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Faith Today

Do these women really exist?



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Think for a moment about the female characters on your favorite TV programs.

What images come to mind?

The good-hearted but flighty Diane on "Cheers," who spouts English poetry while serving beers in the neighborhood bar?

Or the sophisticated, designer-dressed Pamela Ewing on "Dallas" whose life seems uncluttered by regular office hours despite her executive position in a high-powered oil company?

Or the dedicated, no-nonsense police detectives Cagney and Lacey who solve crimes with competence and personal dilemmas with compassion?

Are these TV images accurate reflections of women today?

No, say some experts, who hold that film and TV portrayals of women are not keeping pace with women's expanding responsibilities.

What effects will these portrayals have on the way women — and men — look at their lives and relationships?

"On the whole, this is not a good period in television and film for young women to see interesting and complex role models," said Dr. Lynne Waldeland, an associate professor of English at Northern Illinois University.

Too many TV programs and movies treat women solely as objects of desire and violence, said

Ms. Waldeland, who teaches a course on women in film.

Few programs portray women who make choices guided by religious values, achieve professional excellence, successfully balance career and family responsibilities or lead full and satisfying lives.

"According to television, you wouldn't get a nice long list of career options for women," Ms. Waldeland said. On television many women "hold jobs just to pay the rent while most of their activity centers around dating and getting into and out of minor scrapes."

And the responsibilities of women who are full-time homemakers tend to be demeaned on TV, according to some experts. They feel that the talents real homemakers possess and the kinds of decisions they must make rarely come into full view on television.

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Joyce N. Sprafkin, writing in "Television Awareness Training" (Abingdon Press, 1979), said that on television only about 20 percent of roles "having a definite occupational activity are held by

women" even though women make up more than 40 percent of the national labor force.

She said women are cast more often than men in light or comic roles. In those roles they are portrayed as nicer people — "more likely to help and share and cooperate with others."

However, they are "less likely than males to accomplish tasks" and often are portrayed as impulsive and vulnerable.

Stereotyped portrayals of women can have an insidious effect on people's feelings about themselves, Ms. Sprafkin said. "At some level, we judge our own success, happiness and status in comparison to TV characters who are similar to us."

Ms. Waldeland believes the fundamental problem with TV portrayals of women is that they present a limited view of the roles and choices available to women today. "What people see on the screen tends to put certain limits on what they imagine and expect to find in the world," she said.

It is difficult to find female characters who "think of values beyond themselves or who are motivated by something other

than self-interest," Ms. Waldeland added.

She worries especially about the adverse effect such portrayals might have on teen-age and young adult women, "people who are still working on the question of their own identity." Young women are affected greatly by the signs of their culture, of which the media are very powerful and influential components.

"There is this tremendous outpouring of films aimed at teen-agers in which teen-age women are portrayed as objects of desire whose own interests do not go beyond sex, clothes, appearance," she said. "I've often wondered what happens to young women who go to film after film that portrays young women in that way"

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Ms. Waldeland admitted it would be difficult to "calculate the losses" caused by the lack of a variety of positive women's images.

But she said some of her students are not so much upset by the frivolous portrayals of women as by the lack of interesting female characters on the screen.

Women, she said, "are very anxious to see visual and historical signs" of the doors that are open to them in society.

(Ms. Liebhart is media reporter for NC News.)

Options and opportunities for women in society continue to increase, writes Cindy Liebhart. But, she adds, you wouldn't know it by watching television, where stereotyped images of women abound.