Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1557 (2007)[1]

The image of women in advertising

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly notes that images of women which are totally at odds with their actual roles in our contemporary societies are still common in advertising today.

2. Too often, advertising shows women in situations which are humiliating and degrading, or even violent and offensive to human dignity.

3. The Assembly is angered by the fact that it is nearly always women who are reduced to the role of mere consumer commodities or sex objects in certain advertisements.

4. Respect for human dignity should, however, be one of the advertisers' constant aims.

5. The Assembly is aware that much work will be required to change attitudes and demolish stereotypes which do women a disservice in their fight for equality. Its fundamental aim is accordingly to ensure that women everywhere can at last see their real image faithfully reflected in the world in which they lead their daily lives.

6. It welcomes the fact that certain governments, non-governmental organisations and European governmental agencies have made progress on the image of women in the media and advertising. Studies have been carried out and laws have even been strengthened in order to combat discrimination between women and men.

7. However, the Assembly deplores the persistence of negative images and representations of women in advertising, which is partly due to the fact that many European states lack adequate laws and that national advertising codes are either ignored or are sometimes even non-existent.

8. It accordingly asks the Council of Europe's member states to take the necessary action to ensure that, whatever form it may take, the image of women is respected in a dignified and non-discriminatory way, while respecting the basic principle of freedom of expression, which rules out any form of censorship.

9. It denounces the harm done to the health of young girls, such as anorexia and, in later life, the development of conditions such as osteoporosis, provoked by certain advertisements that present thin women as a standard of beauty.

10. It recalls the importance of the Declaration and Platform for Action of the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing, September 1995), which recommends, among other things, that the media and advertising bodies develop, consistent with freedom of expression, professional guidelines and codes of conduct and other forms of self-regulation to promote the presentation of non-stereotyped images of women.

11. Basing itself on the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 18 December 1979, the Assembly emphasises the need for action of three kinds: regulation, self-regulation and education to help people to react critically to advertising.

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1. Assembly debate on 26 June 2007 (21st Sitting) (see Doc. 11286, report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Bilgehan). Text adopted by the Assembly on 26 June 2007 (21st Sitting).

12. The Assembly accordingly recommends that the Council of Europe member states:

12.1. ratify the Optional Protocol to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, make a declaration accepting the amendment to Article 20, paragraph 1, of the convention, bring their laws into line with those texts and submit, if they are not already doing so, regular reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the legislative, judicial, administrative and other measures they have adopted to implement the convention and on progress made in this regard;

12.2. implement the Beijing Platform for Action on women and the media and take stock every year of progress made in this area;

12.3. adopt appropriate domestic laws:

12.3.1. making incitement to discrimination an offence in all advertising media;

12.3.2. giving women's associations the right to take legal action in defence of a collective interest – the elimination of discrimination against women in advertising;

12.4. encourage the introduction of national self-regulating schemes and reinforce the self-regulating machinery set up by national advertising standards authorities by:

12.4.1. amending national ethical codes to prevent the dissemination of advertising images or messages which could be interpreted as inciting discrimination against women or as violating human dignity;

12.4.2. including consumer representatives (women and men) on national advertising standards authorities;

12.4.3. strengthening the binding character of decisions taken by advertising standards authorities;

12.4.4. attaching to national advertising standards authorities a group of experts to make an in-depth study of the mechanisms of advertising;

12.5. take the following educational measures in respect of advertising:

12.5.1. provide further training for advertising professionals, and also basic training in advertising schools, on respecting equality between women and men and, more generally, non-discrimination;

12.5.2. set up programmes to help consumers to analyse the effects of advertising;

12.5.3. provide adequate resources and run programmes in schools to teach children to distinguish between advertising and reality;

12.5.4. run press campaigns to make the public aware of sexist or violent advertising and tell them what they can do to curb it;

12.5.5. provide toll-free phone numbers and e-mail and postal addresses which the public can use to complain when advertisements use images of women which violate human dignity;

12.5.6. introduce a prize awarded by advertising professionals, and a prize awarded by the public, for the advertising campaign which breaks most effectively with sexist stereotypes.