



# Promoting Positive Gender Roles in Marketing and Advertising

In the Context of COVID-19: Key Considerations for Business

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This document builds on material developed by UNICEF Programme Division, Gender, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, UNICEF Private Fundraising and Partnerships, and UN Women. It benefited from the contributions of multiple colleagues; writing was provided by Emer O'Doherty; editing was provided by Catherine Rutgers. We emphasize that this is an interim guidance note, developed in a rapidly evolving situation. It should not be seen as promoting particular work arrangements or other measures. Rather, it provides recommendations to business in relation to the social and economic crisis created by COVID-19. Some content may date quickly, and you are advised to check the sources and online information (via links) regularly.

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# Introduction

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**In an effort to address the impacts of COVID-19, companies are making a number of socially beneficial communications to the public. It is essential that these communications avoid harmful stereotypes and seek to depict positive and progressive gender portrayals. This document provides considerations for corporate entities currently creating socially beneficial communications.**

The unprecedented consequences of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak are being felt around the world. Beyond the immediate public health risks of COVID-19, many women, children and their families are caught in a fast-evolving situation that has disrupted education and childcare, threatened protection from or treatment of all types of illnesses, and led to immediate or impending loss of household income. Restrictions on movement and the socio-economic fallout of the crisis put women and children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect and violence.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, access to vital sexual and reproductive health and other health-care services is in jeopardy, while risks of domestic violence are increasing, along with the likelihood of child marriage and early pregnancy.

The COVID-19 outbreak is heavily affecting the labour market and the economy, including global supply chains, leading to widespread business disruptions. Loss of jobs and income, and rising poverty, are rapidly becoming a reality for many more workers.<sup>2</sup> The absence of adequate social protection systems further exacerbates the vulnerability of working families, and especially women, who make up a disproportionate percentage of the informal labour force.

For families at the front line of the response, there is heightened risk of exposure to illness, pressure of

longer work hours, stress and mental trauma, which all have implications for children and other family members. In the health and social sectors worldwide, women constitute 70 per cent of workers, are less likely than men to have full-time employment, and face a significant gender pay gap.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of school and childcare closures, the domestic care responsibilities of parents working outside the home, especially women, have increased considerably. Globally, women already do three times as much unpaid care work as men. Experiences from other disease outbreaks, such as the Ebola virus disease and the Zika virus infection, show that this burden of care also increases women's risk of infection.

This makes for a challenging time to engage audiences with messages of service and support. While many brands are currently struggling to produce new marketing materials in response to the health crisis, others are taking the time to assess their messaging and ensure it reflects COVID-19 sensitivities around impacts such as social distancing and hygiene practices.

UNICEF and UN Women do not advocate using the topic of COVID-19 as a marketing opportunity; however, it is unavoidable that some media and brands or organizations will be particularly motivated to respond.

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1 See, for example: UNICEF, '[COVID-19: Children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence amidst intensifying containment measures](#)', 20 March 2020.

2 Initial estimates by the International Labour Organization "point to a significant rise in unemployment and underemployment in the wake of the virus, all figures indicate a substantial rise in global unemployment." (ILO, '[COVID-19 and the World of Work: Impact and policy responses](#)', 18 March 2020, p. 3).

3 Boniol, Mathieu, et al., '[Gender Equity in the Health Workforce](#): Analysis of 104 countries', Working Paper 1, World Health Organization, Geneva, March 2019, p. 1.

Businesses may be communicating to customers or employees about protection against COVID-19, highlighting helpful products or services, reflecting the reality of changed lives or communicating initiatives for social good.

**During this time of global crisis, we have a crucial opportunity to inspire everyone to work together in the ongoing enterprise of promoting positive gender roles to everyone's benefit.**

Marketing communications have always had a unique platform for portraying empowering gender roles, allowing girls' and women's voices to be heard and representing their needs as well as those of boys and men. In all types of public or internal communication, it is also important to recognize that unconscious bias

can lead to unintended use of harmful stereotypes, especially in such a fast-moving situation.

When we depict positive gender roles, taking care to include female perspectives and avoid harmful stereotypes around women's and girls' roles in society, media and marketing and advertising, we can play a proactive role in challenging social norms and discrimination and balancing the burden of care currently experienced in homes around the world.

Emergencies can offer opportunities for heightened awareness around positive change and promote the importance of women's voices and leadership. The current situation provides a chance to disrupt gender stereotypes, change traditional narratives, and show that leadership and decision-making, household chores, and caring for and teaching children can and should be shared responsibilities, advancing equality for all.

## Considerations to Ensure Gender Equality and Positive Representation Through Marketing and Advertising

Marketing communications during the COVID-19 crisis can act as a positive force in driving gender equality for the benefit of all. To avoid harmful gender stereotypes that can increase the burden on women and girls, consider applying the **3Ps – Presence, Perspective and Personality:** <sup>4</sup>

### PRESENCE

**Presence** considers who is featured in the communication. Ensure that a diversity of people – including girls and boys, women and men – are included to reflect the world in which we live.

### PERSPECTIVE

**Perspective** relates to the framing of the communication, and from whose perspective the story is told. Take care to feature female and male perspectives, equally.

### PERSONALITY

**Personality** refers to the depth of the character. Portray men and women, children and young people as multidimensional, with their own depth of personality and agency.

<sup>4</sup> The 3Ps were developed by the Unstereotype Alliance, UN Women's action platform that seeks to eradicate harmful gender-based stereotypes in all advertising and media content, <https://www.unstereotypealliance.org>.

# DEPICTING WORK PRACTICES



As business puts in place steps to protect workers' risk of exposure and many employees work from home for the first time, consider showing the diversity of employees, workplaces and household types as well as the availability and use of technology and practical solutions around the world. For example, marketing and advertising communications could look to:

- Include women and men at work in a variety of situations and leadership roles.
- Reflect the reality of diverse family settings and working practices, including multi-generation households, single mother- or father-led families, and other non-nuclear family set-ups.
- Show teleworking situations to reflect shared solutions in diverse households (couples and other male and female family members sharing space, house-share/roommate situations, etc.).
- Include all genders and diverse settings in content giving advice on how to socially distance, implement safe ways of commuting or receive deliveries into the home.
- When illustrating health-care settings, reflect the reality that 70 per cent of health and social sector workers worldwide are women, and show women as doctors and decision makers, not only nurses, cleaners or caterers.
- Show how technological solutions in a family context allow all members of a household to work effectively, and show women using technology as much as men.
- Depict women in non-traditional work roles (e.g., women migrating back to the village after a factory shutdown or leaving a technology company that is closing for a few weeks).
- Include all genders in images and content, showing the diversity of society across race, class, ability and body size.

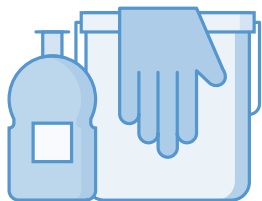
# DEPICTING EDUCATION AT HOME



As more countries take measures to limit the movement of citizens to protect health, there will be an increased need for educational resources and tools for teaching children at home. To promote positive portrayals of gender roles, consider if content could:

- Show both men and women helping children of all ages in home-schooling situations, not just mothers.
- Portray girls as well as boys being given time, space and resources to continue with home-studies when schools are closed.
- Look to ensure that suitable home-schooling resources such as learning materials, books, toys and games are available and accessible for both boys and girls. Take care to avoid conveying harmful stereotypes.
- Show girls and boys in non-stereotypical home-learning activities (e.g., girls can pursue activities related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, while boys can also practise arts or languages).
- Show men as well as women demonstrating correct methods of handwashing to children.

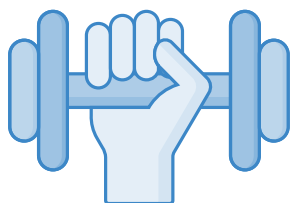
# DEPICTING HOUSEHOLD TASKS AND BURDEN OF CARE



With normal shopping habits suspended and families restricted to their homes, communications might show how all family members can contribute to household tasks and caregiving responsibilities. For example:

- Emphasize equal sharing of all types of work and offer messaging that encourages shared responsibilities and promotes equal opportunities within the household.
- Ensure boys and men are also shown preparing meals, doing housework, taking care of children in the home or bringing children to health centres or hospitals; show boys and men using cleaning products in a competent manner.
- Show fathers as well as mothers demonstrating correct methods of handwashing and preparing healthy meals. Make sure not to reinforce the misconception that family hygiene is the sole responsibility of mothers or other female family members.
- Show men and boys caring for young children, the sick and the elderly, as well as women and girls.
- Consider using marketing and advertising channels to promote messages to end violence within households against women and children.
- Make sure household tasks traditionally associated with women are portrayed with equal importance as traditional male tasks. Use communications to promote the idea that traditionally 'female tasks' should also be carried out by men and boys, and that women and girls can do traditionally 'male' tasks.

# COMMUNICATING OPTIONS FOR HOME EXERCISE AND PERSONAL HEALTH



With movement outdoors restricted, consider harmful stereotypes around the way keeping healthy in the home is presented. For example, content could look to:

- Show both girls and boys, women and men exercising at home and show both mothers and fathers, and other female and male caregivers engaging in exercise (with or without children).
- Avoid gender stereotyping the kinds of sports in which boys/men and girls/women are participating, and keep an equal balance in portraying girls' and boys' skills and capacities in practising sports.
- Avoid messages that encourage women and girls to use quarantine as a time to lose weight or achieve beauty standards.
- In communication portraying and/or encouraging children and parents to talk about emotions or the psychological burdens of the pandemic, show children and parents, especially boys and fathers, to be experiencing and expressing all spectrums of emotion, including sadness and grief.

# Act for Gender Equality Beyond Marketing

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Businesses also have a vital role in taking action to support empowering gender norms beyond marketing, advertising and other communications. During the COVID-19 crisis, it is increasingly important for the private sector to protect the most vulnerable groups. The seven Women's Empowerment Principles<sup>5</sup>, for example, offer a vigorous framework for business in understanding and applying concrete measures to promote gender equality.

The points outlined below provide ideas for action that support positive gender norms in the workplace, marketplace and community.

## Workplace

Ensure that all companies adopt and implement workplace policies that are gender-sensitive and inclusive of new COVID-19 challenges, e.g., how to ensure safety, and deliver training and professional development. Such action could aim to:

- Adopt flexible working arrangements with full pay during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly for parents and other caregivers, including both men and women, and demonstrating their important roles within families.
- Support employees who are unexpectedly working from home through online guidance and training on remote working arrangements, processes and technology.
- Consider providing hazard pay to workers in the service industry (a majority of whom are women) to cover, at minimum, medical insurance.
- Set up easily accessible hotline services for employees that provide resources and guidance for preventing domestic abuse and violence, and to report risk or instances in the home or other settings.

## Marketplace

Step up as a responsible business to help contain COVID-19 and make us safer, stronger and more connected through inclusive and

responsive supply chain policies and standards of engagement. For example:

- Ensure diversity in supply chains, including by supporting women-owned suppliers and making them more visible through pro bono ads.
- Take the opportunity to discover new local businesses, particularly women-owned companies, and support them by sourcing their products and services.
- Support local retailers to leverage connectivity and mobile services to sell their products.
- Connect small- and women-owned businesses with grants and funding opportunities.

## Community

In times of crisis, such as COVID-19, there are many ways for businesses to support their customers and the broader community. In just a short list of examples, companies can:

- Contribute targeted financial products and services that help women and girls overcome specific COVID-19 challenges.
- Donate personal protective equipment, food and services.
- Consider supporting employees' household costs for rent and utilities (water, gas, electricity, internet access).

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<sup>5</sup> The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) are based on international labour and human rights standards, and grounded in the recognition that businesses have a stake in and a responsibility for gender equality and women's empowerment. For more information and associated resources, see: <https://www.weeps.org/about>. This work is funded by the European Union through the WE EMPOWER G7 programme (2018-2020).

