

# Sociological Study on the Female Stereotypes in Sri Lankan TV Commercials

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**Abstract**— Common female stereotypes found in the media have a powerful influence over how society views women and how women view themselves as a whole. A Stereotype is a rigid and inflexible image of the characteristics a group. It attributes these characteristics to all individuals belonging to that group with positive and negative impacts. Thus, the main objective of the present study is to examine the impact of Sri Lankan TV commercials on generating and reflecting the female stereotypes in the society. This content analysis is conducted by employing 100 advertisements selected under purposive sampling method, which has telecasted in the ITN channel from 01<sup>st</sup> September - 30<sup>th</sup> September 2012. The study is limited to ITN, as commercials telecast in TV channels generally similar in nature. Furthermore, ITN has undergone some notable changes to compete with other TV channels and gained much attraction from audiences and came top of the rank in the television awarding ceremonies within the recent years.

According to the research findings, 69% of women in the advertisements were attached to household activities by impounded them in conservative portrayals of the private sphere, while presenting men as an incompetent for those. Female images in the advertisements tend to undervalue women as whole, and diminish them to sexual objects and passive human beings by adding desirable physical characteristics include being thin, long-legged, slim-hipped in 71% of commercials. Furthermore, purpose of commoditisation of the female body, it has used 35% of Indian and 10% of European advertisements. Traditional village beauty is highlighted in the most local commercials. In 52% of advertisements women were represented as helpless beings depending on male power and knowledge. This creates very low expectations, especially for adolescents and their role models. Accordingly, most of the advertisements clearly

reflecting the existing gender inequalities and maintain the status quo. These negative stereotypes inevitably affect our cultural values and norms through the socialization process. Thus, it is needed some unbiased practice and policy framework in creating TV commercials in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords**— Stereotype, Commoditisation, Socialization

## I. INTRODUCTION

Female and Female body is used as medium to persuade an audience to purchase products by the contemporary television advertisements. According to Poornima Pokharel, “advertisement is a form of communication intended to convince viewers, readers or listeners to purchase or take some action upon products, ideals or services. Advertising includes the name of a product, its narrative, how that product could benefit the targeted consumer along with its symbolic meanings” ([https://www.academia.edu/1929940/Stereotype\\_representation\\_of\\_female\\_body\\_in\\_advertisement...](https://www.academia.edu/1929940/Stereotype_representation_of_female_body_in_advertisement...).....). The aim of the modern TV commercial is not only the satisfaction of needs but also their creation. For Ervin Goffman, advertisements offer highly stylized versions of social mores, definitions, attitudes, values and behavioural tendencies whose meanings must be clear enough to be interpreted in an instant (Shields, 2002: 37).

Thus, advertisers commonly use stereotypes for conveying their messages to audiences very easily. Stereotype is a shortcut with reference to the world. In other words, stereotypes are effective vehicles of representation as the media communicate with their audiences through the process of representation. By using familiar signs and symbols, they create a representation of reality (Marsha and Jones. 1999: 103). There are several aspects of this process of representation. It always portrays as natural, focus on groups and inevitably

ideological. In general terms stereotypes are attached with negative meaning. Because, they are often confused with prejudices, because, like prejudices, a stereotype is based on a prior assumption (<http://examples.yourdictionary.com/Stereotypeexamples.html>). Stereotypes are created by the continual, extended exposure of consumers to patterns of imagery. Among the many stereotypes used by the media, gender stereotyping comes to the first place. This is a highly critical issue among feminists who interest in the media studies.

However, using women or female images for the TV commercials is not a wrong doing, but the way of doing is problematic as it largely creates negative impact. This is the reality one should undergo in an investigation. We need to question whether these female stereotypes represent the reality or not. It has already proved by many researchers that, there is a given agenda on representing women in the media. This is none other but came through evolution of societies in the era of capitalism and the post modern societies in the long sweep of history.

## II. OBJECTIVES

According to the general assumption, women are treated differently and not fairly in the media. It reflects gender stereotypes, which have negative impacts on society as a whole. The audience usually accepts these stereotypical implications as natural. Women are represented in stereotypical ways, according to social ideologies and it has made the society to consider it as natural. Therefore, these complexities of representing women in the media going to be questioned in this research paper. The main objective of the present study is to examine the impact of Sri Lankan TV commercials on generating and reflecting the female stereotypes in the society. To gain the main objective it is intended to find out the stereotypical representation of women in the TV commercials. And to study how these stereotypical images portrayed conservative gender inequalities.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

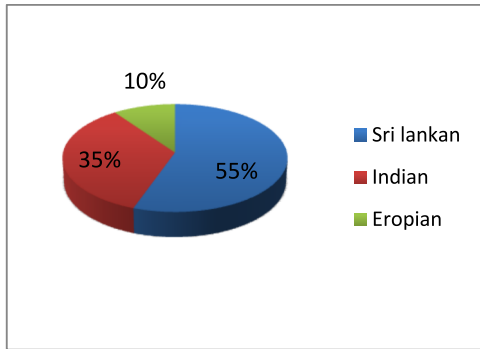
The content analysis method is used for this study. Bernard Berelson defined Content Analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of

communications" (Berelson 1952: 74). Content analysis is a research tool focused on the actual content and internal features of media. It is used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner (<https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/content.html>).

100 advertisements telecasted in the ITN channel from 01<sup>st</sup> September - 30<sup>th</sup> September 2012, selected under purposive sampling method. Specifically, ITN has selected as the television channel, as ITN depicted of undergoing some notable changes within recent years to compete with other TV channels and came to top rank in the television awarding ceremonies. In other words, it has concerned about the attraction of the audience when it was to select the TV channel. Advertisers themselves concern about it, prior to putting their advertisements in those respective channels. However, most of the advertisements telecasted in TV channels were similar. This content analysis is conducted by creating manageable categories and themes by observing the advertisements. For instance, Language, facial expressions, symbolic gestures, behaviours, clothing and adornments, fashion ideas, tradition vs. modern, local and foreign, music, etc. were used as categories and women's role, women as sex objects, commodifying female body etc. were used as the themes. It helped to code the data and interpret the identified patterns by doing so.

## IV. DISCUSSION

When it comes to the findings of this study, women are the central figures of most of the advertisements. Although 56% of advertisements were locally produced, most of them were structurally looks like foreign. Because, it may be that people as consumers may fond of using foreign goods and services than local products. Total foreign advertisements were 44% as shown in the below figure. Inevitably these foreign advertisements are affecting to our own cultural values and norms, even in the case of gender. However, using foreign commercials is considering as the easiest and cheapest way of advertising. Transnational co-operations (TNCs) and Multinational co-operations (MNCs) are using these foreign advertisements largely.



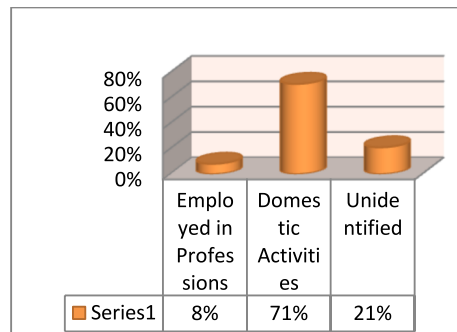
**Figure1: Varieties of Advertisements**

Source: Research data, 2012

Generally, young women in 18-35 age category seems to use for most of the advertisements even it was needed to portray a matured woman. 71% of women were portrayed as married and housewives. They portrayed as spending a happy time involving in various domestic tasks including using washing powder for washing clothes, making meals and cleaning etc. Women are portrayed as good wife/mother who serves for her nuclear family mostly with handling domestic work. For instance, in “Laogi” and “Nestomalt” advertisements although women have done bulk of domestic work she is to wait with a tea while husband comes home after work. The female domestic consumers are targeted by this type of stereotypical assumptions as domestic labourers.. Further, Milk powder advertisements (“Anchor”, “Raththi”), Baby products (“Baby CheraMy”, “Pears baby” etc.) comes under this ‘good wife: a happy housewife’ category. But it has never concern about the needs of the housewife and the multiple roles played by her.

Women are responsible for all domestic work. If she fails to perform these entire tasks, often they portrayed as helpless in sorrowful faces. In the same occasion husband was representing as incompetent with those. For an example in “Iodex” advertisement, while wife is suffering from backache, husband is not able to even fry an omelette and help children to get ready to go to school. “We have become used to seeing images of women naturally working in the kitchen: more recent adverts that have placed men in the kitchen either serve to show how unnatural a setting it is for them, or that men use domestic labour as a means of obtaining rewards for women” (Marsha and Jones, 1999: 103).

Thus, media act as an agent of gender role socialization. Possible exception of family and peer groups as the socialization agents, the media probably the most powerful transmitters of gender stereotypes. Because there is a relationship between exposure to gender stereotypes in advertising and the cultivation among viewers of more traditional attitudes toward gender roles. According to the cultivation analysis theory, repeated exposure to media messages leads a person to hold opinions or views of society that can be discordant or distorted the reality (Katherine and Mueller, 2010). Thus, children easily internalize these media stereotypes of gender and perpetuate and it affects the very role played by them in future life. “Research suggests that while stereotypical representations may not induce product purchase, they do encourage viewers to internalize the socially constructed image of femininity presented in advertising, thus helping to define femininity and acceptable female roles” (Lafky, Duffy,Steinmaus, and Berkowitz 1996: 381). In other words, according to feminists, the media act as key agents in reinforcing and perpetuating a patriarchal society (Marsha and Jones. 1999: 111). Thus, the below figure is showing the female roles depicted by the advertisements.



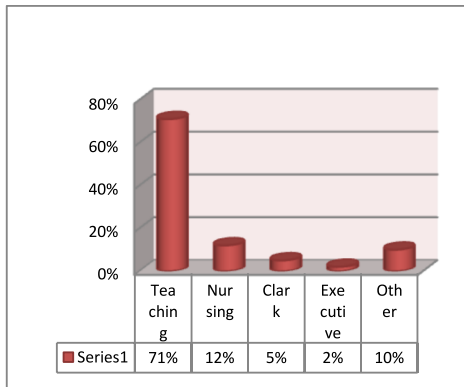
**Figure 2: Roles of women in Advertisements**

Source: Research data, 2012

According to the above figure, women are more likely to show in the home arena (private sphere), unlike men, who are shown outdoors (public sphere). Men generally advertise business products or investments, whereas women are shown rather in the commercials with cosmetics and domestic products. Using Women for those types of products, they are presented as passive, weak, shy, soft, delicate, innocence, and with low esteem. In 52% of advertisements women were represented as helpless beings depending on male power and

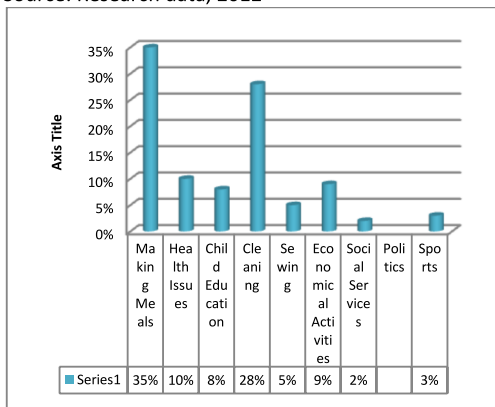
knowledge. This creates very low expectations especially for adolescents and their role models.

Nowadays the differences between male and female roles are smaller and diminishing dramatically. However, mass media still perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes to fulfil their commercial purposes. In general, men still outnumbered women in advertisements in terms of occupational roles. Although women now engage in wide range of employments still there is an underrepresentation in the advertisements. Following two figures clearly shows it.



**Figure3: Female Professions depicted in Adds**

Source: Research data, 2012



**Figure 4: Activities engaged by women in ads**

Source: Research data, 2012

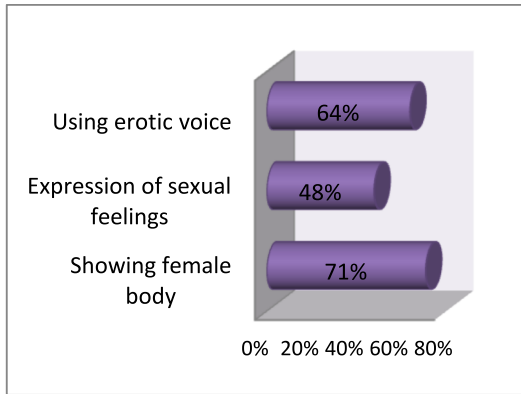
In Sri Lanka large numbers of women are in the work force and women labour participation rate is 31.8% in 2011([http://www.cbsl.gov.lk/pics\\_n\\_docs/10\\_public\\_docs/statistics/other/econ\\_&\\_ss\\_2012.pdf](http://www.cbsl.gov.lk/pics_n_docs/10_public_docs/statistics/other/econ_&_ss_2012.pdf)).

Seemingly, increasing number of women are engaging in professional occupations like doctors, lawyers, executive etc. in present Sri Lanka. But,

males were more likely than females to be doctors, lawyers, etc. in advertisements. The media presents only the stereotypical picture of women engage in domestic work. This is not something only about underrepresentation but also undervalue the contribution they made for the country's economy. Because present day women are not a dual role player, but the triple role including, employment, domestic work and community work. Although these multiple tasks were less concerned with the advertisers, reality couldn't be hidden. But we need to careful as we live in a world which is increasingly saturated by media and communication technologies.

One of the major criticisms of advertising by the feminists is that, women's bodies were being used to sell everything from milk powder to tyre. Women are used in promoting male products like perfumes, gel, and even vehicle spare parts and the males think what is portrayed in commercials is the acceptance of females of that product and by believing it as the reality, they are motivated to use those.

To grab the viewers' attention women's bodies are sexualized in advertisements. The female body is the medium of conveying message to the audience. For an example, "Exide battery" advertisement, one woman was breakdown her car and two men were to help her. They used kind of vulgar language to verbally abuse her in the guise of helping her. It is a violation of law. Further she seems to try to get some attraction with her partly dressed. Female stands to arouse the sense of desire in man. Precisely she was depicted as an object of passion. To sell the products, women's bodies are often dismembered into thighs, legs, breasts, stomach, midriffs, bare behinds, partly clothed parts, reinforcing the message that women are objects rather than whole humans ([https://www.academia.edu/1929940/Stereotype\\_representation\\_of\\_female\\_body\\_in\\_advertisement...](https://www.academia.edu/1929940/Stereotype_representation_of_female_body_in_advertisement...)). Women as a whole diminish to sexual objects and passive human beings by adding desirable physical characteristics include being thin, long-legged, slim-hipped in 71% of commercials. This is called as a commoditisation of the female body.



**Figure 5: Using women as Sex Objects**

Source: Research data, 2012

According to the above figure there were a number of more advertisements which used the female body as a sexual object. For instance, “Zesta tea” advertisements, here mainly used this erotic voice to grab the attention of audiences. Mainly most of the time women were attached to male figures.

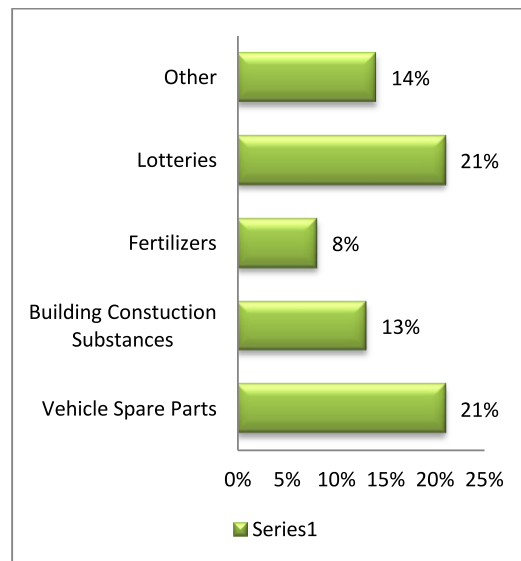
Further, most of the Sri Lankan advertisers would like to use the concept of village beauty of women. But this village beauty is mixed and beautify with modern western cosmetics. For an example, in “Sunlight” advertisement, the girl in a chintz frock who represented as coming from a village background is not matched with her straitened and partly coloured hair. This type of hybrid fashion ideals, itself has an influence to the audience. Advertisers not only create such styles by mixing up Sri Lankan patterns but also the foreign. Youngsters catch fashion ideas and many more things through the media. The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells ordinary women that are always in need of adjustment. Thus, the advertisement is propagating unattainable beauty that is creating negative effects in the present society

([https://www.academia.edu/1929940/Stereotype\\_representation\\_of\\_female\\_body\\_in\\_advertisement.](https://www.academia.edu/1929940/Stereotype_representation_of_female_body_in_advertisement.)).

They promote only young, beautiful and sexually attractive women. Researchers had pointed out that even those caused to some illness such as eating disorders among adolescents in western countries. Thus it proves that this is not something a trouble encountered by the Sri Lankan audience, but a common thing. Sut Jhally (2011) listed some portrayals of women in advertising:

- Touching self
- Caressing an object
- Lying on the floor
- Sitting on a bed or chair
- Eyes closed
- Not alert
- Confused
- Vulnerable
- Body contorted
- Dressed like a child
- Holding an object or a man for support
- Sexy and sexually available
- Seductive
- Playful
- Careless

All these were targeted on the commoditisation of the female body as depicting them as beautiful object of products Women’s bodies have adorned a wide array of products aimed at men. For instance, “Bic Races” advertisement, “Black Night” advertisement. Women in these advertisements depicted as passive in decorative sexual role as they are precisely presented as objects of the male gaze. In addition, women were sometimes used to sell products which their contribution should not need directly. The below figure clearly shows it.



**Figure 6: Women portrayed in directly unrelated products**

Data Source: Research data

Finally, uses of gender stereotypical images by the advertisers caused to marginalize, discriminating

and commodifying female. This is heavily criticized by various feminist scholars. Portraying women as almost dependent on male power is questioned by them. It is just not reflecting the things taking place in the society, but also they are creating new types of gender inequalities for the purpose commercial values. The time has come to rethink about the conservative malpractices in the field of television advertising as it has already encompassed the peoples' life by the media.

## V. CONCLUSION

However, mass media not only gives people information and entertainment, but, according to a Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, it also affects people's lives by shaping their opinions, attitudes and beliefs (1964) (Malgorzata, 2011). Thus, advertising act as mirrored images of the society. Therefore it merely not reflecting but reinforcing the existing stereotypical representation of the society. Commercials are the vast source of gender stereotyping. In other words, advertisements are "the reflection of the recipient". As advertising is gendered, they address our physical senses of self, our knowledge of the world. In that sense, it is just going beyond representation, but moulding self identity.

Women are more often presented in commercials, because they are seen as responsible for making everyday purchases. The field of advertisement is male dominated where female are victims of the popular culture. Thus, women were depicted as more dependent and as the weaker sex. This cause to the underrepresentation and undervalue of the precious and multiple tasks which is performed by women in the society. The world is changing. Conservative views are largely challenged by the day today practices. This should clearly reflect by the media. Keeping the old conservative practices is kind of a threat to the social development, as we are a developing nation. Therefore, it is better to rethink of the good practice in creating gender neutral television advertisement in Sri Lanka. Although, the study is not going to demonstrate a generalized picture of present television commercials as a research limitation, precisely the study is going to emphasis on implementing a policy framework of unbiased gender practice for Sri Lankan TV commercials which pertinent authorities (government and nongovernment) should pay their attention. Finally, we have to be very careful when

taking the foreign advertisements as there may be contradictions with Sri Lankan cultural values and norms. Thus, we do not need to import the foreign things, but can come across the practice for gender equality in media representation by turning back to our native morals.

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