

“Labels are for clothing. Labels are not for people”

*Martina Navratilova*

## Sex Sells?



Level 2



10 to 30



60 to 75  
minutes



**Complexity:** Level 2

**Group size:** 10 to 30

**Time:** 60 to 75 minutes

**Overview:** This activity addresses several issues concerning public perceptions of gender, sex and sexuality. Participants analyse how different genders are depicted in advertisements in newspapers and magazines using a special tool for analysis.

**Objectives:**

- To identify gender stereotypes projected through the media
- To reflect upon and discuss the social construction of gender roles
- To raise awareness of inequality of opportunity between genders

**Materials:**

- Newspapers and magazines
- Scissors, glue
- Flipchart paper and “post-its” in two different colours
- Copies of the grid for analysis for each group (see handouts)

**Preparation:**

- Collect various newspapers and magazines, rich in advertisements and with pictures
- Read through the instructions carefully and study the grid that participants will use in the second part of the activity (see handouts)



## Instructions

- 1) Introduce the activity. Start by referring to daily life and common perceptions of different gender roles in society: remind participants that it is almost impossible to find aspects of life where gender issues are absent. Even with basic questions, such as who washes the dishes at home, how girls and boys sit in schools, or where women and men are generally employed, gender is present. Explain that advertisements in the media very often reflect and magnify the different characteristics, stereotypes and prejudices relating to gender that exist in society.
- 2) Hand out the newspapers and magazines, with a selection of “post-its”, and ask participants to look through them and select one advertisement to analyse individually. The selected advertisement should convey something about gender roles and expressions (e.g. it might contain pictures of women, men, or other genders)

Using the grid (see handouts), each participant should then identify and note down the different parties in the advertisement they have chosen, the direct (obvious) messages and any possible hidden messages, and the use made by the advertisement of gender stereotypes.

In addition to filling out the grid, ask participants to write down the attributes of men and women they find in the advertisement on post-its of different colour. Specify at the beginning of the activity which colour they should use for attributes of men, and which for attributes which apply to the women portrayed.

- 3) Once participants have filled out their grid (give them about 20 minutes for this task, to include time for reflection), ask them to get together in pairs to share their advertisements, grids, and gender analysis (the different post-its with attributes of men and women). Give participants about 20 minutes for this task as both participants in the pair will need time to present and share.
- 4) When participants have finished the work in pairs, ask them to present the attributes assigned to different genders to the whole group. They should stick all the post-its describing women onto one piece of flip chart paper, and all those for men onto another.



## Debriefing and evaluation

Ask participants to comment on the attributes on the post-its, particularly relating to the differences between those applying to men and those to women. They may refer to the advertisements, but this is not essential.

Use some of the following questions to explore the issues in greater detail:

- How do you feel about the lists of male and female attributes which were to be found in the advertisements you analysed?
- Do these attributes accurately describe men and women you know, or men and women in general? Explain your answer.
- Is there anything problematic or unethical about the way men and women were portrayed in these advertisements?

- How are attributes such as those you identified reflected in the context where you live?
- How does the way that women and men are portrayed in advertising affect the way that young women and men see themselves and others?
- How do you think advertising could avoid the use of stereotyped and negative portrayals of women and men?
- How might advertising contribute to forms of gender-based violence?
- Are there any consequences of such advertising practices on human rights, how they are perceived and respected?
- How can you / your organisation contribute to the creation of more gender equitable advertising practices?

### Tips for facilitators

Be aware that advertising often uses overtly sexual images or covert sexual messages about women or men to “sell” the product they are advertising. This needs to be addressed but be aware that any discussion relating to sex may be uncomfortable for some participants.

You can decide to include additional colour for ‘other genders’ if you feel it is important to tackle the issue related to transgender people. If you decide to do it, adapt the questions in the debriefing accordingly.

### Suggestions for follow-up

The topic of media and gender could be explored further. The activity “Digital media bash” uses research and observation techniques to look at the use of violence in the digital media.

This activity can also be used to initiate discussion on homophobic or sexist online hate speech. In the activity “Saying it worse” from *Bookmarks*, participants have to rank different examples of anti-gay hate speech according to which they think are ‘worse’. In this manual, the activity “Our daily sexism” involves participants in the process of deciding how they would respond to different examples of sexist hate speech online. They also need to develop an online action that they could carry out to address sexist hate speech.

### Ideas for action

Ask the group to develop a code of ethics for media professionals working in advertising and marketing to guide them on the presentation of gender in the media.

Contact local media professionals, especially those working in marketing and advertising, to discuss the issue of the presentation of gender in the media. If your group has already worked out a code of ethics, ask for the media professionals’ comments. Alternatively, invite media professionals to come and meet the members of your group and organise a panel discussion on the presentation of gender in the media. Consider inviting feminist activists with strong views on the issue to take part in the discussion.





## Grid for Analysis

Look at the picture you have chosen and describe it:

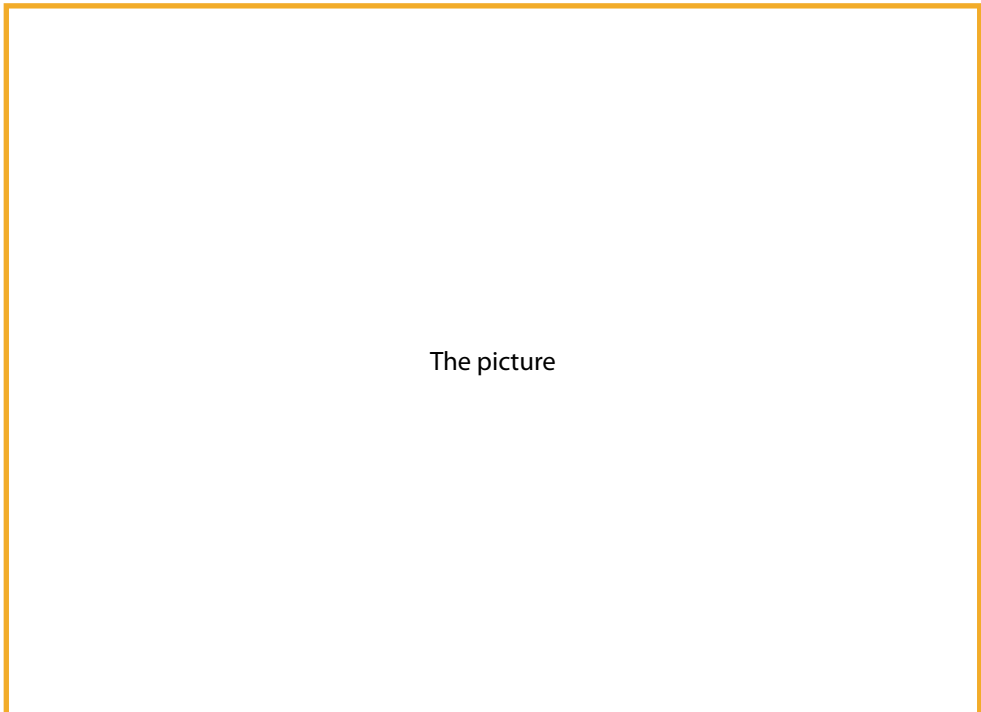
- 1) What roles people have in the picture, e.g. husband, wife, partner, parent, etc.
- 2) What are people actually doing?
- 3) What is their behaviour: active or passive, smiling or being sad, showing aggression, taking initiative, etc.

Once you identify the roles, activities and behaviours, assign them to a concrete person (write it down in the “Who?” column), e.g. husband (role) - man (who?)

In the “(In-)appropriate?” column decide if you consider the connection between the person (who?) and the role they have, the activity they do and their behaviour appropriate or inappropriate.

In the “Why?” column justify why you consider this connection appropriate or inappropriate.

Once you finish your analysis, write down different attributes assigned to people of different genders in your picture. These attributes should be written on post-its of different colour (your facilitator will tell you which colours to use). Attributes are usually qualities or features of a person, such as: dominant, self-confident, strong, weak, etc.





	What?	Who?	(In-)Appropriate?	Why?
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Role

Activity

Behaviour