

We would like to express our disappointment in the way *Women in Action* (WIA) has portrayed older women (issue no. 3, 2000). In particular, its cover and editorial. The cover and the editorial *do not* reflect the contents of the magazine.

The articles in the magazine provide a varied representation of older women. The contents candidly addressed the problems faced by older women, as seen through their eyes, looked at the different mechanisms older women used in dealing with these problems and reaffirmed the positive role and contributions of older women in society.

The cover, however, which is a crucial aspect of a magazine given it is the first thing the readers see, seems to have reduced older women to being impoverished, helpless, barren and needy. This image, as captured by the cover, is a one-sided, and stereotypical portrayal of older women. It is clear from some of the articles that the older women would like to break these stereotypical images of themselves.

The call of the editorial, 'Giving them a Louder Voice,' which clearly states that it is the role of younger women to give older women a voice, is not only patronising; it also deprives them of their own voice. The editorial also proposes that this can best be done through the UN-sponsored activities, thus reducing the concerns of older women to 'agenda points' in a UN conference.

We want to critically contribute to WIA in order to strengthen it. That is the spirit in which we are making these comments.

Sincerely,
Tesa de Vela
Lorna Israel
Reihana Mohideen

Dear Tesa, Lorna and Reihana,

Thank you for your letter concerning the cover and editorial of the *Women in Action* issue on older women. It is always useful to get feedback on the work that we do, something that we thrive on given the nature of our work.

Firstly, let me respond to the question of the image on the cover that you feel is a stereotyped portrayal of older women. To give you some background on why the cover was chosen: we wanted to find an image that would symbolise the

productive contributions of older women in this region, since many older women are in fact working women throughout their lives. We did some research and found an image of an older Nepali woman in an issue of ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development) Newsletter (Issue No. 37) which accompanied an article on "Gender and Livestock Managed in Mixed Farming Systems." This article highlighted the significant role that older women play in livestock production, a fact that has become even more notable with the increasing out migration and seasonal migration of farm labour in Nepal. With globalisation and structural adjustment policies, older women are increasingly left with the productive and reproductive roles of their children and in-laws that seek employment elsewhere.

While there were some differences of opinion within the Editorial team about the angle of the shot, since that does indeed have the impact on how the image is perceived, we did not think that this woman looked "helpless, barren and needy" as you say. Impoverished yes, tired yes, old yes, but helpless, barren and needy, no. In fact, an older woman carrying a rather large weight on her back challenges the middle-class notion of older people being frail and fragile and unable to contribute to society meaningfully after the young years. Even wizened and old, the woman in that image is still very strong. We had the choice of another cover that would have the faces of two of the older women who were written about inside the issue, but for various reasons, the Editor decided to go with another cover. We realise that we could have explained the image better, and perhaps in the coming issues, we will provide a small comment on the front cover so that our audience can understand the images selected better.

As to the editorial, we are sorry to hear that you find the tone of it patronising. Given that you all know the staff of Isis personally, I am sure you realise that this was the least of our intentions. We understand that there are now debates about merely "giving voice" instead of giving space for the exercising of political agency. As a publication that seeks to highlight current issues and debates within the women's movement, we have always sought

to allow the voice of the women engaged with the issue to speak for themselves. This has been our policy for the past 26 years. However, it is not always easy to find women who can write about their issues themselves, although you will note that there are a couple of articles that have been written in interview style, and at least two written by older women themselves. The act of "giving voice" to their issues is merely a first step, and we did try to do both, of allowing them to speak their own voice as well as amplify their voices in the ways that we knew best—through the publication. In terms of proposing that older women's issues can be best done through UN-sponsored activities, I think that this is reading far too much into one editorial. We mentioned the fact that the issue of older women was seen as an emerging issue in the Beijing + 5 Review process, because there are a large number of people who read *Women in Action* who are working at national level or at the international advocacy level on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. We do not support the notion that the UN processes provide the only solution for women's empowerment, although we realise that the women's movement has taken big strides towards making an impact within UN spaces. We do believe that initiatives on the ground and fundamental shifts of attitudes towards older women in society are necessary to address the concerns and realities of older women.

Thank you once again for your comments and the opportunity to engage in a debate on these matters. If you do have more questions, we would be very happy to discuss them further with you.

In solidarity,
Susanna George
Director, Isis International-Manila
Editor-in-chief, *Women in Action*

Note: What do the rest of our readers think about the cover of the last issue of *Women in Action* on Older Women? We invite other readers to give their comments on this or other issues in our publication. An essential way in which we can encourage meaningful debate on the issues that we raise is if you write back to us and tell us what you think. We look forward to that always!