



# GUIDE TO REPORTING SEXIST ADVERTISING

What we see and hear in the media affects us, as individuals and as a society

Studies have shown that when we're repeatedly shown images of women as victims or sexualised objects, it can shape our values and attitudes, creating acceptance of these ideas as normal.

That's why advertising companies and media organisations have a responsibility to avoid using imagery that's sexist, exploitative or overly violent – and they're bound to that responsibility by their own code of ethics and by state law.

If you see something that you think oversteps the line, there are steps you can take to get it removed.

## **What advertising can and can't show**

Discriminatory imagery is prohibited by Victorian law. On top of that, Australia's advertising companies have created their own code of ethics about the kinds of things that shouldn't be shown in advertising.

Here's a quick summary of a few things they've pledged to do:

- Not discriminate against people because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual preference, religion, disability, mental illness or political beliefs.
- Not use sexual imagery in a way that's exploitative or degrading to any group of people.
- Not show violence, unless it relates to the thing being sold.
- To treat sex and nudity with sensitivity to the relevant audience (for example, when advertising is aimed at kids, or shown in a timeslot when children are likely to be watching).

## What's acceptable?

It's not always easy to say definitively whether something is discriminatory, sexist or exploitative – there will always be differing views on where exactly the line is. But here are some of the things that might lead an advertisement to be considered 'over the line'.

### Does it show people as a 'product'?

Is a person shown as a sexualised commodity or product? An example would be showing someone as a thing that can be bought or sold without their consent.

### Is someone being harmed?

Does the image show a sexualised person being harmed, coerced or unable to give consent?

### Does it treat people as interchangeable?

Does the image show a sexualised person as interchangeable – for example, by being presented among a collection of similar bodies?

### Are people's bodies reduced to just body parts?

Is a sexualised person shown as just body parts, such as breasts or buttocks? Are people treated like objects? Is a sexualised person's body used as an object, like a chair or a table?

### Does it show one gender as inferior to the other?

Is one gender shown as being less intelligent, or unable to do certain activities?

## Making a complaint

If you've seen something that's discriminatory or sexist, there are a few different ways you can go about getting it removed.

### Contact the advertiser

Advertisers are generally concerned about public perception – and, in many cases, they may not realise they're offending people with their advertising.

Often the simplest way to remove a piece of sexist content is to contact the advertiser directly, and to request a response.



For more information about this process, visit [melbourne.vic.gov.au](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au)

## Making your complaint

Make your complaint in writing by clearly outlining how the advertisement is discriminatory or sexist, and why it is harmful. Be as clear as you can – they can only address your complaint if they can understand why you find their advertisement offensive.

Weight of numbers also helps, so encourage your friends, family and workmates to write their own letters or emails too.

### What happens then?

The advertiser should respond to your complaint. Make sure you keep a copy of any correspondence you send and receive, so that you've got a record of the issue having been raised.

If you're not happy with their response – which isn't uncommon – you've got the right to escalate your complaint to one of the regulatory bodies listed below.

## Contact the Advertising Standards Bureau

The Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) was created by advertising companies to police themselves. It works to uphold a code of ethics created by the advertising industry, but it's not backed up by any government legislation.

The ASB is often the next step people take if they're unhappy with the response they receive from the advertiser. You can go straight to the ASB without going to the advertiser first.

### Making your complaint

You can make your complaint by going to the ASB website, hitting the 'Lodge a complaint' button on the front page, and filling in your details and the specifics of the offensive advertisement.

### What happens then?

The ASB will examine your complaint, decide whether it should be acted on, and let you know their decision.

If they agree with you, they'll ask the advertiser to remove the offending advertisement – and the advertisers pretty much always comply.

If they rule against your complaint, you can ask for a review of the decision at a cost of \$100 (which is refunded if they end up changing their original stance).

## Contact the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

This is the government body that helps people resolve complaints about discrimination, sexual harassment, victimisation and racial or religious vilification.

You should approach the commission if you think the advertisement you saw is in breach of discrimination laws – there's no requirement to contact the advertisers or the ASB first.

### Making your complaint

You can lodge a complaint with them online or by calling 1300 292 153. You can make a complaint in any language, and the commission can organise a translator or sign language interpreter if needed.

### What happens then?

The commission uses a conciliation process to resolve complaints, by having the people involved talk through the issues with the aim of reaching an agreement about how to resolve the dispute.



## Other things you can do

You don't have to rely on the advertisers or the government bodies to take action for you – here are some other ways you can take action.

### Raise awareness on social media

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr present powerful ways to raise awareness about sexism or discrimination in advertising.

Make yourself heard on the advertiser's social media pages, or spread the word and encourage others to also make complaints; the more people who complain, the stronger your case against the advertiser.

### Start an online petition

Online petition websites like change.org or Collective Shout can be an effective way to rally support for your issue, particularly when promoted on social media.

### Join a campaign

There are people out there already fighting against sexism, objectification and discrimination – why not get involved?

- Destroy the Joint - An Australian Facebook page dedicated to exposing sexism in the media and preventing violence against women.
- Collective Shout - A grassroots movement campaigning against the objectification of women in the media.
- The Luke Batty Foundation - A foundation dedicated to preventing violence against women and children, and to raising awareness around the attitudes that cause it.
- Our Watch - An organisation created to change the behaviours and attitudes that lead to violence against women and children.

- Violence and women: telling it like it is - An initiative of the Centre for Advancing Journalism, aimed at creating a space for women to share their stories (anonymously, if they wish) about domestic violence.
- White Ribbon - A male-led campaign to end men's violence against women.
- 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Campaign - A global campaign to raise awareness about violence against women, and the impact it has on women's physical, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing.

## Guidelines, industry codes and complaints

- Advertising Standards Bureau - Gender Complaints Overview ([adstandards.com.au](http://adstandards.com.au))
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission - Make a Complaint page ([humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au](http://humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au))
- Victorian Government - Gender Portrayal Guidelines ([dpc.vic.gov.au](http://dpc.vic.gov.au))

## Feedback

Did you find this information useful? We welcome your feedback by completing the feedback form on the Guide for Reporting Sexist Advertising page on the City of Melbourne website.

For more information, contact City of Melbourne on 03 9658 9658 or [melbourne.vic.gov.au](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au)