

Scottish Women's Convention

Response to the Advertising Standards Agency call for Evidence on Gender Stereotyping in Adverts

June 2016

"In recent years, there has been increasing political and public debate on equality issues. The mocking of women and men in non-stereotypical roles, the reinforcement of stereotyped views of gender roles and gender-specific marketing to children, as well as concerns regarding objectification, sexualisation and the presentation of an idealised or unrealistic body image are all issues that have gained considerable public interest.

As a proactive regulator, we want to find out more about these issues and others to ensure they continue to be alive to and in tune with prevailing standards when interpreting and applying the rules. Consequently, we will be examining evidence on gender stereotyping in ads, seeking views from a range of stakeholders and commissioning research into public opinion.

This project will report on whether we are getting it right on gender stereotyping in ads."

Advertising Standards Agency (ASA)
6th June 2016

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) has long been concerned by the perception of women in the media. Women from throughout Scotland have spoken about the unrealistic ways in which women are presented in adverts, being reduced to nothing more than offensive stereotypes which have no place in a modern society. The SWC, therefore, welcomes this ASA call for evidence into gender stereotyping.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to the issues around gender stereotyping in adverts as outlined below.

The reinforcement of stereotyped views of gender roles

The female body and outdated ideas as to women's place in society are exploited by advertising, primarily in order to make money for multinational companies. They sell not just a product, but a lifestyle for consumers.

Adverts in the 1960's and 1970's with slogans such as *'On Christmas morning she'll be happier with a Hoover!'* were commonplace, perpetuating the idea that a woman's place is in a domestic situation. Unfortunately, this notion still continues to be presented. Women are almost always the key focus of adverts for, in particular, cleaning products and household appliances. Similarly, supermarkets perpetuate gender stereotypes with slogans such as *'that's why Mums go to Iceland'*, which suggests that it is the role and responsibility of the women within the household to do the shopping.

There is a direct correlation between this type of advertising and the work that women traditionally undertake. Women continue to be clustered into roles in what is known as the '5c's' – catering, cleaning, caring, cashiering and clerical. These jobs offer low wages and little in the way of training, development and progression. This type of employment is often part-time. It can also raise issues around temporary and zero hours contracts and agency work. These are all insecure forms of employment and tend to be predominant in areas of what is traditionally seen as 'women's work'.

There are also still a number of adverts which depict women as 'nagging' or henpecking', as well as unrealistic representations of the role of a mother.

"Adverts which show women as 'Supermums' are unrealistic. Women with perfect hair and perfect clothes at seven o'clock in the morning, preparing lunch for their families while a full breakfast sits on the kitchen table in an immaculately clean house are not the norm. Most women know that. However we still can't help but put pressure on ourselves worrying if that's what everyone else expects. It's not the kind of image we should be putting out."

As long as this type of promotion is allowed to exist, society will believe it is acceptable to assume that women do and should undertake these roles. Advertising which perpetually promotes negative gender stereotypes is, therefore, undoubtedly a major contributor to gender inequality within society.

Gender-specific marketing to children

Toys aimed at children also demonstrate outdated gender stereotypes. Adverts on television and in the print media almost always show boys playing with, for example, cars, army toys and construction equipment. These are almost always in dark, traditionally 'male' colours, such as blue. Toys such as dolls, cookers and teddy bears are advertised by girls, for girls, and are more often than not pink or purple in colour. This sets out what a woman's expected role will be in society from a young age.

"It's sad that even in this day and age toys are separated by gender. Little children only really start to be aware of and think about their gender and what that means when they're told which aisle they can pick their toys from. Lego is packaged differently for boys and girls. Why does it matter what colour the box is? Even colouring books are often split by gender. What kind of message is this sending out to our children?"

Girls who play with 'boy's toys' and boys who play with 'girls toys' can be subject to name calling and ridicule by their peers. Similarly boys who want to do things that they see in the home but are considered 'girly', like having their nails painted, owning a tea set or playing with dolls, can be subject to homophobic slurs.

"I was on a bus recently and was disgusted to overhear a group of adults laughing at a wee boy who was pushing a wee doll's pram. They were calling him a 'girl' for having such a toy, which implies that there's something wrong with being female. That experience will stay with him and has the potential to shape his life going forward. It's very sad."

Objectification, sexualisation and the presentation of idealised and unrealistic body images

Women's worth is determined by their physical and sexual attractiveness, as well as their ability to attract a man. When that is combined with so many objectifying comments and images of idealised beauty, it can be toxic.

Too many images used in advertising, particularly in print media and on billboards, have a strong focus on the way a woman looks, how she acts and what she wears. There are few which promote positive female role models, concentrating on unrealistic and potentially harmful body images instead of, for example, professional or sporting abilities.

The increased sexualisation of young women is an example of gender inequality which is both a cause and a consequence of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG). Pressure to conform, commercialism and social media are all contributing factors. Many young women have spoken about the difficulties in challenging stereotypical and unrealistic images presented in the media, as well as peer pressure to conform. The increased use of social media perpetuates views of how young women should look and act. It also allows anonymous comments and images to be posted of impressionable and vulnerable people. This is having a detrimental impact on young women.

The media has a huge role to play in the prevention of VAWG. There is continuous use of sexualised images in advertising, which promote women's bodies as nothing more than commodities.

"The media in general presents a really skewed view of sex and sexual relationships."

Many adverts for products aimed specifically at men, such as computer games, magazines and aftershave, objectify women's bodies.

"In some cases women are completely naked. We don't use men's bodies in that way."

The idea that the 'perfect woman' is one who can be dominated by a games console controller; or that the best way to test a deodorant for men is to see whether a picture of a half naked young woman bent over an oven can make him "lose control", are just some of the examples of adverts which have been in the public domain. Companies such as American Apparel consistently use inappropriate, highly sexualised images in order to sell basic items of clothing such as socks and shirts.

“I fail to see why big companies think showing women as nothing more than sexual objects is a sensible way to advertise their products. The sad thing is, this is now so normalised and accepted that people don’t get offended any more – they’re so used to seeing this type of image. Yet women who attempt to breastfeed in public are subject to abuse?”

Images used in advertising are seen to enforce the idea that women have to be constantly performing in order to be valued. For example, an advert for a camera showed two women in their underwear cavorting on a bed. This image had no correlation to the selling of the product.

“More often than not there’s no connection between how products are being advertised and the item which is actually being sold.”

There is a real blurring of lines between adult and child in many images which are used in advertising.

“It’s not just desirable to look like a teenager – some companies are using models as young as 4 to sell products such as makeup.”

Products for young children are also often hyper-sexualised. Dolls aimed at young girls are often disproportionate to what real women look like, with cinched in waists, enlarged breasts, big hair, false eyelashes and painted nails. Even toy horses are sexualised, wearing high heels, fake hair and jewellery. These toys are constantly advertised on television, in newspapers and magazines, aimed specifically at young girls. This has the potential to be extremely damaging, skewing their image of what girls and women should look and act like, as well as creating and promoting unrealistic expectations for boys and men.

“We do not have to be depicted in a picture to be objectified. We are objectified simply by being women in a society where images like this are normal, accepted and widespread.”

Conclusion

The normalisation and subsequent societal acceptance of the hyper-sexualised presentation of women in the media, as well as the reinforcement of stereotyped views of gender roles and gender specific marketing to children, is a contributing factor to deep rooted gender inequality within society. As long as this is allowed to continue and women are allowed to be presented as nothing more than objects within advertising, women and men will never be considered equal. The SWC believe that the ASA has the potential to play an extremely significant role in tackling this issue. There needs to be more emphasis on what women can do, their skills and abilities, and much less of a focus on the way they look, act and dress.

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