

Elderly Women

in the Netherlands



This picture was taken during a fashion-show for the elderly women.

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In politics, the media and the public eye, the "older woman" is under regular discussion. That older women can be an active group could be seen in a recent edition of the magazine **Rails** (a consumer publication from the Dutch Railway) entitled "Old is in" with an eighty year old model on the cover. The eighty year old model illustrated with her sophisticated outfit the kind of classic tops, body stockings and singlets that will soon be available in the shops.

The aim of this article is to describe the position of elderly women in the Netherlands. This will be sketched along the following lines: What is the attitude of the public and the media to the older woman in the Netherlands? How are they received in the employment market? How do older women see themselves, and how do they shape their lives?

Public Images

The population of the Netherlands is becoming increasingly older, and the majority are women. In recent years, the government devoted much attention to the position of the older woman. In its policy towards the elderly, the government considers older women to be a separate interest-group. Older women are still a disadvantaged and undervalued group in society in respect of income, education, employment and participation in political decision making. In daily life older women are constantly confronted with the many prejudices related to them. In the negative image, elderly women appear as

unattractive, unhappy, dependent, asexual and socially isolated. At the same time, they are more liable to be judged on their appearance than their male counterparts. A 56-year-old television program-maker asserts: "What I find most difficult is when people give me the idea that I am finished, that they consider me to be no longer 'in my bloom', that I have become sexually unattractive." This negative attitude is mainly focused on the mental and physical weakening of the older woman. Such view does no justice to the independence, competence, and capabilities of a large number of older women.

These negative images give the impression that there is nothing positive to be said about them; however, contrary to the traditional view have arisen positive images in which the older woman is seen as vigorous, active, enterprising, and adventurous. These views fit into a new vision of the elderly, which includes the new opportunities and possibilities open to them as they enter a new phase in later life. Recent investigations into attitudes towards the elderly members of the Dutch population give a more positive view of older women than of older men. Women are seen as more sociable and hospitable. They have a rich social life with (grand) children, brothers/sisters, neighbors and friends and generally feel less lonely than men of their age. Older women take care of their appearance and their health and are better able to look after themselves and structure their lives than men.

Images of the elderly are diverse and differ among different age groups, the older Elderly and the younger Elderly. Since today

women of 50 or 55 are viewed as elderly, the number of elderly people has not only increased, but has added a good number of active people within its ranks.

Older Women in the Media

The portrayal of older women in the media is twofold. One view is that they are associated with sickness and death, and are opposed to everything that is young and dynamic. Aging is seen as pure misery for women; men no longer want you, because the word "woman" automatically means "younger woman". On the other hand, there are other attempts in the media to break the association between age and negativity and to introduce a more positive view of older women, women who are still functional and attractive despite their age, and who are still lively and active in employment and social life.

Older Women and Employment

The consequences of negative images and representation can clearly be seen in age discrimination against older women in the job-market. In Dutch society, where youth and productivity are important factors, finding employment for older women is difficult since the general view is that a career must be established before one's fortieth year. Since the capacities of the older woman are undervalued, she is placed within the category of an unproductive group, unable to keep up with new developments, and feeling threatened by the younger generation. There are many kinds of employees among women: breadwinners, second-starters, part-timers and others. This diversity requires more jobs tailored for women particularly that there is a group that makes the conscious decision to engage in work after forty (second-starters). It is untrue that older women are unproductive, and companies with second-starters are enthusiastic about hiring them since these women have a high sense of responsibility and a low sickness rate. Granted that it is hard to change jobs as you grow older, women who undertake to work in later life are faced with barriers that have nothing to do with their knowledge, experience or ambition, and everything to do with their age. Just like older men, older women are the victims of age discrimination. This explains why a vast number of older women in the Netherlands are engaged in volunteer work rather than regular paid jobs.

A woman of 59 asserts: "I wanted a job. I applied but it was no use. I'm too old and too expensive."⁷² In certain areas, such as politics and care, there is a rising percentage of older women, and it is expected that there will be an increase in the number of older female doctors in view of the number of women who have chosen this profession.

How Older Women See Themselves

Aging is regularly touched upon in all kinds of women's magazines. Subjects such as: "Grandmas with filled agendas", "Is getting old really such a disaster?" and "Fun-loving at fifty"

are included. How does the Dutch woman see herself? Investigation seems to show that the self-image of the older woman is more likely to be positive than negative. Health is the chief criterion by which people measure aging. A woman evaluates herself through her physical condition. Good health leads to a positive self-image. Older women who still have a partner and live independently have a more positive attitude than those who have lost their partner and are no longer independent. Loneliness, dependency and bad health, lead to a negative self-image. These are indirect consequences of aging, especially since Dutch women live on average seven years longer than men.

In the Netherlands the elderly continue to live independently for as long as possible. When this is no longer viable they move to special apartments, retirement-homes or nursing homes. This vision of a life of dependency is, for many women, so frightening that younger elderly women tend to paint a negative picture of the organized world of the elderly with its retirement-homes and nursing-care: "They sit there (in the retirement-home) and have no more interest in the outside [world]. Those people are dead. Old-people's homes give me the shivers"⁷³ (A woman of 69). In reality the percentage of elderly people in care is around 8%, and as many older women as possible remain independently housed.

Among the positive aspects of aging are more experience, wisdom, the ability to relate, increased freedom, peacefulness and new chances to develop: "I'm finally free to do as I please. I am no longer concerned with what is expected of me. I make my own decisions, and that is a form of liberation"⁷⁴ (A woman of 66, divorced and working for a women's organization). "I find this a nice age to be. You are more confident and better able to know what you want. Men treat you differently, more as a person, than as a woman. I like that. I am judged on my qualities, not on my sex"⁷⁵ (A 54-year-old woman, director of a chemical concern).

Movement of Women from the House to the Public Arena

Over the years gender has been an important criterion that has contributed to the generally accepted attitudes to women. The roles of men and women were clear. The man assumed the duty of financial provider for the family, and the woman was responsible for raising the children and running the home. Most women stopped working after marriage, and these assumptions over the division of labor between men and women caused division in various areas of life until the sixties. Women drew their identity from parenthood, family life, social life and only marginally from paid employment. The choice of paid work was limited and women generally were hired as domestics, nurses, seamstresses or teachers; however, the changes of the sixties and the rise of the Women's Movement brought about a revolution in assumptions about gender. Married women with children began taking paid work and generated extra income, but also extended their activities into other areas of life creating a greater involvement in society.

Older Women as Conscious Designers of their Own Existence.

Older women are much less influenced by gender than before when it comes to organizing their lives. These days individuality is the most important source of identity and it is to be expected that this tendency towards individualization will increase in the coming years. Greater self-awareness has led many women to abandon the assumptions which previously governed the form of their lives and the realization of their own limited wishes. In the Netherlands, the traditional bonds of society whereby children take care of their parents, and grandmothers care for the children have disintegrated.

Increased individualization has led to freedom from the traditional class and family ties, so that individuals are gradually relying more and more on themselves. Since women live longer than men, they need to seek new challenges in life in order to avoid



Picture Credit: Maria Poppe

loneliness. Today women make less sacrifices in the care of a partner and (grand)children and make demands that would earlier have been unthinkable. Grandmothers do not want responsibility for raising their grandchildren. Research indicates that the meaning of aging is different among men and women. As their domestic responsibilities recede, older women seek activities in the public arena. Men, on the other hand, on retiring from a life at work, feel better in a domestic environment and direct their activities more towards the wife and grandchildren.

A Diversity of Styles.

At this moment there are many diverse ways in which older women can shape their lives. The personal experience, historical situation, health, and financial situation of the woman are critical in her forming of her own life.

Research (T.Nederland 1998) shows that there are five different life-styles among older women:

- Independence/Autonomy: Financial and emotional independence are essential to these women. In dividing their time, priority goes to time spent in paid work.

- Self-Development: These women are above all interested in their personal development. This takes the form of study, social or political activity, volunteer-work or creative activity though the relationship with their own children remains an important part of their program.

- Seize the Day/Enjoyment: These women are concerned with the joys and pleasures of life. They emphasize "not having to", and insist on their freedom. The activities of these women are leisure, dining out, cinema, museums, shopping and travel. They join clubs where they share company with other women and avoid social isolation. Among their activities are swimming, playing bridge, golf, etc. Contact with their families basically depends on whether it gives these women happiness and does not restrain their freedom.

A woman of 63 asserts: "I'm used to the rhythm of my new life, into town to shop, play bridge, or stroll with friends, occasional travel, alone or with my husband. I don't want to give these things up. Not that I don't like my grandchildren, on the contrary I'm crazy about them, but I have so many wonderful things to do that I don't want commitment. I expect the care of the grandchildren to be properly organized. I prefer being a "free-grandma" not one who baby-sits, and I certainly don't want to be a part of bringing them up."⁶

- Service/Altruism: They get their satisfaction from caring. Caring for others takes up most of their time. These women mainly do volunteer work but they are the ones to determine their availability and the extent of work, they will indulge in.

- Complementation: This is the group that looks backwards on important events and past experiences that have influenced their lives. These women often have bad health and have



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resigned themselves to their fate, and their social network is mainly restricted to friends and family without any involvement in social activities.

Aging demonstrates that the role of gender as a source of identity is changing. Many women have abandoned gender-determined assumptions and have moved on to a personalized, self-awareness attitude. The notions about division of labor by gender have disappeared. Older women have expanded their horizons beyond the care of husband and children into the public arena of paid work, education, and volunteer-work. Men, on the other hand, go in the opposite direction and withdraw from society. For a long time children were the core of women's existence, but, women today have other interests. They have their own life and prefer to seek new fulfillment in life once the children have left home.

Out-of Date Image - Changed Policy.

Although older women have been underrepresented in many areas of society, they are now a major group within the government policy for the elderly. The main aims of this policy are to remove the barriers that prevent the elderly from participating in society, and to find employment in various areas. Special attention is focused on women's problems and making training sessions available to help them to adapt and assert themselves and be in the forefront.

In 1999, the UN year of the elderly, special attention is being paid to opinions of older women. One example is the international film festival "Images of Aging" which will be held during the UN year in the Netherlands. The media, in particular, must be motivated to portray the elderly in accordance with their contribution to European society, to avoid stereotyping, and to strive for a more sophisticated reporting of the elderly in their publications.

ENDNOTES

1. Ingeborg van Teeseling "Ik werk harder dan menig jong ding" (I work harder than any young women) *VB Magazine*, 1996, p.20.
2. VWS, Government policy for the elderly. "Verouderde beelden" (Old attitudes) 1997, Rijswijk, p.37.
3. Ingeborg van Teeseling. op cit., p.20.
4. Ingeborg van Teeseling. op cit., p.20.
5. Lilian Schuit. "Oma nieuwe stijl heeft een volle agenda" (Grandmas with filled agendas), *Opzij*, 1998, p.26.
6. VWS, op cit., p. 37.

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3. Manschot, Anke (1998) "Is ouder worden werkelijk zo'n ramp? (Is getting old really such a disaster?). *Opzij*, p. 8-13.
4. Nederland, Trudi (1998) "Stijlen van ouder worden van vrouwen en mannen" (Life-styles of Dutch elderly women and men), Department of Women's Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, State university Leiden.
5. Nederland, Trudi (1999) "De oudere vrouw bestaat niet" (The elderly women doesn't exist). *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, nr 2, p. 5-12.
6. Schut, Lilian (1999) "Oma nieuwe stijl heeft een volle agenda" (Grandmas with filled agendas), *Opzij*, p. 24-29.
7. Steen, A.M., Scheepens, J.E. (1998) "Beeldvorming en ouderen" (Attitudes and elderly), LBL, Utrecht.
8. Teeseling van, Ingeborg (1996) "Ik werk harder dan menig jong ding" (I work harder than any young women) *VB Magazine*, p. 18-22.
9. VWS, directie ouderenbeleid (1997) "Verouderde beelden" (Old attitudes), Rijswijk.

(Endnotes and references originally in Dutch. Translated for Al-Raida).