

**WOMEN'S COMMISSION**  
**Gender Stereotyping in the Media**

**PURPOSE**

This paper invites Members' views on the Women Commission's position on gender stereotyping in the media.

**BACKGROUND**

2. Concerns have been expressed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from time to time on advertisements, news stories or media programmes in which women are portrayed in a biased manner or a sexist approach is adopted. Women have been portrayed as sex objects, subordinate to men or object of jokes, and sometimes women are defamed. On 30 October 2002, East Week published a nude photo of an actress allegedly taken against her will. The Women's Commission (WoC) on 1 November 2002 issued a statement to the press and lodged a complaint to the HK Press Council and the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority, condemning the way East Week handled the case, as it did not only bring harm and insult to the victim, but also severely infringed on the dignity of women.

3. Members' attention was brought to a watch advertisement which was placed in SCMP on 22 April 2003, in which a biased message against women was featured. Members have exchanged views on this issue over e-mails, and different views have been given. They are now summarised below:-

- (i) the insinuation that women are not punctual carries a negative image of women and degrades women;
- (ii) the advertisement perpetuates negative stereotypes about women;

- (iii) WoC should lodge a complaint (e.g. to the Equal Opportunities Commission);
- (iv) WoC should express concern about sexist advertisements to media executives and copywriters;
- (v) an appeal should be made to media executives and copywriters to develop a set of good practices or non-sexist guidelines and avoid gender stereotyping;
- (vi) WoC should issue a position letter;
- (vii) the advertiser should be requested to give an apology and withdraw the advertisement;
- (viii) the advertisement is not too offensive when compared with others and WoC should not over-react, and
- (ix) WoC should aim to get the message across in a non-adversarial way.

4. Instead of picking on isolated cases that may be tips of an iceberg and giving a response in an ad-hoc manner, it is suggested that a more comprehensive review on this subject be carried out so that a more holistic and systematic approach could be adopted.

## **COMMON GENDER BIASES IN MEDIA AND ADVERTISEMENTS**

5. It is not uncommon to see in advertisements, news stories and media programmes biased messages about women and men, varying in degree of subtlety or explicitness. On the one hand, this reflects that gender roles help form an integral part of a person's identity and define his/her social behaviour, on the other hand, it reinforces sex-role stereotyping and biases. Some examples of common biases that are more detrimental to women's images include:-

- (i) making use of women's body and/or portraying women as sex objects for marketing purpose and for product appeal, including attracting attention and boosting sales;
- (ii) making fun of women's or particular parts of women's body: e.g. jokes were poked at the hairstyle of the Secretary for Security, chubby women are nicknamed "pork-chop", etc;
- (iii) sensational reporting of sexual violence against women inflicting further harm on the victim;
- (iv) making sweeping statements about women from the behaviour of some: e.g. women like to keep men waiting, women like shopping, women are gossipers, etc;
- (v) stereotyping images of women: e.g. the need for a slim figure, good looks;
- (vi) featuring women and men in specific family roles: e.g. father as the breadwinner, mother as carer; men's principal place is at work, women's at home; and
- (vii) projecting certain occupations as female and others as male: e.g. teaching is a women's job and IT, a man's job.

### **WoC's POSITION ON GENDER STEREOTYPING IN THE MEDIA**

6. In view of the wide range of biased messages against women that are currently conveyed by the media, it appears desirable to work out a position to be adopted by WoC. Relevant considerations may include:-

- (a) WoC is tasked to promote the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong;
- (b) WoC and the Administration consider it important to change deeply-entrenched misconceptions about women and men, promote greater gender sensitivity within the community, and raise general awareness about women-related issues;

- (c) the powerful impact of mass media in creating and reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes;
- (d) ideas, concepts and messages conveyed in the advertisements, news stories and media programmes and features fall within the highly sensitive area of freedom of expression and press freedom, which the Government and the community are committed to upholding;
- (e) the need for creativity and innovation, especially in industries like multimedia entertainment and infotainment, product design and marketing, and the need for a tolerant culture for these industries to thrive;
- (f) the desirability of a rational and consistent approach in dealing with stereotyping in the media, and
- (g) capacity or resources constraints and relative importance of this subject vis-a-vis other priorities and initiatives of WoC and the Women's Division.

### **PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE**

7. In addressing biased messages in the media, WoC could aim to achieve the following:-

- (a) enhance community gender sensitivity and raise awareness about women-related issues by generating public discussion about the subject;
- (b) enhance community's understanding about the various roles that women in Hong Kong are engaged in and their contributions;
- (c) change commonly-held gender-related misconceptions;
- (d) protect women's interests by condemning outrageous advertisements or messages, and

- (e) promote gender sensitive advertising and news reporting in the long term.

## **STRATEGY**

8. WoC may wish to consider developing a strategy to address biased messages in the media. In this regard, a two-pronged approach is suggested:-

- (a) acting on specific advertisements, news stories or programmes, and/or
- (b) tackling biased messages more generally, e.g. through public education programmes, and efforts targeted at the media and advertising sector.

9. It is **suggested** that intervening action should be taken on specific advertisement, message, news story or programme that are considered:-

- (a) extremely repulsive (either visually or verbally);
- (b) highly violent;
- (c) very indecent and disrespectful to women, or
- (d) exceedingly blatant blemishing message against women.

10. Members of WoC are most welcome to draw to the attention of other Members and the Women's Division advertisements or news stories or programmes displaying characteristics described in paragraph 9 above which they come across. Depending on the seriousness and extent of blatancy, WoC could write to the relevant media or advertiser, drawing to their attention that their advertisements, messages, new stories or programmes contain biased messages against women, and they should re-examine the issue, initiate appropriate remedial action and reply to WoC. WoC could also write a "Letter to the Editor" or issue a press release depending on circumstances.

Members may also wish to consider whether and how women's groups and organisations should be invited to join in this effort. WoC could make known its position on the offensive message to the latter, and also invite their views and comments on media advertisements, news stories or TV programmes which they feel strongly about and we could post them on the WoC website where appropriate. This should help generate public discussion and raise gender sensitivity.

11. As for proactive public education efforts, WoC may wish to ask the Public Education Task Force to explore the possibility of holding events or activities to promulgate women sensitive advertising with a view to projecting a positive image or message about women, and their place in society. In this connection, members may be interested to know that the Women and Media Concern Group of the Association for the Advancement of Feminism staged a contest for the 10 "worst" television commercials in terms of their degradation of women's status in 1991. Alternatively, WoC may bring up this issue for discussion on suitable occasions or public fora. WoC may also contribute articles to newspapers and magazines on this subject from time to time to generate public discussion. Messages on this subject could also be publicised in the WoC website.

### **ADVICE SOUGHT**

12. Members are invited to give comments and views on:-
- (a) the purpose and objective of addressing biased messages in the media (paragraph 7);
  - (b) the suggested strategy to address gender biased messages in the media (paragraph 8);
  - (c) the criteria or guidelines suggested in taking action on specific messages carried in the media (paragraph 9);
  - (d) the desirability of involving women's NGOs in this matter (paragraph 10), and

- (e) the possible general public education efforts in addressing this issue (paragraph 11).

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Women's Division  
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