



# REPRESENTATION REVOLUTION TOOLKIT

## FOCUS ON ADVERTISING

### RESEARCH BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVERTISERS

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 behavior on the basis of gender."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5,6</sup>

To promote positive gender norms more aligned with human rights, evidence suggests that interventions targeting multiple agents and institutional sites of gender socialization are needed.<sup>7</sup> 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 attempts to address some of these data gaps by investigating the forms and prevalence of gendered messaging in advertising content in Mexico. Specifically, the study includes a systematic content analysis of gender representation in 400

advertisements from television and digital media that aired in Mexico in 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, including those associated with the perpetration and normalization of 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 Mexico. However, inequities are often subtle. Women and men appear in advertisements at similar rates overall – but their portrayals are often distinct and illustrative of discriminatory gender norms and a patriarchal system that privileges masculinity over femininity.

- 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 portrayed in the home (38.1% compared with 30.7%), parenting (5% compared with 1.9%) and performing domestic tasks (7.6% compared with 3.4%). At the same time, women were more likely than men to be shown in revealing clothes (4.6% compared with 2.1%). Although a smaller portion of children were depicted with revealing clothing, it is notable that 0.5% of girls and young women were identified as such, while no boys or young men were.
- On the other hand, men were portrayed as workers and “breadwinners.” Specifically, men were more than twice as likely as women to be portrayed in advertisements as having paid employment (31% compared with 14.2%), to be shown working in paid employment (26.2% compared with 11.6%), and to be depicted in an office setting (10.5% compared with 5.5%).
- Furthermore, this analysis also finds that advertisements in Mexico failed to capture the country's diversity and widely excluded nondominant groups. Indeed, less than 4% of those portrayed were estimated to be ages 60 and older, less than 2% were identified as LGBTQIA+, less than 1% were identified as having a nonbinary gender identity, less than 2% had large body types, and less than 1% appeared to have any disabilities. Additionally, very few characters had darker skin tones.

Therefore, although the reviewed advertisements depicted very few instances of outright violence or harm being done by individual characters, the subtle ways in which they depict and therefore reinforce 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 were very few instances of interpersonal harm, and the gender difference between being shown at school or studying was not significant. Furthermore, several reviewed advertisements illustrated positive norms, including men engaged in domestic and caregiving tasks as well as the inclusion of characters with disabilities.

## Recommendations for Agencies and Advertisers:

- **Develop content that promotes positive messages, advances human rights, and challenges harmful stereotypes and normalized beliefs around VAWG.**
  - Build alternative and positive depictions of masculinities by portraying men and boys in more diverse ways so as not to reduce their worth to harmful and simplistic stereotypes.
  - Include messaging that encourages children and adults to talk about and display a range of emotions, especially for boys and men.
  - Refrain from messages that pressure women and girls to lose weight or achieve beauty standards.
  - Include women and men at work in a variety of roles and settings (e.g., women in the workplace portrayed in leadership roles, and men in the household portrayed in caregiving roles).
  - When portraying household settings, reflect the reality of diverse family units, including multigenerational households, single-mother- or single-father-led families, and other situations outside of the nuclear family.
  - Include a greater diversity of characters, considering characteristics such as race, class, disability, body size, gender, and sexual orientation.
  - Do not include content that promotes any kind of violence (including gender-based and sexual violence, corporal punishment, or other forms of symbolic or psychological violence).
- **Mainstream gender- and age-sensitive advertising practices, including through raising awareness and building capacities for education.**
  - Audit in-house creative content practices, using tools such as [UNICEF's Playbook: Promoting Diversity & Inclusion in Advertising](#).
  - Regularly train staff (especially senior management, advertising production, and creative teams) on unconscious bias, including how our identities impact content development and marketing choices in a way that promotes or challenges harmful gender norms.
  - Make clear and specific commitments throughout the marketing value chain, using functioning accountability mechanisms, to combat harmful stereotypes in content and product design.
  - Develop long-term strategic plan and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in marketing and advertising.
  - Create internal strategies or checklists to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in content development and marketing, so that checking for harmful stereotypes becomes part of the creation process (including the revision of existing content).
  - Develop new ways of engaging consumers to position brands in the nontraditional narrative, by being gender-focused, promoting empowered women, adolescents, and girls, and promoting new and nontoxic masculinities for men, adolescents, and boys.

- o Hire diverse teams of writers, producers, and artists who can bring new perspectives and experiences to the production process.
- Strengthen content-quality testing and evaluation mechanisms.
  - o Leverage tools like the [Unstereotype Metric](#) to create and track advertising content that is free of gender stereotypes, and to push for progressive portrayals of all people.
  - o Test advertising scripts and copy for bias among a diverse audience.
  - o Conduct impact assessments with diverse child stakeholders to understand how marketing can impact their perceptions of themselves and others.
- **Develop partnerships and collaborations with gender-equality organizations.**
  - o Partner with gender-equality organizations and women-led media groups to identify appropriate ways to use marketing and advertising channels to promote messages that combat violence against women and children.
  - o Collaborate with marginalized groups and the organizations that represent them to ensure that their perspectives are reflected while creating advocacy and training materials.

## Recommendations for Policy Makers 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).

## Relevant Guidelines and Resources:

[UNICEF, Promoting diversity and inclusion in advertising: A UNICEF playbook, 2021.](#)

[UNICEF, U.N. Women Promoting Positive Gender Roles in Marketing and Advertising in the Context of COVID-19: Key Considerations for Business, 2020.](#)

[UNICEF and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media: Case Study: Gender Bias & Inclusion in Advertising in India, 2021.](#)

[Unstereotype Alliance, U.N. Women Beyond Gender: The impact of intersectionality in advertising, 2018.](#)

[Unstereotype Alliance, U.N. Women Beyond Gender 2: The impact of intersectionality in advertising, 2021.](#)

[The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, If He Can See It Will He Be It: Representations of masculinity in boys' television, 2020.](#)

1. Marcus, Rachel and Harper, Caroline. (2015). Social norms, gender norms and adolescent girls: a brief guide. Overseas Development Institute. Page 4.
2. Fuentes, Lorena; Saxena, Abha; and Bitterly, Jennifer (2022). Evidence Review: Mapping the Nexus Between Media Reporting of Violence Against Girls. U.N. Women and UNICEF. Page 11.
3. The United Nations defines violence against women [and girls] as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”
4. Amaral, S., Bandyopadhyay, S., & Sensarma, R. (2015). Employment Programmes for the Poor and Female Empowerment: The Effect of NREGS on Gender-based Violence in India. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, 27(2), 199–218.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0260107915582295>
5. Ladysmith. (2021). Policy Brief No. 1: Femicide and the Media: Do reporting practices normalize gender-based violence?  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ox6TzMAMgUEdm5C2pNr3\\_kQUbSCu345r/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ox6TzMAMgUEdm5C2pNr3_kQUbSCu345r/view)
6. Fuentes, Lorena. (2020). “The Garbage of Society”: Disposable Women and the Socio-Spatial Scripts of Femicide in Guatemala. *Antipode*.
7. Cookson, Tara Patricia; Fuentes, Lorena; Saxena, Abha Shri; Jha, Shreyasi. (2020). Programmatic norms change to eliminate violence against children: Insights for practitioners and researchers from a UNICEF global mapping study. *Global Public Health*.