A Report to the Labour Commission on Older Women

Representing Older Women in the Media: the Key Issues

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The position of older women in the media industries

The position of older women in the media industries needs to be investigated in the broadest sense of representation. That is, who is represented, on what terms, and for whose benefit? Representation 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. In both areas women become increasingly marginalised as they age and it is only by addressing both aspects of the problem that real change can be achieved. Crucially, powerful myths, unsupported assumptions and taken for granted beliefs about who and what women can be help to institutionalise sexist ageism and to naturalise the ways in which women and men experience profound differences in their access to recognition and power.

We therefore need to investigate *where*, *when* and *how* older women are represented across the full gamut of media from newspapers and magazines to broadcasting and cinema. We also need to make meaningful connections between representation in its democratic sense and representation in its mediatory sense in order to achieve real world change. As well as more obvious concerns with the practice of ageist/sexist discrimination against older women in the media industries 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.

The connection between a reductive range of representations within the media and reduced opportunities for employment has been well established in relation to discriminatory practices based on class, race, gender or sexuality. It is therefore crucial that this Labour Commission avoids a fragmented or short-term approach in which the immediate issue of employment opportunities for older women in the media is privileged above an examination of the representational practices that stereotype older women and thereby lend legitimacy to sexism and ageism. Indeed, overtly political interventions to ensure older women are valued in the media workplace will not have long-term benefits if the mechanisms used do not recognise that: a) the presence of *individually* recognisable and powerful women in the media will not automatically ensure wider change since such women frequently benefit from reproducing not challenging institutional sexism; and b) that media representations matter because they do not simply reflect reality – they shape our perception of reality, often in highly distorted ways. It is thus only by recognising the centrality of media to the beliefs and values that shape sexist age discrimination that its consequences in the form of economic impoverishment, cultural marginalisation and social exclusion can be properly addressed.

The proliferation of images of women

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 and images of women are prolific. Yet – and this is the problem - they favour and approve only a narrow range of womanhood: a range from which older women are largely excluded. In newspapers, images of attractive young women are routinely used to mark the publication of A Level results, for

instance, while pictures of young female models and celebrities are frequently deployed on business pages in relation to stories to which they have the most tangential connection. Such practices ensure that whilst images of women are widespread, they are not simply content determined. This hyper-visibility still extends to the use of young women as visual 'accessories' or trophies attached to items or brands aimed at men (cars, shaving gear, even farm machinery) in ways that are so ubiquitous they appear perfectly natural. 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 almost unknown 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) to feature as the face of such brands. A more properly 'reflective' range of images would mean that, for example, most hair care products (not just hair dye)would be advertised using models over 40 or that popular drama would regularly feature female central characters who are over 50. Both changes would genuinely acknowledge the real world demographic, yet both are unlikely to happen without deliberate intervention.

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. The common sense claim that television and other media simply reflect the tastes and wishes of a majority is undermined by the extent to which both audience demographics and media institutions and structures are increasingly complex, and by the simple fact that women have always constituted a majority of the UK population but they have never dominated British cultural forms or media in terms of either numbers or power. The presence of images of young women and the absence of images of older ones is not a symptom of women's own tastes and wishes, but rather indicates the continued power and privilege of men within the institutional structures of media and the ideological structures of beliefs and values.

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. For example, the current concern with fashion magazines' use of extremely thin and under-age models has undoubtedly helped to identify some deeply problematic practices and assumptions, but the world of fashion is not exclusively responsible for images of women and certainly does not contain the most demeaning, offensive or abject representations of older women. These tend to be found in lads' magazines, male-orientated comedy TV shows and 'gross-out' comedy films, all of which are addressed to young white and middle class men, whose cultural power is rarely challenged or problematized. 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.

The absence and presence of images of older women

While older women are statistically largely absent from a broad swathe of media they do appear in age and gender specific spaces, genres and social or cultural roles. For example, on television older women may appear in the role of comic battleaxe (Nora Batty, Hilda Ogden, Hyacinth Bucket, Mrs Brown – here the grotesque older woman is a man in drag), as victims or potential victims of crime (newspapers, television news), and as 'at risk' through the health impacts of aging (health campaigns, advertising), and also in stereotypical roles primarily linked to the family and domesticity (the ubiquitous 'nanna' found in all too many media texts). British television sitcoms have historically provided a space where older women might be found, but here, as in other media, they tend to be in highly stereotyped roles as secondary and inherently comic figures: as dotty

housewives or 'batty, bossy and bustling' mothers or mothers-in- law. Generally, such characters are also presented as domestically focused rather than economically independent (*Keeping Up Appearances*, *My Family*). Even the refusal of domesticity by *Absolutely Fabulous's* comic grotesques, Edina and Patsy, is no closer to reflecting the real world in which most British women work for a living throughout their lives. Yet such stereotypes persist even in contemporary 'woman friendly' shows such as *Miranda*, and make little space for alternative figures that represent different modes of aging. The black comedy *Getting On* is one significant exception – and it is screened on the 'minority' channel BBC Four for no discernible reason other than because of its cast and subject matter: older women. 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,* or the gritty depiction of a working class middle aged woman found in the 1990s comedy, *Roseanne*, or the recent politically attuned legal drama, *Harry's Law*. What these programmes powerfully illustrate is that, where there is sufficient will, it is possible to make interesting and widely accessible television programmes featuring active and likeable older female characters that attract a large audience.

Generally though, 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. Exceptions to these representations include the highly successful TV dramas *Call the Midwife* and *Downton Abbey* (both marked by extensive casts of older women, yet both denigrated as 'sentimental nostalgia'), the detective dramas *Vera* and *Scott and Bailey* and the ubiquitous *Miss Marple*. These shows are notable because they are unusual, but even here the tendency is to represent older women who are middle or upper class in more 'positive' ways than those who are working class. Crucially, most big budget or prestigious television drama features a cast of young men with a token woman or two for 'love interest,' and the sole older woman typecast as the mother of the central male character, and depicted as a castrating ice-queen if she is upper class (*Dancing on the Edge*). Indeed, where an older woman is represented as powerful beyond the domestic sphere it is frequently in roles that cast her as overweening, villainous, or untrustworthy (perfectly illustrated by the proliferation of dramas and drama-documentaries about Margaret Thatcher which notably focus on her as a heartless individual, rather than the policies of the party she represents). The most significant exception to this stereotyping of older women is perhaps the Danish series, *Borgen*, a drama 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, as noted below; 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*, and Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel as politicians, are subject to endless 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). Indeed, while some effort has been made recently to balance the number of women experts who appear in such programmes, the default tendency remains that older men dominate the more 'serious' and prestigious news stories and discussions. This tendency is strongly 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.

As noted above, television channels both reflect and reproduce the normalisation of these power imbalances with authoritative older women more likely to appear in programmes screened on secondary or less 'mainstream' channels such as BBC2, BBC Four and Channel 4, and younger, less authoritative women on the 'mainstream' channels of BBC1 and ITV1 (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). Indeed, 'mainstream' is too often taken to mean young, male and middle class when the majority of regular television viewers do not fit this demographic. In film and cinema, similar kinds of assumptions underpin what is cast as mainstream material. However, because British films are themselves part of a 'minority' industry and have a strong tradition of quality drama which is itself frequently linked to what are seen as feminine genres such as the literary adaptation, the social comedy and the heritage film, the potential range of representations of older women is in many ways broader than for the Hollywood equivalent. Indeed, some of the most successful recent British films have focussed on older women and the condition of aging and have secured considerable success with audiences hungry for such stories (*Calendar Girls*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *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* became yet another vehicle to regulate women into narrow definitions of attractiveness and desirability, while *Song for Marion* perpetuates the myth of the failing female body and, its title notwithstanding, is a male-centred story. *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* has much to recommend it, since the film usefully highlights the economic exigencies facing many older people, it uses an ensemble cast whose faces bear the signs of long lives well-lived, and actually accords an active sexuality to its older female characters, but it is ultimately a film which re-naturalises women's subordination to men and the necessity of Third World labour being subordinated to the needs of the west's aging population.

Stereotypes, the youthful body and 'cosmeceutical' interventions

The cases of Miriam O'Reilly and Arlene Philips, as well as the more recent furore over Fiona Bruce's hair, 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. 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 has become a 'national treasure' with age). 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', none admit to surgery).

However, alongside the inducements of make-over shows such as *Ten Years Younger* and classified magazine advertisements for cosmetic surgery clinics, the congratulations and rewards such stars are offered (whether in the form of a continued career or in comments on their 'amazing' youthfulness) help to remind women that signs of aging are tantamount to failure in the world of media and celebrity. The scandal over Seth MacFarlane's grotesquely misogynist performance at the 2013 Oscars helps to point towards the consequences of women's continued marginalisation from power within the film industry globally, in both senses of representation. But MacFarlane's 'jokes' also underlined the extent to which female stars, even the most successful, remain almost wholly judged on their appearance and the intensification of the requirement to appear 'youthful' and sexually desirable in rigidly narrow ways. It is crucial that such sexist practices are challenged.

Change will only come when the capabilities of older women are no longer judged against impossible to achieve standards based on stereotypical notions of youthful appearance. The exceptional status of 'actor' not celebrity accorded Meryl Streep within this context is just that: exceptional status.

Indeed, the increasing normalisation of cosmetic surgery (and its euphemistic description as 'procedure'), via make-over shows, women's magazine 'consumer tests' and even the kind of sensationalist reality shows that promise to reveal the horror of surgical mistakes, only serves to make it seem like a reasonable consumer 'choice', rather than the invasive and potentially dangerous intervention that it actually is. Such 'choices' are not surprising, however, 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*). The new pervasiveness of such stereotypes can be illustrated by the current website of the British Film Institute which shows ten figurative images of currently successful films, two of which represent troubled or demented, older women. Such images of 'old' (if not 'old*er*') women are becoming increasingly normalised and reiterate familiar assumptions about women's inherent physical and mental weakness, as well as the myth that older women are passive victims of their bodies and as such, are a 'burden' on young people. Such representations do not 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.

Women, Class and Marginalisation

Of course, there *are* older women on television, notably presenters such as Gloria Hunniford, Angela Rippon and Julia Somerville; but they are largely marginalised within less prestigious broadcasting slots such as Morning TV or the daytime consumer show, *Rip Off Britain*, and other programmes addressed to an older audience demographic. Such ghettoization suggests that older women are not fit to be seen by 'younger' audiences, and this assumption helps to perpetuate both their absence and the normalisation of youthful appearance for women and the unchallenged authority of older masculinity in a cycle of perpetuity. 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. Equally importantly, the presence of older female faces in the 'shop front' should not be taken to mean much has changed in the boardroom. Some television channels in particular have worked hard to populate local news programmes with female presenters, for example, but this does not mean the news agendas have changed (as the plethora of female sports reporters discussing the Premier League indicates). If younger, 'attractive' women can be marginalised even as they are made hypervisible, it is evident that the specific *way* in which women are represented carries as much, if not more, importance than how frequently they appear. This logic has to be central to any interventions made into the position of older women in the media industries.

As noted above, representations of working class older women 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 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.

Invisibility

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?

This report has highlighted a number of positive examples of older women such as Kirsty Wark, Gloria Hunniford, Julia Somerville and Angela Rippon, who successfully present factual television; similarly, television and film do offer some excellent representations of strong and vibrant older women in dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, *Call the Midwife* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. But such representations continue to be exceptions. Because they are so few and far between they powerfully throw into relief the surrounding deficit of representation, both of older women generally, and older women from marginal groups more particularly. The British media, in its broadest sense, is failing to recognise the significance of older women both in terms of their importance to audience demographics and as a group which makes a significant social contribution. The media industries are therefore neglecting a valuable human resource that could enrich their own personnel and their creative output, as well as neglecting their democratic responsibility to represent a broad range of British lives in ways which include the richness of older women's experiences.

The mainstream terrestrial television channels have a duty of public service written into their charters, but other media also have a responsibility to fairly represent the constituencies they serve and to do so effectively. Employing older women in greater numbers in key roles across the media industries is essential, and will help to transform the ways in which older women are represented. Recognising that representation is a complex issue that cannot begin and end with immediate issues of employment is also vital for real change.

Recommendations:

- Set up a meaningful audit of the number/proportion of women in the TV/media workplace across all media institutions/companies based in or operating in the UK (e.g. the Murdoch press, *Hello* etc.). Do not confine this to the BBC. Make sure the commercial newspaper and media conglomerates are included and must comply.

- Set up compliance regulations for the employment of women over 50 across all media organisations.
- Ban advertisements for cosmetic surgery in women's magazines (as in Germany) and the 'advertorial' of such surgery in TV make-over shows.
- Instigate a realistic quota system of women over 50 as both presenters and editorial staff for all TV current affairs/new shows (this will be greeted with howls of anger and resentment but it will work).
- Avoid exclusively focussing on media forms or genres which address women only and identify ways in which a broad range of media are required to address their under-representation, stereotyping or marginalisation of older women.
- Ensure that older women are positively and frequently represented in publicly funded films and those supported by national lottery funding distributed by the British Film Institute, perhaps via positive discrimination mechanisms.
- Instigate a bi-annual competition at the British Film Institute for lottery funding to produce a film about older women.

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