

Advertising



Nordic regulation of gender discriminatory advertisements

There are several international obligations to eliminate gender discrimination in general. These obligations also encompass gender discriminatory advertisements. However, the States have several means to choose between. Legislation is one mean, to rely on industrial self-regulation is another mean. These two means can also be combined. The Nordic countries have responded to the obligations and the ambitions in varying ways. One path is not evidently better or worse than other possible paths. It seems likely to believe that an active public debate and 'critical voices' contribute to less discriminatory advertisements.

Gender discriminatory advertisements

There is no generally accepted definition of the concept gender discriminatory advertisements, but there are some common core elements of what it is considered to be. The concept captures (1) infringements of a person's sex and (2) stereotypical perceptions of the sexes. Advertisements are gender discriminatory when men or women are reduced to sex objects, when bodies are used to draw attention to a commodity not having to do with the body, and when based on or promoting stereotype perceptions of girls and boys, women and men.

Both elements are considered as 'discrimination against women' according to the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) from 1979. With 'discrimination against women' is meant '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 a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental



Photo: Jeffrey Johns

The Author

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freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field' (Article 1).

The international context

There seems to be broad consensus about gender discriminatory advertisements being problematic and not in accordance with the basic principles and social responsibility of marketing communications (ICC Article 1 and 4). The obligation for State Parties of CEDAW to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women has been interpreted to include those forms of discrimination that are rooted in gender stereotypes (Cook & Cusack 2010:104). Gender stereotyping is considered to be an obstacle for gender equality and may constitute a form of discrimination in the convention (Article 5a).

The issue has been addressed in a EU context several times. Gender stereotypes and sex discrimination in advertisements and in the media has been the subject of two European Parliament resolutions in recent years (2008 and 2012), and discussions in the Parliament. 'Media should favour a more balanced and non-stereotyped representation of women and men in the media and promote the gender equality dimension in their regulatory and self-regulatory authorities and training programmes.'¹ The European Parliament seems to be aware of the fact that CEDAW actually obliges the States Parties to combat gender stereotypes also in social and cultural life.²

Parallel to EU, the Council of Europe has adopted a recommendation to the member states on gender equality and media. 'Media organisations should be encouraged to adopt self-regulatory measures, internal codes of conduct/ethics and internal supervision, and develop standards in media coverage that promotes gender equality, in order to promote a consistent internal policy and working conditions aimed at: (...) a non-stereotyped image, role and visibility of women and men, avoidance of sexist advertising, language and

content which could lead to discrimination on grounds of sex, incitement to hatred and gender-based violence.'³

The obligations and ambitions from international bodies put pressure on State Parties to act, but this does not mean that the states are to use legislation. They can also choose to act indirectly through encouraging self-regulatory measures. The Nordic countries have chosen different ways.

Legislation and self-regulation in the Nordic countries

The debate on gender discriminatory advertisements started in the Nordic countries in the 1970s in relation to the ambitions to adopt legislation on sex equality and the prohibition of sex discrimination. Only in Iceland, the provision on gender discriminatory advertisements came to be part of the Act on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men. In Denmark and Norway the issue is considered to be under the scope of their Marketing Acts, and in Finland, under the Act on Consumer Protection. In Sweden, the issue is handed over to a self-regulatory body. Self-regulatory bodies are complementary to the Finnish provisions.

Denmark

Section 1 in the Marketing Practices Act (2012) states that traders shall exercise good marketing practice with reference to consumers, other traders and public interests. What good marketing practice is, is not further developed in the Act but subject to guiding principles made by the Consumer Ombudsman. In the guiding principles gender discriminatory advertising is defined as advert in which the sex has a considerable role, or in which nudity or eroticism is included as essential instruments (section 3). Every consideration of whether an advert is gender discriminatory is made in the concrete case. When an advert is considered, the guidelines in section 4 are relevant. References are made to the transformation over time of what good marketing practice is as well as to the respect for freedom of expression (The European Convention on Human Rights Article 10), and it is stated that freedom of expression also includes commercial expressions. However, the freedom of expression may be restricted due to important public interests.

1 *Combating sexist stereotypes in the media*, Report, Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Parliamentary Assembly Doc. 12267 26 May 2010.

2 How could the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) be implemented in the EU legal framework? Directorate-General for internal policies, European Parliament, 2011, 6.

3 Recommendation CM/Rec(2013)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on gender equality and media

The Marketing Practices Act is an example of such restriction, and in line with other legislation. The Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (2005/29/EC of May 2005) does not cover taste and decency; therefore Member States can be able to restrict such aspects of advertising. References are also made to The EU Treaty of Lisbon's and the Danish Gender Equality Act's prohibitions of gender discrimination. To combat gender discrimination is understood as a public interest, and as such it can restrict also the freedom to communicate commercially.

The Consumer Ombudsman handles complaints from traders and consumers, and there are several cases on gender discriminatory advertising to be found on the Ombudsman's website.

Finland

The Consumer Protection Act (from 20.1.1978/38) prohibits advertising which is in conflict with good practice or otherwise unfair against consumers. Until 2008, it was not explicitly said what was in conflict with good practice, but in a case from the Marketing Court (MD 1994:7) it was stated that gender discriminatory advertisements could be in conflict with the act. In 2008 a provision was added to the Act (Ch. 2, para. 2) saying that advertising is in conflict with good practice if clearly inconsistent with general accepted public values and particularly if it is discriminatory on the base of sex and some other grounds.

The Consumer Ombudsman, part of the Finnish Competition and Consumer Agency Authority, supervises that the Consumer Protection Act is observed and to ensure that marketing activities conform to current legislation. The authority handles complaints from consumers according to a certain procedure as well as issues identified by the Ombudsman itself. If a company cannot be persuaded to cease with an unlawful activity, the Ombudsman can use certain enforcement actions or refer the issue to the Market Court. There are several cases on sex discriminatory advertisements, reachable at the website of the authority.

There is also a self-regulatory body, The Council of Ethics in Advertising, which operates under the Finland Chamber of Commerce. It can issue statements concerning good marketing practices and whether or not an advertisement or advertising practice is ethically accepted, in relation to the ICC ethical code. Consumers may turn to the Council. The Gender Equality Ombudsman is

one of the members of the Council. The available information on the website is meagre, no information is shown of the delivered statements.

Iceland

Article 29 Section IV in the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men No. 10/2008 concerns the obligation for advertisers and those who design or publish advertisements to ensure that the advertisements are not belittling or disrespectful towards either sex and that they do not run contrary to gender equality in any way. Such advertisements may not be published in the media or in any other public venue. The sanctions for violating the Act are fines or compensation for financial or non-financial loss, if relevant. The Centre for Gender Equality is the supervising authority and the Gender Equality Complaints Committee examines cases and delivers a ruling in writing on whether provisions of the Act have been violated. The rulings are binding for the parties, but can be referred to the courts. There are no self-regulatory bodies comparable to the bodies in Finland or Sweden.

Norway

The Marketing Control Act (from 2009) section 2 contains the provision on good marketing practice. Marketing shall not conflict with good marketing practice. Emphasis shall, in the assessment, be given to whether the marketing offends against general ethical and moral views, and to whether it employs offensive means. The marketer and the designer of the marketing shall, according to the same section, paragraph 2, ensure that the marketing does not conflict with the equality of sexes or convey an offensive or derogatory appraisal of women or men. In determining whether the provision have been infringed, emphasis shall be given to whether the marketing stands out as particularly intrusive by reason of its design, format or scope, or other means employed.

It is the Consumer Ombudsman and the Market Council who monitor compliances with the provision on good marketing practice. The Ombudsman may consider advertisements on its own or others initiative (section 35). The Consumer Ombudsman shall base the consideration on the interests of consumers (section 34). Compliances based on section 2, paragraph 2 shall be based on

the consideration of equality between the sexes, with a particular emphasis on how women are portrayed (section 34). The Consumer Ombudsman shall seek to persuade the trader to enter into a voluntary settlement to terminate the practice. If no voluntary settlement is reached or if the practice is of principal interest, the Ombudsman may submit the case to the Market Council for a decision. There are no decisions concerning gender discriminatory advertisements between the years 1999-2013 taken by the Consumer Ombudsman (forbrukerombudet.no/lov-og-rett/vedtak) and only one case submitted to the Market Council (markedsradet.no, sak 13/1116).

Sweden

In contrary to the other Nordic countries, gender discriminatory advertisements are not handled within the judiciary system. This is despite Sweden having similar legislation on marketing, consumer protection, gender equality, and despite being a country with a gender equal self-image. For many years, several propositions for legislation have been unsuccessful due to strenuous resistance to legislation, with reference to obstacles in form of the freedom of expression. The latest proposition was put forward in 2008 (SOU 2008:5). Freedom of expression has not been seen as an obstacle in the other Nordic countries, and, what is more, has not in Sweden been seen as an obstacle in relation to the Marketing Act, an act that actually restricts the free access to communicate commercially.

In 1976, the Marketing Court considered a sex discriminatory advert as not being an infringement of the 1970 Marketing Act (MD 1976:8). The advert was actually considered to be sex discriminatory, but not as misleading in relation to consumers, which was the subject interest of the Market Act to protect. Gender discriminatory advertisements have since then not been possible to file a complaint against under the judicial system.

The Swedish Consumer Agency was for many years assigned the task to work against gender discrimination in advertisements, but this task was expired in the late 1990s. The Agency produced several reports on discrimination and stereotypes in advertisements.

In 1988 a self-regulatory organization was established (*Etiska rådet mot könsdiskriminerande reklam*) and it still runs, but now under the name The Swedish Advertising Ombudsman, although it is *not* a public authority. Its main task is to review advertising

and make sure advertising standards are kept high by self-regulating the industry. The body follows the ethical code established by International Chamber of Commerce (ICC article 4) about gender discriminating advertising. An advert can be considered gender discriminatory if objectifying, stereotyping, or in some other deprecatory way, obviously discriminating. They have no sanctions at its disposal except for the publication of its considerations, due to not being a public authority. The relatively speaking many decisions are available at the website (reklamombudsmannen.org). Over time, the self-regulatory body has become more visible and more accessible. It claims legitimacy as a neutral body.

To sum up

All of the Nordic countries, except for Sweden, consider gender discriminatory advertisement under the legislation. It is considered to be an issue under the marketing or consumer legislation in Denmark, Finland and Norway. In Iceland the provisions are in the gender equality act. Public authorities fulfil the supervision. Which authority depends on which legal area the provisions belongs to. Self-regulatory bodies exist in Finland and Sweden, in Finland as a complement, in Sweden as the only body handling this kind of advertisements. The sanctions that a self-regulatory body have are evidently not as effective as legal sanctions. On the other hand, the self-regulatory body (that is, in Sweden) handle many more cases than the public authorities in the other countries. If a self-regulatory body enjoy legitimacy among the advertisers and traders, it can of course be effective. On the other hand, why is such an important democratic issue such as discrimination in advertisement not obviously an issue worth attention from the most powerful mean a state has to deal with something, the law? Principally, the law is the norm system a society has to express democratic values and goals. It is essential out of a democratic perspective to give notice to the importance of prohibiting gender discrimination, in every context. Practically, the different ways to deal with gender discriminatory advertisement in the Nordic countries are not easy to connect to the outcome. Are advertisements in Denmark less gender discriminatory than in Sweden, for instance? It is hard to say without an extensive empirical study. Probably, it depends on several factors. One important factor may be to keep the debate alive, and to constantly have the focus on gender discriminatory advertisement.



Websites

The Danish Ombudsman
www.consumerombudsman.dk

The Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority
www.kkv.fi

The Council of Ethics in Advertising, Finland
www.kauppakamari.fi

The Centre for Gender Equality, Iceland
<http://jafnretti.is/jafnretti/default.aspx>

The Norwegian Consumer Ombudsman
<http://forbrukerombudet.no/english>

The Swedish Consumer Agency
www.konsumentverket.se/otherlanguages/English

The Swedish Advertising Ombudsman
<http://reklamombudsmannen.org/eng>

Towards an industry in balance 2020

The Swedish Association of Communication Agencies, KOMM, promotes the overall belief that communication generates growth. Our job is to increase the awareness of what good communication can bring to the world of business as well as to society as a whole. However, being a small organization within one of the world's most impactful industries, it is hard to embrace all aspects of this issue. Therefore, in 2011, we decided to establish eight different committees – Ethics, Education, Pitches, Internationalisation, Design, Growth, Contracts and Agreements and Human resources – in order to be active on several arenas, putting the spotlight on relevant issues and contributing to a positive development.

The committee for Human Resources has one single focus – How can we create an advertising industry in balance by 2020?

From a gender point-of-view, PR agencies have come the farthest, whereas advertising agencies still have a long way to go. In 2011, there was only one woman to be found on the list of the ad industry's 50 highest-paid people. Only 65 out of KOMM's 200 member agencies had a female CEO, which means that the proportion of female leaders at communication agencies is lower than that of the management boards of Swedish companies noted on the stock exchange. When it comes to ethnicity and diversity of class and socio-economic backgrounds, the communications industry is extremely closed and homogenous, whereas one would expect us to be in the frontline, acting as an inspiring role model.

#1 Changing the rules

Our first initiative was to scrutinize our own charter. If we were to enable change, we had to have clear regulations and prerequisites.



The Author

Christina Gillberg, Partner and Account Director at Det° Agency, Stockholm, has been in the advertising industry for the past 20 years. She has been actively involved in the gender issue since 2011, as the Chairwoman of the HR2020 Committee, hosted by The Swedish Association of Communication Agencies. She aims to make a difference for the coming generation in the ad industry, always through creativity and with an action plan and a smile.

Therefore, on the 21st September 2012, the board of KOMM, with Chairman Gustav Martner, executive creative director and partner CP+D Europe, proposed a change of the first paragraph: 'to actively support members to create a positive working environment and culture based on equality and focusing on leadership, working conditions and wages.' It turned out to be a historical voting, where the change in charter – the first one in 20 years – was supported 100 per cent. The change not only means that our industry has critically examined itself, wanting to actively create a balanced industry. It also means that KOMM has been assigned by the member agencies to help them achieve this change. Also, we are able to secure a long-term difference, reaching beyond organisational changes with new CEOs who might have other issues on the agenda.

#2 The survey

Our second action was to carry out a survey on equality, diversity and age segmentation among Sweden's communication agencies. The response rate was high and helped us detect that there is a balance between men and women in numbers – of all the people employed in the communications industry, 49 per cent are women and 51 per cent are men. However, at a closer look, it was obvious that there were greater differences within the various professions.

In Management groups only 36 per cent were women, 8.6 per cent of the agencies had employees with another mother tongue than Swedish and 14 per cent of the respondents answered that they had recruited someone over the age of 50 in the past year. We will continuously follow this development with great interest.

#3 Looking for role models

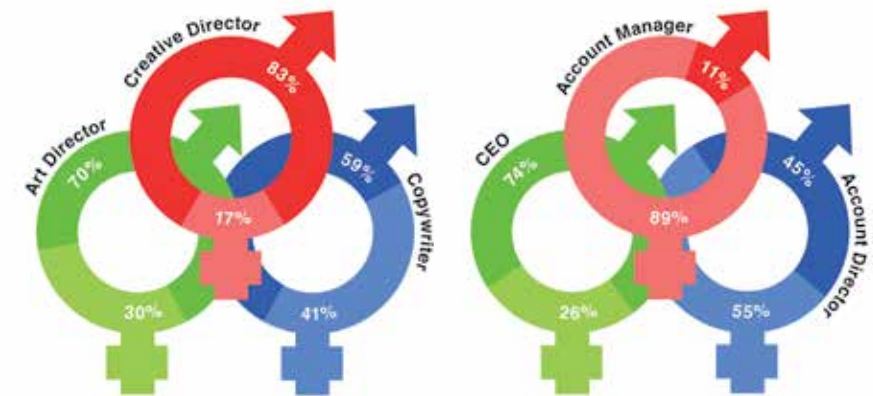
All initiatives to create change are aided by role models. This involves showing someone who has obviously succeeded with his or her aim and who can inspire and empower others. Therefore, our next project was to identify and present women who have succeeded in the communications industry.

One such person is Christina Knight, one of Sweden's most famous and established creative directors. She had an idea for a book that KOMM decided to publish. The result – *Mad Women – A Herstory of Advertising* – is a unique collection of stories, experiences and advice from some of the world's most successful women within advertising, communication and design, like for example



The following women share their stories in this unique book: Christina Knight, Sweden, Shelly Lazarus, USA, Stefanie Wurst, Germany, Kat Gordon, USA, Nunu Ntshingila-Njeke, South Africa, Susan Hoffman, USA, Nina Åkestam, Sweden, Cilla Snowball, the UK, Rabkshin Patel, India, Mary Wells Lawrence, USA, Anna Qvennerstedt, Sweden, Margaret Key, South Korea, Catrin Vagnemark, Sweden, Jean Grou, USA.

Extracts from the survey



The entire survey is available at komm.se

Mary Wells Lawrence, the first female CEO to have a company noted on the New York stock exchange and Shelly Lazarus who has been on Forbes list of the 100 most powerful women in the world several times.

'When I lecture I always get questions on what it is like to be a woman in advertising and how I have been able to stay on for so long. Young women who I mentor ask me where they can find the experiences and stories of advertising women. It is obvious that there is a lack of visible, inspiring women role models. The time was quite simply right for this book', says Creative Director Christina Knight at INGO – Part of the Ogilvy & Grey Networks in Stockholm.

After the launch the book took off completely. Christina Knight and KOMM were invited by the Swedish Government to talk about equality within the communications industry. Christina has been active in talks in Almedalen, Sweden, debated gender balance at the world's most prestigious advertising award show, Cannes Lions, spoken at The 3 per cent Conference in San Francisco, given a TED-talk on the topic, been elected as a board member of Fredrika Bremer Förbundet, lectured and taken part in panel debates all over



Photo: Anika af Klercker

Jessica Bjurström, CEO at KOMM.

Sweden as well as in the US, Mexico and Italy. The gender issue is strongly established on the agenda and the success of 'Mad Women' continues all over the world.

#4 Implementing an equality plan

The Swedish Discrimination Act states that every employer with 25 or more employees is obliged to establish a written plan for equality, every three years. The plan should contain the goals and initiatives needed in the workplace in order to promote and support equality and opportunities for both men and women within a range of areas.

Unfortunately, such equality plans are missing at many workplaces within the communications industry. Therefore, we took the initiative to offer seminars free of charge on 'How to establish and implement an equality plan'. With the right tools and knowledge, it is easier to shift positions in the right direction and it all starts in everyday situations, in the workplace. Today, 51 per cent of the member agencies have established an equality plan.

#5 The scholarship

An industry that plays such a large part in the public discourse, should represent and mirror society when it comes to ethnicity, class and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as language and experiences. This means we still have some way to go. In order to highlight the issue of diversity and interest people who would perhaps not normally plan or even be aware of a career in the communications industry, we decided, in 2014, to introduce a 'Scholarship of the Future' together with Berghs School of Communications.

'KOMM's and Berghs' "Scholarship of the Future" is a big step towards facilitating future needs for recruitment and creating a more heterogeneous industry', says Jessica Bjurström, CEO at KOMM.

Through the scholarship, the chosen students receive payment for half of the cost of full-time studies at a programme of his or her choice at Berghs.

Keeping up the good work

We believe that a mix of experiences and more opposing ways of thinking enrich the creative process. We also believe that diversity is a must if our industry is to continue being competitive in the future. We still have a long way to go before we have an industry

in balance. Action plans, surveys, regulations and awards are only part of the solution. It is only once you believe in the power of what a workplace in balance can bring, that results and real change can be brought about.

Our work continues.



Facts

The Swedish Association of Communication Agencies serves as a consultative and inspirational member organisation, as well as an informative interest group and creator of public opinion. Jessica Bjurström is the CEO and initiator of the HR2020 Committee.

Taking action against retouched advertisements

Ungdom Mot Retusjert Reklame [Youth against retouched advertisements] is a network that has been working against retouched advertisements since 2010. Our focus has been to work for new legislation requiring labelling of retouched advertisements. The network was started by Rød Ungdom [Red youth] and consists of several youth organisations in Norway.

Today's society has become increasingly commercialised and sexualised. We live in a world where there is huge pressure, especially for young girls, to look a certain way. Advertisements are all around us, and young people are comparing their own body with the unattainable images presented by the advertising industry. This causes self-esteem issues, eating disorders and depression amongst young people. The consequences can be severe; eating disorders are the third largest cause of death among young girls in Europe. If young boys and girls are unhappy with the way they look, they will buy more of the advertised products. In this way, the fashion, beauty and advertising industries all cash in on our poor self-esteem.

Ungdom Mot Retusjert Reklame [Youth against retouched advertisements] believes that young people should not have to compare themselves with images created in Photoshop. Therefore, we demand that the government impose legislation forcing the advertising industry to label retouched photographs. This way, people will be fully aware that the images they compare themselves with truly are unattainable.

Changes don't come easily, and we understand that if we really want progress in this area, we have to do something. We have therefore decided that until the government imposes labelling requirements for retouched advertisements, we will take action ourselves.



PHOTO: Ole Mjelstad

The Author

Runa Fjellanger has been the spokesperson for Ungdom Mot Retusjert Reklame (Youth Against Retouched Advertisements) since 2012. She was born in 1992, lives in Oslo and is currently studying to become an author.

The great Scandinavian gender war

I write this article with slight hesitation. This is explosive material. Not in Denmark, where I am from, but in Sweden.

Because there is a great risk that I will overstep certain boundaries in what I say next. Danish media regularly report from Sweden that Danes have been attacked when they participate in discussions about gender roles. We Danes often find it difficult to see where we have gone wrong in what we have said.

Please keep this in mind while reading this article. I am not a female male chauvinist. I just come from another planet.

Last year, the advertising and knowledge agency of which I am strategic director – envision – carried out a major survey of the differences among Scandinavian consumers. The results were published in the Avoid Fighting with Your Neighbours report.

The basis for the report was that we were puzzled about how often advertisers get into hot water when running the same advertising campaign in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Because on paper, the Scandinavian countries are fairly similar, right? Small, efficient, democratic welfare states with a high level of education, low level of corruption and high standard of living. We even share much of our history. Nevertheless, major differences seem to exist when it comes to advertising.

In our survey, we asked 3 000 Scandinavians about their attitudes to television advertising. When is an advertisement good? And more specifically: What is your attitude to sex, violence and making fun of minorities in advertising? We also asked respondents to name television advertisements from the past six months that they believed to be particularly good – and to tell us why. And which ones they simply could not stand. This provided us with a very good picture of the dos and don'ts in all three markets.

PHOTO: Sofie Amalie Klougart



The Author

Award-winning copywriter and Strategic planner **Anne Glad** has been in Danish advertising for more than 16 years. She is also the co-host of one of Denmark's most popular TV programmes, in which she comments on the Danes' values, lifestyle and consumer trends.

We also interviewed 14 mixed Scandinavian married couples, who were able to provide unique insight into value differences, as well as a number of anthropologists, marketing directors, film distributors, advertising executives – and even 16 flight attendants from Scandinavian Airlines.

The most pronounced difference between Sweden and Denmark was the attitude to nudity, sex and gender roles. Several Danish advertisers have felt this in recent years. Around the time of the survey, the Danish angling magazine *Fisk & Fri* ran into problems in Sweden. For many years, the magazine had had a regular feature on their website: a pin-up portrait of a scantily dressed woman taken outdoors with a fish in her arms. Maybe not particularly tasteful, but in Danish eyes completely harmless – and something that generated a great deal of traffic to the website.

In October 2012, the magazine decided to retire the ‘angler girl’ and took the opportunity to tell the story behind the pictures in the magazine – and put the final angler girl on the front page. This generated a great deal of light-hearted coverage in Denmark. Three months later, the Swedish blogger Genusfotografen came across the front page and created a storm in Sweden. The Danes were speechless.

Based on the survey results, this shouldn’t come as a surprise. When asked ‘Is sex OK in advertising?’, almost half of the surveyed Danes said ‘yes’. 43.5 per cent to be exact. Only 28.5 per cent of the Swedes felt this way, with the Norwegians close behind at 33.7 per cent.

Danish anthropologist Jeppe Trolle pointed to the legalisation of image pornography in Denmark in 1969 as part of the explanation for the liberal Danish mindset:

‘Sweden did not legalise porn, but rather liberated erotica... While an increasingly liberal attitude to nudity developed in Denmark throughout the 1970s, in Sweden things went the other way. An almost radical feminism, which still informs the debate today, developed.’

In Denmark in the 1970s, the average Dane went to the cinema to watch soft porn disguised as comedy. Today, porn has lost its innocence, creativity and innovation in Denmark, yet the liberal attitude to nudity on film has remained an important part of the Danes’ sense of self. We are quite amused about Lars von Trier being



The report is available to download from envision.dk in both Danish (*Undgå Nabokrig*) and English (*We Know Scandinavians*).

able to cause offence with his film *Nymphomaniac*. But nudity is also closely related to Danish humour. The Danes’ choice of favourite advertisements gave a clear picture of a fairly coarse sense of humour often involving stereotypical characters (dumb blondes, grumpy old men etc.), references to everything below the belt, and slapstick. The Swedish taste in advertising, on the other hand, was significantly more sophisticated. Their gallery of characters reflected a far greater diversity than the Danish, with the ICA campaign not surprisingly being the clear favourite.

Stereotypical gender roles are widespread in Danish culture. So when the Danish households received Top Toy’s Christmas catalogue in 2013, there was an outcry. The catalogue showed little boys playing with dolls and hairdressing salons – and little girls with tools. The Danes were outraged: Political correctness had now gone too far – the natural instincts of children was not going to be held to ransom. This looked too much like Sweden!

Top Toy’s approach could be traced back to an incident in Sweden in 2008, which resulted in the company being reported to the Advertising Ombudsman, who in turn deemed the catalogue at the time to be discriminatory. Top Toy chose to enter into a dialogue



PHOTO: KVINFO

Anne Glad is attending KVINFO's debate on gender stereotypes in advertising in Copenhagen in April 2014.

with the Ombudsman and changed its entire marketing strategy – but encountered problems when its gender-neutral strategy was rolled out in Denmark.

‘Don’t they like women in Sweden anymore?’ asked a debater on a Danish newspaper website when a film by the Danish clothing company Jack & Jones Fitness Club was banned in Sweden. The campaign was about helping young men get fit and ready for all the sex the company’s new spring collection would catapult them into. When I show the Jack & Jones film in Denmark, the reaction often sounds like: ‘Well, OK, I also feel a bit Swedish about this. It clearly overstepped the mark.’ But the fact is that not one single Dane complained about the campaign.

The differences in gender politics between Sweden and Denmark are insurmountable. They have been determined by historical, political and cultural circumstances. A hierarchical, industrial Sweden with a firmly cemented notion of mutual respect against a Danish peasant society where everything can be sold, interpreted and negotiated. This can be regarded as a fundamental difference in national character. Our clear recommendation is therefore: If you are thinking of using the same marketing campaign throughout Scandinavia, avoid sex. Sex sells – just not in Sweden.