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LSE Equality Symposium

From 'Old and Cold' to Media Gold: the New and Troubling Visibility of Older Women?

Representation: the position of women in the media industries

Women have never been more visible in both broadcast and print media industries, or across the full gamut of factual and entertainment media output. However, this should not be seen as an indicator of equality for women working in the media industries. Indeed, in most countries a pay gap between men and women persists, whilst global media production and distribution largely remains in the hands of white men[1].

As the figures on the slide suggest, across the full spectrum of media industries it is evident that women are broadly under-represented as employees, and especially under-represented in positions of power and authority. And, crucially, representation here refers both to the public sphere of political and social activity and to the realm of media, film and television, in which powerful images of the world, and meanings about it, are circulated. We need to take especial care when presented with examples of so-called 'gender balance' and ensure that they are not masking other, equally invidious inequalities that affect women in the media. Here we acknowledge the racism of most output, which to follow Greg Dyke remains 'hideously white'; but our aim today is to focus on gendered ageism.

In recent years, the issue of ageing has further extended and complicated the marginalisation of women. Parliament's own statistics show that the number of people in the UK aged 65 and over is projected to increase by 23 per cent

[1] Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner and Lisa McLaughlin (2014) 'Introduction' in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, London & New York: Routledge:1-20.

from 10.3 million in 2010 to 12.7 million in 2018, and that women continue to outlive men. At the same time, the deferral of pensions is a powerful signal that working life will continue long past traditional expectations. In this context, we can no longer afford to ignore the place of older women in the media industries. As well as more obvious concerns with the practice of ageist/sexist discrimination against older women exemplified by the high profile cases of television presenters Miriam O'Reilly and Arlene Phillips, account must be taken of the ways in which older women are either *stereotyped* by, or *marginalised* and made *invisible* within the vast majority of media output, both fictional and factual. While, in the last few years, some commendable attempts have been made to redress the balance in terms of the visible presence of older female characters in drama across the media, these remain exceptions.

Because this pattern is ubiquitous, short-termist approaches which 'pick off', scrutinise and critique only those media addressed to women are not only unlikely to facilitate meaningful and fundamental change, they will also imply that it is the responsibility of women alone to undertake the necessary social interventions that will improve things. If we are to improve media representations of older women, a concerted effort to address *both* men and women, *both* young and old, is required.

Media Gold: the proliferation of images of women and the hypervisibility paradox

The widespread use of media images of women that are decorative, rather than illustrative, is brought into sharp focus when the absence of older women is acknowledged. It is not the case that images of women are absent from our screens, pages and streets. Rather, the opposite is true; they are prolific. Yet, and this is the problem, they promote only a narrow version of womanhood which, in recent years and as a response to anti-discriminatory laws, has been extended to include non-white women, but which continues to largely exclude older women.

The only advertisements to consistently use older women are themselves selling 'age' orientated products such as stair-lifts, baths, and even wills or legal advice. It is still rare for an advertisement for a prestige or glamorous product/brand to associate itself with 'older' women unless that product

promises to dispel the signs of aging (as in Jane Fonda's advertisements for L'Oreal), even though it is common for aging male stars (e.g. George Clooney and Nespresso) to feature as the face of such brands. Some exceptions appeared in 2014 in response to earlier critiques (e.g. the 67 year-old Charlotte Rampling is now the face of Nars cosmetics, while 45 year-old Cate Blanchett advertises Armani perfumes and 47 year-old Julia Roberts advertises Givenchy), but these remain the exception not the rule. Some high-end fashion brands, including Celine, Yves Saint Laurent and Dior, have recently sought to associate their names with an image of 'eccentric' aging femininity that apparently challenges conventional stereotypes by featuring Joan Didion, Joni Mitchell and Daphne Self in magazine advertisements. Yet these ploys look more cynical than genuinely indicative of a transformation in attitudes, not least because Didion et al appear only in a small number of selected adverts in which the supposedly 'untouched' nature of their faces becomes a novelty gimmick in line with high fashion's desire to distance itself from whatever has become everyday (this year's 'new black') rather than a refreshing acceptance of the norm. This is despite the fact that it is older women who are more likely to have the economic capital to invest in such fashion.

The pervasive surfeit of images of young women does not then reflect real world conditions so much as the power of the image and the continued dominance of patriarchal structures and ideas that objectify young women and demean and marginalise older ones. While older women are statistically largely absent from a broad swathe of media they do appear in age and gender specific spaces and genres - but usually within extremely proscribed cultural roles.

An emerging issue: the absence and presence of images of older women

On television, a medium with an audience statistically dominated by older women, the big soap operas do offer older female characters considerable narrative space, but even here the roles are limited, often to stereotypical figures linked to the family and domesticity (as mothers, grandmothers etc.), and the hegemonic discourse of the genre presents dealing with domestic and family concerns as the 'proper' responsibility of its older female characters.

British television sitcoms have also historically provided a space where older women might be found, but here, as in other media examples, they tend to be secondary and inherently unsympathetic figures: comic battleaxes (Nora Batty, Hilda Ogden, Hyacinth Bucket), dotty housewives or 'batty, bossy and bustling' mothers or mothers-in-law rather than the central protagonist. Generally, such characters are also presented as domestically focused rather than economically independent in ways that do not reflect a real world in which most women have paid employment - and even rewarding careers. Even in contemporary 'woman friendly' shows such as *Miranda* little space is made for alternative figures that represent different modes of aging. If anything, much mainstream television comedy has of late reverted to stereotypes and grotesques in which women are a source of parody or of unfulfilled desire, with 'older women' signified through drag (*Mrs. Brown's Boys*, *Big School*). Even the ensemble-based *Up the Women*, with its suffragette subject matter, relies on hackneyed stereotypes and suggestive dialogue at the expense of older women for its comedy. Jo Brand's black comedy *Getting On* was one significant exception – and it was screened on the 'minority' channel BBC Four for no discernible reason other than because of its cast and subject matter: older women. It was also cancelled after just three series, despite critical acclaim and relatively high audiences. To date, no British television sitcom has offered the kind of positive, witty and subversive representation of older women found in the 1980s US show, *The Golden Girls.*

Where 'older women' are featured in British television drama outside the regular soap operas (as in *Last Tango in Halifax*) it is often in roles that make 'being old' a defining characteristic and point of the narrative rather than as human beings who happen to be over 50 or 60. Significant exceptions to these representations which perhaps point the way towards a different approach include the highly successful TV dramas *Call the Midwife* and *Downton Abbey*, both of which were marked by extensive casts of older women, yet were both denigrated as 'sentimental nostalgia', the detective dramas *Vera* and *Scott and Bailey*, both of which offer broadly 'feminist' representations of women succeeding within the masculine domain of police procedural, and the ubiquitous if very different *Miss Marple* dramas.

However, where an older woman is represented as powerful beyond the domestic sphere it may well work to exaggerate the 'real world' context and thus suggest battles are already won (as in the frequent use of older women in secondary roles as senior police officers in crime dramas). There is also a

tendency to depict powerful older women as overweening, villainous, or untrustworthy (as *in Indian Summers* and *Game of Thrones*), illustrated by the proliferation of dramas about Margaret Thatcher which notably focus on her as a heartless individual, rather than the policies of the party she represented. The most significant exception to this stereotyping of older women is perhaps the Danish series, *Borgen*, which permits its central character to be psychologically complex, politically powerful and an engaging older woman rather than a pantomime villain. Again, the show was screened on BBC Four rather than a 'mainstream' channel.

In factual programming, older women are mainly clustered in low-budget, low status daytime/afternoon shows; while high budget news and current affairs remains dominated by older men. The notable exceptions to this, such as Kirsty Wark as a presenter on *Newsnight*, appear in programmes screened on secondary or less 'mainstream' channels such as BBC2, BBC Four and Channel 4 (this power imbalance is also noticeable in radio, which is an important space for women as presenters, producers etc. but which is treated as a ghettoized space compared with television). In TV news, with the important exception of senior reporters such as Libby Wiener, Lyse Doucett and Bridget Kendall, visibly older women appear primarily as victims or potential victims of crime or as 'at risk' through the health impacts of aging. In this way, the idea of the older woman remains dominated by a discourse of social passivity and loss, and vulnerability and physical and intellectual frailty rather than vigour and social agency.

Indeed, while some meaningful effort has been made recently to balance the number of women experts who appear on current affairs and political programmes, the default tendency remains that older men dominate the more 'serious' and prestigious news stories and discussions. The BBC's planned General Election coverage will feature *one* woman presenter (Fiona Bruce) amongst five men, for example, thus perpetuating the conflation of politics with patriarchal power and despite the apparent feminisation of electoral politics through the emergent five-way split This tendency is also associated with the ways in which an aged appearance for men is equated with the *acquisition* of authority and wisdom while aging for women is linked to the *loss* of sexual attractiveness and therefore social value, discussed in the next section. For women who work in news and current affairs the requirement to maintain a balance between 'acceptable femininity' (i.e. youth) and cultural authority (i.e. age) is difficult because women are judged on their appearance

in ways in which 'respected' older men like David Dimbleby, Andrew Neil, John Humphries and Jeremy Paxman are not. Most visibly, no leading woman presenter has naturally greying hair.

However, British cinema presents a different story. Because British films have a strong tradition of quality drama linked to what are seen as feminine genres such as the literary adaptation, the social comedy and the heritage film, and because of its marginal international status, the potential range of representations of older women is in many ways broader than for the Hollywood equivalent, which is dominated by rejuvenated female stars, or disturbing reiterations of the abject crone in its CGI driven fantasy films ., In contrast, some of the most successful recent British films have focussed on older women and the condition of aging and have secured considerable success with global audiences hungry for such stories (*Calendar Girls*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and *Second Best*, *Song for Marion*).

This does not, however, mean they currently offer significant departures from stereotypes in their representations of older women. With Helen Mirren as its lead, *Calendar Girls* chimes with the Hollywood paradigm in its regulation of women into narrow definitions of attractiveness and desirability, powerfully illuminated by appearances by leading actresses at the Oscars and BAFTA award ceremonies, and celebrity culture more broadly. In these contexts, the 'successful ager' epitomised by Mirren becomes a role model whose glamour is impossible to emulate by most ordinary women.

Stereotypes, the youthful body and 'cosmeceutical' interventions

These examples make evident the powerful connection drawn between an older woman's appearance and stereotypical adjudications of her un-fitness and incompetence to fulfil a 'front of house' role or the trivialisation of her actions because of a perceived lack of gravitas. Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel are subject to media judgements on their appearance rather than their considerable abilities (most memorably in the absurd media fixation on Clinton's hairstyle as she undertook complex international negotiations in her career as Secretary of State). While these practices are most common in a print and online media that does not have the regulatory constraints and requirements imposed on the terrestrial TV channels, the latter frequently follow the agenda set by the former.

The inherent sexism of such judgements is brought into sharp relief when the position of similarly aged older men is left unquestioned and their increasing age is seen as an asset because of accrued wisdom and experience (Bruce Forsythe and Tom Jones have become 'national treasures' with age, while Len Goodman's authority as a *Strictly* judge was apparently conferred 'naturally 'because of his seniority in stark contrast to the sacking of the aging Arlene Philips). Effectively, where a woman's wrinkles and greying hair have come to signify a decline to be remedied by enforced retirement, for men they signify increased authority and secure employment.

Evidence of female stars' and presenters' attempts to achieve this youthful appearance via apparently botoxed, surgically enhanced faces, is visible if never openly confessed (some endorse various 'youthifying' products 'because we are worth it', few admit to surgery). The congratulations and rewards such stars are offered (whether in the form of a continued career or in coded comments on their 'amazing' youthfulness) help to remind women that signs of aging are tantamount to failure in the world of media and celebrity.

Indeed, the increasing normalisation of rejuvenation treatments, especially cosmetic surgery (and its euphemistic description as 'procedure'), via make-over shows and women's magazine 'consumer tests' only serves to make it seem like a reasonable consumer 'choice' rather than the invasive and potentially dangerous intervention that it actually is. The presence of an increasingly 'advertorial' culture in which the difference between marketing and content is difficult to identify makes this even more pernicious. Yet such 'choices' are not surprising when the alternative is a stereotype of the frail, doddery and incipiently senile old lady whose distastefully failing body is matched by an increasingly demented mind (See *The Iron Lady*, *Iris, Amour, Away From Her, Still Alice*). These loaded meanings become even more disturbing when compared to dominant representations of male genius in highly acclaimed films like *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Imitation Game* and *The Theory of Everything*.

The depiction of Alzheimer's Disease as a peculiarly 'feminine' condition associated with the inherent weakness of the aging female body is underlined by the way the dramas noted above far outnumber any representation of male sufferers of the condition. Yet such representations do not remotely reflect a society in which most voluntary work is energetically undertaken by women over 50, and in which most women can look forward to an active old age.

Class, Sexuality and Race - Marginalisation

Of course, there *are* older women on television, notably presenters such as Gloria Hunniford, Angela Rippon and Julia Somerville, are largely marginalised within less prestigious broadcasting slots such as daytime television, and programmes overtly addressed to an older audience demographic, whilst prime-time television is the province of youthful female glamour. Even in such shows which assume an aging audience, and their print magazine equivalents (*Good Housekeeping*, *Saga*, Sunday supplements), images of older women are overwhelmingly of the white middle class and heterosexual 'successful ager' whose money and social position enables her to achieve the consumer autonomy that is valued in our culture to the exclusion of much else. Exceptionally, the now celebrated and treasured Mary Berry is allowed to grace prime time TV where she is defined by the 'properly' feminine and domestic art of baking, patronisingly feted for being able to bake at her astonishingly advanced years, whilst her 'female, aging profile' is balanced by a pairing with the handsome, and youthful Paul Hollywood

As noted above, representations of working class older women are rarer and cluster in soap operas and low status drama. Even here, they tend to be marginal, used as comic relief or as a foil to younger, more 'important' characters. Crucially, these soap characters are rarely happily single and economically independent: they are married, divorced or widowed, defined primarily by their relationship to men and heterosexuality. This pertains in middle class drama too, and the possibility that an older woman might be defined by a career, a positive choice to remain single, or by a same sex relationship is pushed to the margins of representation or, even more problematically, made to seem unhealthy and predatory (*Notes on a Scandal*). Indeed, such marginalisation also applies to the many Second Wave Feminists who are now aged over 50, who protested and campaigned for many of the rights that younger women now enjoy. Marginalisation therefore impoverishes the stories we see and hear because it denies the variety of older women represented, and also denies the possibility of an accrued 'feminine' knowledge that can be produced and disseminated.

Perhaps most damagingly, representations of older Black, Asian and other British women of ethnic minority heritage are almost entirely invisible across much of the media except when they appear in a limited range of 'real world'

stories (as 'battling mums' fighting drugs or knife crime, for example). It is now 20 years since *Bhaji on the Beach* was the first British-made film to feature older, British-Asian women in non-stereotypical roles, but the promise of change it seemed to herald has hardly been fulfilled in either the film or television industries. Subsequently, soap operas remain the main dramatic space for such characterisation. Even here they are limited in range and are overwhelmingly presented in decontextualized ways that test credibility (e.g. Asian families are depicted in isolation from a broader Asian community and have few or no older characters). The delightfully subversive Asian grandmother played by Meera Syal 10 years ago in *The Kumars at No 42* has not led to the regular appearance of similarly transgressive characters (but even here a younger actress offered a comedic grotesque of old age). Shamefully, when compared to the treatment of older women from the African diaspora in Britain, this looks like a success story. Since the disappearance of Moira Stewart from the BBC news we are hard-pressed to identify an older, Afro-ethnic British woman in a positive role on British television in any capacity. Indeed, being an older woman from an ethnic minority who is lesbian or with a disability, simply seems to increase the likelihood of encountering multiple forms of marginalisation.

Positive Conclusions?

WAM Manifesto – see below

The WAM Manifesto

Colleagues working together as part of WAM's collaborative research group demand that:

1. The academy and the public sector recognize, address, challenge and refuse misogyny directed at older women in the media and public life.

2. The media should aspire to more diversity in representations of old age than the dominant consumerist notions of ageing for women in public currently do.

3. Issues of class race, non-normative sexualities and materiality need to be recognized and responded to in relation to older women, both in academic work on representation and in public policy.

4. Older women need to be at the centre of debates to discuss their own identities, their own lives and the policies governing them.

5. Ageing studies need to produce research that explores intergenerationality as a means for old and young to work together in their diversities to produce real world outcomes and incremental change.

6. Research on women, ageing and media should be recognized as a form of activism that strives to empower women and older women in particular, by demanding that a wider range of older women should be more visible in all areas of the media and media representation.

(Launched at the New Dynamics of Ageing event, *Ageism and Sexism in the Media,* London13th November 2012)

Dr Ros Jennings, Director of the Research Centre for Women, Ageing and Media (WAM), November 2012.