



Submission to the Inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising

1. 2020women welcomes the opportunity to provide comments for the Inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising. 2020women was founded in August 2009 to celebrate the choices and aspirations of Australian women, to improve the role and value of women in Australian society, to foster goodwill and understanding amongst women, irrespective of age, race, colour or religion and to collect and present the views of women on issues affecting them.
2. We do this through practical means that include conducting surveys, giving women the opportunity to voice their opinions. We also play a role in advocacy on issues affecting Australian women and provide comment on the impact of government policies. For example, we have commented or made submissions on:
 - 2.1. *The review of women's health policy for Australia*
 - 2.2. *The review of the EOWW Act*
 - 2.3. *The review on the reform of Australian government administration (the Moran Review)*
 - 2.4. *The Australian NGO Beijing +15 Review*
3. 2020women is a politically independent feminist organisation working in partnership with other women's organisations. This submission has been endorsed by the following women's organisations:
 - 3.1. WEL Australia;
 - 3.2. Australian Centre for Leadership for Women;
 - 3.3. Australian Federation of Graduate Women;
 - 3.4. Australian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Alliance; and
 - 3.5. National Council of Single Mothers and their Children.
4. We are pleased to be given the opportunity to provide comments to this Inquiry. The progress for equality for Australian women is disappointingly slow, and 2020women believes that adverse stereotypes of women used in media and advertising is one of the main reasons for this.
5. It is our view that there have been decades of adverse reaction from women and women's groups about the inappropriate portrayal of women in the media, but this long-standing community dissatisfaction has been ignored and advertisers have continued to present the same old stereotypes in a highly unimaginative manner.

- 5.1. Advertising relies on the use of stereotypes to provide audiences a common understanding of a person or group of people, but the groups being stereotyped in advertising have had little say about the way they are represented.
6. Typical advertising stereotypes of women have had an adverse impact on the development of attitudes and expectations of women by men, women and children. This is borne out by recent data¹ showing that despite the fact that Australia ranks very highly for women's educational achievements, we rank at a low level for women's participation in the workforce and for the representation of women in Parliament.
7. It is also well recognised that women's earnings continue to fall well below men's earnings and the gap has widened over the last three years. Women chair only four of the Boards in the ASX200; they hold only 8.3% of Board Directorships; hold only four Chief Executive Officer positions (2% of ASX200 companies) and represent only 10.7% of Executive Management positions.
8. While formal discrimination has been almost eliminated in Australia, the power of stereotyped social expectations continues to disadvantage Australian women and we agree with the view that "discrimination turned out to be a stronger and more subtle phenomenon than the law had anticipated²."
9. We strongly argue it is time to address the underlying causes of social discrimination created by inappropriate depictions of women and women's role in society in the media. This Inquiry provides a starting point³, as stereotypes used in billboard and outdoor advertising are almost impossible to ignore.
10. 2020women is concerned that billboard advertisements, like other advertisements, often represent women in stereotypical ways, using inappropriately sexualised imagery, and submit that there needs to be greater industry and accountability in the use of outdoor advertising. We recommend the following actions be taken:

Recommendations

11. As the images and messages on billboards are visible to the entire community, they should be included in the National Classification Scheme and a 'G' rating should be applied to all billboards and outdoor advertising.
12. An advertising award system should be established which awards the positive portrayal of women in advertisements, including billboard advertisements.

¹ *Gender Equality Stats* Australian Human Rights Commission web site http://www.hreoc.gov.au/sex_discrimination/sda_25/index.html#stats and *Australian Social Trends* September 2010, Australian Bureau of Statistics

² Gaze, Beth (2010) *Insights: The Sex Discrimination Act after 25 years: What is its role in eliminating gender inequality and discrimination in Australia?* Vol. 7, April, pp. 13-17

³ Although we refer to the Committee to the *Portrayal of Women in Outdoor Advertising* prepared by the Victorian State government's Portrayal of Women Advisory Committee. [http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/Commstoolswomenoutdooradvertising/\\$file/Women%20in%20advertising%20outdoor.pdf](http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/Commstoolswomenoutdooradvertising/$file/Women%20in%20advertising%20outdoor.pdf)

13. The government's Sex Discrimination Act should be used to control the use of advertising on the basis of sex by including a general prohibition against sex discrimination and sexual harassment in any area of public life, equivalent to section 9 of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*. This should be considered as part of the Consolidation Project.

Issues

14. The following issues give rise to our conclusion that there is a need for greater accountability in the use of outdoor advertising.

14.1. While other published material is subject to classification standards, billboard advertising is not. This is a problem for the following reasons:

14.1.1. Size and placement of billboards can make the images they depict even more offensive and shocking than if the same material were in a different context;

14.1.2. Billboards remove the consumer's choice whether or not the material they contain is viewed. Therefore more stringent controls are required over the images and concepts they display; and

14.1.3. Outdoor advertising differs from other forms of advertising in that there is no other context than the text and image provided on the billboard, therefore the impact of the images and text is greater than it might be if it were used in another form of advertising.

14.2. The Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Review of the effectiveness of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 suggested that the Act be amended⁴ to include a general prohibition against sex discrimination and sexual harassment in an area of public life equivalent to section 9 of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.

14.2.1. This was in recognition that the Act "has had an impact on the most overt forms of sex discrimination but has been less successful in addressing system discrimination."⁵

14.2.2. It is our view that advertising plays a significant role in public life, and is responsible for perpetuating disadvantage for women. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

14.3. The images that are commonly used to sell products on billboards are discriminatory against women.

14.3.1. Depictions of women in many advertisements, including outdoor advertisements, lack diversity, and the advertisements associate women's bodies and body parts with sex, as sexual objects or as sexually available.

14.3.2. The objectification and sexualisation of women in advertising is more offensive when it is unavoidable and images are on a large scale. Many of the images depicted would be considered sexual harassment if passed around in a working environment, but there is no legislation to protect women who feel harassed by seeing these images every day at their bus stop or train station.

⁴ 2008, *Effectiveness of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 in eliminating discrimination and promoting gender equality*,

⁵ System discrimination is described as "referring to policies practices or patterns of behaviour, which are absorbed into the institutions and structure of society, that create or perpetuate disadvantage for a particular group."

- 14.3.3. It is recognised that self-esteem and body image are adversely impacted by stereotypical, sexualised images by many magazine publishers, and some effort is being made to address this. However, this issue appears to be ignored by advertisers using billboard advertising.
 - 14.3.4. The images used in many of these advertisements reinforce the message that women are only considered useful/attractive if they are sexy, thin and young. This ignores the diversity of women, particularly in relation to appearance, race and age.
 - 14.3.5. The humour employed in some of the advertisements oversteps social boundaries and is offensive. For example, advertisements for sexual dysfunction remedies can be quite inappropriate.
 - 14.3.6. Sexual stereotypes are often employed that are not only demeaning and destructive to women, they also have an adverse impact on children. The advertisers' messages influence the expectations of both boys and girls in a dysfunctional way. Girls are influenced to strive for unrealistic goals in order to be deemed acceptable, and boys are influenced to have unrealistic expectations of the appearance and behaviour of girls/women.
- 14.4. Safety issues are also at stake.
- 14.4.1. Research has shown that road safety can be adversely impacted by inappropriate images.⁶ In this research, US psychologist found people shown erotic or gory images could not process what they were seeing, and may not see another car or pedestrian immediately after witnessing such a scene.
 - 14.4.2. Women's safety can also be compromised by images that are violent and/or sexually explicit. Many of the billboard advertisements are placed in railway stations or at bus depots. These are locations many women need to travel through at times when they are almost deserted. The sexualised images of women under these circumstances can present a threat to women's sense of safety.

Conclusion

15. In conclusion, 2020women is pleased that the Paragraph 2.1 of the Australian Association of National Advertisers' (AANA) Code of Ethics states:

Advertising or Marketing Communications shall not portray people or depict material in a way which discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability or political belief.

16. However, it is clear that in practice the intention not to discriminate against people has little influence. There is no doubt that images of scantily clad young women are frequently used to sell products that have nothing to do with women, their state of dress or their appearance. The narrow range of women portrayed in these advertisements is discriminatory. These advertisements encourage the viewer to see women as decoration, not as users of products or as buyers of products. Advertisements rarely portray a diverse range of women portrayed as pro-active, knowledgeable, in control and competent.

⁶ August, 2005 Psychonomic Bulletin and Review cited in New Scientist, August 12, 2005

17. Therefore, we can only agree with Melinda Tankard Reist who states⁷ “the Advertising Standards Board is limited in effectiveness, and therefore acts in the interests of the industry, because of a weak code of ethics, voluntary advertiser participation, no pre-vetting of material, no power to withdraw ads and no penalties for offending advertisers.”
18. We propose the Committee consider including advertising in the National Classification Scheme and applying a ‘G’ rating to all billboards and outdoor advertising the issues discussed above could be resolved.
 - 18.1. Other types of advertising are already subject to the National Classification Scheme, and are monitored by the Office of Film and Literature Classification as they are published either in magazines, in film and television and on the internet.
 - 18.2. Setting a standard and requiring the pre-vetting of advertising is the most effective way of achieving accountability. All advertisers would be required to meet that standard, and advertisements that failed to meet the standard would be withdrawn. Penalties would also apply.
 - 18.3. If the ‘G’ standard was applied to outdoor advertising, accountability for meeting the standard could be the responsibility of either the Advertising Standards Board by being or added to the responsibilities of the Office of Film and Literature Classification.
19. We also propose the introduction of an incentive for advertisers to create advertisements that better reflect community standards through the introduction of a federal award to celebrate the positive portrayal of women in advertisements, including billboard advertisements.
 - 19.1. It is clear to us that some advertisers still firmly adhere to the view that notoriety and shocking consumers boost product sales.
 - 19.2. The feedback we receive from women is that this view is outdated and sexist, and does not accurately reflect the desires of female consumers.
 - 19.3. Given that women’s purchasing decisions are important to success, we believe that advertising companies need to be encouraged to continue to improve the way they reflect society, and to take greater responsibility for the influences they have on society.
 - 19.4. We encourage the Committee to consider ways of encourage advertisers to adopt more positive approaches to their craft by rewarding the positive portrayal of women.
20. Lastly, as freedom from sexual discrimination is a basic human right, we see no reason that it should not be treated in the same way that racial discrimination is treated, providing redress for individual complaints by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
21. Women will continue to face disadvantage if the need to redress social influences on their discrimination is ignored by government.

⁷ Tankard Reist, Melinda “Advertising and objectification: women’s equality should come before vested commercial interests” on <http://melindatankardreist.com/2010/07/advertising-and-objectification-women’s-equality-should-come-before-vested-commercial-interests/>, viewed on 17 January 2011



Signatories

This submission was prepared by 2020women Incorporated, and has been endorsed by the following organisations: WEL Australia, the Australian Centre for Leadership for Women, the Australian Federation of Graduate Women, the Australian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Alliance and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children.