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# Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Advertising in China

A Report Commissioned by UNICEF China and UN Women China



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# Foreword

In today's increasingly interconnected world, media and advertising wield immense power in shaping cultural norms, beliefs, and values. This includes gender stereotypes, which are simplified generalizations about the attributes, behaviors and roles of men and women in society.<sup>1</sup> By influencing the gender socialization process—through which individuals learn and internalize these norms from childhood to adulthood—media and advertising play serves as a pivotal force in shaping social expectations about the behaviours and roles based on gender, where gender stereotypes often emerge and take root.<sup>2</sup>

With this powerful influence comes a profound responsibility: the opportunity to tackle harmful biases and dismantle deeply rooted gender stereotypes and negative social norms. Doing so can contribute significantly to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment globally – which is enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goal #5, (or SDG 5) as well as to the attainment of all 17 SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, given gender equality's cross-cutting nature.

However, the reality is that media and advertising often reinforce – or even exacerbate – outdated gender roles, impacting the opportunities afforded to women, men, girls, and boys across all spheres of life –from education to the workforce and beyond.<sup>3</sup> For instance, despite boys and girls exhibiting equal academic performance in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) during early education, globally, only 35% of women and girls are graduates of STEM programs.<sup>4</sup> While women comprise 40% of the global workforce, they account for only 28% of managerial positions.<sup>5</sup> Perceptions and biases towards traditional gender roles also result in women doing 2.5 more times unpaid care and domestic work globally.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, as an example, research reveals that exposing children and adolescents to positive media and

advertising examples, such as men and women equally sharing domestic and care work or women leadership in various settings, can challenge the traditional gender roles and stereotypes from an early age.<sup>7</sup> By embracing inclusive advertising, we can shift how gender is portrayed, challenge social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities, and foster a more empowering environment where everyone can realize their full potential.<sup>8</sup>

This report, "Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Advertising in China," is an essential first step to identify how these media-driven stereotypes manifest in China and what can be done to address them. By shedding light on the urgent need for action, this report also contributes to the broader goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2021–2025), the Outline of Women's Development in China (2021–2030), and Outline of Children's Development in China (2021–2030) to address gender discrimination and reduce gender inequality and other forms of social inequality. This report calls on key stakeholders in the media and advertising industry to fundamentally shift how gender is represented. By ensuring positive, diverse, and empowering portrayals of all genders in media and advertising, we can help eliminate negative stereotypes and biases and inspire future generations to envision a world where every individual—regardless of gender—can thrive and live with dignity.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we must work together to accelerate our collective efforts to achieve gender equality and women and girls' empowerment globally. This also includes working with key partners in media and advertising—including industry leaders, decision-makers, and creatives—to depict an equal and inclusive world.

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## Executive Summary

Across cultures and societies, people face pressure to conform to gender stereotypes portrayed in media, notably those in marketing and advertising. Gender stereotypes are simplistic generalizations about the gender attributes, differences and roles of women and men<sup>9</sup>, which can often leave people feeling underrepresented and misrepresented. By neglecting to challenge harmful stereotypes, narratives in advertising can entrench harmful gender norms and behaviours, leading to real-world inequalities.

From a young age, people learn societal expectations and norms in accordance with their gender. They learn about social roles—such as what is expected of their physical appearance, personality, and behaviour—depending on their gender. Puberty is a stage at which children are especially susceptible. Children learn social norms from their families,

peers, social networks, and from media, including advertisements (ads). Compounding this is the fact that the people in children's lives also learn from media (such as advertising), giving it an especially profound impact on learned gender roles.

Media and advertising can impact both the construction—or the dismantling—of social norms and contribute to the promotion of healthy bodies, self-esteem, and nutrition.<sup>10</sup> Portrayals of men and women in ads can counter harmful gender norms by showing girls and women in leadership roles, and boys and men in caregiving and domestic roles. Advertising can also remove stigma around topics related to gender (e.g., menstruation and body image), and it can work against norms that contribute to a culture of violence targeting women and girls.



Therefore, understanding how gender stereotypes show up in advertisements can help mitigate their harmful effects. With a deeper understanding of gender stereotypes in advertisements, recommendations can be made to guide advertisers in creating empowering portrayals of women and girls and promoting healthy gender expression for men and boys. In line with this effort, the present research analyses gender roles and stereotypes in advertising. The research was conducted by the Geena Davis Institute, with technical support from UNICEF China and UN Women China. The study analysed 1,000 Chinese TV, Internet and social media advertisement with the most plays in 2022, including 800 TV advertisements and 200 Internet and social media advertisements (according to the China Advertising Association),<sup>11</sup> to measure the portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes in the nation's advertising.

## Key Takeaways

This report's findings show that in the sample of 1,000 advertisements analysed, male characters are more prominent and more likely to narrate, hold paid occupations, and appear as leaders, while female characters are more often confined to domestic roles, caregiving, and visually objectified.

Female characters are also disproportionately depicted in sexually revealing clothing and are with slim body types (adults who have a BMI under 18.5 are considered as "underweight" according to the World Health Organization)<sup>12</sup>, reinforcing narrow and stereotypical gender portrayals about women's appearance. However, there were no gender differences in characters shown in STEM professions, or among young characters shown in school settings, which means male and female characters

were shown in these roles at a similar rate, in the sample of advertisement analysed. Several key findings are as follows:

- \* **Men make up 55% of characters on screen and are three times more likely than women to be narrators.** Compared to women, men are more visually prominent (54.6% compared with 45.4% of all characters) and are three times more likely to be narrators (63.4% of ads are narrated by only men, compared with 18.6% of ads narrated by only women).
- \* **Women are four times more likely to be visually objectified and five times more likely to wear sexually revealing clothing.** Sexualisation was measured by looking at whether characters were shown in sexually revealing clothing (such as a low-cut shirt), or if characters were visually objectified, which is when the camera (or another character's vision) focuses on their bodies, such as their chest or their legs. Compared with men, women in advertising are more likely to be visually objectified (0.9% compared with 0.2%) and to wear sexually revealing clothing (3.4% compared with 0.7%).
- \* **Men are 1.5 times more likely to be shown to have a paid occupation and almost twice as likely to be leaders.** Male characters in ads are significantly more likely than female characters to be portrayed in a leadership capacity, and are more likely to be shown holding a paid occupation. Male characters are more likely than female characters to have a paid occupation (21.3% compared with 14.6%) and are almost two times more likely to be portrayed as leaders (2.8% compared with 1.5%).

- \* **Women are nine times more likely to be shown cleaning and are more often shown in other domestic roles.** A greater share of women than men are shown as caregivers to dependents (13.0% compared with 8.2%) and in a setting with their families (27.9% compared with 22.0%). Women are nine times more likely than men to be shown cleaning, which is a domestic activity (0.9% compared with 0.1%).
- \* **Female characters are more likely to have a slim body type.** Female characters are significantly more likely than male characters to have a slim body type (64.9% compared with 48.4%). Just 1.5% of female characters (and only 2.5% of male characters) are shown with a large body type, while the remaining share were deemed “average” body type. At the intersection of age, 68.5% of female characters ages 20 to 49, are slim, compared with 51.3% of male characters ages 20 to 49; 25.5% of female characters who are 50-plus are slim, compared with 23.1% of male characters who are 50-plus.
- \* **There are no gender differences in STEM professionals shown in ads.** Of characters with a paid occupation, 11.1% of men and 9.5% women were shown in a STEM occupation, a difference that is not statistically significant.
- \* **Young boys and girls are shown in school at a similar rate in ads.** About 8% of girls under 12 and 7% of boys under 12 are shown in a school setting in ads, a difference that is not statistically significant.



## Background

### What Is Gender Socialisation?

**Gender socialization** refers to a life-cycle process by which individuals learn and internalize **gender norms** -- the ideas, standards and expectations about how men and women should be and act.<sup>13</sup> For example, girls may be encouraged to embrace caregiving roles through toys like dolls and are often praised for their appearance, while boys are given toys that promote physical and cognitive skills and are praised for their strength. This process shapes how children “do gender” and influences their behaviors and attitudes as they grow. While gender socialization process is particularly influential during childhood and adolescence, it continues throughout life. As individuals, they interact with and expose to agents (e.g. peers) and institutions (e.g. places of work) that reinforce – or challenge – previously learned and internalized gender norms.<sup>14</sup>

Related to gender norms, **gender stereotypes** refer to simplistic generalizations about the gender attributes, differences and roles of women and

men.<sup>15</sup> For instance, a widespread gender norm is that women and girls ‘should’ take primary responsibility of caring family, and men and boys ‘should not’ cry and show their vulnerability (especially in contrast to women and girls, for whom crying and showing vulnerability is acceptable).<sup>16</sup> Over time, these stereotypes and norms are reinforced by various agents and institutions, like peers and schools, but can evolve or be challenged, particularly through efforts to empower women and transform traditional ideas about masculinity.<sup>17</sup>

The media – which encompasses television advertisements, through which we are presented with or consume information – constitutes a key institutional site of power and sphere of influence over the gender socialization process.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, media can perpetuate discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes, and bolstering the social permission structures that normalize discriminatory and harmful behaviours.<sup>19</sup> By the same token, evidence also suggests that media has the great potential to serve as a positive force by promoting positive social norms and helping to illuminating and addressing the root causes of discriminatory and harmful behaviours.<sup>20</sup>



## Gender Norms and Their Implications on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in China

In recent decades, China has taken steps aimed at advancing gender equality and women's empowerment through legislative measures, policy initiatives, and social reforms. For example, China passed the new amended Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, which took effect on January 1, 2023. Nearly 30 new provisions were introduced, aiming at enhancing women's protection in various areas, including gender equality in recruitment, contract negotiation, employer obligations in sexual harassment prevention, and relief measures for women whose rights are infringed.<sup>21</sup> Despite these efforts, gender biases and discrimination against women and girls continue to impact the rights and interests of women and girls, as well as opportunities for them to live up to their full potential. The following sections highlight four key areas of gender disparities that are critical to the development of children and empowerment of women in China, including gender bias in STEM education and career paths, unequal distribution of care responsibilities, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and gendered expectations and their impacts on health. These areas are closely tied to potential, opportunities, and well-being of women and children, while also reflecting the influence of marketing in shaping gender norms and behaviors.

### Gender Bias in STEM Education and Career Paths

The first area this report highlights is in STEM education and careers. Boys and girls exhibit equal academic performance in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) during early education. However, once they enter higher education, girls tend to gravitate towards liberal arts, while boys dominate STEM majors. This disparity reflects broader societal expectations that steer

girls away from technical fields, thus limiting their career prospects in STEM-related industries. The gender gap in STEM education extends to the workplace where women are significantly underrepresented in STEM leadership roles across both public and private sectors.<sup>22</sup>

### Unequal Distribution of Care Responsibilities

The second area is surrounding caregiving. In spite of the changes that have occurred in global women's participation in the labor market, women continue to bear most of the responsibilities for the unpaid domestic and care work: caring for children and other dependent household members, preparing meals and doing other housework.<sup>23</sup> In China, despite women making up a large chunk of the workforce (60.5% of women are in the paid labour force, compared to 72.1% of men),<sup>24</sup> they still spend 2 times more time than men on unpaid domestic and care work.<sup>25</sup> Contributing to this is traditional gender norms and social expectations that still prescribe women as homemakers and men as breadwinners. Subject to these gender norms, women tend to be encouraged to prioritise family and caregiving (i.e., children, parents, in-laws) over their careers and education.

### Violence Against Women and Girls

The third area is around gender-based violence. Despite legislative efforts like the National Law on Anti-domestic Violence enacted in 2016 and the Minors' Protection Law enacted in 2020, this issue persists in China, with a troubling rise in sexual assault cases, particularly involving minors.<sup>26</sup> While personal and social factors contribute to sexual harassment, culture plays an important role, too.<sup>27</sup> Research shows that portraying women and girls in sexualized and objectified ways through media has been identified as a cultural factor in normalising sexual harassment and violence.<sup>28</sup> These depictions suggest that women's value lies in their looks rather than their abilities, impacting the mental and emotional well-being of young girls and influencing how others interact with them. For

instance, studies conducted in multiple countries indicate that exposure to such media makes subjects more likely to engage in unwanted sexual attention and harassment.<sup>29, 30, 31</sup> This suggests that to combat sexual violence against women and girls, we need to also address how media shapes the cultural standards of sexualization and objectification against women and girls that contributes normalising of gender-based violence.

## Gendered Expectations and Their Impacts on Health

The fourth area is how gender norms impact girls' and boys' conceptions of themselves, which impacts their health. For girls, "beauty standards" are societal expectations that define what is considered attractive. Images that suggest women and girls are physically flawless set unrealistic beauty standards, which can contribute to body-image concerns, eating disorders, and diminished self-esteem among young girls striving to meet unrealistic standards. And boys frequently encounter expectations related to masculinity, which can discourage them from seeking help for mental health issues or embracing diverse interests beyond what are typically male-dominated interests. If boys and men do not feel safe expressing their emotions, this can lead to higher rates of aggression, substance abuse, and risky behaviours as they navigate societal pressures to conform to rigid gender norms<sup>32</sup>. While advertisements alone cannot address the root causes of these issues, they play a significant role in shaping societal norms and perceptions. By showing diverse representations of beauty and healthy expressions of emotionality, advertisements have the potential to promote positive body image, healthy eating habits, and mental health awareness among youth. Moreover, advertisements that promote well-being and social connection can encourage positive behaviours, like sociability and help-seeking among both girls and boys, thereby contributing to their overall health and development and the well-being of others in their lives.

Gender stereotypes in advertisements have profound consequences, particularly for children and

youth.<sup>33</sup> By consistently portraying men and women in narrow, gendered roles, ads can lead young people to internalise and apply these stereotypes to their own lives, aspirations, and interpersonal interactions. Moreover, in a society where the female consumer base is quickly expanding and there is also an increasing advocacy for positive female representation in media, biased portrayals may also be bad for business. In recent years, there has been a rise of "femvertising," which are advertisements that challenge traditional gender roles and promote gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>34</sup> Femvertising can lead women to purchase from particular brands that empower them and represent them in a favourable and nuanced manner. Thus, not only are gender stereotypes in ads detrimental to young people's health and development, but also they undermine brand success and weaken consumer loyalty.

China needs more media portrayals and representation that open up possibilities for women and girls. With this research, UNICEF China and UN Women advance their mission by providing a benchmark for representation in Chinese advertisements. This research contributes to UNICEF's and UN Women's broader work by promoting positive gender portrayals and norms in advertising and marketing, which can positively impact gender socialisation through:

1. Raising awareness of the advertising's powerful role and its relationship to the construction and/or perpetuation of gender stereotypes.
2. Analysing the representation and portrayals of female and male characters, understanding how the two differ and how they can ultimately relate to gender stereotypes in current Chinese advertising.
3. Providing recommendations to advertising stakeholders, such as brand managers and content creators, such as cinematographers, to challenge and end harmful stereotypes in advertising and promote positive social norms.



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# Methodology

## Content Analysis

This study applies a content analysis methodology, which is an objective, systematic, and quantitative analysis of media, such as advertisements. Content analysis is used by social scientists to quantify and investigate patterns, themes, or concepts in different media. The analysis is of 1,000 TV, Internet and social media advertisements in 2022 with the most plays in China, according to the China Advertising Association.<sup>35</sup> The ads used in this analysis were compiled and translated by the China Advertising Association and UNICEF China. All reported differences between men and women are statistically significant unless otherwise indicated. Statistical significance means that the relationship between specified variables is unlikely to have occurred by chance. Statistical significance in this report is determined using chi-square analysis, which is a statistical test that analyses the co-occurrence between two variables (such as gender and caregiving). Statistical significance in this report

is based on a p-value threshold of 0.05, which corresponds to 95% confidence. The unit of analysis for this study is the character, as in the actor shown on screen. The present study is interested in the portrayal of male and female identities broadly, and thus character-level analysis is appropriate. Our final dataset includes 3,358 characters across the 1,000 advertisements.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on UNICEF and UN Women's expertise and experience, secondary data has been used to supplement our findings and recommendations.

The advertisements under investigation were from 13 market sectors identified by the Chinese Advertising Association. (See Table 1 for the market sectors and the percentage of the 1,000 advertisements in each market sector.) The market sector with the most ads was Food & Drink (40.1%), whereas the market sector with the fewest ads was Education (0.4%). The market sector analysis in this report concerns ads for the specified sector—and therefore, fewer ads overall—and thus it garners less statistical power to identify statistically significant differences.



**TABLE 1. Share of 2022 Chinese ads from each market sector**

MARKET SECTOR	PERCENT OF ADS
Food & Drink	40.1%
Clothing, Grooming/Beauty, & Appearance	15.1%
Medical, Health, & Personal Care	13.4%
Home Care, Decor, & Appliances	8.2%
Electronics, Technology, Apps, & Online Services	7.9%
Automobiles	5.8%
Banking & Insurance	3.4%
Utilities & Professional Services	2.3%
Entertainment	1.4%
Restaurants & Food Service	0.8%
Other Markets	0.6%
Travel & Tourism	0.5%
Education	0.4%

### Interrater Reliability

Eight expert human analysts identified themes and concepts across advertisements to collect the data in this report. See Table 2 for the operational definitions of the outcome variables (also known as dependent variables). To establish reliability and objective agreement in the data across analysts, two rounds of training on the operationalisation definitions (see Table 2) of each outcome variable were carried out. In each training, eight expert human analysts learned how to identify the variables under investigation in visual communication (such as ads). Training amounted to 10 hours per expert human analyst. Training was complete after each variable met acceptable levels of interrater reliability, using Fleiss Kappa indicating consistent agreement among coders. Interrater reliability ensures that there is a high percentage agreement, beyond chance or randomness.

### Limitations

This study has certain limitations. One is that the use of expert human analysts invites the potential for human errors and mistakes. While human error is possible and understandable in this process, random errors introduced by human coders do not undermine the overall validity of the findings. Second, the study is an analysis of a sample of 1,000 advertisements; therefore, not every ad is considered. However, sampling from a larger population is a standard methodological approach that allows for meaningful insights while managing practical constraints. Third, the literature review is not comprehensive, and considers findings and insights from only UNICEF and UN Women.

**TABLE 2. Definitions of variables under investigation**

<b>VARIABLE</b>	<b>OPERATIONAL DEFINITION</b>
<b>Conceptual Category: Work and Leadership</b>	
Paid Occupation	Characters with a “paid occupation” are those who are presumed to be paid for their work, which is determined by observing them at a workplace, if they have a uniform on (such as a law enforcement uniform), or if they reference their paid work or occupation in some manner.
STEM Occupation	Characters with a STEM occupation are those who have a paid occupation in the fields of science, technology, engineering, or maths.
Leadership	Characters are considered leaders if they are shown holding a position of power or if others follow their directives.
<b>Conceptual Category: Family</b>	
Caregiver	Characters are considered caregivers if they are taking care of dependents, such as children, someone who is ill, or ageing parents or family members. This does not include people in careers associated with caregiving, such as home health aides or nurses.
Family Status	Characters are identified as having a family if they are portrayed in a family relationship, such as parents, siblings, or cousins.
<b>Conceptual Category: Domesticity</b>	
Disciplining	Characters are shown disciplining if they are enforcing a set of rules, behaviour, or punishment to a child.
Cooking	Characters are cooking if they are shown preparing food.
Cleaning	Characters are cleaning if they are shown performing actions like washing, cleaning, scrubbing, mopping, or sweeping.
<b>Conceptual Category: Activities</b>	
Socialising	Characters are socialising if they are shown spending quality time with another character(s).
Exercising	Characters are exercising if they are engaging in structured, planned, and repetitive acts of physical activity.
Shopping	Characters are shopping if they are shown purchasing items or looking at items in a retail or grocery store, or online store.
Driving	Characters are driving if they are driving a vehicle from the driver's seat.
<b>Conceptual Category: Gendered Play</b>	
Masculine Play	Masculine play refers to play that is stereotypically associated with men and boys, such as playing with military toys, sports toys, sports cars, adventure toys, STEM (including space), or toys that are violent, like toy guns or swords.
Feminine Play	Feminine play refers to play that is stereotypically associated with women and girls, such as playing with beauty sets (like makeup or hair brushes), nurturing toys like baby dolls, or using domestic-related toys, like brooms, vacuums, or kitchen sets.
Gender-Neutral Play	Gender-neutral play that is not overtly feminine or masculine, such as playing with puzzles, chess, checkers, or cards.
<b>Conceptual Category: Sexualization</b>	
Visual Objectification	Visual objectification occurs when a character is portrayed as an object, such as zooming into specific body parts in advertisements.
Revealing Clothing	Revealing clothing includes exposing body areas, such as legs, midriff, chest, or muscles.



## Findings

The next section presents the findings from this study, focusing on statistically significant differences, unless otherwise noted. The findings are organised around the following topics:

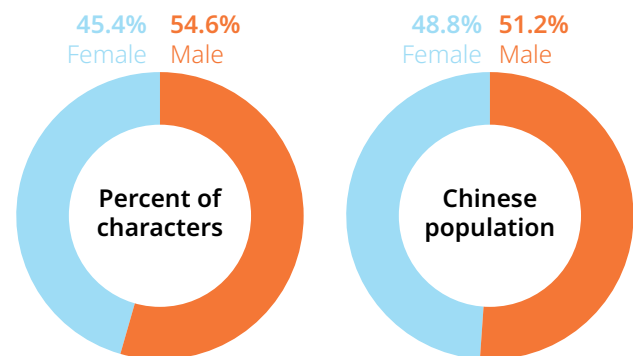
1. The narrative prominence of women in advertising.
2. Gendered expectations related to health in advertising.
3. Gender stereotypes in advertising that contribute to women's dehumanisation.
4. Gender bias in advertising about the workforce, leadership.
5. Unequal distribution of care responsibilities: Advertising portrays women in domestic roles.

### The Narrative Prominence of Women in Advertising

#### Men Are More Visually Prominent

More than half of all visually prominent characters<sup>37</sup> are male (54.6% compared with 45.4% who are female characters) (See Figure 1.).

**FIGURE 1. Percent of male and female characters in 2022 Chinese ads**





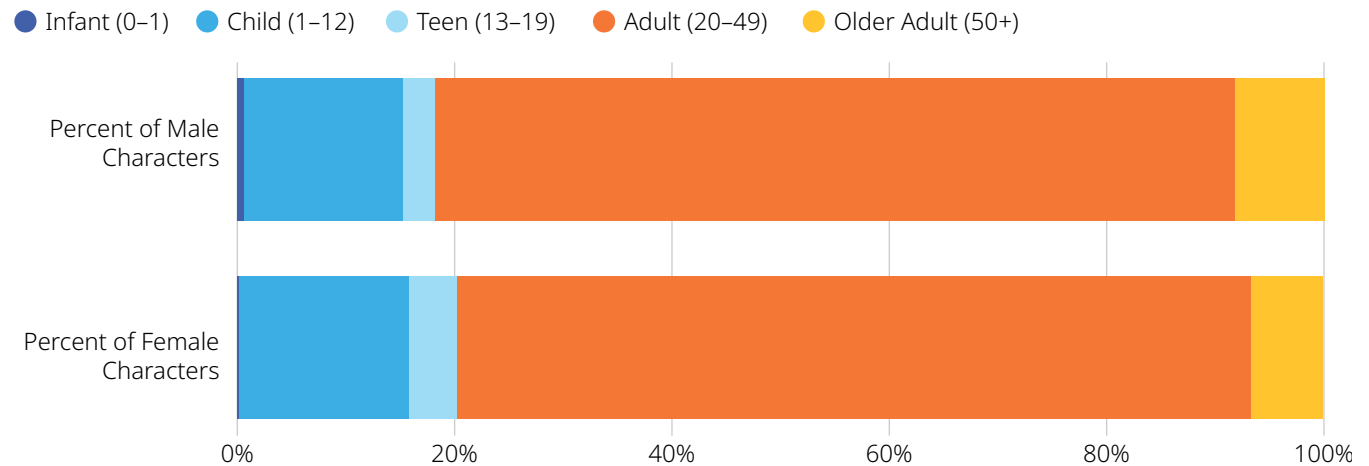
Moreover, more ads featured mostly male characters than female characters — 45.9% of ads had more male characters than female characters, 36.4% of ads had more female characters than male characters, and in 17.7% of ads, there was an equal number of male and female characters.

When analysing the gender of characters by age, male and female characters were similarly likely to be infants, children, adults, and older adults. However, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be teens according to a chi-

square test of statistical significance, although the difference is small (4.4% of female characters are teens, compared to 3.0% of male characters) (See Figure 2.).

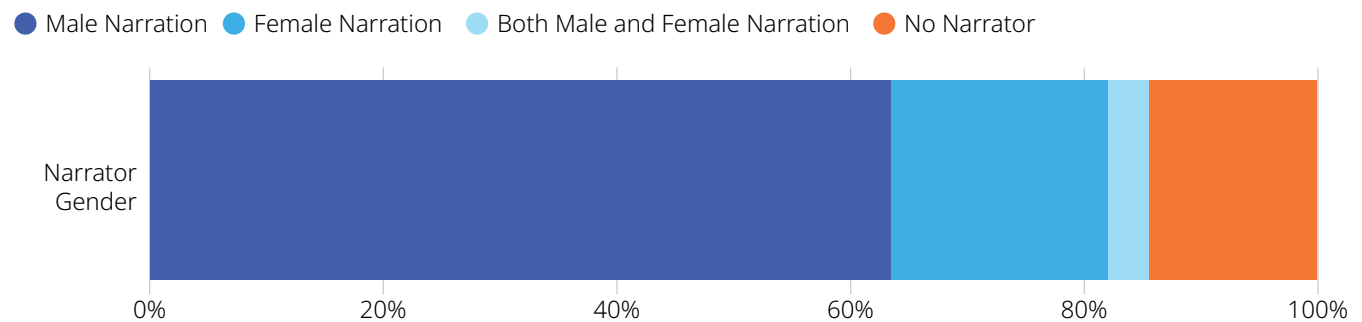
Looking at narration, the vast majority of the ads (63.4%) feature a male narrator. Just 18.6% of ads feature a female narrator, while 3.5% of ads feature a mix of male and female narrators. The remaining ads did not feature a narrator. Figure 3 presents the breakdown of narrator gender.

**FIGURE 2. Distribution of male and female characters by age in 2022 Chinese ads**



Note. Female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be teens.

**FIGURE 3. Percent of ads narrated by men and women in 2022 Chinese ads**



Note. Narrator gender was measured per advertisement.

**TABLE 3. Gender representation in ad market sector**

MARKET SECTOR	FEMALE CHARACTERS	MALE CHARACTERS
Entertainment	57.5%	42.5%
Clothing, Grooming/Beauty, & Appearance	53.5%	46.5%
Education	52.2%	47.8%
Automobiles	51.6%	48.4%
Restaurants & Food Service	51.0%	49.0%
Travel & Tourism	50.0%	50.0%
Medical, Health, & Personal Care	49.6%	50.3%
Home Care, Decor, & Appliances	47.9%	52.1%
Food & Drink	44.0%	56.0%
Banking & Insurance	42.2%	57.8%
Electronics, Technology, Apps, & Online Services	41.2%	58.8%
Utilities & Professional Services	35.8%	64.2%
Other Markets	17.9%	82.1%

Note. Market sectors are organised by most to least female inclusion. "Other markets" are advertisements from miscellaneous sectors that did not fall into the specified categories listed)

### Market Sector Analysis for Character Gender and Prominence

- ✱ The most gender imbalanced sectors that favour male characters are Utilities & Professional Services (64.2% of visually prominent characters were men), and Electronics, Technology, Apps, & Online Services (58.8% of visually prominent characters were men).
- ✱ Entertainment ads featured the most female characters (57.5% of all visually prominent characters).

### Gendered Expectations Related to Health in Advertising

#### Women Are More Likely to Have a Slim Body Type

The study also examined characters' body types, to get an understanding of how much body-type diversity there is in Chinese advertising and whether there are gender differences. The majority of all characters had a slim body type (55.9%). Just 2.0% of characters had a large body type. The remaining characters had an average body type. Female

characters were significantly more likely than male characters to have a slim body type (64.9% compared with 48.4%). Very few male and female characters were shown with large body types (2.5% compared with 1.5%) (See Table 4.). Therefore, men and women with slim body types are especially overrepresented in advertising—but especially slim women. Unrealistic expectations around beauty standards, including body size, can impact health and well-being, resulting in feelings of anxiety and shame, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression.

Table 5 presents the breakdown of body type among characters in the ads by age. The majority of younger adults (ages 20 to 49) had a slim body type (59.1%). A majority of older adults (ages 50-plus) had an average body (69.8%). Therefore, younger adults (ages 20 to 49) are much more likely than older adults (ages 50 and older) to be slim.

Figure 4 presents the breakdown of body type by gender and age. Younger adult female characters (ages 20 to 49) are more likely to be slim than younger adult male characters (68.5% compared with 51.3%). Among this age group, just 0.8% of female characters had a large body type compared with 2.3% of male characters.

**TABLE 4. Percent of female and male characters with slim, average and large body types**

CHARACTER BODY TYPE	ALL CHARACTERS	FEMALE CHARACTERS	MALE CHARACTERS	GENDER DIFFERENCE
<b>Slim Body</b>	55.9%	64.9%*	48.4%*	+16.5%
<b>Average Body</b>	42.1%	33.6%*	49.1%*	-15.5%
<b>Large Body</b>	2.0%	1.5%	2.5%	-1.0%

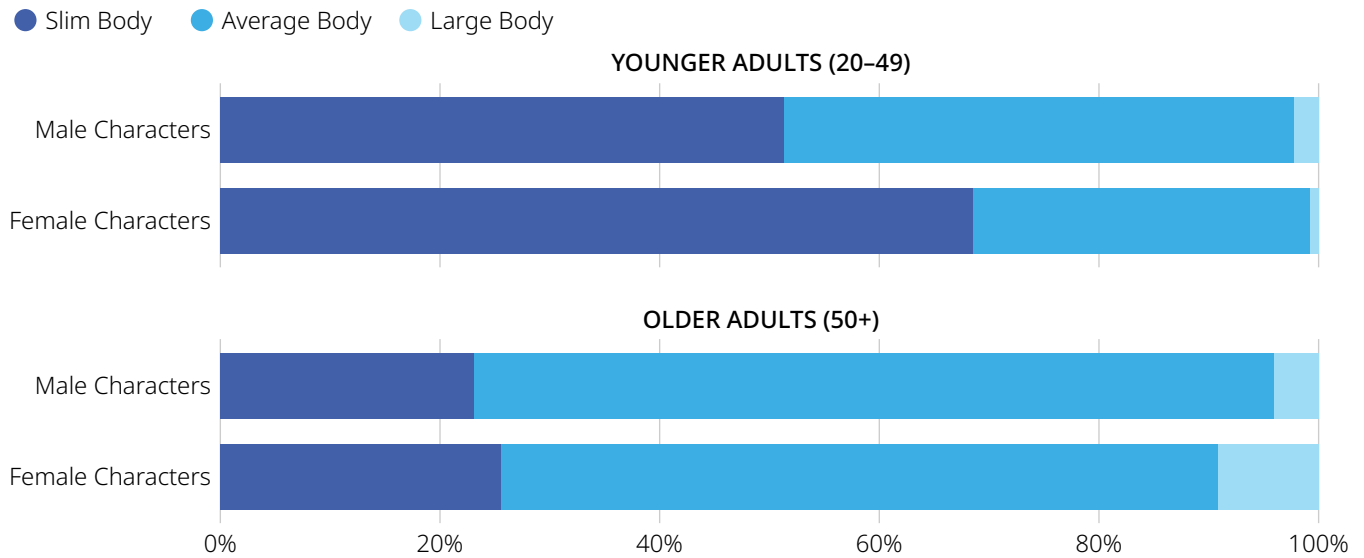
Note. Asterisk (\*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

**TABLE 5. Percent of younger and older adults with slim, average, and large body types**

CHARACTER BODY TYPE	ALL CHARACTERS	YOUNGER ADULTS (20–49)	OLDER ADULTS (50-PLUS)
<b>Slim Body</b>	55.9%	59.1%	24.1%
<b>Average Body</b>	42.1%	39.3%	69.8%
<b>Large Body</b>	2.0%	1.6%	6.1%

Note. Asterisk (\*) indicates a statistically significant difference. Body type is measured for only adults 19 and older.



**FIGURE 4. Percent of male and female characters with slim, average, and large body types, by age**

Note. Among younger adults, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to have a slim body type; but male characters were significantly more likely than female characters to have an average and large body type.

## Gender Stereotypes That Contribute to Women's Dehumanisation

### Women Are Sexualised More Often Than Men

The sexualisation of women and girls reinforces harmful stereotypes that reduce them to objects of desire, fostering environments where sexual violence is more likely to be tolerated. This objectification dehumanises women and girls, making them more vulnerable to harassment, assault, and exploitation. For the purpose of analysis in this report, sexualisation was measured by looking at whether characters were shown in sexually revealing clothing (such as a low-cut shirt), or if the camera (or another characters' vision) focused on their bodies, such as their chest or their legs. The analysis found:

- ✦ Female characters were more than four times as likely as male characters to be visually objectified (0.9% compared with 0.2%).
- ✦ Female characters were nearly five times more likely than male characters to be wearing sexually revealing clothing (3.4% compared with 0.7%).

### Market Sector Analysis of Sexualisation

- ✦ For Automobiles ads, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be wearing sexually revealing clothing (7.3% compared with 0.0%).
- ✦ For Beauty, Clothing, & Appearance ads, female characters were about 10.5 times more likely than male characters to be wearing sexually revealing clothing (10.4% compared with 1.0%).

- \* For Food & Drink ads, female characters were 10 times more likely than male characters to be wearing sexually revealing clothing (1.0% compared with 0.1%).
- \* For Medical, Health, & Personal Care ads, female characters were 3.5 times more likely than male characters to be wearing sexually revealing clothing (7.5% compared with 2.0%).

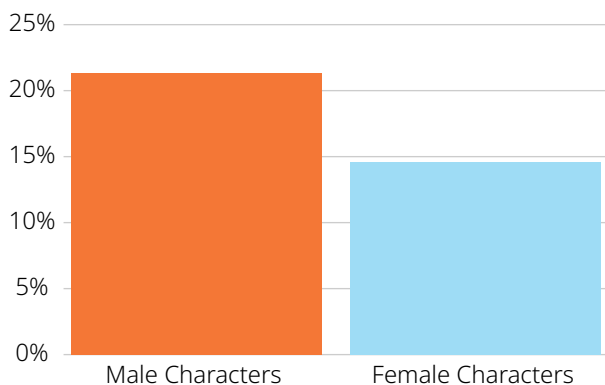
## Gender Bias in Advertising About the Workforce, Leadership, and STEM Education

### Men Dominate in Workplace & Leadership Roles In Advertising

Below, we list the differences in how ads showed men and women in paid occupation roles, and leadership roles, as well as driving a vehicle.. Differences related to STEM occupations and representation in the school setting were not statistically significant.<sup>38</sup>

- \* Male characters were 1.5 times more likely than female characters to have a paid occupation (21.3% compared with 14.6%) (See Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5. Share of male and female characters shown in a paid occupation**



- \* Of characters with a paid occupation, 11.1% of men and 9.5% women were shown in a STEM occupation, a difference that was not statistically significant.
- \* Male characters were almost two times more likely than female characters to be portrayed as leaders (2.8% compared with 1.5%).
- \* Male characters were almost two times more likely than female characters to be shown driving a vehicle (2.1% compared with 1.1%).
- \* There are not statistically significant differences in the share of male and female characters 19 years old and younger shown in a school setting (See Table 6).

**TABLE 6. Share of Characters in School by Gender and Age**

	SHOWN IN A SCHOOL	
	Male Characters	Female Characters
<b>Ages 1 to 12</b>	6.8%	7.9%
<b>Ages 13 to 19</b>	18.5%	16.4%
<b>Ages 20 to 49</b>	1.1%	1.1%
<b>Ages 50-plus</b>	0.0%	1.0%

## Market Sector Analysis for Work & Leadership Roles In Advertising

- ✱ For Home Care, Decor, & Appliances ads, male characters were about three times more likely than female characters to have a paid occupation (18.9% compared with 6.2%).
- ✱ For Medical, Health, & Personal Care ads, male characters were about two times more likely than female characters to have a paid occupation (17.3% compared with 9.0%).
- ✱ For Utilities & Professional Services ads, male characters were about two times more likely than female characters to have a paid occupation (50.0% compared with 23.7%).
- ✱ For Automobile ads, male characters were about two times more likely than female characters to be driving (35.1% compared with 15.9%).

## Unequal Distribution of Care Responsibilities: Women Are Portrayed in Domestic Roles

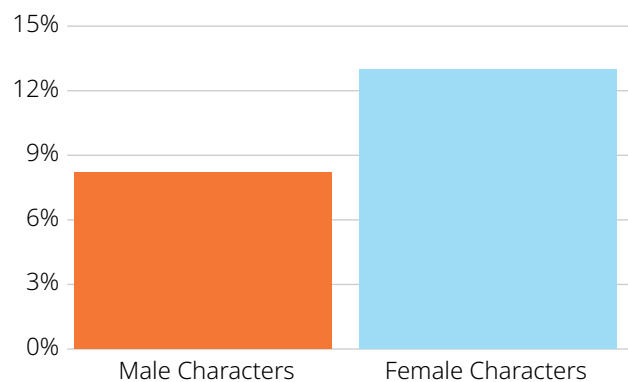
As reviewed above, women and girls are often assumed to naturally take on domestic roles—an assumption that reinforces stereotypes limiting their opportunities outside the home and perpetuating gender inequality. The ads analysed reinforce this.

Below are the statistically significant differences in how ads show men and women in domestic roles. To operationalise this, this analysis considers whether characters are shown as caregivers, in family settings, in home settings, and carrying out cleaning, cooking, shopping; and differences in disciplining children.

- ✱ Female characters were 1.5 times more likely than male characters to be caregivers (13.0% compared with 8.2%). (See Figure 6.)

- ✱ Female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be shown in a family, such as spending quality time with their children during an outing (27.9% compared with 22.0%).
- ✱ Female characters were nine times more likely than male characters to do cleaning work, such as mopping the floor, cleaning the windows (0.9% compared with 0.1%).
- ✱ Female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be shown in a home setting (30.7% compared with 24.4%).

**FIGURE 6. Share of male and female characters shown as caregivers**



## Market Sector Analysis for Domesticity

- \* For Food & Drink ads, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be caregivers (16.1% compared with 9.2%).
- \* For Food & Drink ads, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be in a family (33.0% compared with 24.6%).
- \* For Home Care, Decor, & Appliances ads, female characters were almost seven times more likely than male characters to be cleaning (10.7% compared with 1.6%).
- \* For Food & Drink ads, male characters were significantly more likely than female characters to be in a home setting (37.1% compared with 30.4%).
- \* For Home Care, Decor, & Appliances ads, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to be in a home setting (58.9% compared with 42.6%).

## Men Are Shown Exercising More

By depicting women and girls engaging in non-domestic activities in advertisement, media can help eliminate discrimination against women and girls in social life highlighting the same and equal rights of men and women to participate in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life.<sup>39</sup> Below are the differences in how men and women are shown exercising, in a gym setting, and socialising with others as examples of different aspects of cultural life.

- \* Male characters were significantly more likely than female characters to be shown exercising (7.2% compared with 5.2%).

## Market Sector Analysis for Physical and Sociable Activities

- \* For Food & Drink ads, male characters were about two times more likely than female characters to be exercising (7.4% compared with 3.4%).
- \* For Food & Drink ads, male characters were about four times more likely than female characters to be in a gym setting (1.5% compared with 0.3%).

## Boys and Girls Engage in Gender Stereotypical Play

Even in the way male and female characters are shown playing, we often see girls playing in ways that coincide with domesticity. Below are the statistically significant differences in gendered play.

- \* Female characters were 20 times more likely than male characters to be engaging in traditionally feminine play (20.8% compared with 0.0%), but male characters were 2.5 times more likely than female characters to be engaging in traditionally masculine play (44.7% compared with 16.7%).
- \* Among characters ages 1 to 12, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to engage in traditionally feminine play (31.2% compared with 0.0%).



## Market Sector Analysis for Gender Counter Stereotypical Portrayals

- ✱ For Entertainment ads, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to engage in feminine play (47.4% compared with 0.0%), and male characters were about six times more likely than female characters to engage in masculine play (62.5% compared with 10.5%).
- ✱ For Entertainment ads and among characters ages 1 to 12, female characters were significantly more likely than male characters to engage in feminine play (52.9% compared with 0.0%), and male characters were significantly more likely than female characters to engage in masculine play (57.1% compared with 5.9%).

The analysis of these 1,000 ads suggests that more men and boys are shown as leaders, in paid occupations, driving, and exercising, while women and girls are sexualised, are wearing revealing clothing, are shown more in home settings, with their families, and doing unpaid care and domestic work. These portrayals may reinforce and perpetuate existing gender stereotypes in the workplace and in domestic labour and caregiving. Notably, female characters were more often shown in a nature setting, and as often as men in a school setting and as STEM professionals in the sample of ads analysed which are positive representation findings for gender-equality efforts.

# Applying the Key Findings

As outlined earlier, this report set out to analyse representation in advertising related to four highlighted areas in China: gender bias in STEM education and career paths, unequal distribution of care responsibilities, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and gendered expectations and their impacts on health. These are 4 areas closely tied to children's potential, opportunities, and well-being, while also reflecting the influence of marketing in shaping gender norms and behaviors.

In some cases, the advertisements analysed did not reinforce gender norms. For example, a similar share of male and female characters were shown in STEM professions in the sampled ads. But the analysis finds gender differences in other key areas, and indicate some way in which advertising could play a role in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, including through providing inspirational role models, upholding respectful relations, and showing healthy personal interactions. These insights can be applied to address gender stereotyping, promote gender-equitable practices and women's empowerment, promote mental and physical wellbeing, and contribute to ending gender-based violence.

## Promote Economic Participation and Leadership for Women and Girls

### Increasing Women and Girls' Leadership in STEM

To Increasing Women and Girls' Leadership in STEM, women and girls need to be supported to succeed

in STEM education and careers, and particularly for female role models to be promoted.<sup>40</sup> Social norms and practices, including parents holding stereotypical views about girls' abilities in STEM subjects<sup>41</sup> and association of STEM subjects with supposedly masculine traits such as abstract reasoning,<sup>42</sup> can discourage and impede women and girls from pursuing many STEM careers where men are the majority. In schools, traditional gender roles and expectations persist, with boys often encouraged to be assertive while girls are expected to be passive, leading to differential treatment and academic expectations. Additionally, educational materials frequently reinforce gender stereotypes, exacerbating the issue.<sup>43</sup> Although women account for 45.8% of China's STEM workforce overall, they account for less than 20% of the most popular STEM positions in the field of technology, including machine learning, deep learning, image recognition, and architecture<sup>44</sup>. In 2019, women comprise only 5% of the members of the Chinese Academy of Engineering.<sup>45</sup> They also encounter obstacles in career advancement due to gender-based barriers that lessen their chances of occupying senior and leadership roles, including sociocultural influences around care responsibilities, a lack of mentors, visibility, and funding for female scientists<sup>46</sup> as well as perceived challenges in accessing recruitment and promotion opportunities.<sup>47</sup> At each level of advancement, women's presence in science leadership roles drops off — a phenomenon known as the "leaky pipeline."<sup>48</sup>

This study shows how advertising in China is more likely to show male characters in the workplace, as leaders, and as dominant voices, while more

likely showing women in domestic roles. Gender stereotypes around child's play were also found, bolstering traditional social norms dictating that girls and women belong in the domestic sphere as mothers and caregivers, while boys and men are seen as natural leaders or expert voices of authority. The takeaway for viewers, then, remains that certain domains "belong" to boys and others to girls. In addition, given that women are more likely to be sexualised in the advertisements can reinforce a message that women's beauty is more prized than their brains.

Encouragingly, women in the advertisements analysed were likely as men to be featured as working in a STEM occupation. Representation of women working in STEM, especially in leadership positions, can encourage girls and women to have a successful career in STEM and inspire girls and women to increase STEM participation levels in education and in the workplace.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, presenting women in leadership roles suggests that women have the same capabilities and strength to lead and make decisions, and may encourage women and girls to pursue leadership roles and other educational and career advancement opportunities.

- ✱ Advertisers should continue to show women working in STEM occupations, across a range of paid occupations and levels of seniority.
- ✱ Show women and girls as decision-makers, in leadership positions that may not be specific to paid occupation alone, nor even just in unconventional roles. All of this would show the important roles that women can play outside of the family setting.



## Increasing Women and Girls' Leadership in the Green economy

The impacts of disasters and climate change are not gender neutral and this is a serious challenge confronting the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>50</sup> While women and girls are actively contributing to climate action, their participation and leadership have yet to achieve gender parity or a critical mass to adequately influence decisions and policies.<sup>51</sup> In pursuit of gender-responsive and just green economies transition, women and girls need to be empowered to influence, shape, and drive the collective climate response.<sup>52</sup> They need leadership skills and confidence to engage in advocacy for themselves, to become experts, and to push for necessary action, along with participating fully in the green economy at all levels. This is important given the context that the representation of women in key STEM occupations associated with the green economies is especially low in Asia-Pacific countries.<sup>53</sup>

The underrepresentation of girls and women as both characters and narrators in advertisements risks driving a message for women and girls that

it is not their place to speak out and can infer that their needs and challenges are not given the same amount of attention and values as those of men and boys. Increasing the proportion of prominent women with decision-making roles and as voiceover narrators in advertising would portray a more equal world. If we are to harness women and girls' voices and knowledge to advocate for gender-responsive and just green economies transition, more women need to be shown as leaders or shown in STEM occupations, in advertising. Advertisements can be crafted in a way to promote and encourage women in leadership, which will be critical to this important social issue.

- ✦ Increasing the number of advertisements with a female narrator across sectors would help promote a norm that women too can speak with authority as experts and leaders.
- ✦ Show women as leaders and experts to provide role models for children and adolescents to aspire to.





## Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

Rooted in gender inequality, violence against women and girls remains one of the most fundamental social, economic and political means that reinforce the subordinate status of women and girls in relation to men and boys.<sup>54</sup> Rigid gender norms hegemonic masculinity has been shown to be connected to violence.<sup>55</sup> Norms that prize a type of masculinity associated with toughness, physical strength, and aggression are associated with violence against children and women.<sup>56</sup> Studies have found that exposure to stereotypical portrayals can reinforce gender norms, contribute to sexism, harassment, and violence among men, and constrain women's career aspirations.<sup>57</sup> Programmatic and scholarly research show that discriminatory norms are a key driver of violence against women and girls.<sup>58</sup>

While there is no explicit representation of child marriage or gender-based violence found in the advertisements included in the study, the findings show women in ads are more likely than men to have a lack of voice and leadership roles, and are more likely to be shown in domestic and caring roles. These combined portrayals, along with the increased likelihood of women being sexualized on screen, risks perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes about power and hierarchy.

- ✦ Women and girls should be shown in the workplace and in positions of authority as popular and potentially powerful individuals to the same extent as boys and men.
- ✦ Traditional norms around masculinity can also be challenged, showing men and boys as caring, vulnerable, and sensitive rather than focusing on toughness and a perceived need to be the main provider for the family.



## Promoting Healthy Minds and Bodies

Childhood obesity and overweight children are major issues in China, affecting around 45 million children, with rates increasing.<sup>59</sup> Promotion of nutritious, affordable, and sustainable diets and healthy lifestyles that protect children against the triple burden of underweight, hidden hunger (where children suffer from a deficiency in micronutrients), and overweight is needed.<sup>60</sup>

In China, while obesity is more prevalent among boys than girls,<sup>61</sup> girls report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.<sup>62</sup> Mental health is impacted by lack of self-confidence, often linked with unrealistic expectations around beauty standards, including body size.<sup>63</sup> Gender norms are an important systemic determinant of adolescent exposure to situations or behaviours that can contribute to poor mental health.<sup>64</sup> It is important to include a gender lens as different health issues, with different triggers, are relevant for boys and girls.

This study shows differences in how ads show men and boys in terms of body types and activity

compared with girls and women, which may indicate different attitudes on the types of body types expected from men and women. The study found women were more likely than men to be shown with smaller than average body types. Just 2% of characters over 19 years old in the study were identified as having a larger body type. This may contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction with body image, especially among girls and women. Focusing on promoting healthy lifestyles in advertising, especially in food and drink ads, is key to enabling healthy futures for children.

- ✱ Ads could show women and girls more frequently as having average body types and engaging in sporting activities
- ✱ Men and boys could be included more in ads as caregivers and in a family setting, playing a full and competent role in shopping and preparing for healthy meals.
- ✱ Advertisements should promote healthy eating and exercise and a balanced diet rather than encourage overconsumption of unhealthy foods and beverages.



## Care Is Everyone's Business

Advertisement can perpetuate and reinforce discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes against women and girls as primary caregiver by portraying female characters in traditional domestic role. This research finds that ads are much more likely to show girls and women cleaning, in a family setting, and as caregivers in advertisements, especially in Food & Drink and Home Care, Décor & Appliances sectors.

In the advertisements analysed, women are more likely to be placed as the primary caregiver, while men are not as likely to be portrayed as being responsible for caring for others and are more likely to be seen as breadwinners. Overall, men were more likely to be shown with a paid occupation. In this way, advertising tends to normalise care responsibilities being relegated to the feminine spheres, while boys and men are not expected to take an equal role in domestic responsibilities. Given that Chinese women spend 1.9 times more time than men on unpaid care work in 2024, continually normalising gender stereotypes around care responsibilities through

advertisements validates and helps perpetuate social norms that result in women's disproportionate provision of unpaid care.<sup>65</sup> This unequal burden of care has negative impacts on women's and girls' quality of life and can impact career or study ambitions and reduce potential earnings.

- \* Men and boys could be shown more sharing household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and caring for others to encourage sharing of care responsibilities and purchasing decisions.
- \* In ads where food preparation is featured, scenes could show men playing a full and competent role in shopping for food and preparing meals. This promotes the critical role of men in providing positive role models not just as providers but also as caregivers and nurturers, involved in the lives of children and taking care of elderly family members.
- \* Showing households where everyone contributes to domestic work underlines that caring is everyone's business.





## The UNICEF & UN Women Perspective: Our Work to Promote Gender Equality and Women and Girls' Empowerment

Gender equality and women's empowerment multiplies and accelerates the drivers of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a standalone SDG5: *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*. Addressing gender stereotypes and discrimination in advertising will directly contribute to achieving the SDG5 target of *ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere*, while also accelerating progress towards all of the SDGs, including SDG4: Quality Education, SDG8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG10: Reduced Inequalities; SDG13: Climate Change.

More specifically, promoting a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in media,"and mobilising diverse media channels for awareness-

rising and outreach regarding the elimination of harmful practices against women and children have long been emphasised by the landmark global policy agreements on gender equality and women's empowerment. For example, they have been mentioned as one of the objectives under the critical areas of concern of Women and the Media in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and as the part of the general recommendations of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>66</sup> China has adopted and committed to targets and recommendations of the BPfA since 1995 and the CEDAW since 1980. While progress has been made, including strengthening gender-responsive regulatory mechanisms in the field of media, areas for further improvement recommended by Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women include "*adopting a regulatory framework to combat gender stereotyping in the media and advertising, including a gender-specific code of ethics that promotes positive images of women and girls, and taking measures including*

*awareness-raising to address the use of gender stereotypes and discriminatory content, language and portrayals of women by the media.*<sup>67</sup>

UN Women and UNICEF are both committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in China, including promoting a gender-responsive advertising environment. Promoting positive gender norms and socialisation is critical to achieving SDG5. Gender socialisation begins early in life and intensifies in individuals by the time they reach adolescence. Discriminatory norms, attitudes, and behaviour can become more ingrained in adolescence and adulthood but can also change. By promoting positive gender socialisation, UNICEF and UN Women seek to explicitly address discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes as part of their programme of work to achieve equitable outcomes for girls and boys as well as women and men.

UNICEF's Gender Action Plan (GAP) 2022–2025<sup>68</sup> outlines how UNICEF promotes gender equality across its programmes and organisation. The GAP approach goes beyond responding to the manifestations of gender inequality to tackle its underlying drivers by engaging boys and men as allies, advancing upstream financing and policy solutions, and supporting girls' agency and voice. Priority results for gender equality across the UNICEF Strategic Plan Goal Areas include improvement in the quality of maternal health care and nutrition, and HIV testing, counselling, and care; more gender-responsive education systems and equitable access to education for all; progress towards the elimination

of violence and harmful practices; more equitable water, sanitation, and hygiene systems; and gender-responsive social protection systems. Addressing the impact of discriminatory gender norms and socialisation has been identified as a key priority for UNICEF in its engagement with the business community and in achieving its programmatic goals across all sectors.

UNICEF China is committed to promoting a gender-responsive approach by prioritising the generation and dissemination of sex disaggregated data, promoting the participation of girls and women in public and community life, fighting for behavioural change around gender norms, and facilitating access to services in an inclusive and intersectional manner. This includes efforts to contextualise egalitarian development, as well as creating opportunities for the development of girls, and promoting their empowerment to better leverage these opportunities. Education, Health, Nutrition, and Child Protection and Social Policy are key thematic areas for focus, with prioritisation on areas including skills and leadership for girls, gender-responsive parenting, mental health for adolescents and mothers, green skills and leadership for girls, and gender-based violence (GBV) against children.

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide. UN Women China's work is aligned with the 2021–2025 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) for China to support China's development



priorities in the next five years. It is also in line with China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), China's National Human Rights Action Plan (2021–2025), and the Outline of Women's Development in China (2021–2030). Having been active in China since 1998, UN Women works on the following prioritised thematic impact areas with both public and private partnerships and civil society organisations.

UN Women's work in China includes advancing Women's Economic Empowerment with multiple partners so that women and girls can have income security, decent work, and economic autonomy. Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW) is another priority area. UN Women in China has been working on strengthening women's equitable access to violence against women and girls' services with government stakeholders and civil society

organisations and advocating for positive social norms changes by fostering a multi-stakeholder engagement including men, boys, and young people. UN Women also work with key partners so that all women can fully and equally participate in decision-making, and that women and girls can benefit from gender-responsive laws, policies, budgets, services, and accountable institutions. As a core element of the communications and advocacy efforts, UN Women China works closely with media and marketing professionals through messaging and storytelling to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote positive social norm change.

In 2017, UN Women convened the industry-led initiative, namely Unstereotype Alliance, united advertising industry leaders, decision-makers, and professionals to accelerate progress to end harmful stereotypes in advertising and promote positive cultural change to build a more equitable world where people in all their diversity can be empowered.



## The Way Forward

UNICEF and UN Women are committed to working with key stakeholders to harness the power of business, with a focus on the marketing and advertising sector to both deconstruct harmful gender stereotypes and to promote social norms of gender equality and women's empowerment through messages, representation, storytelling, and imagery.

In China, the China Advertising Association has a dedicated working committee of responsible advertising to children. This committee focuses on promoting responsible advertising practices targeting children. The efforts include setting guidelines, monitoring advertising content, and ensuring that brands communicate with children in an ethical and age-appropriate manner.

In 2021, the Shenzhen municipal government launched an official guideline to identify and prevent gender discrimination in advertisements. The guidelines outline instances of sexism in advertising, listing six types of ads that can be considered

containing gender discrimination, such as containing sexual cues, degrading and insulting the human body, and emphasizing a subordinate role or status for women.

By conducting this research, UNICEF and UN Women aim to further engage with the China Advertising Association and other stakeholders in the advertising industry to engage with these insights and use them to better understand the social impacts of their creative outputs, such as advertising. The findings also highlight potential areas for action to affect positive cultural change to help shape perceptions by using the power of advertising.

Some recommendations are appended based on the research insights. Further consultations and engagement with the advertising sector is needed for mutual understanding on the impact of advertising and what collective efforts should be made.

## What Can Stakeholders Do?

**Strategic Objective: Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media to eliminate structural barriers, discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, and promoting social norms and practices that empower all women and girls and that recognize their contributions and eliminate discrimination and violence against them.**<sup>69</sup>

### Actions to be taken:

#### By the mass media and advertising organizations:

**Every element of the creative process should be examined through the lens of diversity and inclusion—from the composition of the creative team and suppliers, to the language within casting briefs to the execution of the advert itself.**

- \* Increase the share of women and girls across advertisements and ensure they have prominent speaking and narrating roles.
- \* Show female and male characters in counter-stereotypical roles related to their genders.
  - \* Create alternative depictions of femininity by portraying women and girls in ways that do not reduce their worth to sexualisation.
  - \* Depict women in the workplace, in positions of authority, as leaders, and with power.
  - \* Build alternative depictions of masculinity by portraying men and boys in more diverse ways so as not to reduce their worth to harmful and simplistic stereotypes.
- \* Depict men as caregivers, contributing to household duties, experiencing a range of emotions, and showing vulnerability.

- \* When portraying household settings, reflect the reality of diverse family units, including multigenerational households, single-mother-led or single-father-led families, and other situations outside of the nuclear family.
- \* Hire diverse teams of writers, producers, and artists and ensure that they can bring new perspectives and experiences to the creative and production process.
- \* Use distribution channels that ensure inclusive and non-discriminatory marketing mechanisms, including preventing the use of gender-biased algorithms in digital platforms.
- \* Use data and evidence-based communications to address stereotyping regarding Use data and evidence-based communications to address stereotyping regarding people with diverse backgrounds.

#### By governments, the media and advertising organizations:

**Legislation, policies, measures and programs to ensure that the media respects and promotes respect for women and girls, change gender stereotypes, and to reinforce and hold the accountability.**<sup>70</sup>

- \* While some municipal governments in China have launched official guideline to identify and prevent gender discrimination in advertisements, adopt a regulatory framework to combat gender stereotyping in the media and advertising, including a gender-specific code of ethics that promotes positive images of women and girls, and take measures including awareness-raising to address the use of gender stereotypes and discriminatory content, language and portrayals of women by the media.<sup>71</sup>
- \* For the media and advertising companies/ organizations, develop professional guidelines

and codes of conduct and other forms of self-regulation and monitoring mechanisms to promote the presentation of balanced and non-stereotyped images of women in advertising.<sup>72</sup> Specific actions could be:

- \* Leverage tools to create and track advertising content that is free of gender stereotypes, and push for progressive portrayals of all people.
- \* Test advertising scripts for bias among diverse audiences, including women, children and adolescents.
- \* Conduct impact assessments with diverse stakeholders, including consultations with women, children and adolescents, to understand how marketing can impact their perceptions of themselves and others.
- \* Establish guidelines for advertising with benchmarks for gender-equitable representation.
- \* Develop a long-term strategic plan and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in marketing and advertising.

**By the media, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in collaboration, as appropriate, with national machinery for the advancement of women:**

**Encourage gender-sensitive, gender-responsive or gender-related topics training and capacity development for media professionals, including media owners and managers, to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women in the media.**<sup>73</sup>

- \* Train staff regularly (especially senior management, advertising production, and creative teams) on unconscious bias, including how our perceptions impact content

development and marketing choices in a way that promotes or challenges harmful gender norms.

**Intensify education campaigns for the general public, public officials and media professionals on the use of gender-sensitive language to counter discriminatory gender stereotypes and objectification of women and to promote positive portrayals of women as active drivers of development.**<sup>74</sup>

- \* Forge a cross-sectoral partnership, including, women-led and girls-led organisations and women-led media groups to identify appropriate ways to use marketing and advertising channels to promote messages that dismantle harmful stereotypes and combat violence against women and children.
- \* Practise positively gendered marketing and promote positive gender socialisation to women and girls by focusing on traits such as intelligence, strength, and perseverance rather than just attractiveness, thinness, and domesticity.
- \* Promote extensive campaigns, making use of public and private educational programmes, to disseminate information about and increase awareness of the human rights of women and girls.<sup>75</sup>
- \* Ensure that awareness-raising programmes provide accurate information and clear and unified messages from trusted sources about the negative impact of harmful practices on women, children, in particular girls, their



families and society at large. Such programmes should include social media, the Internet and community communication and dissemination tools.<sup>76</sup>

***Strategic Objective: Increase women and girl's participation and access to expression and decision making in and through the media, advertisement, and new technologies of communication.***<sup>77</sup>

### **Actions to be taken:**

**By government, national and international media system, non-governmental organizations, media professional associations, as appropriate, or national machinery for the advancement of women:**

- \* Support research into all aspects of women and the media so as to define areas needing attention and action and review existing media policies with a view to integrating a gender perspective.<sup>78</sup>
- \* Promote women's full and equal participation

and decision making in all aspects of media in the media, from management, programming, education, training, research, as well as laws and policy making, regulatory bodies related to media.<sup>79</sup>

- \* Produce and/or disseminate media and advertisement materials on (diverse groups of) women leaders, inter alia, as leaders who bring to their positions of leadership many different life experiences, including but not limited to their experiences in balancing work and family responsibilities, as mothers, as professionals, as managers, decision-makers, and as entrepreneurs, to provide role models, particularly to young women.<sup>80</sup>



## Further Resources and Reading

### The Unstereotype Alliance

The Unstereotype Alliance is an industry-led initiative convened by UN Women that unites advertising industry leaders, decision-makers, and creatives to end harmful stereotypes in advertising and businesses. The members collaborate to help create a world without stereotypes, empowering people in all their diversity. The Unstereotype Alliance aims to challenge advertisers and advertising agencies to deliver the best unstereotyped marketing content and setting clear goals and measuring change annually. Visit [www.unstereotypealliance.org](http://www.unstereotypealliance.org).

### UNICEF and UN Women Introductory Brief

This introductory brief from UNICEF and UN Women presents key insights and evidence on how gender equality is impacted by media, marketing, and advertising, and supports the case for businesses

and stakeholders—including policy-makers, industry aggregators, civil society, and children—to foster a multi-stakeholder collaboration to dismantle stereotypes and to drive progressive gender and marketing action in the Asia-Pacific region. Visit <https://www.unicef.org/eap/documents/gender-equality-women-and-girls>.

### UNICEF Diversity and Inclusion Playbook

UNICEF, in collaboration with LEGO Group, developed a playbook to provide starting points for defining the different types of stereotyping that can have a harmful impact on a child's well-being and development, with tools for business to create guidelines and strategies for ensuring diversity and inclusion in their creative content and products for children. Visit <https://www.unicef.org/documents/promoting-diversity-and-inclusion-advertising-unicef-playbook>.

## Appendix: List of Relevant Terms

**Body type:** According to the “criteria of weight for adults” in China, adults with a BMI under 18.5 are considered “underweight.” According to the “criteria of weight for adults” in China, adults with a BMI over 24 are considered “overweight.” Characters’ estimated height and weight were used to determine characters’ BMIs and therefore their body types. Underweight was categorised as “slim” and “overweight” as “large.”

**Domestic work:** Domestic work include work done around a residence, such as cooking and cleaning.

**Family:** For each character, it was determined whether they were shown in a family, including a parent with a child or a grandparent with grandchildren.

**Gender discrimination:** “Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” [United Nations, 1979. ‘Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women’. Article 1]

**Gender equality** (Equality between women and men): This refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will

become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.<sup>81</sup>

**Gender norms and Socialisation:** Gender norms are ideas about how men and women should be and act. We internalize and learn these “rules” early in life. This sets-up a life-cycle of gender socialization and stereotyping. Put another way, gender norms are the standards and expectations to which gender identity generally conforms, within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community at that point in time.<sup>82</sup>

**Gender representation:** In this analysis, it refers to the ways in which media serves to produce, shape, and change societal norms and beliefs of perceived differences between genders.

**Gender responsive:** Policies, programs, initiatives, or actions that recognize and address the different experiences, needs and vulnerabilities faced by women, men, girls, and boys, while upholding their human rights, promoting their empowerment and advancing gender equality.

**Gender roles:** Gender roles refer to social and behavioral norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex. These often determine the traditional responsibilities and tasks assigned to men, women, boys and girls. Gender-specific roles are often conditioned by household structure, access to resources, specific impacts of the global economy, occurrence of conflict or disaster, and other locally relevant factors such as ecological conditions. Like gender itself, gender roles can evolve over time, in particular through the empowerment of women and transformation of masculinities.<sup>83</sup>

**Gender stereotypes:** Gender stereotypes are simplistic generalizations about the gender attributes, differences and roles of women and men. Stereotypical characteristics about men are that they are competitive, acquisitive, autonomous, independent, confrontational, concerned about private goods. Parallel stereotypes of women hold that they are cooperative, nurturing, caring, connecting, group-oriented, concerned about public goods. Messages reinforcing gender stereotypes and the idea that women are inferior come in a variety of “packages” – from songs

and advertising to traditional proverbs.<sup>84</sup>

**Gender:** Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through **socialization** processes. They are context/time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context.<sup>85</sup>

**Gendered play:** In this analysis, for each character that was shown playing, analysts determined whether the character was shown engaging in masculine play (e.g., military, sports, sports cars, adventure, STEM, violence), feminine play (e.g., shopping, beauty, nurture, domesticity), or neither which was determined to be “neutral play.”

**Narrator:** For each ad with narration, analysts determined whether the narrator was a man or a woman.

**Objectification:** Objectification occurred when a character was treated like an object, symbol, or prop, rather than a person with their own individual qualities.



**Settings:** For each character, analysts determined whether they were shown in the following settings: rural setting, urban setting, gym, nature, school, and home.

**Sexualisation:** In this analysis, analysts determined whether each character was objectified (i.e., sexual body parts are emphasised and a focus of the character) or wearing sexually revealing clothing (i.e., clothing that exposes sexual body parts).

**Work and leadership:** For each character, it was assessed whether they had a paid occupation (e.g., their paid occupation was part of the ad narrative, they were seen wearing a uniform, they referenced their job), if the paid occupation was in STEM, and if they possessed leadership (e.g., others were seen following their directives, formal positions of power).

## Endnotes

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## About GDI

Since 2004, the Geena Davis Institute has worked to mitigate unconscious bias while creating equality, fostering inclusion and reducing negative stereotyping in entertainment and media. As a global research-based organisation, the Institute provides research, direct guidance, and thought leadership aimed at increasing representation of marginalised groups within six identities: gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, disability, age, and body type. Because of its unique history and position, the Institute can help achieve true on-screen equity in a way that few organisations can. Learn more at [www.geenadavisinstitute.org](http://www.geenadavisinstitute.org).

## About United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to help children around the world realise their rights to survival, development, protection, and participation. Our work is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and we are committed to establishing children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards for children. Together with our partners, we work in over 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action for the benefit of children everywhere.

UNICEF defends and promotes the rights and well-being of 298 million children across China. Since 1979, we have worked in partnership with the Government of China in education, water, and sanitation, child health and nutrition, child protection, including for those who are most in need. UNICEF also provides humanitarian assistance during emergencies.

Our approach begins with gathering data and research. We work with the Government of China to

carry out innovative projects to improve children's lives. The results of these projects inform national policies, legislation, and guidelines so that children come first. This helps improve the lives of millions of children across China.

Visit UNICEF China website: [www.unicef.cn](http://www.unicef.cn)

Visit UNICEF Global website: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

Follow us on Weibo: <http://weibo.com/unicefchina>

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Follow us on X: @UNICEFChina

## About UN Women

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women works to develop and uphold standards and create an environment in which every woman and girl can exercise her human rights and live up to her full potential. We are trusted partners for advocates and decision-makers from all walks of life, and a leader in the effort to achieve gender equality.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes, and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide.

Active in China since 1998, UN Women primarily works on the following thematic impact areas in the country: (i) Governance and participation in public life, (ii) Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE), (iii) Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW), (iv) Global Partnership, (v) UN Coordination, (vi) Partnerships and Resource Mobilization, (vii) Communications and Advocacy, and (viii) Operations and Management Oversight.

UN Women China website: <https://china.unwomen.org>

UN Women global website: <https://www.unwomen.org/en>

UN Women China Weibo: @联合国妇女署

UN Women China WeChat: @联合国妇女署

UN Women China X: @unwomenchina

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