



Case Study:  
**Titillating Abusive Advertising**  
 By Anushka Virahsawmy

**Synopsis**

For over 10 years, Media Watch Organisation (MWO), under the leadership of Loga Virahsawmy, has brought about sanctions against abusive, degrading and unacceptable advertising with an unfair sexual connotation on the Mauritian market. Billboards, posters, newspapers, magazines, songs, television and radio have all been scrutinised to bridge the gaps between policies in place against gender violence, the existing code of ethics (from the Association of Advertising Agencies of Mauritius) and the sexist and degrading advertising on the local market. This best practice demonstrates that with the commitment of various stakeholders, i.e. MWO, the local authorities and the government including the sex discrimination division, challenging issues are tackled and solutions are found.

**Brief Background**

In the seventeenth century, advertising as a discrete form is generally agreed to have begun with newspapers, which included line or classified advertising. Simple descriptions of products served their purpose until the late nineteenth century, when technological advances meant that illustrations could be added and colour was also an option.

It was not until the emergence of advertising agencies in the latter part of the nineteenth century that advertising became a fully-fledged institution with its own way of working and with its own creative values. These agencies were a response to an increasingly crowded marketplace, where manufacturers were realising that promotion of their products was vital if they were to survive. They sold themselves as experts in communication to their clients and this is when

the whole concept of stereotyping started, as advertisers found a shorthand way of communicating a set of meanings.

Throughout history there have been many studies that suggest women are mainly portrayed in advertisements as housewives or in occupations that are subservient to men. Men are shown as primarily functional and associated with heavy machinery, business decisions, wearing executive suits and watches, and being taller than women, etc. Women on the other hand are shown as decorative accessories, associated with kitchen equipment and domestic financial decisions and are often shown lying down on beds and floors.

According to the research report *Mirror on the Media: Gender and Advertising in Southern Africa*, published by Gender Links in 2007, women are more likely to



Billboard using a woman's image to advertise fried chicken

feature in advertisements than as news sources. Overall, women constituted 41% of all subjects (those featuring in the advertisements as voices and or images) in the advertising monitoring, compared to the regional average of 21% news sources in the *Gender and Media Progress Study* of 2010.

Women are also far more likely to feature as images than as voices in advertisements. In the study, women comprised 54% of subjects in billboards followed by 51% of the subjects in print advertisements. In contrast, they comprised 42% of TV and 35% of radio advertisement subjects. Another way in which stereotypes are reinforced is in the different roles that women and men are portrayed in advertising. For example women constitute 82% of those classified as model/beauty contestant/sex object and 60% of home-makers. Men dominated in business (68%).

The research also found that many of the most graphic examples of blatant stereotypes came from billboards.

A high proportion of these featured women placed

in the picture merely as a lure or decoration, with no relationship whatsoever to the product advertised. These took the form of a woman with a sensual look in front of a car; a scantily dressed young woman with a "thumbs up" for a new SMMS service; the "storm in a D Cup" woman in a bra with a packet of cigarettes that she is not even touching barely showing in the background despite the fact that they are the main subject of the advertisement. Another billboard example is an advertisement of women's underwear. Rather than appealing to women, the subject is lying down and "ready to bare," projecting her as an object for the pleasure of men.

This trend is still very powerful today even though there are more and more gender activists who are making their voices heard. Mauritius has come a long way with a decline in sexist advertising and more and more organisations are cautious of the type of either commercial or business advertising they are propagating in the market.

## Objectives

Media Watch Organisation (MWO) is the Mauritian Chapter of the Southern Africa Gender and Media (GEM) Network, which works in partnership with Gender Links of South Africa. MWO is an independent membership-based organisation that strives to be a visible and inclusive human rights organisation interacting with the media towards the achievement of a non-sexist society. It serves as a checkpoint for the gender awareness of media works. It ensures that gender awareness in the media is highly visible. It challenges negative stereotyping and lack of representation of women in the media. It also takes practical steps to gain access for women who are excluded from the media. Furthermore, it promotes networking which bridges the gap between grassroots women, parliament, institutions and the media.

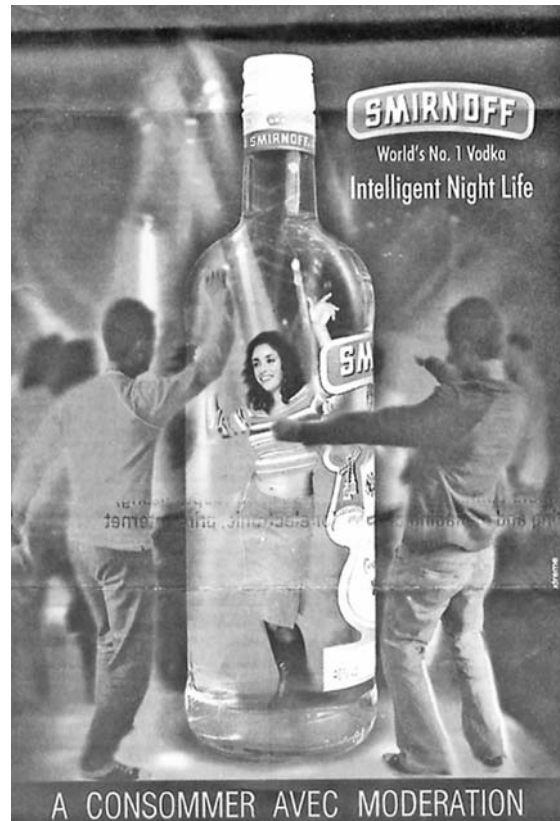
The striking pressurising methods and the 'CAN DO' attitude adopted by Media Watch Organisation through the media and different stakeholders have earned the organisation a notorious reputation amongst the advertising agencies in Mauritius. The organisation has also demonstrated high effectiveness in undertaking timely actions in filing complaints and ensuring the removal of sexist advertisements.

## Target

Advertisers through their Billboards, posters, newspapers, magazines, songs, television and radio adverts and regulators through the reinforcement of their policies.

## Process

The beginning of Media Watch Organisation's challenge started a few years ago, when it took its first public stand against the brick/cement company United Basalt Production (UBP), one of the biggest and oldest cement industries in Mauritius. UBP was advertising its product in both newspapers and the broadcast media. The print advertisement illustrated



a brick next to which was the silhouette of a woman's legs with the very simplistic slogan "UBP block will go through time without any damage." The even cheaper televised version showed a woman performing a strip tease in front of the brick as a desperate attempt to turn it on. The subjective slogan was that the building block will NOT bulge even with the desperate attempt of the woman to do so.

This unsophisticated and uncreative advert proved to be equally offensive to men and women and was eventually subject to Media Watch Organisation filing a formal complaint to the Independent Broadcasting Authority's (IBA) complaint commission. After much debate about the subject, the adverts were banned. This was the pride of Media Watch Organisation under the leadership of Loga Virahsawmy.

From thereon a series of advertisements including 4

Play (a chain of fashionable garments for youngsters), an advert for an alcoholic drink where a woman is trapped in a bottle with three men surrounding her and adverts using the naked human body without the product having any relation to it, were removed. Media Watch Organisation did not wince at Benetton's renowned provocative strategy. By that time with all the positive work the organisation was doing, the best practices achieved and also with the commitment of various stakeholders, the local authorities and the government including the Sex Discrimination Division, challenging issues were tackled and solutions were found. Some of the battles were of bigger endeavours than others. For example, the international organisation Benetton was not amused by the decision of the attorney of Mauritius to remove the billboards and threatened that legal action would be taken against the Government of Mauritius.

Media Watch Organisation sustains its credibility over time as a result of its promptness, strong public discourse through the media and refusal to compromise.

### Resources

The President of the Organisation and some members organised workshops in various media houses. The government played a key part in the success of the project.

### Sustainability

The collaboration of Media Watch Organisation with strong local partners has led to various fruitful initiatives. As a careful watchdog, Media Watch Organisation has built strong alliances with multiple partners including the Attorney General, Ministry of Women (now Ministry of Gender Equality), the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), the Association of Advertising Agencies (AAA) and the Press Complaints Commission, amongst others.

### Outputs and Outcomes

Another key collaborative principle of Media Watch Organisation with its partners is the active participation in the formulation of gender sensitive policies. In July 2010, the organisation was invited to attend a dialogue session organised by the IBA in view of disseminating and discussing the finalised "Code of Ethics" with all the relevant stakeholders prior to its adoption. The IBA solicited the participation of Gender Links to ensure that women were not undermined within the provision for the new Code of Ethics. The key point brought forward by Media Watch Organisation and Gender Links addressed the importance of adding a few lines to the advertising and drama section.

The Code of Ethics read that "The rules as to the use of children in advertising materials are clearly defined in the Code of Advertising Practice (Chapter 3, Protection of Minors)" and "Licensees shall also ensure that trailers and advertisements contain material suitable for the time of its transmission and likely audience." Media Watch Organisation and Gender Links added that the IBA should ensure that advertisements, drama, sex and nudity scenes in the broadcast media do not reinforce women stereotypes.

Section 1.2 in relation to Sex and Nudity states that "Many people are offended, some of them deeply, by the portrayal of sex and nudity in television programmes. The existing ethnically and culturally diverse nature of the Mauritian society makes content that is liable to cause offence on television a potentially charged issue. Though popular entertainment and comedy have always relied to some extent on sexual innuendo and ambiguous gesture and behaviour, this however does not justify crudity. Therefore the portrayal of sexual behaviour and that of nudity needs to be contextualised and scheduled appropriately." Once again, it was added that the use of sex and nudity in advertising should be explicated within the policy to ensure the elimination of sexist advertisements. All feedback provided by Media Watch Organisation and Gender Links were accepted



and shall be given due consideration prior to the adoption of the new Code of Ethics. The IBA reassured that they would compile, review and consider all feedbacks.

In 2004, the Ministry of Women, Media Watch Organisation and the Association of Advertising Agencies (AAA) took a creative approach to promote gender sensitivity within the advertising sector. A call amongst professional advertising agencies and graphic design students was made to participate in the Gender Sensitive Advertising Award. Since then, various collaborative programs have been undertaken; all crowned with success and resulting in increased awareness amongst advertising agencies.

### Challenges and Way Forward

There has been an interesting decline of titillating abusive advertising in the media and the continuous effort of Media Watch Organisation has paid off. The most recent advert for a brand of whisky in a woman's cleavage needed a telephone call from Loga Virahsawmy to the relevant authorities to get the advert removed from the media. Another success story is with Pride Mark, a chain of fashionable clothing, which used a woman unzipping her hotpants to advertise sensational sales. After a letter was sent explaining the damage their kind of

advertisement can do on our society, they apologised profusely and removed all their adverts.

Media Watch Organisation takes pride in all the challenges and gaps that have been bridged and would like to thank all the stakeholders for their support and commitment. This is an ongoing process and MWO prides itself in keeping a good rapport with all the business partners.

### Replication

A building of trust with various stakeholders is the key to replicate this best practice. A lot of discussions will be needed and training will also have to be given. If you have the buy in of the stakeholders and a good business case, anything can happen.

#### Writers Bio

Anushka Virahsawmy is one of the founding members of Media Watch Organisation, and worked on various projects with the organisation, including: media monitoring (newspaper, radio and television for the 16 days campaign); a dance therapy project "MIRAK" designed to heal the stigmas and traumas associated with gender violence as well as raise awareness on the creative ways to challenge gender violence and gender stereotypes in Mauritius; and various gender training workshop. She has 15 years experience in designing, marketing, communications and training and is presently working for an international Business Process Outsourcing Firm.

