

Elderly people and pensioners

Many older people in post-Communist societies have found themselves in desperate situations. Whereas their pensions used to be sufficient to ensure them at least a basic level of survival, social and economic changes have forced many of them to seek ways of earning enough extra money just to feed themselves. Inflation has so outstripped their ability to purchase goods and services that they often have to resort to begging on the streets.

Although their plight is well-known, journalists rarely focus on them. When seniors do appear in media reports, it is almost always in the person of a babushka, stooped over and dressed in a torn shawl, complaining about how things are not the way they used to be. It is rare that elderly people are portrayed as accomplished, attractive, fighting for their rights, or anything but passive victims of circumstances.

Here are a few tips on creating a more diverse image of the elderly:

- ★ Find out if there are any organisations involved with helping seniors in your city or region. Talk to them about the issues confronting the elderly. Visit a community centre or a park frequented by the elderly. Ask them about what kinds of issues they face. You may think you know all about what the elderly are facing. But if you spend some time examining the issue, you may be surprised at what you learn.

- ★ Financial concerns are important, of course, but they are not the only aspect to explore. For example, you might choose to focus on what health issues the elderly face. What illnesses are widespread among them, and where can they receive health care? How are they treated at clinics and hospitals? Do economic problems contribute to poor diet and nutrition?

- ★ Relationships between the elderly and their children and grandchildren have changed dramatically in the past decade. Many young people have moved away in search of a better life, leaving their parents behind. In some cases, families have been separated by war or are struggling with disability or death suffered in the upheavals of recent years. Write a story exploring these issues. How have the economic and social changes affected family dynamics?

- ★ Spend a day with one or more elderly people begging on the street and write about it. How do other people react? How do the seniors themselves feel about what they are doing? How much do they collect in a day? How do they intend to spend it? How do they decide which corner or location to select?

- ★ Do the same with an elderly man or woman selling something—chocolate, perfume, whatever—on the street. Explore the economics of the situation. Where do they get

the goods? How much do they have to pay? How much do they earn? What problems do they encounter with the authorities?

★ Profile elderly people doing extraordinary things. Is there a well-known actor in your area who continues to work past retirement age? How about any lawyers, doctors, or other professionals? Find seniors, well-known or not, who have interesting hobbies or unusual skills, or who are engaged in sports or some other form of physical activity. Does pursuing a special interest help them feel young and stay engaged in life?

★ Write an article exploring the issue of “ageism.” The concept, which refers to prejudice or discrimination against older people, has become increasingly recognised in the West as a major problem confronting seniors in many aspects of their lives. Is there a comparable understanding in your region? Do older people face discrimination in, for example, the workplace, or in other areas of their lives?

Case study

This brief article is an example of the media conveying prejudice against the elderly without offering them a chance to respond. The proposal is a blatant effort to generate antagonism toward people over 60 by suggesting that they are incapable of making an appropriate choice about Montenegro's future. This kind of information should not be transmitted without at least an effort being made to contact representatives of pensioners to allow them to explain why they should be granted a full vote like everyone else.

8. a) **Half a vote for the 60+**

Podgorica — Liberal Alliance delegates Vesna Perovic and Labud Sljukic have proposed that people over 60 should only have “half a vote” at a referendum on Montenegro's future. The Podgorica media report today that the LA delegates said that 20 and 60-year-olds cannot carry the same weight in decisions on Montenegro's future.

Danas/Beta, Belgrade, 20 December 2000

What is the rationale for granting 20-year-olds a greater say? Is it just because they have a longer life ahead of them? Should 20-year-olds also have a greater say than 40-year-olds? How about 50-year-olds? Do the proponents of this plan believe that 80-year-olds should have no vote at all?