

MEDIA RELEASE

New report calls on advertising industry senior leaders to embrace gender equality and lead by example

MELBOURNE – 17 MAY 2023

The shEqual project led by Women's Health Victoria has today released the *Behind the Ads* report which identifies significant barriers faced by women and other marginalised groups working in the advertising industry, as well as solutions senior leaders can take to greatly improve gender equality outcomes.

[*Behind the Ads: Advertising Professionals' Perspectives on Gender Equality in the Workplace*](#) has uncovered firsthand accounts of how gender inequality plays out in workplaces in the advertising industry, the devastating effects it can have on women's careers and wellbeing – and the risks of speaking out.

Respondents to the survey on which the report is based, spoke of widespread sexism in their workplace cultures, where gendered division of labour and male dominated leadership teams that create, reinforce and protect gender inequality are rife. Overall, less than two in five respondents agreed that the advertising industry prioritises gender equality in advertising content, or as a workplace issue.

Dianne Hill, CEO of Women's Health Victoria, said that considering the conversations taking place around Australia about safety in the workplace, increasing community expectations and significant legislative change following the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect@Work Report – now is the time for senior leaders in the advertising industry to demonstrate their leadership and commit to improving gender equality within their organisations.

“shEqual – Australia's movement for advertising equality – is working with the advertising industry so the ads we see every day are representative, real and empowering, rather than harmful and perpetuating gender stereotypes and norms. Our in-depth analysis, based on industry feedback, demonstrates the underlying culture must also change if advertising equality is to be achieved, as culture and content cannot be separated,” Ms Hill said.

“We are calling on leaders in advertising to embrace this opportunity to promote gender equality in their workplaces, by addressing the five key issues identified in our report.”

The five key issues identified in the *Behind the Ads* report are:

1. **[The need for] A shared understanding of gender equality**
2. **Sexist workplace cultures**
3. **Unequal employment conditions and support**
4. **Sexist advertising content is still being produced**
5. **The unclear role for men in driving change**

The key issues have been identified by researchers from Empirica Research and RMIT University, who have provided further gender-informed analysis of shEqual's survey in *Behind the Ads* of people working in the advertising industry. The original research conducted in 2021 surveyed 598 people across the industry and canvassed awareness and perceptions of gender equality in their workplaces and in the content they commission, create, and distribute.

Lauren Gurrieri, Associate Professor, Marketing, RMIT University and co-author of the report, said "This research highlights the range of gendered inequalities that persist in Australian advertising workplaces, that in turn fuel the problematic gendered portrayals that continue to be produced in advertising content. One issue cannot be addressed without attending to the other. Action is urgently needed to drive change in the industry given advertising's powerful cultural role in shaping gender norms and relations."

Lauren Zappa, Manager Gender Equity and Capacity Building, who oversees the shEqual project at Women's Health Victoria, said respondents gave thought-provoking feedback and insights for employers to consider and act on.

"There's a powerful opportunity here for senior leaders in the industry to listen to the voices and ideas of those employees who are most impacted by gender inequality," Ms Zappa said.

"What was quite striking was the number of people who welcomed the opportunity to take part in the survey considering workplace cultures in the advertising industry make it difficult to speak up about gender inequality.

"Our survey found 46% of female respondents who had hesitated to speak up about gender equality issues in the workplace felt worried about negative consequences from doing so (compared with 17% of male respondents in the same position).

"It is also important to note at Women's Health Victoria we take an intersectional lens approach to feminism and in doing so we acknowledge the barriers to inclusion impact people differently based on their race, class, ability, sexuality, and other characteristics. We all have a role to play in creating a culturally safe environment and a more level playing field.

When it comes to solutions, *Behind the Ads* identifies a range of actions to improve industry-wide engagement with gender equality. These include:

- Implement practical policies that address discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment in the workplace
- Create a transparent procedure for reporting discriminatory or sexist behaviour in the workplace
- Managers, C-suite executives and creative directors make a public commitment to equality
- Provide gender equality training for all employees so everyone can make a commitment to safer workplaces and gender equal ads
- Provide training and resources that gives men confidence to be allies - actively supporting gender equity at work and in life.

Further quotes from survey participants:

"The Australian advertising industry does not place a priority on gender equality in boardrooms, so it cannot prioritise gender equality in advertising content because those people are not in the room making decisions. ...Don't look at the ads, look at the senior leadership teams. That's where the power, influence and control of the narrative sits..." **Female 18-34 years-agency**

"Advertising is a volatile industry - troublemakers get the boot, or worse still get talked about in the industry as "painful." It's scary to speak your mind - safer to stay quiet." **Female 35-54 years-agency**

"The statistics don't lie - especially at the top. When it is men making the decisions, however best intentioned they may ever be, it won't always be the decision that benefits women. The industry somehow went through 'me too' without a single scalp. I have worked in agencies where the leaders (who are still leaders) routinely harass, make comments and even implement hiring policies based on looks. They joke about it, they are predatory and they downright criminal in their conduct. But the industry doesn't hold them to account; the press don't cover it and it is up to the women to raise the

flag; not the men. There are people in charge of agencies who get named champions of change... but go into business with men who are found to be grooming juniors.” **Male 18-34 years-agency/client**

“So many times, I’ve felt too uncomfortable to raise an issue about something a senior member of my department has joked about, and I feel if I don’t ‘laugh along’ I’ll be viewed as a prude and it may impact my role - in the sense of work received but also from a social standpoint.” **Female 25-29 years, agency/client**

Media inquiries - For media inquiries, please contact Colleen O’Sullivan, Senior Communications and Digital Coordinator at Women’s Health Victoria at colleen.osullivan@whv.org.au or 0410 009 600.

Available for interview:

Lauren Zappa, Manager Gender Equity and Capacity Building, Women’s Health Victoria.
Phoebe Sloane, Founder of the Aunties, Senior Copywriter and Clemenger BBDO.

About Women's Health Victoria

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) is a not-for-profit, statewide women's health promotion, advocacy and support service, focused on improving the lives of Victorian women. WHV collaborates with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence and inform health policy and service delivery for women. Our work is informed by a feminist approach to health promotion and the social determinants of health.

For more information, visit whv.org.au

About shEqual

shEqual is an Australian initiative to use the power of advertising to promote gender equality and address the drivers of violence against women. Launched by Women’s Health Victoria in 2020, and working in partnership with Australian advertisers, shEqual’s mission is to raise industry and public awareness, reinforce positive behaviours, and empower people to take action in shaping how women are represented in the stories we tell and consume. In 2020, shEqual published the first national framework to champion gender equality in advertising, Seeing is Believing, shEqual is also guided by Safe and Strong, the Victorian Government’s gender equality strategy. For more information, visit shEqual.com.au

shEqual is supported by the Victorian Government and Respect Victoria.

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