

Sexism in advertising

Women continue to be misrepresented in the media, which has negative consequences for the personal and professional development of both women and men. Due to its purpose and pervasiveness, advertising can be especially powerful in conveying messages, both positive and negative. The European Parliament has recognised the importance of combating sexism in advertising, and called on the Commission and the Member States to step up their efforts.

The problem

Media exposure has become an unavoidable fact of life. In order to attract as many people as possible, media messages tend to [emphasise](#) shared values, and provide a simplistic representation of reality. Nowhere is this more the case than in advertising, since adverts are designed to speak to as big an audience as possible in the shortest amount of time. Although it has changed significantly over the years, reflecting developments in society, advertising can still be rife with stereotypes, as can be seen in its representation of women. Until the 1980s, women were mostly presented inside the home and in positions subservient to men. As a response to feminism, this changed slowly in the following decades, and nowadays, although there are still adverts showing women in such roles, the problem has become more complicated. In the typical advert today, feminism has ostensibly won, and women can be and do whatever they want, but the stereotypical female is mostly young, slim, (unrealistically) beautiful and sexually available. Women are often objectified and infantilised, and their sexual appeal is presented as their most important quality.

This is especially problematic because how people behave and how they conceive themselves and others is not only naturally acquired, but also socially constructed. Young boys and girls, learning gender roles, who are exposed to such messages may internalise them as true and natural. In [gender stereotyping](#), certain attributes are ascribed to individuals solely on the basis of their belonging to the social group of women or men. Women may, for example, be perceived as nurturing or weak, and men as decisive and strong. Gender stereotypes have been [recognised](#) as harmful when they 'limit women's or men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives and life plans'. The consequences can be even more pernicious: traditional attitudes, in which women are regarded as subordinate to men or in stereotyped roles, are considered to perpetuate violence against women, contribute to 'the propagation of pornography' and the depiction of women as sexual objects ([CEDAW Recommendation No 19](#)). Gender stereotypes can also lead to [discrimination](#). Continued exposure to these types of messages makes the audience inured to them. [Research](#) has shown, for example, that young men may not perceive sexism in adverts widely seen as sexist. Men are also [much less likely](#) than women to say that there is a problem with the representation of women in media and advertising, and even less likely to say that it needs to be addressed.

A 2016 project of the UK Advertising Standards Authority on gender stereotyping in advertisements [identifies](#) six categories of gender stereotypes: roles (occupations or positions usually associated with a specific gender), characteristics (attributes or behaviours associated with a specific gender), mocking people for not conforming to stereotype (making fun of someone for behaviour or a look which is non-stereotypical), sexualisation (portraying individuals in a highly sexualised manner), objectification (depicting someone in a way that focuses on their body), body image (depicting an unhealthy body image). Such messages can be [conveyed](#) both overtly and covertly, 'through language, body movement, behaviours and gestures'.

EU action

One of the core values of the European Union is equality between women and men. The European Commission's [Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019](#) lists dismantling gender stereotypes, and



promoting non-discriminatory gender roles, as issues to which particular attention will be paid across all of its priority areas. The EU's [Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme](#) co-finances national projects promoting efforts to overcome rigid gender roles and stereotypes. In the media sector, the 2010 [Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#) prohibits discrimination based on sex and prejudicing respect for human dignity. It also endorses self-regulation and co-regulation at state level. The directive currently only applies to television adverts and other audiovisual messages, but an ongoing [revision](#) is likely to extend its scope.

The **European Parliament** has brought attention to this issue, and called for stronger commitment from the Commission and Member States, several times in this parliamentary term. Specifically, it has adopted a [resolution](#) on empowering girls through education (September 2015), where it warns that the work done in schools on combating gender stereotyping is often undermined by the media, and calls on the Member States to provide guidelines to schools to combat sexism in the media and advertising. The April 2016 [resolution](#) on gender equality and empowering women in the digital age calls on the Member States to adopt measures to protect girls from digital advertising which could incite them to behaviour harmful to their physical and mental health. A [resolution](#) from 2013, on eliminating gender stereotypes, warned that the way in which girls are portrayed in the public space also promotes violence against them, with the inclusion of gender stereotyping in advertising shown during children's programmes a particular problem. The resolution also emphasised the importance of including boys in gender mainstreaming, as well as the importance of training for media professionals. It called on the Commission to provide financial support for measures taken in the Member States, and stressed the importance of advertising as an effective tool in challenging and confronting stereotypes.

Best practice

There is broad consensus among international organisations that gender stereotypes are harmful. The media have also been recognised as highly influential in the potential spread of such stereotypes. For example, the 1995 [Beijing Platform for Action](#) of the United Nations (UN) recognises the importance of media in promoting gender equality and combating stereotyped portrayals of women, and urges UN member states to portray women in the media in a non-stereotyped manner. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)) obliges states parties to eliminate prejudices and all other practices that are based on the inequality of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women. The [CEDAW Committee](#) has repeatedly asked states parties to prevent gender stereotypes in the media, including in advertising, and has called for policies that promote positive portrayals of women.

The Council of Europe Recommendation [No R\(2013\)1 on gender equality and media](#) requests avoidance of 'sexist advertising, language and content which could lead to discrimination on ground[s] of sex' and proposes measures in six areas: policy and legislation (the legal framework on media from a gender perspective should be assessed and updated regularly), national indicators (which should be monitored and updated regularly), provision of information and promotion of good practices (the public should be informed of the complaints procedure in relation to media content), accountability channels (all relevant stakeholders should be encouraged to bring their concerns to self-regulatory or other specialised bodies), research and publication (from a gender perspective, including on the impact of media in the shaping of values and interests of women and men), and media literacy and active citizenship (the young, media professionals and other groups should be equipped to assess media content critically). It also draws attention to the fact that women are under-represented in media ownership and in the production of content.

Self-regulation seems to be the most common means of regulating advertising in EU Member States, either through a legislative framework, or without one (for example, Sweden chose [not](#) to legislate because it considered such an approach a threat to freedom of speech). The European Advertising Standards Alliance, which has self-regulatory agencies from 23 EU Member States among its members, has published a series of guidelines for [better self-regulation](#) of advertising. Its code is based on the [Advertising and Marketing Communication Code](#) of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), which is intended primarily as an instrument of self-regulation, but it may be used by courts as a reference within the applicable legislative framework. It states that all marketing communications should be legal, decent, honest and truthful. Particular emphasis is given to social responsibility, under which 'marketing communications should respect human dignity and should not incite or condone any form of discrimination, including that based on gender'.

Some self-regulatory agencies have gone further than this code. For example, the UK Advertising Standards Authority has published a [study](#) on the effect of adverts that feature stereotypical gender roles. Based on the evidence, a tougher approach is needed, and a new standard will be [developed](#).