly rated programme that ran for over 10 years was cancelled at the height of its popularity because the audience was deemed too old, and the time sold, not profitable enough. That show was "Murder, She Wrote", starring the over-60 actress, Angela Lansbury.

Despite studies that debunk the idea that older people are set in their ways and do not try new products, the young people in advertising agencies who make the crucial decisions, continue to believe that it is true. There has never been any hard evidence to that effect. Young families are considered to be more easily swayed by brand appeals. One cynical observer said that the actual programmes are simply filler between the commercials.

Let's look at how older people are portrayed in dramas, soap operas, and magazine format news. I quote observations gathered from an analysis of programming monitored in 2000. Here are some facts:

- Men outnumber women on the screen
- Only 3% of both men and women characters portrayed were elderly
- Older women were much less likely than older men to be portrayed as working outside the home
- Actors, members of the senior caucus of the Screen Actors Guild, whom I interviewed recently complained about their shrinking opportunities. They said few soap operas had characters representing grandparents, aunts, doctors, lawyers, neighbours, or sales people; the world of soap operas is composed of young adults, usually in romantic situations and not at all resembling the real world.

The overall message about aging on television, when we are there at all, is decidedly negative. In a study conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons in 1996, it was noted that while older men have been barely visible on TV, older women have been virtually invisible. Those that do appear are defined by traditional social roles – their marital status and their relationship to family. In terms of economic status, mostly well to do women were visible. Women are more likely to be portrayed positively when they are under 64. The so-called positive qualities are: sweet, pleasant, giving and caring. Negative images were: slow, feeble, cranky, and repetitive. Older women were seen as significantly less successful than older men; among characters over 65, nearly half of the men were winners – people who succeeded, but only 26% of the female characters achieved their goals. Besides, older women are not considered attractive – just the opposite.

When the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging held hearings in September 2002, one expert said that "ageism is one of the last remaining 'isms' that can be openly expressed in our society" He cited expressions like "geezer", often paired with the term "greedy", referring to older peoples pressure for drug subsidies and other government benefits.

Certainly the image driven into the minds of TV viewers is not a wonderful vision of aging. This no doubt contributes to many forms of age discrimination, damaging women's progress in the job market. I have a theory – that old people remind others of their mortality – something that they do not want to see.

A few comments are in order about the news end of the business – the area I know best. Women anchors and network reporters make up about one third of current staffs. In recent years, several star anchors have been allowed to age as have a handful of street reporters. This is progress. But the women stars around 60 look fabulous! Most could pass for somewhere in their 40s. They do not fit the stereotypes of aging. But can they continue to look that good indefinitely? Will they be allowed to appear when they are as craggy-faced and grey as some of the men? Will their years of experience trump the aging process? Stay tuned.