

# it's ALL in the MESSAGE

by Meena M. Shivdas



The messages that are targeted at young women in the Asian region by the media, are similar to the ones their peers in the North receive—you have to be young, light-skinned, sexy, slim and beautiful if you want to get noticed. Young men, on the other hand, are exhorted to be the essential male—aggressive and dominating. Given this scenario, is there a chance that young women's images in the media will change to reflect some of their dreams, aspirations, joys and sorrows?

Concerted action by the women's movement, consumer groups and media practitioners in consultation with young women could initiate the process of change.

## What's the in thing?

Television in most Asian countries beam images of young people that are considered "hip," "cool" and "trendy"—roughly translated, they would mean young women

in designer jeans, crop tops, shimmering lip gloss and waterproof mascara all on a body that is wafer slim, and young men in baggy trousers, trainers and the hallmark baseball cap worn reversed. Advertisements in the print media are replete with the

same kind of images that combine youth, energy and style.

The advertisement industry promotes a lifestyle through these images with the aim of raking in consumer dollars. The advertisement industry thrives because transnational





Feminists fight sexism in many ways. Pickets are just one of them.

corporations largely rely on their expertise and creativity to build markets. Where do young women and men fit into the picture? While they are largely seen as active consumers with impressionable minds and as part of the growing affluent middle class in most Asian countries, young women often become part of the projected lifestyle through the way their bodies are used by the industry. Although it may be argued that young women who are part of the industry chose to enter the trade and that they have profited from it, the point that the advertisement industry promoted a type of trendy lifestyle which attracted the young women in the first place still remains.

In fact, there is a fundamental difference in the way young women's bodies are used to provoke, titillate and convey a sense of subservience that sets them apart from the way young male bodies are used. Young male bodies are positioned to convey authority and power.

**COFFEE, TEA OR ME?**

In 1995, most governments geared up for the Fourth World

Conference on Women that took place in China by releasing reports and statements on the status of their women. Malaysia was no exception. However, International Distillers, a supplier and promoter from the brewing industry in Malaysia, thought otherwise. Their promotion of a tequila, Jose Cuervo 1800, drove home a major point: that commercial interests are not necessarily in congruence with women's interests. Media reports outlined in detail how several pubs in Penang hired young women to cater to customers according to the promotion's theme "Lick, Shoot and Suck." For RM10.00, customers got to lick salt from a young woman's cleavage, shoot down the tequila offered and then suck a sliver of lime held in the woman's mouth. As expected, the Mexican manufacturer denied that the promotions ever took place even as consumer and women's groups around the country denounced the promotions.

Some time ago, in neighbouring Singapore, a leading hotel chain, the Pan

Pacific group, released an offensive print advertisement that played on the word "tart." The advertisement showed a young woman standing at the entrance of the hotel holding a tart to promote the hotel's bakery. The imaging and the words used—"Come and pick up our tarts"—was blatantly sexist.

After encountering protests from groups, the Danish General Manager and the advertising agency took the campaign to further heights. The General Manager appeared in the advertisement and exhorted everyone to come by and get a danish instead. But the implications of using the word "tart" as against the use of the word "danish" was not lost on women's groups.

Although these are only two examples from the Southeast Asian region, they are fairly representative of Asia and, more importantly, of the way young women's bodies are constructed and used in advertisements. In Japan, young women's bodies are increasingly being used in the production of pornographic films. In the Philippines, women's bodies are used in beer advertisements. Indian teens and girls have had the chance to play with Barbie, the archetype 19-year old with the trademark body and outfits the world over. The Avon lady has hit China, where Mao outfits are out and fashions from Hong Kong and Shanghai are in. Silicon implants, body tatoos and slimming teas and supplements seem to have edged out regular exercise and healthy eating habits.

The female body is no longer viewed as holistic; it is seen in a fragmented way by corporations and media. Young women's self-



perception of their bodies is influenced by ideals of the perfect body and face promoted by media.

Where does all these leave the realities of young women's lives in Asia? Although Asia houses some of the miracle economies and the world's largest markets, it also has the poorest communities. Its young women are disadvantaged. While the advertisement industry largely addresses itself to an urban audience, it has had to contend with the rural populace as corporate tentacles seek out fresher markets. It is within this scenario and given the socio-economic realities of Asia's young women that the images promoted by media seem to be skewed and out of context.

## THE REALITY

What are the realities of young women's lives in Asia? Incontrovertible facts prove that teen prostitution is on the rise and more and more young rural women are brought into the sex industry. Therefore the trafficking of young women as sex slaves is rampant across most Asian borders. The unsatisfactory state of girls' education in most Asian countries and the limited employment options available to them exacerbate the situation. Cultural and other institutional barriers set further limits on young women's lives.

At the same time, significant numbers of young Asian women are entering professions previously considered male bastions. They are becoming more independent and assertive. They also see the links between women's inequities and the

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larger global inequities. And yet, media still see them as objects.

Although young women's lives were addressed at both the Asia-Pacific regional Women in Development (WID) meeting and the Beijing conference, the commitments made by governments in both events are couched in language that waters down intents. Significantly, the media sections in both the Jakarta Regional Plan of Action and the Beijing Global Platform for Action do not adequately address the issue of the advertisement sector of the media.

While it is acknowledged that images in advertisements continue to perpetuate sex-stereotypes, the "action" part of the commitment only seeks to encourage the advertisement sector to self-regulate and urges the industry to induct more women on management and executive boards. Given the profit motives of the industry and the largely inherent sexist work philosophy and culture that are deeply entrenched in the advertising and media industries, is there a way that young women—as a constituency—could bring about change?

## WAY TO GO

The women's movement in Asia has made remarkable gains since 1975. As a lobbying force, it was able to influence public policy in order to change women's private lives. Women have been able to build on the gains through international networking and achieved much to further the status of women.

Women media practitioners and owners have also made significant gains but more needs to be done. This is where young women's strength as consumers could come in and a pro-active young women's constituency could be built to effect changes in the advertisement sector of the media.

For too long, young women have been considered passive consumers. Exercising their roles as consumers in their own right can be the first step. By forging links with women in the media industry, media practitioners and owners, activists and young women can build their case against the advertisement industry. More importantly, by choosing to say "no" to products that continue to be sold through sexist advertisements, young women can make a difference. After all, women have come a long way while media have not. ♪

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