GENDER BIAS & INCLUSION IN ADVERTISING IN INDIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
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FOREWORD

Every child deserves to reach her or his full potential but gender inequalities in their lives as well as of those who care for them hinder this reality. While gender inequality impacts on both genders, statistically, it is girls that are the most disadvantaged.

We know that gender socialization begins at birth and intensifies during childhood and adolescence. Children observe and learn social and gender cues from parents, family, schools and the society, including the advertising and marketing that they see around themselves.

The impact of negative gender norms and emphasis on stereotypes influences children's self-perception. To bring about gender equality we need to identify what influences perceptions and behaviours in order to instil and advance positive change, as needed in those spaces.

In today's world, advertising and marketing plays a powerful role in the process of gender socialization. It also has an immense potential to promote women's and girls' empowerment. We need to better identify and understand the advertising and marketing likely to influence children and adolescents if we are going to challenge gender biases and promote equality.

At UNICEF, we work for the rights of every child, every day, across the world. In India, equity and gender equality remains at the core of our country programme as we strengthen our focus, advocacy and engagement on increasing the value of the girl child.

We are delighted to work with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to measure the level and type of gender stereotyping found in Indian advertisements on television and YouTube. The study analyses a sample of frequently viewed advertisements in India during 2019 and offers an assessment of advertising media in reinforcing and challenging harmful gender roles that shape the lives of girls and women in the country.

We hope that the findings of this report will help in enhancing advocacy efforts towards gender equality and more gender-sensitive advertising, working together with Indian advertising community as well as other stakeholders across South Asia. This study is an important step towards understanding how we might better communicate positive gender norms in marketing and communication materials that will help promote gender equality, for the benefit of all children.

Dr. Yasmin Ali Haque
UNICEF Representative in India

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UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advertising and marketing play a powerful role in the process of gender socialization and women and girls' empowerment. This research project was conducted by UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, UNICEF Programme Divsion in New York, and UNICEF India with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The study measures the level and type of gender stereotyping found in Indian advertisements on TV and YouTube, through analysis of the 1,000 most viewed advertisements in 2019. The purpose of this study is to assess the role of advertising media in reinforcing and challenging harmful gender roles that shape the lives of girls and women in the country in order to drive more gender sensitive advertising.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING STEREOTYPES

UNICEF works to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, for gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Promoting positive gender roles in marketing and advertising is critical for achieving this goal.

Children learn from family, schools and the society around them. They are exposed to a barrage of media messages daily; some directed at them and others seen by them, even if they are not the target. Gender stereotypes differ across time and cultures and to understand more about the key issues to tackle in India to promote equality, an understanding of the kinds of advertising likely to be seen by children and adolescents in the country is needed.

The process of gender socialization means expected gender roles are learned from birth and intensified throughout childhood and adolescence with messages received from society, including from the marketing and advertising they see around them. Negative gender norms and stereotypes influence children's self-perception and contribute to shaping different pathways for their future. Addressing negative gender socialization is critical to achieving gender equality.

Societies around the world are becoming more and more sensitive to how gender roles are portrayed and the world of advertising is a powerful agent for change. Achieving gender equality is about breaking down negative gender stereotypes and realizing equal rights for women and girls – and gender positive advertising is a confirmation of these rights. Positive gender norms in marketing and advertising exposes children and adolescents to a concept of gender parity and encourages a way of thinking that includes the perspectives of all, leading to better outcomes for everyone.

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UNICEF'S WORK ON GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA

UNICEF in India contributes to national efforts to enable all children, especially the most disadvantaged and excluded, to have their rights progressively fulfilled and to develop their full potential in an inclusive and protected society. Equity, including gender equality, is at the core of the Country Programme. Gender based programming, with a focus on increasing the value of the girl child one of the key strategies of UNICEF's strategic plan 2018-2022.[1]

Gender equality in India has made gains as a result of legislative and policy measures, social-protection schemes for girls and adolescents and gender sensitive budgets over past years. India has attained gender parity in primary enrolment and boosted female literacy from 54 per cent (2001) to 66 per cent (2011).[2] Gender-based discrimination and normalization of violence continues to be a challenge. India ranks 108th out of 153 countries in the global gender inequality index in 2020, an increase since 2015 when it was ranked 130th out of 155 countries. India is among one of the few countries where under-5 mortality rates among girls is higher than boys. Many women face overlapping social, emotional, physical, economic, cultural and caste related deprivations. Adolescent girls face vulnerabilities, including poor nutritional status, increased burden of care, early marriage and early pregnancy, and issues related to reproductive health and empowerment while 56 per cent are anemic.[3]

One of UNICEF India's overall priorities, in line with UNICEF's regional vision, is to address system-wide bottle-necks that impede children's rights by strengthening gender-informed and gender-responsive programming in all areas. Priority results and strategies include:
- promotion of gender and an equity focus on the health of the girl child and marginalized communities to reduce child and maternal mortality;
- reduction of undernutrition of children and adolescent girls; safe and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services including menstrual hygiene management to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters and climate change;
- preventing and responding to child marriage and gender-based violence in emergencies;
- ensuring all boys and girls learn including engagement with partners and influencers and decision makers to scale up access for adolescent girls.

WAY FORWARD: APPLYING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS TO ADDRESS GENDER STEREOTYPING

This study systematically analyzes gender representations in ads in India and will serve as a benchmark for making advertising more gender sensitive in the country, as well as providing an evidence-based approach for highlighting key areas for action.

Globally, research increasingly finds that consumers are rejecting stereotypes in advertising and respond better to balanced, representative and positive portrayals of gender roles. With a deeper understanding of how gender is represented in Indian advertising, UNICEF can contribute to enabling the marketing and advertising industry to both deconstruct harmful gender stereotypes and promote empowering gender norms and attitudes by highlighting areas for action and advocating for evidence-based change for positive gender portrayals in advertising.

With a clearer understanding of the way gender is portrayed in advertising across India, UNICEF can use the results to influence how it can communicate around its own programme priorities to advance gender equality.   This research gives insights and concrete measurements on how the advertising and marketing environment portrays women and girls, which helps to enable design of effective interventions and strengthen gender-informed and responsive programming.

The results of this research project have important implications for UNICEF's work in India across a number of programme priorities. Below are highlighted some of the key findings in terms of how they are linked to UNICEF's work in addressing gender stereotyping in India and promoting gender equitable practices.

ADDRESSING HARMFUL GENDER STEREOTYPES AND NORMS TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

While the research finds women are well represented in the most viewed Indian advertisements during 2019, with equal screen presence and in fact more speaking time than men, they are still stereotyped in potentially harmful ways, with women more likely to be portrayed as young and attractive in terms of traditional beauty norms and/or caretakers and parents, mainly seen in private, rather than public spaces. Female characters in ads are more likely to be shown in revealing clothing, depicted as partially nude or sexually objectified compared with male characters. Almost all the detergent and food commercials depicted a woman caretaking for her family who speaks directly to women viewers about caring for their families. This means that female characters are plentiful in Indian advertising, but mostly in ways that uphold traditional gender roles for women. Girls are less likely to be shown in adverts as boys, meaning young girls are less likely to see themselves as present, and important, in society.
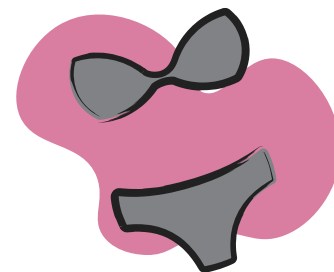
There was little representation of child marriage, or violence found in ads included in the study. Given this is a key issue in Indian society and considering COVID -19's disproportionately negative impact on women in terms of loss of employment and increases in domestic violence, there may be an opportunity for advertisers to address these issues through advertising campaigns and narratives.

- It is clear the presence of women and girls in advertising is not enough to drive gender equality: gender equitable portrayals and actively promoting gender equitable practices are needed to inspire girls and boys of their possibilities, unrestrained by gender stereotypes.
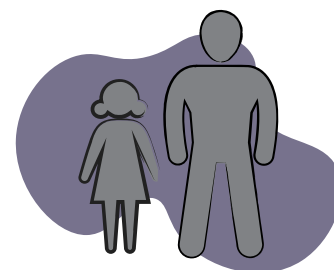
ENSURING GIRLS STAY IN SCHOOL AND HAVE AN EFFECTIVE TRANSITION TO GAINING SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

According to the findings, women are less likely to be shown in public spaces, in paid employment, as leaders or making decisions about their futures. These representations bolster traditional gender norms that girls and women belong in the domestic sphere as parents and caretakers, and boys and men get to dream about and plan their futures and reinforce sexist notions that women are less intelligent and humorous than men.

- Increased representation of women working, making decisions and as successful leaders can inspire girls to stay in school and help demonstrate different templates of women working both inside and outside their homes.

GENDER & NUTRITION

In the world of advertising in India, one of the drivers of female presence is depictions of female characters selling domestic products. Female characters are plentiful in Indian advertising, but mostly in ways that uphold traditional gender roles for women: men and boys are much less likely to be shown shopping, cooking or being involved with household decisions. Women are firmly placed as the primary – and best – caregiver, while men and boys are not expected to be responsible for choices made around nutrition.

To drive gender equity in the home and in purchasing decisions, men and boys could be shown as sharing household tasks, including cooking, cleaning and caring for others. Involving men in the purchase and preparation of meals shows all that everyone should participate in nutrition choices.
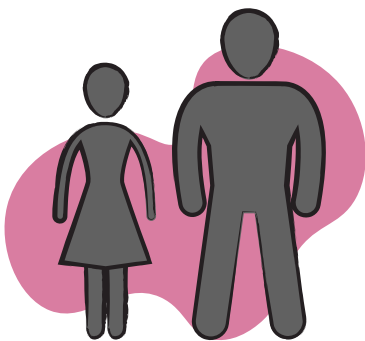
In terms of healthy bodies, female characters are invariably thin but male characters appear with a variety of body sizes in Indian advertising. This reinforces the idea that girls and women are supposed to take up less space physically and figuratively.

- Advertising can show women and girls across a variety of body shapes, in line with men, leading to a healthier outlook around body shape. By increasing the proportion of women and girls found in sporting settings, there is the opportunity to increase participation of girls in sports and promotion of healthy, strong bodies for girls and boys.

RAISING AWARENESS OF MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT AND WATER, SANITATION & HYGIENE INITIATIVES

Women and girls are much more likely to be show undertaking or being responsible for care work/childcare or normative gender roles such as shopping as well as being responsible for hygiene decisions. For example, almost all the detergent and food commercials depicted a woman caretaking for her family who speaks to women about caring for their families.

There is also a need for more advertisements promoting menstrual health and busting taboo around the issue: Almost 50 percent of adolescent girls in India did not know about menstruation until the first time they got their period and hardly one-third (36 per cent) of menstruating women use sanitary napkins.[4] Among the 1,000 advertisements analyzed, none related to menstrual health.

- Advertising could increase representation of men in advertising speaking about cleaning products and other consumer goods to normalize hygiene decisions in the household being taken by all genders, as well as normalizing menstrual health.

COLOURISM

The research highlights some problematic issues in advertising around colourism in India, with advertising presenting characters with lighter skin as more physically attractive than characters with darker skin. The findings of the study show colorism is starkly reflected in Indian advertising in ways that reinforce discriminatory social arrangements.

Colourism is also gendered, affecting Indian women more than men. We also find that characters with light skin tones are presented as more physically attractive than characters with darker skin tones and more likely to be represented as middle and upper class.

- To contribute to a society that values diversity and inclusion, advertising could show a more diverse range of skin colours and tones, especially among women and girls shown in advertising to ensure children see representation across skin types and social class.
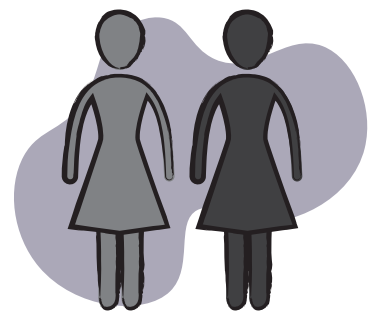
KEY FINDINGS

This section presents the major findings of this study. More detailed results can be found in the full report below.

Throughout this report, metrics that measure existing societal standards of beauty such as "average looking" or "stunning" have been included. It essential to clarify that neither UNICEF nor GDIGM endorse this classification of 'traditional' beauty. Our objective position on beauty is that there is no universal construct of beauty and we do not endorse any beauty standards. However, for the purpose of the study, it is important to include measurements according to existing societal standards of beauty to understand to what extent advertisements 'think outside the box' or adhere to existing standards.

Similarly, gender tropes and stereotypes based on perception have been developed and tested by GDI and are coded by expert coders in line with an agreed framework as part of content analysis methodology.

GENDER & PROMINENCE

- Female characters are just as likely to appear in ads as male characters (49.6% compared with 50.4%).
- We find that female characters dominate screen time (59.7%) and speaking time (56.3%) in Indian ads.
- Most of the ads we examined passed the See Jane Test (77.8%) that measures whether there is at least one prominent female character who is not depicted as a trope or stereotype.
- It is important to note that while girls and women have a strong presence in Indian advertising, they are mostly reinforcing traditional gender roles by selling domestic and beauty products to female consumers.

49.6%
APPEAR IN ADS

56.3%
SPEAKING TIME
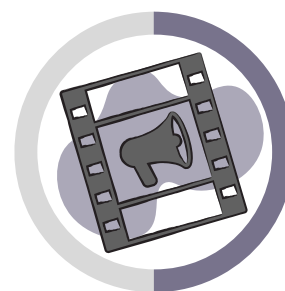
59.7%
**SCREEN TIME**

DIVERSITY ANALYSIS

- There are more young boys (ages 1 – 12) than girls in ads (20.5% compared with 13.1%).
- Female characters are more likely to be depicted in their 20s than male characters (38.2% compared with 26.7%), and most older characters are male.
- About half of characters are shown as middle-class (51.3%), while few are lower-class (6.4%).
- Six-in-ten characters have light skin tones (59.6%), and few characters have dark skin tones (4.0%).
- A majority of characters with dark skin are presented as lower-class (56.5%) while two-thirds of characters with light skin are shown as upper-class (65.7%). Colorism is evident in Indian ads.
- Two-thirds of female characters (66.9%) have light or medium-light skin tones—a far higher percentage than male characters (52.1%).
- Male characters are five times more likely to have a dark skin tone than female characters (6.5% compared with 1.3%).
- Female characters are four times as likely to have a small body type than male characters (41.8% compared with 9.4%).
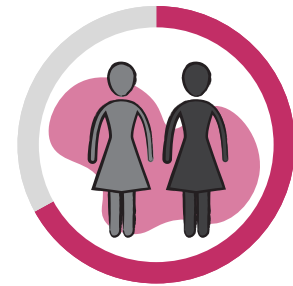
66.9%
LIGHT SKIN TONES
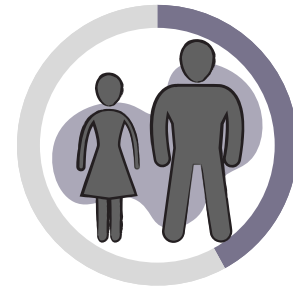
41.8%
SMALL BODY TYPE

SEXUALIZATION & STEREOTYPES[5]

- Female characters are nine times more likely to be shown as 'stunning'/'very attractive' than male characters (5.9% compared with 0.6%). Female characters are twice as likely to be shown as 'better than average' looking than male characters (33.6% compared with 16.8%)
- Female characters depicted as upper-class are far more likely to be shown as 'stunning' or 'better than average looking' (62.6%) compared to characters who are middle-class (38.3%) or lower-class (6.9%).
- Female characters with light skin tones (49.8%) are more likely to be shown as 'stunning/better than average looking' than characters with medium skin tones (44.3%) or dark skin tones (40.6%).
- Female characters are six times more likely to be shown in sexually revealing clothing than male characters (11.2% compared with 1.7%).[6]
- Female characters are four times more likely to be depicted as partially nude than male characters (7.6% compared with 1.6%).[7]
- Female characters face five times more sexual objectification than male characters (4.7% compared with 0.9%).[8]
- Female and male characters are about equally likely to be reduced to a gender trope or stereotype (2.9% and 2.0%).
- The most common gender tropes/stereotypes for female characters are "The Subservient Wife" and "The Pushy Aunt", and for men, the "Domineering/Controlling Male" and a man who does not help with domestic activities.
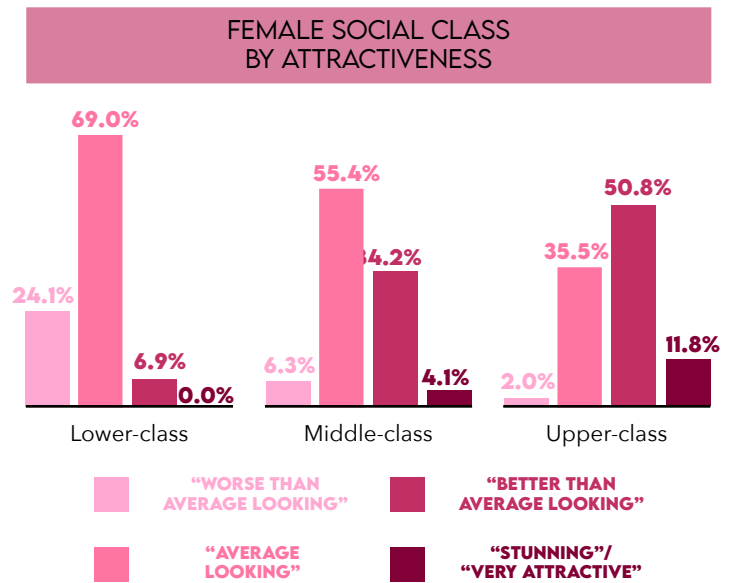
The most common gender tropes/stereotypes for female characters are "The Subservient Wife" and "The Pushy Aunt", and for men, the "Domineering/Controlling Male" and a man who does not help with domestic activities.

WORK AND LEADERSHIP

- Male characters are twice as likely to be shown with a paid occupation[9] than female characters (25.2% compared with 11.6%).
- Male characters are more likely to be shown actually working than female characters (16.4% compared with 9.3%).
- Male characters are significantly more likely to be shown as leaders than female characters (26.3% compared with 19.3%).

PERSONAL TRAITS

- Male characters are more likely to be shown as smart than female characters (32.2% compared to 26.2%).
- Male characters are nearly twice as likely to be shown as funny than female characters (19.1% compared to 11.9%).

FEMALE SOCIAL CLASS BY ATTRACTIVENESS

Lower-class: 24.1%, 69.0%, 6.9%, 0.0%
Middle-class: 6.3%, 55.4%, 34.2%, 4.1%
Upper-class: 2.0%, 35.5%, 50.8%, 11.8%

Legend:
- "WORSE THAN AVERAGE LOOKING"
- "AVERAGE LOOKING"
- "BETTER THAN AVERAGE LOOKING"
- "STUNNING"/ "VERY ATTRACTIVE"

GENDER ROLES

- A greater percentage of female characters are depicted as married than male characters (11.0% compared with 8.8%).
- Male characters are more likely to be shown making decisions about their future than female characters (7.3% compared with 4.8%).
- Female characters are twice as likely to be shown making household decisions than male characters (4.9% compared with 2.0%).
- Female characters are three times more likely to be shown as a caretaker of others than male characters (18.3% compared with 5.2%).
- Female characters are three times more likely to be depicted as parents than male characters (18.7% compared with 5.9%).
- Of characters who are parents, mothers are three times more likely to be shown as an excellent parent than fathers (10.1% compared with 3.2%).
- A small number of male characters in Indian advertisements are featured as supporting gender equity (4.4%).

HOUSEHOLD DECISIONMAKING

4.9% / 2.0%
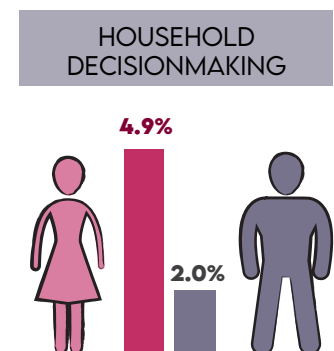
ACTIVITIES

Female characters are more likely to be shown doing the following activities than male characters:
- Shopping (4.1% compared with 2.3%).
- Cleaning (4.8% compared with 2.2%).
- Being involved in the purchase or preparation of meals (5.4% compared with 3.9%).

SETTINGS

Female characters are more likely to be shown in the following settings:
- A living room (18.8% compared with 15.7%).
- A bedroom (6.8% compared with 3.1%).

Male characters are more likely to be shown in the following settings:
- An office (7.1% compared to 4.7%).
- Outdoors (28.7% compared with 21.7%).
- A sporting event (8.1% compared to 3.3%).
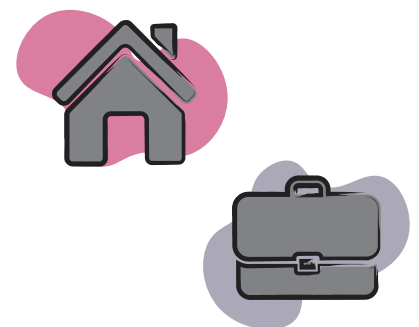
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CONCLUSIONS

While it is heartening to see that women and girls have achieved or exceeded parity of representation in terms of presence and voice, deeper analysis shows that the quality of this representation is problematic and there is enormous room for improvement by the advertising community in India to address the issues of gender stereotyping in Indian marketing to help drive gender equality. The research also highlights issues particularly pertinent to address and includes some recommendation on interventions for advertisers and content creators including but not limited to:
- Increased representation of women and girls across age, social class, skin tone and other diversity indicators.
- Promotion of diverse templates of beauty and avoiding regressive beauty norms of women and girls being only fair and thin.
- More women and girls portrayed as leaders, especially in the public sphere.
- Positive gender norms around body and attitudes towards healthy eating.

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