

Portrayal of Women and Men in Advertising and the Image of the Self

Report of the Public Meeting Held on September 24, 2001 at New Delhi

The Centre for Advocacy and Research in collaboration with the **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**, organised a Symposium entitled *Portrayal of Women and Men in Advertising and the Image of the Self* on September 24, 01 at New Delhi.

Those who attended included members of two sub-groups of the **Viewers' Forum - Urbanised Women's Group** and *Forum of Viewers' with Disability*, Ms. Roopa Bajpai, Consumer Activist from VOICES; Ms. Damyanti Sridharan, Senior Advisor, Gender and Development, Friedrich Ebert Foundation; Ms. Sadhana Vohra, Clinical Psychologist. Mr. Sudeesh Pachauri, a media analyst and columnist, moderated the meeting.

Akhila Sivadas (CFAR) opened the discussion. She said the whole purpose of the meeting was to look at what we think is the self-image of women and the role media _ and in particular advertising _ plays in forming and influencing this image. Since the nineties, specially after Sushmita Sen was crowned Miss Universe in 1995, there has been a tremendous growth in the beauty industry. This has been matched by the growth in media as a vehicle.

In one sense, this has been a great leveler. Today, in the public domain, you can hardly differentiate between different stratas of society _ nobody carries that stigma. Girls in the less privileged areas, are as well turned out as any middle class or so called upper class woman. This is what may be called a healthy homogeneity and deserves to be encouraged.

But in this process of mass homogenisation what is happening to the individual psyche? What is happening to our personal anxieties, the social pressures we feel to conform? The fact is many of us of know is not only a problem of the young. Now, many of us have to worry about ageing gracefully. And the possibility of being ravaged or weathered is much higher today than in our parents time or what our mother went through.

Our concern is that in all this homogeneity, in all this modernisation, is the mind being modernised? We don't think so. Instead, they are exploiting age old sentiments. They play on a mix of attitude, perception, anxieties, neurosis and misunderstandings.

Let us take the example of fairness creams. Nothing can be more indicative of the crisis that many of us are facing, today, that these ad campaigns and line of products. We think it is time for an informed, sustained, strategic consumer response, based on dialogue, and perhaps with the assistance of legal aid.

Damyanti Sridharan spoke of the FES and its association with CFAR. There followed a screening of some TV ads of the beauty products.

Sudeesh Pachuri analysed the ads. He pointed out that in all the ads, the element of humor has been used.

At this point, the findings of the consumer survey were presented. The study had been conducted by CFAR in the cities of Delhi, Ahmedabad and Lucknow among students, homemakers and working women in the age group of 16-30 from SEC A and B. The study had some interesting insights into the notions of self and the importance of fairness as a vital prerequisite of beauty. (Annexure 1)

Then, the moderator asked those present to share their personal views on the issue. Sujata Goenka, member of the *Forum of Viewers' with Disability* said that women with disabilities have far greater concerns than fairness or their looks.

But television emphasises the perfect body. The media reinforces these images constantly. Young boys are fed upon these notions. There are young women who are scared of motherhood because of the effects it will have or leave on their bodies. Men are constantly brought up to desire a perfect body in a woman.

Rekha, a member of the Forum of Viewers' with Disability, pointed out that women, especially young women, are the main consumers of television as well as the products advertised on TV. Television advertisements seem to be saying that their products will transform into a 'new self' which people will find irresistible. Advertisers, she felt, don't know whether or not consumers are satisfied with the information these ads carry.

Meera Sapra, a post-graduate student, said beauty products caused her serious anxieties. "Whenever I see my face, I wonder whether it is a face of a homemaker or a working woman. As such, I am very comfortable with my body. But television creates a lot of conflict, a lot of pressure. I have a whole history of acne and skin allergy and I have tried all kinds of creams. Now these fairness cream ads make me crave for a glowing skin and whenever I meet I ask _ does it really work?"

"The same goes for the hair ads. There are so many shampoos and all of them are so tempting. When I have to go out, for half-hour before that, I am a total mess. I have to wash my hair, set it, scrub my face. All this is adding so much pressure in my life. But this doesn't end here. Not only should you have beautiful hair and a glowing face, you have to be doing all those exciting things for your kids, for your house, you have to try all those recipes, you have to handle the washing machine, fridge... and be a working woman.

I have friends who are obsessed. We look at our faces and we scream - 'Oh my god! I have a pimple!' It is really anxiety provoking. After watching these ads, I don't know what to do. I don't know which part of my body should I pay attention to. Are we looking only to attract boys or attract attention? We just saw the Fair and Lovely ad. That girl has a beautiful voice. She is teaching music. Then she is told, 'you don't have *nikhaar* to your face... your beautiful voice is not enough if you want to attract a man'!!.

Minal Hazarika, a member of the Urbanised Women's Group said women of today are confident and take their own decisions. But in everybody's life there is one moment of weakness. For most women that moment is when the boy's family comes to see your daughter. She is scared, she wonders whether they will look at the colour of her skin. These advertisements only increase the pressure on the girl.

Hazarika revealed that during media education programmes in schools, she found that most of the girls (12-14 years) were using fairness creams. She recalled the case of one girl who had said she is embarrassed by her dark complexion.

This was followed by screening of some advertisements of fairness creams and soaps. Meeta Parti, Programme Officer with CFAR, presented facts on the fairness creams: when they were introduced in the Indian market, the market share they enjoy, the kind of products available and some studies on how much importance Indian society gives to the fairness of complexion. (See Annexure 2)

Consumer activist, Roopa Vajpai said that the India's consumers rights have been inspired by the West. But as more and more Indian groups are now coming forward to work in this area, they feel the need to interpret these rights in the Indian context. She said consumer's rights must extend to areas such as cosmetics.

For instance, when an advertiser makes claims about the quality of their product, that it contains Vitamin E, that it has ingredients like lemon, almonds and assures us that you will become fair in a couple of weeks time _ in such cases, what follow up action is available to consumers, what rights do they have? These are the types of issues that have added a new dimension to consumer rights.

“When I talk about the rights of the consumers,” said Vajpai, it is not only a right to *safety*, it is also a right to *choice*. But all that got confused in the post globalization scenario. We buy imported goods and desire fairness and beauty. Those goods or the products like the Stayfree Napkins, or Baby Nappies or even the creams, which are obsolete abroad, rejected by consumers over there, is accepted by Indians with great alacrity.

That's why I want to focus on consumer responsibility. Consumer right is absolutely fine, but we need "*consumer bonding*" and a "*consumer sense of responsibility*". But here I see a large number of women on this platform, and I am sure this group will soon come forth as a stronger group, one which will be heard by the industry.

The "*right to choice*" again creates problems. For example, there might be only one multinational company but it will have 8-9 similar products, and will promote each in a way that differs from the other.

As consumers, you should be very careful on whether or not the ingredients are mentioned on the label, are safety precautions mentioned along with weights and measures, right price, etc. As consumers, it is your right to know all these things, and it is their responsibility to provide you with all the required information. As consumers, it is in our hand to be careful, about our *rights and responsibility*.”

So as consumers what are your responsibilities? There are consumer forums. You can go and register your complaints. The good thing is that you don't need a lawyer, you don't need money. It is quick. These rights have been given to the consumers. But if you are not able to exercise these options, then you should go to the NGOs. Third, and very important, is consumer bonding. If you face some consumer problem or dissatisfaction, share it with other people. You will be surprised to know how many more people have the same experiences. Once this is there, you can form a lobby and this way compete with the market forces. The sooner you have a lobby you have a voice and the sooner you have a voice, you will be heard.

Also you should write letters to the newspaper, response cells of the channels. Of course they will respond.

Sadhna Vohra, a clinical physiologist talked about the persuasive powers of the advertisement. She said that we, as human beings, are very susceptible to how the world looks at us. In India, we are in period of transition, we are not sure how we identify and how we define ourselves.

I consider myself a smart and confident woman. But there are times when I have gone to the shop and thought, yes, I have seen that ad, this product must be good, even though there something inside me which tells me that these things don't work.

Advertisements manipulate the fear in us. If I am not sure of myself, if there are no clear messages, if my friends are saying you have to try this product because it really works wonders for you, how can I stop myself from being persuaded? It is a very difficult question and I don't think there are any easy answers.

But we have to understand that there are two issues at work here. One is that advertisers are trying to sell products. They are trying to sell them in a way which exploits us emotionally, in way that ensures we pay no attention to consumers forums, what the research says and or that perhaps 20 years later, we will be at high risk of getting cancer.

Secondly, I think and this is my personal view, we have lost the stories that make us feel good about ourselves. Usually for a society there is literature, which is the representation of the society that we learn from. So Ramayana, Mahabharata are popular. If you look at it, we have to work hard to get strong, empowered images of men and women. I think

that in the populist culture what we have right now is Hindi movies, the commercial cinema, which is tied up in the same way as the advertisements.

I think the people are confused right, now even the advertisers. Sometimes they find that they are not able to sell because they have been too smart and the people have not got their message. A great deal of the influence comes from the way of speaking. There are so many ways of influencing thought. For example, if you say, 'Oh, I wish people would do yoga, then they would have a better body'. There is a message there. Immediately, one learns that that if you want to have better bodies, do yoga. This is how messages are sent across.

For example, in the survey, women have voted the advertisement for a deodorant, Axe Effect, as vulgar. But, these ads are all over because the product is selling. There are men out there who feel that no women likes me. May be no women will marry me. And these men are going out and buying these deodorants thinking that this will work for them.

Anita Ghai a disability activist and a member of the Forum of Viewers' with Disability made the following observation: 'As a disability activist I am concerned with the fact that there is hegemony of perfection or normality which often gets depicted on television and one has tried to work towards a particular end where one could at least change the scenario.'

One question is about our literature providing good examples for us as role models. I slightly disagree, because in the populist culture, in the mythological narrative, women who are working are absent. And the disability representations are highly negative, it's like right

down from 'Dhutrastra' who is deprived of the kingdom, because he is visually impaired, to 'Mantra' who is dwarf to 'Shakuni'. There is no positive representation. And if there are positive representations and culture in form of 'Ashtwarka' or 'Surdaas' and they do not receive the same kind of attention. as a disability activist. I stand correct it in case it is not true.

So the narrative is not there for a certain class of people who are marginalised because their quest is not a fairness, or height, or this perfect image As an activist I would be really interested in knowing whether there is any thing which should take a certain class from not being representative at all or else, almost to the extent of being invisible. Can we make a dent in this hegemony of perfection?

One of the participants said, my experience is that advertisements, which are shown, cause disturbance in the budget of the women living the 'working women hostel'. You start stealing things and money of others that results in quarrel. A child steals Rs.10 from his school and when he is asked he said I have to eat 'Chaska Maska' biscuits. Actually he had seen that ad of biscuits. These things affect young minds and have bad effects on society too.

Roopa Vajpai stated that in India, there is no organisation working for the consumer rights of the disabled person. But in UK there is an organisation, which works basically on the disabled-friendly, designing of the products specifically to the needs of the individual. In India, this is absent.

Another participant shared her views as a mother, who was suffering from anxiety over the advertisements of some food products. She mentioned the Rasna ad. "My children will always ask me why I don't give them Rasna. Rasna is advertised in such a way that it is very wholesome, although it made of chemicals." She said the same was true of the ad of Gagan vanaspati in which the children said the mother who loves her children, cooks it in 'Gagan vanaspati'. "Many times I tried to make them understand that oil is hydrogenated and we use another oil." She felt it was the responsibility of advertisers not to promote products like 'Rasna' or Ganga vanaspati is good, healthy products.

Mridula Murgai a member of the Forum of Viewers' with Disability presented some examples saying in Ramayana, Tulsidas has praised the beauty of Sita in 16 pages and exclusively two pages are devoted to her fairness. It has been a tradition since then, it has nothing to do with the present. It increased under British colonial rule. You go through Mahabharat and Kalidas: in every case, a woman's beauty has been described and priority given to her eyes and fairness.

One participant said fairness was not the most important attribute. If we have confidence, we can achieve anything. But she was contradicted by a participant who said that despite being self-confident we all are vulnerable and susceptible. The more we spend on cosmetics, the more we are satisfied and go out confidently.

Another participant, Anjali was keen that an awareness be created amongst viewers about advertising. Instead of making a noise about that these ads, why don't we work on educating people and help them to make a choice? One lady felt we are perpetuating and contributing to an increase in crime against women by just projecting women as a symbol of beauty and sex objects only.

Madhu, a member of the Forum of Viewers' said we talk about how we get influenced by advertising but I think all of us want to influence people also. I don't want to walk into a room and find nobody taking any notice of me, I want to walk into a room, and either speak or walk in a particular way, or be dressed in a particular way, so that every one notices. This is an advantage I get right a way. So in a way, I am advertising my self and the advertisers are advertising products.

Maybe we are looking at superficial things. If you look good, if you present yourself well, the way you carry your self, all of this is very much a part of influencing and attracting people. But I think we also pick perhaps the easiest ways, so let us not blame the advertisements, alone.

Akhila Sivadas, Director of CFAR said that the advertiser was not the target. ``Obviously they are selling products and we are here, exercising our options as consumers to deliberate on what they are selling and how are they selling them? Should we as a

consumer be swayed by their techniques? If the advertiser is talking about the product we welcome it but how much of that information is balanced, is essential, fundamental and basic? We are looking at very poor standardization we are looking at many problems at even the level of information but even more latent is our concern about the kind of differential values, how the advertiser says this is superior and that is inferior.

This business of superior and inferior, the comparative value system is disturbing. Just two months ago, when I was in New York, I found the ads very aggressive but very informative, very targeted. Certainly they promote the perfect body, but they're also focussing on a well-exercised body, good texture skin They are very careful about story line, and any body can drag them to court for any kind of ethnic value contempt. So we are really deliberating as consumers, our main responsibility is as a consumer.

Another participant said in India beauty consciousness started from the time of Sushmita Sen. Since then girls are more conscious about their beauty and dieting. A responsible forum should be formed to check whether it is good for long run or not.

Manisha Arora another participant said all ads are useful and important for us because we can't gather information from the market about each and every product. Some instructions must be there when the products are shown, like which bleach is useful to which type of skin.

Vajpai talked about segmentation in the market. It is something that market forces have to do. They categorize the women too and so the products to suit them. In Japan, she said, there is a morning shampoo, evening shampoo, a boyfriend shampoo, etc.

Sadhana Vohra agreed. In the beginning, ads played a major role in informing consumers about what is available. We need information. We need to know what is available. They started hooking viewers with the story lines. But stories have a problem. They show other people as better and happier than us because they are using a particular product. They encourage you to become like those people. Based on this aspiration they are trying to sell their products. This affects us in two ways. Either we start believing that we can be like them and we start buying those products or we star feeling totally out of the loop. For example, if the ads show all blonde women. Then a woman like me who can never be blonde will switch off the TV...Even if I bleach my hair it won't stay like this for long...so I will be so

disenfranchised, I will walk away. Thus there are sections in our society which are totally sidelined and there are others like us who have growing feeling that we are not good enough. We will have to build positive stories among ourselves so that we can feel good ourselves. Only then, these ads can prove helpful and informative.

Then, Meeta made small presentation on the role of regulation and especially ASCI (See Annexure 3). She shared with the participants details of ASCI and its codes and some recent judgements on TV ads of beauty products.

Sudeesh Pachuri summed up the meeting and asked Akhila to give the Vote of Thanks.

Akhila highlighted the options consumers have. ``We can go to the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) which is a regulatory body. We need to find ways as member of this Forum to make our voice heard. It is not enough to just have the right attitude or the right perspective. We also need to master the sources of information to establish what is correct and what is incorrect.