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Executive Summary

A Review of Advertising in the Caribbean and Its Links to Gender Equality, Gender Norms, and Violence Against Women and Girls



Spotlight Initiative
To eliminate violence against women and girls

An initiative of the United Nations funded by the European Union



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Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media
If she can see it, she can be it.™

Advertising has a pervasive influence on societies. Children and adolescents are exposed to a barrage of advertisements through television and other digital platforms. This exposure has surged in recent years, as digital technologies have become increasingly integrated into the daily lives of children, adolescents, and their caregivers. Advertisements promote certain messages, which may shape viewers' perceptions of what society is or could be – including what behaviors and roles are considered appropriate for women, girls, men, and boys.

Indeed, evidence suggests that advertisements and marketing materials may significantly influence gender socialization processes. As outlined in a recent UNICEF- and U.N. Women-commissioned evidence review concerning the media's influence on gender norms and violence against girls, **gender socialization** refers to the processes by which individuals learn and internalize **gender norms**: “informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender.”¹ This process is especially influential during adolescence – an important transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, when gender norms are either solidified, rejected, or transformed. Gender norms are closely related to **gender stereotypes**: “generalizations about groups of people as gendered subjects.”² For example, many societies believe that a woman's “appropriate” role is to be primarily responsible for her household's domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for the family. This norm consequently informs stereotypes that “all women” enjoy performing these tasks.

Programmatic and scholarly research show that discriminatory norms are a key driver of violence against women and girls (VAWG). The goal of upholding local norms may be used to justify acts of violence. For example, evidence from India shows that when women's greater access to employment and financial resources challenges household power dynamics and expectations of men and women's “appropriate” roles, women may experience greater risks of GBV.³ Discriminatory gender norms also normalize acts of VAWG: Research from diverse global contexts suggests that media reporting of VAWG that reflects discriminatory gender norms contributes to victim blaming and the cultural normalization of violence, which consequently justifies inadequate state responses.^{4,5}

To promote gender norms more aligned with human rights, evidence suggests that interventions targeting multiple agents and institutional sites of gender socialization are needed.⁶ Yet policymakers and practitioners often overlook advertising as a key site of gender socialization and an entry point for changing harmful gender norms. Greater knowledge around advertising and its influence on stereotypes, norms, and gender socialization – particularly among children and adolescent viewers – can help inform future interventions to dismantle these critical barriers to gender equality.

This research from UNICEF and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, with the support of the Spotlight Initiative Caribbean Regional Programme, attempts to address some of these data gaps by investigating the forms and prevalence of gendered messaging in advertising content across the Caribbean. More specifically, this report presents the findings of a systematic content analysis of gender representation in 600 advertisements from television and digital media in four countries (Barbados, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago) that aired between 2019 and 2021.

This analysis identifies how women, girls, men, boys, and gender-diverse individuals are portrayed in this sampling of advertisements, and it explores how these depictions might reinforce or challenge harmful gender norms. In doing so, the results also surface a number of potential drivers and risk factors

associated with VAWG. In addition to providing valuable baseline data for monitoring progress and accountability toward gender representation in advertising, the evidence generated from this study also informs a series of concrete recommendations for how advertising agencies, policymakers, and other international bodies can better promote positive messages that advance the rights of all children.

Key Findings

The study's findings indicate that **harmful gendered norms and stereotypes are present in advertising in the Caribbean**. However, inequities were often subtle. Women and men appeared in advertisements at similar rates overall – but the ways in which they were portrayed were often distinct and illustrative of discriminatory gender norms and a patriarchal system that privileges masculinity over femininity.

1. First, the reviewed advertisements reinforced imagery that casts **women as caregivers but also as objects of sexual desire**. For example, women were more likely than men to be depicted with family or as having dependent children (10.6% compared with 7.7%), to be portrayed in domestic spaces (22.9% compared with 17.7%), and to be performing domestic tasks (3.3% compared with 1.8%). At the same time, women were portrayed in revealing clothing seven times as often as men (9.1% compared with 1.4%).
2. On the other hand, **men were portrayed as powerful providers and leaders**. Overall, men were more likely than women to be shown having a professional, paid occupation (32.2% compared with 22.5%) and actively at work (26.1% compared with 18.3%). Men were also more likely than women to be represented across almost all of the reviewed occupations, with this difference being statistically significant for service, retail, and blue-collar jobs (11.1% compared with 6.5%) and jobs in military or law enforcement (0.4% compared with 0.1%).
3. Furthermore, this analysis also finds that **advertisements in the Caribbean failed to capture the region's diversity, widely excluding nondominant groups**. Characters portrayed in the reviewed advertisements were largely heterosexual, young, thin, non-disabled, and middle-class. There was a near-total absence of LGBTQIA+ individuals (less than 1% of all analyzed characters), people living with disabilities (less than 1%), and older adults (less than 9% were estimated to be ages 50 or older). Very few characters were portrayed as working-class (3.2%) or having large bodies (6.1%).

Therefore, although there were very few instances of outright violence or harm from individual characters in the reviewed advertisements, the subtle ways in which they depicted and therefore reinforced traditional gender roles may also suggest that it is “appropriate” and “normal” to punish those who violate these norms – including through acts of VAWG.

This report also identified a few promising trends and practices. There was no statistically significant difference between the percentage of men and women portrayed in parenting contexts. There were also no statistically significant differences for behaviors related to decision making, leadership, or socializing. Furthermore, several reviewed advertisements illustrated positive norms, including men engaged in domestic tasks, couples treating one another as equals, and characters with greater diversity in terms of age, race/ethnicity, and body size.

Recommendations

Evidence indicates that gender stereotypes can have harmful social impacts, such as promoting values and behaviors that are associated with VAWG. As such, this study's finding on the prevalence of gender stereotypes in advertisements across the Caribbean is highly concerning, particularly given the severely high rates and normalization of VAWG in the region. In order to challenge these norms and promote positive content that advances the rights of women and girls, this report recommends the following actions by key stakeholders.

Recommendations for agencies and advertisers

- ♦ Develop content that promotes positive messages for children and adolescents, advances human rights, and challenges harmful stereotypes and normalized beliefs around VAWG.
- ♦ Mainstream gender- and age-sensitive advertising practices, including through raising awareness and building capacity for education.
- ♦ Strengthen content-quality testing and evaluation mechanisms.
- ♦ Develop partnerships and collaborations with gender equality organizations.

Recommendations for policymakers and international organizations

- ♦ Expand opportunities for adolescents to participate in their communities and in the processes that affect them.
- ♦ Work with youth organizations to change social norms that stand in their way, and develop platforms for them to share their experiences and propose solutions
- ♦ Partner with CSOs and private-sector allies to develop a set of regional and/or country-specific standards of practice on gender- and age-sensitive advertising.
- ♦ Engage in advocacy with local advertising-standards associations to create or strengthen statutory guidelines.
- ♦ Collaborate with women's organizations and CSOs to develop locally appropriate strategies and campaigns to incentivize uptake and implementation of relevant standards.
- ♦ Invest in local and global advocacy to raise awareness around the linkages between advertisements, gender socialization, discriminatory gender norms, and gender inequality (including VAWG).
- ♦ Invest in research and building the evidence base, including around the nexus between advertisements (and other media formats), gender socialization, discriminatory gender norms, and gender inequality (including VAWG).

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