

# GUIDELINES

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## Guidelines for equal advertising

The benefits of including  
a gender perspective  
in advertising communications

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Consell  
de l'Audiovisual  
de Catalunya



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de les Dones



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# Introduction

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These recommendations are the result of a joint effort between the Col·legi de Publicitaris i Relacions Públiques de Catalunya (Advertising and Public Relations Association of Catalonia), the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC) and the Institut Català de les Dones (Catalan Women's Institute). They are addressed to the main stakeholders in the commercial communications process: the advertisers and the advertising agencies. But they are also addressed to cooperative advertising companies that place advertising, the media—both public and private—and video distribution platforms, which can play a vital role in effectively advocating for equality between men and women.

The concept of *advertising* is used in these recommendations in the broadest sense of the term, including all types of media and formats: outdoor advertising, radio, television and movie advertising spots, and all forms of digital advertising on the Internet and in social media.

The term *gender* refers to the social and cultural construct of women and men, which establishes models of behaviour for femininity and masculinity and which varies in space and time across cultures. Thus, as *gender* is not a synonym of sex or *women*, advertising from a gender perspective is not advertising on women but instead advertising that considers sex and gender as key analytical and explanatory variables. This involves paying attention to the similarities and differences in the experiences, interests, expectations, attitudes and behaviours between women and men.

Companies, with their sense of social responsibility, are essential agents to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and particularly, the goal of gender equality. In this regard, these recommendations are intended to provide tools at the service of the advertising industry, for it to enjoy the benefits of non-sexist advertising.

Stereotypes are simplified images—of particular categories of people, institutions or events—shared in their essential characteristics by a large number of people

and which attribute certain roles according to the category. They serve to simplify the complexity of the information that we receive from our surroundings (TAJFEL 1984).

Stereotypes, by definition, do not have to be positive or negative, but when they show us what women and men should be like, and portray women in a position of inferiority in comparison to men, they result in negative stereotypes that reinforce gender inequalities.

In this regard, Law 17/2015, of 21 July, on effective equality between women and men, defines gender stereotypes as simplified images that attribute fixed roles to allegedly “proper” or “normal” behaviours of people in a certain context depending on their sex. These gender stereotypes apply to both men and women; however, whereas dominant male stereotypes tend to have connotations considered to be positive (power, strength, status, authority, etc.), dominant female stereotypes tend to have more negative connotations (dependence, weakness, irrationality, superficiality, etc.). This is why gender stereotypes are the basis for discrimination between women and men: they contribute towards justifying and perpetuating this such discrimination and using them in a continuous manner could reinforce inequalities and prejudices. In the case of advertising and the media, gender stereotypes should be used with great care, as both of them reach broad audiences and have amplifying power. It is necessary to bear in mind that stereotypes are not unchangeable, that they respond to specific periods and that they must be updated in order to reconcile them to the times we live in.

Advertising uses stereotypes to enhance the credibility of its message to sell goods and services, as this is the easiest way to convey an idea in such a limited space. There is no reason why these stereotypes cannot better portray society in all its diversity, in terms of not only gender and identity, but also age, ethnic and cultural origin, functional diversity, sexual-affective orientation, etc. In this regard, advertising and the media can be the catalysts in the fight against stereotypes and prejudices based on gender, offering an image closer to reality which is in keeping with the times we live in and breaks away from roles that pigeonhole one or the other in imaginaries that correspond to a patriarchal, androcentric and sexist society. If an advertisement is considered to be sexist and is rejected by the audience, a media outlet should be able to remove it. At the end of the day, the image of a media outlet is linked to the advertisement it carries and it could be affected.

Current legislation prohibits advertising that shows women in a degrading manner and that objectifies them. This is set out in Article 92 of Law 22/2005, of 29 December, on audiovisual communication in Catalonia, Article 25 of Law 17/2015, of 21 July, on effective equality between women and men, and Article 3 of Law 34/1988, of 11 November, on general advertising. It is forbidden to produce, broadcast and display advertisements that show people as inferior or superior in human dignity according to their sex or as mere sexual objects, as well as advertisements that justify or banalise violence against women or encourage people to engage in it. These types of advertisements are considered to be illegal advertising, and the law and the public authorities—in the event of a breach—may impose penalties for them.

At times, it can be difficult to recognise or identify sexist stereotypes straightaway, either because they are subtle or because society has unconsciously internalised and accepted them. These recommendations are intended to serve as a guide to be vigilant and to ensure that future advertising campaigns respect equality and are free of the presence of sexist stereotypes. At the end of the day, it is the shared responsibility of all social agents to contribute towards making effective equality between women and men a reality.



# Benefits of equal advertising for advertisers

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Non-sexist advertising provides benefits and positive consequences for the advertiser—financially speaking, in terms of work-related aspects, corporate image and the product.

## **1. It promotes the advertiser's sense of corporate social responsibility and contributes to a more equal society.**

Advertising has the ability to influence the social imaginary and a responsible company can contribute by means of non-sexist campaigns to make progress towards effective equality and improve its corporate image. Sexist advertising is harmful to both women and men and promotes inequalities, which are at the root of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and sex discrimination in the workplace.

## **2. It positions the advertiser and the brand in line with emerging social trends.**

An advertiser whose actions and campaigns show a commitment to gender equality would be in line with an increasingly relevant social movement. In the medium term, this strategy could mean that the company—and its goods, brands and services—would reap the benefits of being a pioneer in this area.

## **3. It reflects reality, which could help to improve brand image and for people to identify themselves with the product or service.**

Equal advertising portrays women in all their diversity and empowerment, beyond traditional stereotypes and patriarchal roles, and helps put an end to sexism. What's more, it promotes a positive image of the advertised product or service and makes it easier for the target audience to identify with it. By contrast, a sexist campaign provokes a backlash and public pressure in the media and in social media can force its withdrawal and paint a negative image of the advertiser.

#### **4. It avoids possible financial losses.**

Having a campaign denounced and withdrawn constitutes a financial burden for the advertiser, because they will not see a positive return on their investment in advertising.

#### **5. It gets the advertisement's core message across without distortion.**

Sexist advertising tends to divert attention from the advertiser's purpose. Either the advertisement is rejected because it is considered to be demeaning or it only grabs attention and the advertised product or service is neither recognised nor remembered. In both cases, the advertisement's concept and primary objective are lost because of the content.

#### **6. It maintains or increases market share.**

Women have a preeminent role and are a key factor in purchase decisions both large and small. In addition to a negative image of the advertiser, sexist advertising may lead to a decrease in sales if women decide to dispense with a brand that does not speak for them. Thus, advertising in a non-sexist manner and promoting an image equality between women and men helps to counteract this negative effect.

#### **7. It expands the target audience and improves the portrayal of today's society.**

The new 21<sup>st</sup>-century lifestyles of women and men are the reason why nowadays most products are bought and used by them indistinctly. Equal advertising is more appropriate to daily practices and makes it possible for the message to reach a wider *target* audience and to gain market share, as no gender is excluded.

#### **8. It promotes loyalty among the target audience that is committed to gender equality.**

Advertising free of sexist stereotypes helps to create loyalty among consumers who have made an active commitment to promote an equal society. For the advertiser, such loyalty translates into financial profits and the possibility of this loyal audience becoming prescribers and recommending their products and services.

#### **9. It gets the advertiser's staff involved in promoting the brand.**

A sexist advertising campaign may cause the advertiser's staff to reject it and disseminate negative messages about it. An equal advertising strategy could result in the staff becoming another means to promote and prescribe the company's goods and services.

**10. It creates a favourable work climate.**

A company that advertises using equal advertising provides elements that can help to create a good work climate, while using sexist advertising promotes a harmful work climate for the advertiser, which can affect the productivity and motivation of the people working there.

# Guidelines for advertising agencies

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The purpose of the recommendations below is for advertising agencies—when creating their advertising campaigns and their advertisements—to promote models that people can identify with and that go beyond sexist stereotypes and gender roles, which are the basis of inequality between women and men.

## **1. Update the gender roles of the people in the advertisements.**

It is necessary to promote the portrayal of different models of people in advertising, having any gender identity. It will be easier for everyone to identify with it, in turn becoming more receptive to this type of advertising.

Equal advertising matter-of-factly shows women in positions of power and responsibility, and never in situations of inferiority, submissiveness, dependence or passivity in comparison to men. It is not about portraying women in traditionally male-dominated roles, but instead about normalising the presence of women and men both in the private or domestic sphere and the public sphere.

## **2. Avoid identifying a product as exclusively for women or exclusively for men if there is no justification for it.**

Advertising should show a product intended for women and men in a neutral manner, despite the fact that its use may be traditionally associated with either of the sexes.

In the same way, in the field of health, if a product is advertised to alleviate a symptom that may affect both sexes, it is advisable to show both men and women as the product's targets.

## **3. Use actors and actresses, voice-overs and language addressed to both sexes in advertising spaces.**

The male voice and figure have been traditionally associated as relating to expert, credible or prescriptive people. Women are usually shown as prescribers in the capacity of users, usually in the case of beauty products or services, in the domestic sphere or in the context of family care.

It is necessary to break away from these stereotypes and promote the presence of actors and actresses indistinctly and voice-overs by both women and men,

regardless of the advertised product and/or service. Whenever the discursive logic of the advertisement allows it, advertising has to address both sexes, using inclusive language without any sexist connotations.

#### **4. Portray women as active people with their own goals.**

Create advertising messages in such a way as to make women's contributions visible and to emphasise their importance in society. They should neither portray them as the only ones who look after their home and family, nor as if their sole purpose were to respond to the desires, needs and will of others based on their role as wife, mother, daughter, subordinate, etc. Advertisements should show people of both sexes carrying out these duties in everyday life.

#### **5. Show women as people capable of controlling their emotions and their reactions.**

It is advisable not to associate women with signs of emotional instability such as hypersensitivity, hysteria or nervousness, or with negative social behaviours such as envy or gossiping.

#### **6. Portray the body in a healthy manner.**

Advertising about the cult of the body is mainly addressed to women, but also, to a lesser extent, to men. It is necessary to steer clear of standards of beauty that may put pressure on physical and mental health—particularly in the case of adolescents—and that can lead to possible eating disorders, depression, etc. It is also advisable not to portray the body as something full of flaws to be corrected or weight increase or ageing as something undesirable that needs to be fought.

#### **7. Do not use women as objects of desire or advertising gimmicks to advertise a product or service.**

Advertising that objectifies women is illegal. An advertisement shouldn't show women's bodies in an erotic, sensual or exhibitionist manner as an advertising gimmick intended to encourage consumption or attract attention. Showing women's bodies—whole or in the foreground—as a decorative element, without any justification and connection to the product being advertised, turns women into objects of desire—in just another product—which is demeaning and degrading for them.

This recommendation is essential if the advertisement shows underage children, who under no circumstances should be portrayed in an overtly sexual way or emulating adult stereotypes assigned to women, particularly stereotypes involving the cult of the body or seduction.

In the portrayal of sexual conquest, women usually appear as passive subjects who seduce men thanks to their physical beauty, sensuality and youth, whereas men are portrayed as the only active subjects in sexual conquest, who attract women thanks to their financial situation and their job, symbolising strength, beauty and power. These stereotypes are a far cry from reality and it is necessary to avoid them in advertising, because they exert a strong influence on people to emulate them.

### **8. Avoid choosing prominent figures, famous people or social media influencers who are against gender equality.**

Including famous people or prominent figures in advertisements is a common practice in advertising. These people turn into icons and their way of life quickly spreads among their male followers and female followers, becoming opinion leaders. It is necessary to avoid choosing influential people who convey values, principles or beliefs contrary to gender equality and diversity, or who portray sexist roles as the image of an advertising campaign.

### **9. Make progress in terms of the portrayal of social diversity.**

In addition to improving the portrayal of women and men, as well as the diversity of their roles and responsibilities in society, equal advertising should also portray social groups that are normally invisible because of their age, ethnic and cultural origin, functional diversity, gender identity or sexual-affective orientation, etc. Advertising should normalise the diversity of families in society: single-parent families, families with one father and one mother, families with two mothers, families with two fathers, etc.

### **10. Train advertising professionals on the gender perspective.**

Advertising can be an effective instrument to question, combat and go beyond stereotypes and promote gender equality. In this regard, it is advisable for advertising agencies to train their team of professionals to include the gender perspective when developing and creating their advertising strategies.

Thus, universities offering courses in communications, advertising and public relations should integrate student training and education on the gender perspective into the school curriculum.

It is also advisable to train the people who sit on policy-making committees, as well as regulatory and self-regulatory bodies in the field of communications, advertising and public relations.



# Resources

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In case of any doubts about the suitability of a campaign, advertisers and advertising agencies can approach the **Institut Català de les Dones (Catalan Women's Institute)** with their advertising campaign idea to seek out an opinion.

You can also request the self-regulatory body **Autocontrol** to get Copy Advice® for the campaign launch.

Lastly, the **Observatori de les Dones en els Mitjans de Comunicació (Observatory of Women in the Media)** has made The [tool for non-sexist communication](#) available to the public. It is an online resource that, by means of a questionnaire, makes it possible to detect whether an advertising message contains sexist elements to be avoided and to draw up a report which includes the aspects for improvement, if any.

# Appendix.

## Gender stereotypes

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Gender stereotypes are in constant evolution. This appendix identifies some sexist stereotypes, which should be avoided in advertising messages, as they encourage discrimination against women and men.

<b>Examples of gender stereotypes in a sexist culture</b>	
<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
<b>Personal traits</b>	
❖ Homebodies	❖ Worldly
❖ Emotional	❖ Do not express emotions
❖ Easily influenced	❖ Not easily influenced
❖ Cry a lot	❖ Never cry
❖ Talk a lot	❖ Of few words
❖ Tidy	❖ Untidy
❖ Artistically inclined	❖ Scientifically inclined
❖ Only look for love	❖ Only look for sex
❖ Not story heroines	❖ Story heroes
❖ Have no physical strength	❖ Have physical strength
❖ Passive	❖ Active
❖ Indecisive	❖ Decisive and sure
❖ Submissive	❖ Dominant
❖ Cowardly	❖ Brave
❖ Fragile	❖ Strong
❖ Complex	❖ Simple
❖ Sensitive	❖ Insensitive
❖ Tactful and affectionate	❖ Harsh
❖ Dependent	❖ Independent
❖ Monogamous	❖ Polygamous
❖ Cautious	❖ Bold
❖ Faithful	❖ Unfaithful
❖ Subjective	❖ Objective
❖ Romantic	❖ Not romantic

❖ Love fashion and cooking	❖ Love football and cars
❖ Collaborative	❖ Competitive
❖ Not very agile	❖ Agile
❖ Impulsive	❖ Analytical
❖ Compassionate	❖ Cruel
❖ Irrational	❖ Rational
❖ Have no control over their emotions	❖ Keep their emotions under control
❖ Self-sacrificing	❖ Unconcerned
❖ Nosy and envious among women	❖ Full of camaraderie and support among men
<b>Household chores</b>	
❖ Do most of the household chores	❖ Do few household chores
❖ Like children very much	❖ Don't like children very much
❖ Very responsible when it comes to household chores	❖ "Help out" with household chores and need women's advice to do them
❖ Responsible for the children's education	❖ Responsible for the home's power installations
❖ Clean and do the laundry	❖ Look after the plants and/or garden and undertake home improvement projects
❖ Cook	❖ Don't know how to cook
❖ Take care of the dependents at home	❖ Financially support their families
❖ Their activities in the domestic sphere are taken as a given	❖ Their activities in the domestic sphere are praised
❖ Make small family decisions	❖ Make important family decisions as the heads of the family
❖ Their mothering skills are a given just by being women	❖ Gestures of affection by fathers towards their sons and daughters are seen as positive

<b>Occupation</b>	
❖ Hold jobs that are related to childhood, education, nursing and the social sciences	❖ Hold technical, scientific and technology-related jobs
❖ Hold jobs as subordinates and lower-level positions	❖ Hold positions of responsibility, leadership positions and jobs requiring high-level qualifications
❖ Their prestige depends on men	❖ Successful on their own
❖ Housewives	❖ Do heavy work
❖ Dedicated to reproduction	❖ Dedicated to production
❖ Give advice on household matters and family care	❖ Are experts and prescribers in the professional sphere
❖ Women obtain a position by winning people over	❖ Men obtain a position on their own merits
❖ Women who lead are bitchy	❖ Men are natural leaders
<b>Physical appearance</b>	
❖ Have to be beautiful, thin and young	❖ Can be ugly, fat and old
❖ Seduce thanks to their physical appearance and their bodies as objects of desire	❖ Seduce thanks to their intelligence, social success and purchasing power
❖ Passive subjects in sexual conquest	❖ Active subjects in sexual conquest
❖ Cannot show their sexual desire and offer excuses	❖ Always feel sexual desire
❖ Have to look after their appearance	❖ Can neglect their appearance
❖ Suffer from health problems such as incontinence, constipation or haemorrhoids	❖ Do not suffer from these problems
❖ Dress in pink as young girls	❖ Dress in blue as young boys
❖ Girls replicate stereotypes assigned to women: standards of beauty and looking after the family and the household	❖ Boys replicate stereotypes assigned to men: technically inclined, experts and without household responsibilities

# Terms of interest and related legislation

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Below is a list of legislation in force—and in some cases, of the codes of self-regulation or recommendations—that are applicable to the terms of interest related to advertising and gender.

## **Illegal advertising and teleshopping spots**

It is forbidden to produce, broadcast and display advertisements and teleshopping spots that discriminate on the basis of birth, race, sex, religion, nationality, opinion or any other personal or social circumstance. Likewise, advertisements showing people as inferior or superior in human dignity according to their sex or as mere sexual objects, advertisements that justify or banalise violence against women or encourage people to engage in it, as well as advertisements that threaten the dignity of people and violate the values and rights recognised by the Spanish Constitution, particularly Articles 14, 18 and 20. Specific and direct use of the body, or parts of the body, as a mere object dissociated from the product it is intended to promote, and the use of images associated with stereotypical behaviours that violate the fundamental bases of the legal system and that help to produce gender-based violence are considered to be degrading.

Law 18/2000, Article 4, Letter n

Law 22/2005, Article 92, Section 1, Letters b and e

Law 17/2015, Article 25, Section 4

CAC instruction on commercial communications (2011), Article 8, Section 1, Letter b

State Law 34/1988, Article 3

Law 29/2005, Article 4, Section 1, Letter c

Organic Law 3/2007, Article 41

State Law 7/2010, Article 4, Section 2 and Article 18, Section 1.

Directive 2018/1808/EU, Articles 6 and 9

European Parliament Resolution (16 September 1997), Conclusions B, C, F, I, U, Points 1, 9, 10 and 12

European Parliament Resolution (12 March 2013), Conclusion J

Autocontrol Code of Conduct for Advertising, Article 10

ICC Advertising and Marketing Communications Code, Article 2

Code of Self-Regulation for Advertising Toys to Children, Article 33

## **Gender-based violence in content and advertising**

For social communication media within the scope of the Government of Catalonia, it is forbidden to create and disseminate content and advertisements that, by means of their presentation or staging, encourage gender-based violence, justify it or banalise it, or that tacitly or implicitly convey sexist and misogynistic messages. Systematic repetition in the profusion or dissemination of messages that undermine women or treat them in a degrading manner or as objects. Institutional advertising and dynamic advertising in Catalonia must also abide by these principles and provisions.

Law 5/2008, Article 22

Law 17/2015, Article 25, Section 4

CAC instruction on commercial communications (2011), Article 9, Letter b

State Law 34/1988, Article 3

ICC Advertising and Marketing and Communications Code, Article 2

## **Specific protection for children and adolescents**

Advertising and teleshopping spots cannot include content that may morally or physically harm minors. What's more, commercial communications intended for minors should not encourage behaviours that promote inequality between women and men, and instead convey an equal, plural and non-stereotypical image of women and men.

Advertisements, in accordance with the level of knowledge of the child and adolescent audience, and taking into account their formative stage, must not encourage violence or the commission of criminal acts, or discrimination, or project stereotypical images of children and adolescents, or degrading or violent images.

They must avoid messages that contain discrimination or differences due to the consumption of the advertised product or service.

During children's airtime (between 6:00am to 10:00pm), it is not possible to run commercial communications that promote the cult of the body and the rejection of one's self-image, such as weight loss products, surgical interventions or aesthetic treatments, that appeal to social rejection based on physical condition or success considering weight or aesthetic factors. Likewise, advertisements that promote poor eating habits or any other behaviour harmful to health cannot be shown.

Radio and television service providers—during children's airtime and particularly when airing children's content—must heed, among other things, the following protection measures for advertising and television: advertisements must not encourage violence or the commission of criminal acts or discrimination on the

basis of birth, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, opinion or any other personal or social circumstance. Neither can they contain discrimination or differences between the sexes in the use of the advertised product and they must convey an equal, plural and non-stereotypical image of women and men.

Law 22/2005, Article 96, Section 1

Law 14/2010, Article 59, Section 1, Letter a and Section 3, Letter e

State Law 7/2010, Article 7

CAC instruction on commercial communications (2011), Article 9, Letters a and f

CAC instruction on the protection of children and adolescents [...], Article 16, Letters a, c and e

European Parliament Resolution (12 March 2013), Conclusions L

## **Toy advertising**

The public authorities must adopt the actions necessary to raise awareness and inform the public about the importance of playing and toys in the transmission of sexist stereotypes, and to prohibit the sale of games and toys that are degrading for women, that threaten their dignity, that make sexist use of language or that encourage aggression among children and adolescents.

It is necessary to avoid identifying a toy as exclusively for girls or for boys. The actors and actresses, voices and language of commercial communications must be of both genders indistinctly regardless of the advertised product.

Under no circumstances should toy advertising show inappropriate sex scenes or scenes that could refer to addictive behaviours or promote discrimination, or use obscene language. Toy advertisements must avoid specific and direct use of the body, or parts of the body, of women or men as an object dissociated from the product it is intended to promote.

Toy advertising intended for children and adolescents should be focused on promoting non-sexist toys.

Law 17/2015, Article 23

Law 14/2010, Article 59, Section 1, Letter d

Code of Self-Regulation for Advertising Toys to Children, Articles 33-35

CAC guidelines on toy advertising, Article 4

## **Improvement measures in the advertising industry**

The administration, civil society and regulatory and self-regulatory bodies for advertising must cooperate to combat the discriminatory and degrading messages in commercial communications, above all by means of effective instruments that ensure respect for the dignity of people, such as codes of conduct, and update them periodically. They must also inform citizens of the mechanisms for filing

complaints for sexist content and advertising carried.

They must undertake information and awareness-raising actions for advertising strategies to promote a change of mentality in favour of effective equality between women and men.

It is necessary to encourage adequate involvement of women and men in the decision-making and production process of advertising and media companies, in order to strengthen the influence of women on content and commercial communications. Likewise, it is necessary to encourage women to found their own agencies and/or alternatives that place an emphasis on non-discrimination and gender equality.

European Parliament Resolution (12 March 2013), Action 9

European Parliament Resolution (16 September 1997), Points 11-18

### **Catalan badge of business excellence for effective equality between women and men in the workplace**

A criterion for regulating the conditions for granting this badge, which is good for four years, is “using inclusive language that is neither sexist nor androcentric and non-sexist advertising in the company’s internal communications, products, services and marketing”.

Law 17/2015 , Article 35, Section 4, Letter g

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# Organisations, associations and institutions

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## **SPONSORING INSTITUTIONS**

Col·legi de Publicitaris i Relacions Públiques de Catalunya (Advertising and Public Relations Association of Catalonia)

Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (Catalan Audiovisual Council)

Institut Català de les Dones (Catalan Women's Institute)

## **CONTRIBUTIONS FROM OTHER ORGANISATIONS**

Asociación de Usuarios de la Comunicación (Association of Communication Users - AUC)

Autocontrol

Ellas deciden

Observatori de la Igualtat de Gènere (Gender Equality Observatory)

Observatori de les Dones en els Mitjans de Comunicació (Observatory of Women in the Media)

Unió General de Treballadors

Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Rovira Virgili University)



**Consell  
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