

---

---

# No sex please, we're women.

WRITER SABINE CLAPPAERT



**I'm a woman and I don't like sex. I want everything around me to be nice, perfect and clean and I want it to be completely politically correct. And above all: no sex, please.**

That at least, is the way I understood women to want things after reading a press statement by the European Parliament's women's rights commission stating that all stereotypes in advertising should be outlawed and a few days later being confronted with a recent study by KU Leuven about the effects of nudity in advertising.

It's interesting to see how our lawmakers and ad-makers alike still grapple with what it is that women want.

European lawmakers, under the watchful eye of Ms Svensson, on the one hand,

call for a ban of all gender stereotypes in advertising. A woman cleaning the kitchen, a man polishing his car. Svensson wants us to realize that these images play up (or down) to stereotypes about the role of men and women – and in doing so undermine equality between the sexes. I agree with Svensson when she says that “gender stereotyping in advertising straitjackets women, men, girls and boys by restricting them to predetermined and artificial roles that are often degrading, humiliating and dumbed down for both sexes”.

Boys should be allowed to play dress-up with their dolls without Dad having a heart attack. Girls should be allowed to come home with a blue eye after a scrap in the schoolyard without Mom becoming hysterical about the reputation of her little girl. Women should be able to admit to enjoying

one-night stands, and men should be allowed to cry during Sex in the City.

While I agree with Svensson that stereotypes can help confine people to boxes they don't fit into, I don't support her solution to the issue. The recommendation that governments police the advertising industry by creating regulatory bodies to monitor ads and introduce a “zero-tolerance” policy against stereotyping and degrading imagery fills me with a faint sense of George Orwellian dread. I wonder how the concepts ‘stereotypes’ and ‘degrading’ will be defined for me, and by whom.

What if the government doesn't like the ad for Opium perfume featuring a stunningly naked size 42 Sophie Dahl in a pose suggesting masturbation? Provocative? Yes. Degrading? No. And will they disapprove

---

---

of the legendary Diet Coke commercial featuring a bare-chested male construction worker? This ad too plays perfectly to a gender stereotype – but it worked oh so tantalizingly well...

Having grown up in South Africa during the apartheid infested eighties, it may be my fear of an overbearing authority speaking, but the question of who will decide what is acceptable or not, and whether these definitions will change with the government of the day, keep me awake. Government-sponsored media control not only affects freedom of speech, it also strips us of our personal responsibility as individuals to help effect change. That is much worse for society than stereotyping a woman fawning ecstatically over her whiter-than-white washing.

The problem with the acceptability of stereotypes lies in this: many stereotypes are in part based on reality. Is a stay-at-home mom a stereotype or a reality? Is a young, muscular construction worker a reality or a perpetuated reality? Distinguishing between reality and what is perpetuated as reality is a very grey area I would rather not have policed by the government du jour.

Which brings me to that other famous grey area in advertising: nudity. A recent study researched the impact of nudity on economic behavior and found that – surprise, surprise: nudity works. Well, at least it does for men. When it came to the way it affects women's behavior, answers became a lot more vague. From "An important group of women is also sensitive to images of scantily clad men" or the confusing "women are equally excitable and will no doubt show changes in their consumption behaviour, but these changes will occur in situations in which the sexual stimulus is delivered through touch instead of through sight."

I'm still trying to understand these findings. Which women exactly fit into this "important of women"? And if, as the study says, women are sensitive to images of scantily clad men, then what about me liking the Opium ad featuring a squirming Ms Dahl?

...And God forbid we consider the implications of women being more affected by a

sexual impulse delivered through touch. I'm just not ready for a sensual fondle by the sales assistant at the local Zara!

But seriously: does nudity in advertising affect women? Yes, it does. I know the stereotype says that women don't like sex or that women are not affected by nudity, but the reality is: we do and we are! We like our Diet Coke Man as much as we like our naked Sophie Dahl. But for us, nudity for nudity's sake doesn't work. It must add value to the message. If it sells us an empowering emotion, if it makes us giggle, if it holds up an inspiring, sensual mirror, if it conveys unabandoned freedom or playful eroticism, then yes, we are affected.

So instead of heading down the slippery slope of government-sponsored media censorship or silently allowing misperceptions about women to persist, here's my recommendation: let's support Ms Svensson's suggestion that the advertising industry instead give prizes to companies who do the most to break down what it sees as gender 'straitjackets'. But let's also take up our own responsibility as individuals and speak up about what we will and won't accept, what we like or don't like.

Do I like degrading images of women? No, I don't. But I like the fact that some government could be deciding for me what is acceptable and what not much less. Shouldn't we as women and consumers be wielding our own conscience and using our wallets to show the advertising industry and big business what we do and don't like, what we will and will not tolerate? For although it is a government's task to draw global boundaries, it remains our individual responsibility to stand up and count in shaping positive and constructive images that accurately reflect our society.

*(original English text of the article "Geen sex graag, wij zijn vrouwen", published in De Morgen Wax, December 2008)*

**But seriously:  
does nudity  
in advertising  
affect women?  
Yes, it does.**