

ADDRESSING & PREVENTING SEXIST ADVERTISING

A SNAPSHOT OF
PROMISING PRACTICE

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A Women's Health Victoria Issues Paper
In collaboration with RMIT University



In 2019, WHV commissioned RMIT University to undertake research into promising practice – at a local and international level – for addressing sexist advertising. The research was part of WHV’s Advertising (In) equality project, funded by the Victorian Government

This research summary provides a snapshot of the analysis undertaken by RMIT’s Dr Lauren Gurrieri and Dr Rob Hoffman – *Addressing and preventing sexist advertising: An analysis of local and global promising practice* – which considers how problematic gender portrayals in advertising can be addressed.

ABOUT WOMEN’S HEALTH VICTORIA

Women’s Health Victoria (WHV) is a statewide women’s health promotion, advocacy and support service. We work collaboratively with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence systems, policies and services to be more gender equitable to support better outcomes for women.

As a statewide body, WHV works with the nine regional and two statewide services that make up the Victorian Women’s Health Program. WHV is also a member of Gender Equity Victoria GEN (VIC), the Victorian peak body for gender equity, women’s health and the prevention of violence against women.

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Introduction

Advertising, along with other forms of everyday media, plays a profound role in shaping community attitudes and expectations in relation to gender roles. Research shows that sexist portrayals are common in advertising. Women and girls remain under-represented in advertising portrayals. Advertisers persistently rely on gender stereotypes and increasingly depict women in sexualised or objectifying ways. These portrayals have been found to have serious physical and mental health implications for girls and women. They also negatively influence how women are perceived and are associated with attitudes that cause violence against women. The continued use of these portrayals undermines efforts to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women in Australia.¹ Advertising can also potentially play a transformative role in promoting gender equality through the use of diverse, realistic and respectful gender portrayals.

In 2019, Women's Health Victoria commissioned RMIT University to undertake research into promising practice – at a local and international level – for addressing sexist advertising as part of its *Advertising (In)equality* project, funded by the Victorian Government.²

The analysis undertaken by RMIT's Dr Lauren Gurrieri and Dr Rob Hoffman – Addressing and preventing sexist advertising: An analysis of local and global promising practice – which considers

how problematic gender portrayals in advertising can be addressed. Based on international and Australian evidence, it provides an overview of key interventions for addressing or preventing sexist advertising and their strengths and limitations, illustrated by local and international case studies. These interventions include:

- legislative frameworks implemented by government,
- industry-based self-regulatory systems,
- community education,
- industry initiatives, and
- consumer activism.³

It should be noted that many of the interventions highlighted in the analysis are recent and their impact is yet to be evaluated.

This snapshot provides a summary of the analysis undertaken by RMIT and the identified opportunities for further exploration or action in the Australian context.

The evidence shows that no single intervention can effectively eliminate sexism or gender inequality in advertising. Governments, industry and consumers each play different but critically important roles in promoting change. A whole-of-system approach with mutually reinforcing interventions is required.

1 McKenzie M, Bugden M, Webster A and Barr M (2018), *Advertising (in)equality: the impacts of sexist advertising on women's health and wellbeing*. Women's Health Victoria. Melbourne. (Women's Health Issues Paper 14).

2 For further information on the *Advertising (in)equality* project, see <https://whv.org.au/our-focus/gender-inequity-advertising>

3 Gurrieri L and Hoffman R (2019), *Addressing and preventing sexist advertising: An analysis of local and global promising practice*. RMIT University, Melbourne.

What is sexist advertising?

For the purposes of this analysis, sexist advertising is understood to take a range of forms, including:

- gender-based discrimination and vilification;
- gender roles and stereotypes;
- unrealistic and unhealthy body ideals;
- sexualisation and objectification; and
- representations of violence against women.⁴

How are gender portrayals in advertising currently regulated in Australia?

In Australia, advertising is self-regulated by the advertising industry through the industry peak body, the **Australian Association of National Advertisers** (AANA), who administers a **Code of Ethics** with which advertisers voluntarily comply. The AANA also issues practice notes that guide advertisers on interpretation of the Code. Consumers can make complaints about potential breaches of the Code to **Ad Standards**. This is an industry body that reviews complaints through a community panel, which decides whether the advertisement is consistent with 'prevailing community standards'.

While there is some legislation in place to regulate certain types of advertising (for example, tobacco and alcohol advertising), there is currently no government involvement in the regulation of sexist advertising in Australia.

Who can influence gender portrayals in advertising?

There are a number of 'actors' who can exert influence to transform gender portrayals in advertising. These include:

- **Advertising agencies:** who create advertisements
- **Product owners/brands:** who commission advertisements
- **Media buyers:** who purchase space on media platforms for advertising
- **Media platforms:** who determine where advertisements are displayed – for example, on television or outdoor billboards or in shopping centres
- **Industry regulators:** who issue guidelines and manage complaints about advertising
- **Ad news media:** who promote discussion and development within the advertising industry, including through editorial, events, conferences and awards
- **Governments** at federal, state and local levels: who have a range of different 'levers' for influencing and/or counteracting advertising messages, including legislation, procurement, social marketing and community education
- **Educators:** who provide education in schools and tertiary institutions that can build citizens' media literacy, as well as training the advertising workforce
- **Prevention and gender equity practitioners:** who specialise in promoting gender equity or preventing violence against women, based in women's health, local government and other community organisations
- **Consumers:** who engage with advertising and influence product owners

⁴ Currier L (2019), Conceptualising sexist advertising. Manuscript in preparation.

Legislative models

There are a range of legislative models that can be used to regulate gender portrayals in advertisements. For example, gender portrayals can be regulated by general legislation relating to gender equality and anti-discrimination or by legislation specifically relating to advertising content.

Legislative models can also sanction advertising that does not comply with legislative standards, including through:

- using existing courts of law
- establishing a dedicated government agency to vet and/or monitor advertisements or
- establishing a co-regulatory agreement with industry, where government provides legislative backing for industry-led regulatory arrangements.

Strengths of a legislative model

- It enables government to ensure advertising portrayals are aligned with any broader commitment to action on gender inequality and prevention of social harms
- It sets a clear standard for advertisers and the community about what is acceptable
- Advertisers who breach the law can be penalised (for example, through financial penalties or loss of broadcast license)
- Evidence from other areas of public health (such as tobacco advertising) suggests legislative restrictions on advertising can be effective in changing consumer attitudes and behaviour, which can in turn influence industry behaviour
- A legislative model may offer some capacity to proactively monitor advertisements, rather than only responding to complaints reactively

Limitations of a legislative model

- A disconnection from industry may result in disengagement and lack of initiative
- The power to enact relevant legislation is held at federal level in Australia which limits the capacity for state and local governments to take legislative action
- Government/taxpayers bear a greater proportion of the costs of regulation than under a self-regulatory model
- The right to freedom from discrimination and violence must be balanced against protections for free speech and market competition

Current Australian context

Australia has obligations under international human rights law to eliminate discrimination against women. However, other than general restrictions on gender-based vilification under federal and state anti-discrimination laws, there are no legislative provisions that explicitly regulate gender portrayals in advertising in Australia.

International examples

The [Law for Real Equality between Women and Men 2014](#) (France) aims to address equality between women and men in all its dimensions, including prohibiting discrimination in the field of audio-visual media. The High Authority for Audiovisual Media (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel) monitors public programs and advertisements for their respect for human dignity and the principle of non-discrimination between men and women, with a particular focus on content that objectifies women. It does not vet material prior to broadcast, but can remove offending content after the fact and sanction advertisers. The French system provides strong protections against objectification, but regulation of gender stereotypes remains confined to voluntary codes. The law is also limited to audio-visual broadcast content.

In 2017, the City of Paris introduced municipal prohibitions on billboards with any 'sexist, lesbophobic and/or homophobic stereotypes, as well as degrading, dehumanising and vexatious representations of women and men', with all advertisements screened prior to release by the contractor responsible for managing the billboards. Other cities, including London, Stockholm and Berlin, have proposed or are implementing similar policies on sexist outdoor advertising.

Opportunities in the Australian context

Legislative action to address sexist advertising enables governments to ensure their approach to gender portrayals in advertising aligns with other government initiatives to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women. In order to take legislative action, government(s) will need to recognise the evidence of social, economic and cultural harms arising from sexist advertising, and demonstrate sufficient political will to address them.

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Increasing the level of community awareness of these harms may be required to mobilise support for legislative action and to counter opposition from product owners and advertisers.

Unlike the regulation of other forms of advertising that targets a specific product (such as tobacco or alcohol) or audience (usually children), regulation of gender portrayals in advertising necessarily has a broad scope as it potentially applies to *all* advertisements. However, in supporting an argument for stronger regulation of gender portrayals in advertising, there may be opportunities to draw analogies with the regulation of advertising of products that cause harm (such as tobacco, alcohol and gambling).

At the federal level, **general legislative protections** to restrict sexist advertising could be enacted. This could include the **creation of a statutory body** to monitor compliance, receive complaints and impose sanctions for advertising that breaches the law.

While **proactive monitoring** is unlikely to be feasible for all types of advertising, more targeted approaches warrant further exploration.

For example, proactive monitoring could be implemented for specific forms of advertising (such as billboards, as in the City of Paris, p. 19-20 of RMIT report) or as part of a ‘responsive regulation’ model which takes an escalating approach to non-compliance (for example, pre-vetting ads produced by advertisers or product owners with a history of breaching standards).

At state level, legislation could be enacted to restrict sexist advertising in areas of state responsibility, such as **advertising on vehicles and public transport**. State governments also have a role in advocating for legislative reform at the federal level. For example, in August 2019, the Council of Australian Governments’ Transport and Infrastructure Council agreed a national approach to deal with offensive advertising on vehicles.⁵

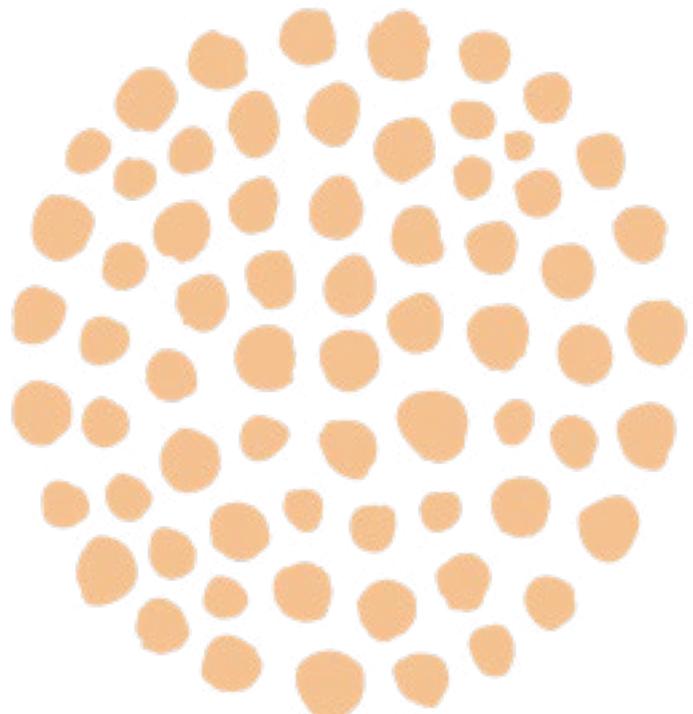
At a local level, sexist advertising could be regulated by **placing restrictions on billboards and other outdoor media**. While local governments in Australia typically only regulate the placement of outdoor billboards, and not their content, local governments could extend their involvement to include pre-vetting the content of outdoor advertising (as in the City of Paris, p.19-20 of RMIT report). Mechanisms for regulating billboards differ across states and local councils.⁶

A further avenue available to governments is to include gender equality criteria when procuring advertising services.

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This approach is also available to product owners.

Incentives for good practice can complement legislative and regulatory approaches and are explored in the *Industry initiatives* section of this snapshot.



5 Council of Australian Governments Transport and Infrastructure Council, *Communique*, 2 August 2019, Adelaide. Available here: <https://www.transportinfrastructurecouncil.gov.au/communique/index.aspx>

6 See <http://www.oma.org.au/regulation-and-community/regulatory-affairs>

Self-regulatory models

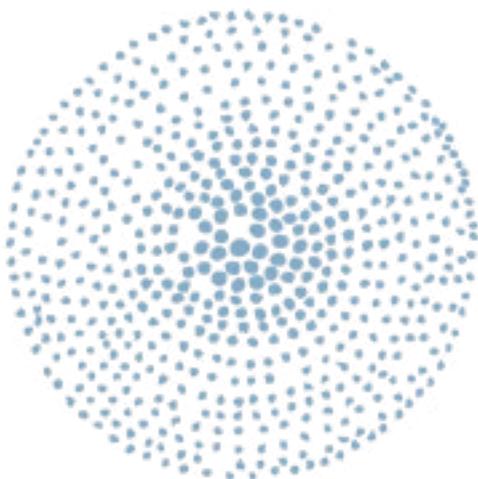
Under a self-regulatory model, advertising is regulated by industry peak bodies, which produce voluntary codes of ethics and practice, and manage processes for handling complaints through industry-run panels or juries.

Strengths of a self-regulatory model

- The advertising industry is integrated into the regulatory process, increasing buy-in and internalisation of industry norms and standards
- Industry is motivated to adhere to codes of practice as a way of both maintaining consumer confidence and avoiding government regulation
- The advertising industry, rather than the taxpayer, bears the costs of regulation
- It protects free expression and market activity

Limitations of a self-regulatory model

- There is an inherent conflict of interest in the advertising industry regulating itself.
- Compliance may be motivated primarily by commercial self-interest rather than the public good.
- There are limited sanctions for non-compliance and a lack of incentives to produce model outcomes.
- Regulation is reactive and complaint-driven. Issues that do not attract public attention tend not to be regulated, even where evidence of harm is established.
- Codes of practice and decisions on complaints are not informed by evidence of harms or linked to broader strategies to address gender inequality.
- Advertisements subject to complaints are considered individually, limiting the regulator's capacity to consider the cumulative impact and normative power of sexist advertising.
- It can create perverse incentives for advertisers who may court publicity by transgressing voluntary codes of practice.



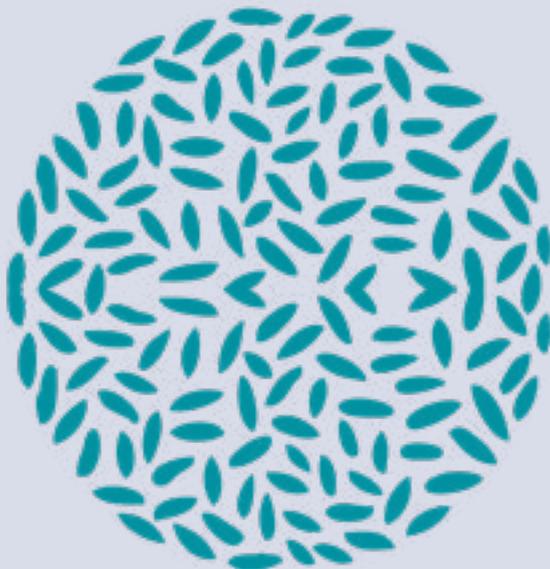
Current Australian context

As outlined on page 3 of this snapshot, and pages 25 to 32 of the RMIT report, advertising in Australia is largely governed through a system of self-regulation managed by the industry peak body, the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA).

Strengths of the Australian self-regulatory system

The current Australian self-regulatory system has some strengths, including:

- There is a significant degree of engagement from industry and general acceptance of norms of behaviour.
- The cost and burden of regulation is borne by industry, not tax payers.
- Broad guidance is provided to advertisers on use of gender stereotypes, discrimination, sexual appeal and violence in advertising.
- There is a degree of transparency in decision-making, with Ad Standards decisions published online.



Limitations of the Australian self-regulatory system

However, it also has significant limitations, for example:

- It is a reactive system that relies on consumer complaints. This means that problematic images may not be addressed, because many in the community are unaware of the harms of sexist portrayals or lack the time or capacity to lodge a complaint.
- Even when complaints are made, there is a considerable lag time before a final determination is made, which means that problematic portrayals have been publicly available for a long time before being addressed.
- There is a high rate of dismissal of complaints by Ad Standards (83% of complaints were dismissed in 2018) – many of which relate to gender portrayals – suggesting a lack of alignment with community concerns.
- There is limited recourse for complainants beyond industry adjudicators.
- Compliance is voluntary and there are no effective sanctions for advertisers who do not comply with determinations.
- There is no systematic mechanism to ensure that industry codes and decisions on complaints are informed by gender equity expertise or by evidence of the harms of sexist advertising.
- Not all advertisers are members of the self-regulatory body and subject to (voluntary compliance with) the Code of Ethics.

Opportunities in the Australian context

Australia's self-regulatory system could be strengthened by more specific rules on gender portrayals, alongside industry education and practice guidance that is based on evidence of the harms of sexist advertising, together with evidence that supports a business case for gender equitable portrayals.

The Code of Ethics and complaints process should both recognise the power of advertising to shape culture, not just reflect it.

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In addition, the introduction of a **gender equity advisory board at the AANA and/or Ad Standards** could build gender awareness and provide expert advice on complaints to assist decision-making.

Public education about the impacts of sexist advertising and available complaints mechanisms – together with simple tools to support consumers to make complaints – may also increase community engagement in advertising regulation.

Greater enforcement capacity and effective sanctions for non-compliance with codes of practice are also required; this could be achieved through a co-regulatory model (see box). Other initiatives to improve industry practice are discussed in the *Industry initiatives* section of this snapshot.

Co-regulatory models

In a co-regulatory model, self-regulation is backed up by legislative requirements. This puts pressure on industry to maintain standards, allows for government to intervene where appropriate, and offers the capacity for punitive action where required, while still retaining many of the benefits of a self-regulatory system.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the statutory communications regulator Ofcom contracts out the regulation of advertising to advertising industry bodies, the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP – responsible for developing codes, similar to Australia's AANA) and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA – responsible for developing codes, similar to Australia's AANA) and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA – responsible for administering the code and adjudicating complaints, similar to Australia's Ad Standards). Advertisers and broadcasters who do not comply with ASA determinations may be referred to Ofcom for further action.

The codes initially focused on sexual objectification, as well as inappropriate sex, sexualisation and nudity. However, following the dismissal of a complaint against a Protein World ad by the ASA – which prompted the City of London to directly ban ads 'which could cause body confidence issues, particularly among young people' – the Minister for Creative Industries suggested Ofcom might 'step in when the market isn't going to drive things in the right direction with self-regulation'. This led the ASA to initiate an inquiry into the impact of gender stereotypes, *Depictions, Perceptions and Harm* (2017), which ultimately resulted in the introduction of a new restriction on 'gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence', including gender roles and unrealistic body image. This restriction came into force in June 2019.

The UK approach illustrates the power of co-regulatory frameworks in ensuring the self-regulatory body is responsive to any disjuncture between its regulations and their interpretation, and broader community standards.

Industry initiatives

Advertising content is shaped by the institutional context within which it is created. Sexist advertising practices may reflect problems in the culture and structure of the industry, such as the under-representation of women in creative and leadership roles in advertising agencies, hyper-masculine workplace norms and cultures, and a lack of focus on ethical issues.

Industry-based initiatives may focus on:

- Increasing the representation of women in creative and leadership positions in the advertising industry
- Promoting a gender equitable workplace culture, including eliminating sexual harassment
- Promoting progressive representations of women and girls in advertising content
- The adoption of ethical positions in advertising work

Industry-based initiatives to improve gender portrayals and workplace practices may involve:

- Formal and informal alliances at international, national or sectoral levels
- Movements of advertising practitioners
- Initiatives launched by individual advertising agencies and practitioners

To work towards these goals, industry initiatives may include:

- Gender-focused education and training for creatives and agencies, including on the social harms and health impacts of sexist advertising
- Inclusion of gender and ethics training in tertiary education for advertising students
- Application of ethical standards in everyday advertising practice, mandated as part of professional compliance
- Implementation of workplace gender equity and inclusion initiatives
- Standards for gender equality against which advertising content and practices can be measured
- Awards for advertisements and advertising practice that promote gender equity, diversity and inclusion
- Government- or industry-led guidelines for gender portrayals to address sexist practices in advertising

Strengths of industry initiatives

- Industry-led initiatives are likely to achieve significant buy-in from industry
- Awards that recognise good practice provide a strong incentive for industry to shift towards more gender equitable advertising practices
- Embedding ethics into everyday advertising practice can address a range of social issues relevant to advertising, not only gender portrayals
- Incorporating gender and ethics training into tertiary curricula has the potential to shape the advertising industry of the future
- Workplace-based initiatives such as gender equity training have been tested across a range of other industries and sectors and are effective in changing attitudes, behaviours and workplace structures

Limitations of industry initiatives

While industry initiatives are promising, evidence of their impact on gender portrayals and equity within the industry is limited due to their recency

- Although social or ethical rationales for changing practices are important, ultimately the industry is motivated by commercial incentives
- Industry may express concerns about ethical standards inhibiting creativity
- Product owners and advertising agencies that promote themselves as ethical and/or equitable are subject to a high level of scrutiny and may attract criticism if their broader corporate practices do not align with their stated principles

Current Australian context

- The number of women and people from other historically under-represented population groups engaged in senior and creative roles within the advertising industry remains low. Voluntary and mandatory initiatives in place for increasing gender equity and inclusion in Australian workplaces include Our Watch's [Workplace Equality & Respect Standards](#) and the reporting requirements of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). These are yet to achieve wide uptake by the advertising industry. The WGEA reporting requirements only apply to advertising businesses with 100 or more employees, therefore a myriad of advertising agencies are not bound by them.
- Australian codes of ethics and practice guidelines exist – for example, the AANA's [Code of Ethics](#) and Practice Notes and government initiatives such as the Victorian Government [Communications Guidelines](#). However, there is limited tailored education and training available for the advertising industry on gender equity, inclusion and ethical practice – either at tertiary level or as part of professional or organisational development. The advertising industry is focused on maintaining compliance with the AANA Code of Ethics, rather than proactively embedding ethical practice. Ad Standards has recently launched a campaign called [*terms and kinder conditions](#) that 'celebrates kinder ads' that exceed the advertising standards.

International and Australian examples

- **Promoting progressive portrayals:** **Unstereotype Alliance**, a collaboration between the UN and the World Federation of Advertisers; **#SeeHer initiative**, developed by the Association of National Advertisers (USA); **#WomenNotObjects** (USA); **Campaign Bechdel** (Australia)
- **Awards:** Cannes Lions industry awards
- **Addressing inequality in industry:** 3% (USA), Creative Equals (UK), Changing the Ratio (Australian communications industry), Times Up Advertising (addressing sexual harassment)
- **Training:** AANA AD|TRAIN free training program
- **Good practice examples:** Billie, Thinx, Target

Opportunities in the Australian context

Strong industry engagement in transforming gender portrayals in advertising is essential to promote change. Acknowledging and harnessing the commercial imperatives that drive the advertising industry is a critical strategy in shifting portrayals. This can be achieved by **highlighting the business case for change**.

Evidence shows that consumers – particularly women – want realistic and respectful portrayals, and there are financial benefits for brands and agencies that recognise this.

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A focused effort on **creating gender equitable and inclusive workplace structures and culture within the advertising industry** is necessary to achieve sustainable improvements in the

portrayals of women and girls in advertising. These could be implemented in Australian agencies as voluntary or mandatory initiatives.

Education and training are needed for industry to increase awareness of the social harms associated with sexist advertising and the business case for progressive gender portrayals.

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Gender and ethics training should be embedded in tertiary curricula for advertising students. For advertising professionals working in the industry, training on ethical practice could be co-designed with experts in gender and participation could be mandated as part of ongoing professional compliance. This could be supported by toolkits, guidelines and other resources (which could draw on existing resources from related fields), as well as mentoring initiatives.

These initiatives could be supported by providing **incentives for good practice, such as accreditation programs and awards**. For example, Australian industry awards could be developed to recognise progressive, equitable and inclusive advertising portrayals in advertising, as well as equitable and inclusive industry/workplace practices.

Recently developed methods for measuring gender portrayals in advertisements, such as the Gender Equality Measure, could be adapted and/or trialled in Australia. **Industry-led good practice standards or guidelines** would set a higher bar for industry to adhere to. There may be a role for peak bodies and training organisations within the advertising industry in establishing and/or promoting initiatives like these to promote change.

Community education

There are two primary mechanisms for educating the community as a means of addressing problematic gender portrayals: social marketing and media literacy education.

Strengths of community education approaches

- Community education can shift attitudes around gender norms, build resilience to harmful portrayals and promote healthy behaviours. In particular:
 - Social marketing can challenge gender stereotypes, promote gender equality and address norms that support violence against women.
 - Media and advertising literacy programs can both protect and empower citizens, particularly children and young adults, by increasing their ability to understand and critically assess media and advertising content.
- Community education can address gaps in the reach and impact of regulatory measures, particularly in relation to online advertising.

Current Australian context

The Australian and Victorian Governments have invested in social marketing campaigns to address the causes of domestic and family violence and challenge gender stereotypes. Recent campaigns include:

- **Stop it at the start** – a national campaign to prevent violence against women, targeting adults and young people (Australian Government)
- **Respect Women: Call it out** – a state-based campaign to encourage bystanders to call out sexist behaviour (Victorian Government)
- **Doing Nothing Does Harm** – a national campaign to empower people to do something when they witness sexism and disrespect towards women (Our Watch)
- **#BecauseWhy** – a national campaign to support parents to challenge gender stereotypes (Our Watch)

- **This Girl Can** – a campaign addressing the barriers to women’s engagement in sport by challenging stereotypes and stigma (licensed by VicHealth from a UK campaign of the same name)

Media literacy education is incorporated into Australian school curricula to a limited extent. It is fragmented across subjects and has a limited focus on issues of sexualisation and stereotyping in media and advertising.

School curricula are complemented by community-based initiatives such as *SeeMe* (Queen Victoria Women’s Centre Trust), which aims to promote positive body image and tackle the impact of media representations.

Media literacy education also has potential to enable citizens to interact with sexist advertising in an informed and critical way. Education is particularly important in online contexts, where regulatory interventions to reduce exposure to sexist advertising may be more challenging to implement.

International examples

MediaSmart (UK): a collaborative project between the UK government and the Advertising Association, focused on media literacy education for children and young people in schools.

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (USA): a research-based organisation working within the media industry to promote the importance of positive gender representation in media

Opportunities in the Australian context

Community education is an important tool to accompany regulatory interventions. Existing social marketing efforts targeting family violence could be complemented with campaigns that focus on shifting gender norms and stereotypes in order to counteract dominant representations of women and girls in the media and advertising.

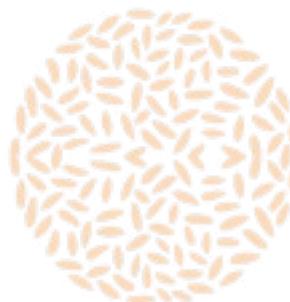
Social marketing campaigns need to be carefully designed to ensure they are effective and do not lead to unintended consequences.

Social marketing campaigns need to be carefully designed to ensure they are effective and do not lead to unintended consequences.

They need to mitigate the risk of resistance or backlash by clearly articulating the health impacts of sexist advertising.

Current media and advertising literacy programs in Australian schools could be expanded to include an explicit focus on sexualisation, body image and gender stereotyping in advertising and the associated social and health impacts. There are also opportunities for better integration of relevant content with Respectful Relationships Education and across the school curriculum.

Further research into the effectiveness of media literacy education, particularly in alleviating the impacts of harmful representations, would strengthen the evidence base.



Consumer activism

Interventions to address sexist advertising can be driven from the bottom-up through collective action on the part of consumers. Consumer-led initiatives have focused on issues such as sexualised and stereotyped representations of women, a lack of diversity in advertising portrayals, and the gendering of products (particularly children's toys).

Consumer-based initiatives include:

- Boycotts of products
- Support and promotion of brands that use progressive portrayals
- Complaints about advertisements made to regulatory bodies
- Targeted lobbying of governments, regulators, brands and other key institutional players
- Awareness-raising, increasingly via social media campaigns
- Building capacity in other contexts or institutions such as schools and families

Strengths of consumer activism

- Consumer activism has proven effective at marshalling public sentiment and exerting pressure on regulators, advertising agencies and product owners
- The internet and social media provide a cost-effective way for activists to mobilise consumer action

Limitations of consumer activism

- Community activists may lack the capacity and resources needed to translate public support into concrete change
- Consumer activism can sometimes attract a hostile reception and pushback from other consumers
- Campaigns that draw further attention to controversy-courting brands can be counter-productive
- Recent research shows that most Australian consumers are not aware of how advertising is regulated and mechanisms for making complaints,⁷ and lack the time and capacity to complain

7 Gurrieri L, McKenzie M and Bugden M, *Community Responses to Gender Portrayals in Advertising: A Research Paper*. Women's Health Victoria, Melbourne. (Women's Health Victoria Issues Paper 15).

Current Australian context

Australian consumer activist campaigns include:

- **Collective Shout** – a grassroots movement that aims to tackle the objectification of women and the sexualisation of girls. The movement offers guidelines and resources for consumers, mounts petitions targeted at regulators and offending brands, and makes regular submissions to Parliamentary Inquiries on topics of concern.
- **Play Unlimited** – aims to eliminate gender segregation of children’s toys by raising awareness of the narrowing impact gendered marketing can have on children’s development.

International examples

- The **Representation Project** (USA) – a non-profit organisation aimed at challenging gender stereotypes in the media. The project has successfully staged social media campaigns to raise community awareness, including #NotBuyingIt, #AskHerMore, and #RepresentHer.

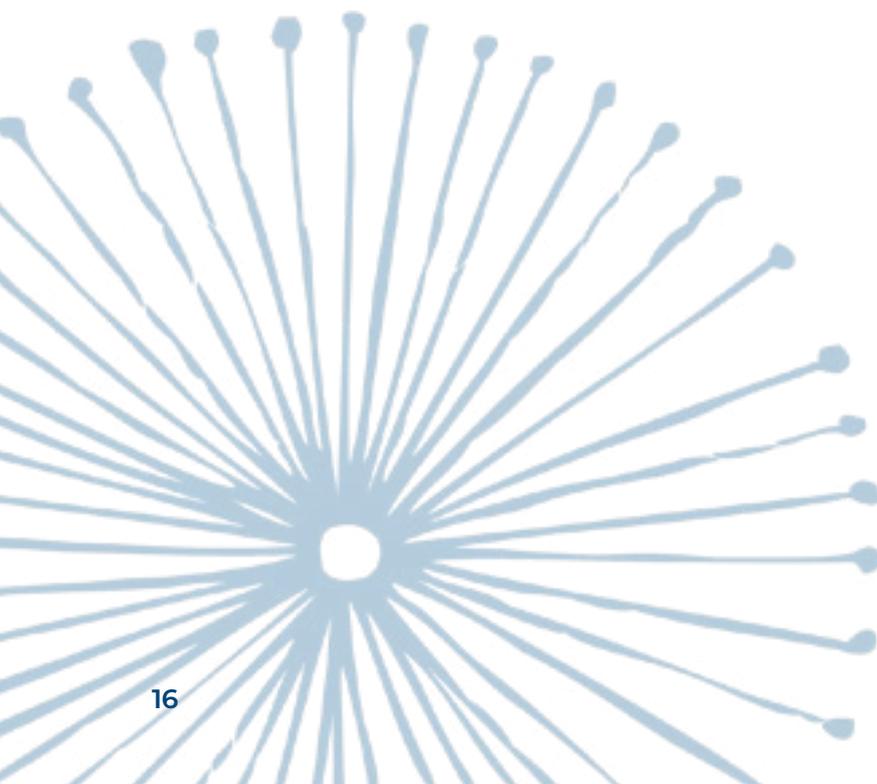
Opportunities in the Australian context

Consumer activists have strong potential to amplify messages about the harms of sexist advertising, including through sharing stories of how sexist ads personally affect them, their children and communities.

Consumers have the capacity to put pressure on advertisers and product owners through boycotts and lobbying that impose an economic cost for inaction. Consumers also have the capacity to demonstrate support for – and deliver economic benefits to – advertisers and product owners who take a more equitable and inclusive approach to advertising.

Consumer engagement and activism can be strengthened by increasing community awareness of the harms of sexist advertising and improving community understandings of advertising regulation and the complaints process.

The rise of the internet and social media offers valuable opportunities to marshal public support for change and influence advertisers and product owners.



Conclusion

A broad range of approaches are available to address sexist advertising and promote progressive gender portrayals. Legislative constraints, self-regulatory arrangements, community education, industry initiatives and consumer activism all offer potential for addressing sexist advertising.

Each of these approaches has strengths and limitations. However, to date, no single approach has been able to address all forms of sexist advertising on all platforms and engage the full range of 'actors' who are able to influence gender portrayals in advertising.

This demonstrates the importance of a 'whole of system' approach to promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women in the advertising setting, involving mutually reinforcing interventions which target different actors using different tools and approaches.



Addressing and preventing sexist advertising: A snapshot of promising practice

Women's Health Victoria Issues Paper No. 16

Written by Mischa Barr and Mandy McKenzie

WHV thanks the following members of the Advertising (in)equality Project Partnership group for their feedback and ongoing support:

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Women's Health Victoria acknowledges and pays our respects to the traditional custodians of the land, the peoples of the Kulin Nation. As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters across Victoria. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 200 years ago and continues today.

Women's Health Victoria acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

