



shEqual

# Female Stereotypes in Advertising

shEqual's guide to identifying and  
challenging female stereotypes in ads

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

shEqual acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands and waters across Victoria and pays our respects to their Elders past and present.

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.

These guidelines were developed with input from shEqual reference group members from:

Respect Victoria  
RMIT University  
Initiative  
The Shannon Company  
Marmalade  
City of Melbourne  
Clemenger Group

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There is a lot of talk about gender stereotypes, and most of us agree they should be avoided. But brands and agencies tell shEqual they still have questions. This 'how to' guide unpacks the what, why, when, and how of gender stereotypes to help brands and agencies push past them and build characters that are authentic and representative of the audiences advertised to.

First, this guide breaks down the seven common female stereotypes seen in ads today: The Model Mother, The Passive Little Girl, The Observed Woman, The Sexualised Woman, The Pretty Face, The Magical Grandmother and The Ticked Box — plus we look at who's missing from ads altogether. We highlight the data that shows how harmful and out of touch stereotypes are. We provide tips to Get Real and Get Equal help you make ads that represent Australian society and promote gender equality.

Next, we answer some frequently asked questions about why advertisers need to be more aware of gender stereotypes and how to actively challenge them in your workplace.

Lastly, we have your reading list. We've compiled a list of resources to support you in starting conversations and creating real change.

Ads show us stereotypes like The Model Mother, who tells us that women are responsible for domestic tasks and nothing else (how uncomplicated!), or The Sexualised Woman who tells us women should be desirable at all times, in public and at home. But consumers want to see more realistic portrayals in ads and, if we look at the stats, these stereotypes don't line up with the world we live in. By using stereotypes, advertisers are trying to tell audiences who they should be — and that can be an unrealistic and harmful picture.

It's time for the advertising industry to get real about the stereotypes being used in ads today, make ads that represent audiences authentically, and pick up the pace to achieve equality.

Let's dive in and look at the seven most common female stereotypes we see in ads today...

### DEFINITION (THE WHAT):

Gender stereotypes are widely held, over-simplified ideas about a group or individual based on gender. They are harmful because they can limit people's personal abilities, professional careers and/or the choices they make about their lives.<sup>1</sup>

### THE IMPACT (THE WHY):

Ads are powerful cultural vehicles so advertisers need to be mindful of how people may or may not see themselves reflected. We still see an overreliance on stereotypes that reinforce a limiting narrative of peoples' roles and value.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/women/wrgs/pages/genderstereotypes.aspx>

## THE MODEL MOTHER

Ads should represent the reality of family dynamics, showing mothers in paid employment, nurturing fathers, rainbow families and single parent homes.

Women are still disproportionately shown as the sole caretakers both of the home and of children. Ads often show women caring, dressing, cooking and cleaning up after children, while mostly showing men engaging with children through playing outside.

To move away from the narrow message of mothers as caretakers and fathers as workers, we need to reflect what Australian families really look like.

Let's check the stats:

- There are more women in the paid workforce today than 10 years ago, and many of those women are mothers who are balancing home and paid employment. Four out of five mothers of school-aged children and two-thirds of mothers of children under five are working in paid employment.<sup>1</sup>
- In 2020, there were 1 million single parent households, making up over 14% of all Australian families.<sup>2</sup>

### Get Real:

- Represent Australian mothers' full lives with simple visual cues, like showing mum dressed in a work uniform or working from home while juggling parenting.
- When showing multiple families in an ad, don't forget that single parent houses make up over 14% of families in Australia and should be represented in your campaigns.

### Get Equal:

- Subvert the narrative of expected gender roles for men and women. Show men as caring, nurturing and playing inside with children, cleaning the home, and cooking and serving meals for the family.
- Broaden the parenting narrative by showing rainbow families, grandparents and extended family, and single parents, in addition to straight nuclear families.

1 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release>

2 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release>



## THE PASSIVE LITTLE GIRL

All children should feel empowered to run, play and learn in any way they wish.

But ads are telling children that boys should engage in active play and girls must be sitting to play. Boys can run around with cars, lightsabers and get outside, but girls are often shown sitting with one another, playing with dolls and home appliances and too often everything is pink!

Toys should accurately represent how children play, regardless of gender. Representation of children's play has the power to shape the way boys and girls grow and learn important skills.

Let's check the stats:

- 68% of girls regularly participate in sports. <sup>1</sup>
- Girls aged 5 to 14 participate in physical play as much or more than boys in the same age groups. <sup>2</sup>
- Toys marketed to boys often require motor development and spatial skills, while toys marketed to girls focus on verbal and social skills, which affects development later in adolescence. <sup>3</sup>

### Get Real:

- Remove the gendering of toys by avoiding gendered colour signals and showing boys and girls playing together in creative ways, both sitting down and running around, with the same toys.

### Get Equal:

- Show girls in active play and show children of all genders playing with all sorts of toys. To subvert stereotypes, show boys engaging with pink toys, dolls and kitchen sets and show girls outside, running, playing with cars, tools and other traditionally 'boys' toys.

1 [https://www.sportaus.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/675562/AusPlay\\_focus\\_Children\\_Participation\\_2.pdf](https://www.sportaus.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/675562/AusPlay_focus_Children_Participation_2.pdf)

2 [https://www.sportaus.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/675562/AusPlay\\_focus\\_Children\\_Participation\\_2.pdf](https://www.sportaus.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/675562/AusPlay_focus_Children_Participation_2.pdf)

3 <https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/advertising-inequality-impacts-sexist-advertising-women%E2%80%99s-health-and>





## THE OBSERVED WOMAN

Women have agency over their lives, and advertising should not position them as people to be observed, gazed at or narrated by men.

The Observed Women often loses her voice to a male narrator or exists for the Male Gaze — made an object for male characters to watch and comment on. This stereotype often intersects with the stereotype of The Sexualised Woman, with the camera acting as the observer as the woman acts seductively for a male audience. This encourages men to view women as objects.

Showing women with agency and authority in ads shows the audience women should be trusted, respected and treated as equals.

Let's check the stats:

- Over 60% of voiceovers in ads are voiced by men. <sup>1</sup>
- Women losing their voice in ads sends the message that a man's voice is more important, trustworthy and respected. Limiting women's independence is a driver of violence against women. <sup>2</sup>

### Get Real:

- Make sure female characters in your ads are given their own voice, through dialogue or narration, that allows them to have their own agency.
- Create backstories for female characters that will help show they have independence with cues from costume and location, and by setting intention with actors and when developing the script.

### Get Equal:

- Challenge who is given the voice of authority in an ad. If the ad is for a product or service that is traditionally considered 'masculine', subvert the stereotype by using a female voice of authority.
- Show women as central to the action in every ad, where the female character is driving the story forwards rather than participating passively in it.

<sup>1</sup> <https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/advertising-inequality-impacts-sexist-advertising-women%E2%80%99s-health-and>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/the-issue/>

## THE SEXUALISED WOMAN

Women should be represented as complex and real and be treated with respect regardless of the way they look.

The sexualisation of women in ads tells us that a woman's value comes only from her sexual appeal or behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics. Women have been sexualised in ads to provoke the Male Gaze and – supposedly – as a form of 'empowerment'. But this sends the message that women's power is linked to their sexual desirability to men.

Ads should show that women can exist, either sexually or not sexually, just for themselves and not for anyone else.

Let's check the stats:

- The sexualisation of women in ads is increasing over time, even in ads for teen and pre-teen girls. This directly affects girls' and women's self-esteem and body dissatisfaction and increases men's perception of women as objects.<sup>1</sup>
- Women make up to 70-80% of household purchase decisions so it makes business sense to appeal to women.<sup>2</sup>

### Get Real:

- Address the male gaze by representing women as they are, rather than a version designed for men. You can do this by interrogating your character's choices – is the character doing this for herself or for someone else?
- If you're unsure if a woman's role, pose or gesture in an ad is sexualising her, ask yourself why a woman has been chosen for this role and if it would still fit if a man was in that role. If a man wouldn't fit in that role, ask if that is because she is being sexualised and we are too used to seeing this.

### Get Equal:

- The best way to ensure your ads are more diverse is by diversifying your workplace first. Prioritise involving women at every stage of production.

## THE MALE GAZE:

The Male Gaze refers to the common practice where women in the media are viewed through the eyes of a heterosexual man and are represented as passive objects of male desire. In advertising, this can be seen in ads for women's underwear, shampoo and activewear, among others, where a product designed for women is marketed towards men through the use of sexualised imagery that objectifies and sets unrealistic beauty standards for women.



<sup>1</sup> <https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/advertising-inequality-impacts-sexist-advertising-women%E2%80%99s-health-and>

<sup>2</sup> <https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/advertising-inequality-impacts-sexist-advertising-women%E2%80%99s-health-and>

## THE PRETTY FACE

Women deserve to be seen and valued by society as smart, independent and equal.

Women are more educated than ever, but some ads still show women as nothing more than a pretty face. While this can present subtly in some campaigns, it still sends the message that women are less intelligent than men and not capable of deep or intellectual thought.

Representing women as skilled, accomplished and intelligent shows us that women are equals in the world.

Let's check the stats:

- The majority of Australian universities have more women than men enrolled every year, with some universities having up to 70% female students. <sup>1</sup>
- Men are 62% more likely to be shown as intelligent and authoritative characters in ads (for example, playing the role of a doctor or scientist) <sup>2</sup>
- Young women are more likely to feel valued for their appearance than their brains. <sup>3</sup>

### Get Real:

- Utilise the wardrobe, props and setting in addition to dialogue to represent the character's backstory. For example, use costume and props like books and magazines to show that a female character is also a doctor, scientist or business owner.

### Get Equal:

- Put women in positions of authority in your ads by making them narrators and sources of information for products and services that require a trusted voice, or make them active by showing them fixing things or making decisions about finance.

1 <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/insights/gender-enrolment-trends-flarkins>

2 <https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/advertising-inequality-impacts-sexist-advertising-women%E2%80%99s-health-and>

3 <https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/advertising-inequality-impacts-sexist-advertising-women%E2%80%99s-health-and>





## THE MAGICAL GRANDMOTHER

Older women are active and influential in society and should be represented that way in ads.

Women aged 55 and over are notably missing from advertising, and when they do appear they are shown as the magical grandmotherly figure, most often in the kitchen, serving food at Christmas or smiling and supporting younger characters. They are always perfectly presented and rarely given lines.

Older women are optimistic, active and participate fully in society and should be represented this way in ads.

Let's check the stats:

- Research shows that women aged 55-64 are happier, more body-confident, more financially secure and less constrained by social expectations than younger groups. <sup>1</sup>
- People aged 55-64 make up 12% of the population (over 3 million people) <sup>2</sup> while those aged 65 or over make up 16% of the population (4 million people). 13% of people aged over 65 are still in the workforce. <sup>3</sup>
- The household spending of people aged 55-64 outstrips the spending of people aged 24-35 and is rapidly increasing. <sup>4</sup>

### Get Real:

- Show women of all ages participating in a range of different activity without being inhibited by their age.
- Target older women in your advertising. Advertising to older women makes good business sense because they are responsible for a higher proportion of household spending.

### Get Equal:

- Portray older women in every role, as mothers, shopping, playing sport, and as leaders. Ask yourself if an older woman can play your character without changing the story or action.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nineforbrands.com.au/advertise/research/blindspot/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nineforbrands.com.au/advertise/research/blindspot/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.webalive.com.au/marketing-to-seniors/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nineforbrands.com.au/advertise/research/blindspot/>





## THE TICKED BOX

Women of all races, ages and abilities should be portrayed as main characters (with lines!) across advertising campaigns.

But white, able bodied, and straight characters still dominate stories. When characters are included for diversity, they are often put in the background, with no substance, backstory or even lines. Portraying women from a mix of backgrounds, with a range of ethnicities, sexualities, ages and abilities, can bring new voices and vision to your work. Depict trans, gender diverse and non-binary characters too. These characters need to be treated with the same respect, authority and attention as characters who are white, straight, cis and able-bodied.

Always maintain that diversity is not a box to be ticked but a way to represent the world as it is and connect with your audience in an authentic way.

Let's check the stats:

- One in four of Australia's nearly 26 million people were born overseas; 46 per cent have at least one parent who was born overseas; and nearly one in five Australians speak a language other than English at home. <sup>1</sup>
- A recent survey showed 18 per cent of Australians had experienced discrimination because of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. <sup>2</sup>

### Get Real:

- Create casting guidelines for your organisation to make sure diversity is a priority and include multiple women from different backgrounds in your ads where possible.

### Get Equal:

- Cast women in roles that are traditionally given to men to challenge traditional ideas of masculine activities.
- Make the main characters in your ads people from marginalised identities, making sure they are given dialogue and narration roles that promote respect and authority.

<sup>1</sup> <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-cultural-diversity>

<sup>2</sup> <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-cultural-diversity>

# THE MISSING WOMEN

Everyone deserves to see themselves represented.

The missing women aren't strictly a stereotype – because they don't exist in ads in the first place. There are many women who rarely or never appear in ads: women with disabilities, in larger bodies, LGBTQI+ women, trans women, gender diverse people, older women, women of colour – particularly First Nations women. When these women are given space in advertising, they are often used for inspiration, to invoke pity or as a joke.

Moving away from stereotypes in ads is about creating a more representative picture of Australians today. But that can't be achieved when so many people are ignored.<sup>1</sup>

Including women who have been forgotten by advertising shows that the brand is listening to consumers while working towards representing an Australia where all people are respected and equal.

Stats:

- Over 3% of Australians identify as being Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both, but First Nations people are usually only shown in ads that are marketing directly to them.<sup>2</sup>
- 18% of people in Australia identify as having a disability but they are not proportionately represented in ads.<sup>3</sup>
- Seeing images of body diversity has an immediate impact on how people feel about themselves and makes them less critical of their bodies.<sup>4</sup>

## Get Real:

- Australians want to see themselves in advertising. If ads are going to be relatable, then they need to include the missing women... and not just to tick the diversity box.

## Get Equal:

- Follow the tips in this guide to push past female stereotypes and see if the missing women start to appear as characters in your ads.

1 <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/fashion/people-will-look-at-these-photos-and-say-wow-i-can-see-myself-20190530-p51st2.html>

2 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release#:~:text=Among%20the%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres,and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20origin.>

3 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability/prevalence-of-disability>

4 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13548506.2020.1734219>



# FAQS TO HELP PUSH PAST THE STEREOTYPES

## WHY SHOULD ADVERTISERS BE MORE AWARE OF STEREOTYPES?

What we want to see in advertising is a shift from using stereotypes to building characters.

With only 15-60 seconds to convey a message, stereotypes have become an easy and fast way to distil a group of people into something widely recognised. Because stereotypes are so deeply ingrained in our social narrative, advertisers often assume that using stereotypes is a normal and accepted way to convey their message or show consumers who the audience is.

While we may not immediately identify something as a stereotype, it might still be pushing a harmful and reductive message about the role of women and fail to engage consumers who don't see themselves represented by the brand.

Everyone in the advertising industry has a role to play – we all need to look honestly at who our audience is and represent them authentically, and find new and creative ways to tell stories about women.

## HOW CAN I CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES IN THE WORK I COMMISSION/MAKE?

First, it's important to acknowledge and challenge our own unconscious bias. Unconscious bias exists in us all so it's important to keep asking questions. Be critical of both the ads you are involved in making and the ads you watch as a consumer and ask, 'is this really what the lives of women are like?'

The best place to start when making change at work is to make sure gender equality is part of the conversation. You could share this resource with your co-workers, bring up recent campaigns you've seen or worked on and discuss whether subtle stereotypes were present, or suggest taking a training session together to expand your team's creativity when it comes to gender equality.

## WHAT IF THERE IS RESISTANCE IN MY WORKPLACE?

Resistance can come in many different forms, from "we don't have time to think about that" to "this isn't important". There may be resistance, but there will also be allies. Find colleagues that support you and strategise ways for pushing past the resistance.

Depending on the type of resistance you face, there are some resources you can use to help counter and reduce backlash.

**VicHealth (En)countering resistance: strategies to respond to opposition to gender equality initiatives**  
<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/PVAW/Encountering-Resistance-Gender-Equality.pdf>

**Our Watch Workplace Equality and Respect: practice guidance - dealing with backlash**  
<https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au/resource/practice-guidance-dealing-with-backlash/>

## WHAT DOES THE AANA CODE OF ETHICS SAY ABOUT GENDER STEREOTYPES?

The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics provides guidance about the harms associated with gender stereotypes and the types of representations that should be avoided.

Specifically, they advise against the use of gender stereotypes that depict a person badly because of their gender. The examples they use are “a woman with the sole responsibility for cleaning; an advertisement that suggests a specific activity is inappropriate for boys because it is stereotypically associated with girls, or vice versa; or a man trying and failing to undertake household tasks.”

For more information about the 2021 updates to the gender stereotype guidelines, see: [https://aana.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AANA\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics\\_PracticeNote\\_Effective\\_February\\_2021.pdf](https://aana.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AANA_Code_of_Ethics_PracticeNote_Effective_February_2021.pdf)

The Code of Ethics represents the minimum standard for ads, but why stop there? Let's move beyond the bare minimum towards more equal and representative practice across the industry.

### RESOURCES WE RECOMMEND:

Current findings about stereotypes in the advertising industry, including data about the increased reliance on stereotypes in ads during COVID:

<https://www.unstereotypealliance.org/en/resources/research-and-tools/unstereotype-metric-2020-findings>

'Beyond Gender – The Invisible Stereotypes' breaks down those characters missing from advertising: <https://www.unstereotypealliance.org/en/stories/beyond-gender—the-invisible-stereotypes-report>

shEqual's Communications and Marketing Guidelines for Local Government provides six principles and practical tips for achieving gender equality in your marketing:

[https://shequal.com.au/app/uploads/2021/09/671WHVA\\_shEqual\\_Guidelines\\_v1.pdf](https://shequal.com.au/app/uploads/2021/09/671WHVA_shEqual_Guidelines_v1.pdf)

Tips for every stage of production of an ad or campaign and how to incorporate inclusive practices across the workplace: <https://all-in.withgoogle.com/>

Gender Stereotypes and Masculinity: <https://theconversation.com/gillette-has-it-right-advertisers-cant-just-celebrate-masculinity-and-ignore-the-metoo-movement-110034>

Inclusion of people with disabilities in ads and ad agencies: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gusalexiou/2021/07/26/advertising-industry-must-overcome-its-anxiety-around-disability-representation/?sh=10b36a807c32>

shEqual provides gender equity training designed specifically for the advertising industry. To further support your work challenging gender stereotypes visit: <https://shequal.com.au/get-involved/>