

# Half of women in advertising offices received unwanted sexual advances, study finds

19 April 2021, by Tony Trueman



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The sexist alpha male of the 1960s advertising world as depicted in *Mad Men* is still alive and well and prowling the offices of today's creatives, a new study shows.

Over half of women in the industry interviewed for the study in England had received unwanted sexual advances during their careers and almost all had heard demeaning comments.

Dr. Martina Topi? told the British Sociological Association's online annual conference today [Wednesday, 14 April] that women faced an old boys' network that kept them out of many of the top jobs.

Dr. Topi?, of Leeds Business School, interviewed 41 women working in [advertising](#) in England, 20 of them managers, many with a decade or more of experience of the industry. She found that:

- around half had been subjected to

unwanted sexual advances in their career.

- only a quarter said that they felt they had the same opportunities as men in the industry.
- almost all had heard demeaning comments about women from their male colleagues.

One woman told Dr. Topi?: "I had a kind of scuff on the knees of my tights and I remember one person making a comment, 'is it because you spend loads of time on your knees?'" The person who said it was quite senior and I just didn't know what to say and I think I just laughed and shuffled off but I remember being taken aback.

"We've had HR issues where at a Christmas party, for example, people get a bit handy, often very senior members of the team... it's very difficult as a girl to say to someone who literally owns the company, 'this is not good.'"

One woman with 22 years' experience in advertising, said: "In every single agency that I have worked at, apart from this one, which is run by a husband and wife team, there have definitely been sexist comments. Yes, absolutely, and inappropriate."

Another told her: "A lot of times in my working life I've been made to feel like a silly little girl and it was only really recently that I realized that maybe that's not true about me. Whenever I've tried to speak about a pay rise or promotion with my boss, I feel like I haven't been taken seriously, like there's been a moment of them raising their eyebrows that I would even ask, and a little bit like smirking."

Dr. Topi? told the conference: "While the media often portrays the advertising industry in the UK through a post-feminist lens of all battles being won and women being respected and equal, [empirical](#)

[research](#) tells a different story—sexism appears to be inherent to the advertising industry in England.

"According to the latest available data, 49.5% of employees in UK's advertising industry are women—however, the more senior the roles, the fewer women were found.

"This means that there is something like an old boys networks in the advertising industry, which naturally constructs hierarchies and affects promotions

"Some women report being asked to do menial stuff well beyond their expertise and qualification levels and not being taken seriously even when they are in a managerial position and should be included in the decision-making process.

"The majority of women who hold a senior position said they feel they had to work harder than men to get promoted."

Dr. Topi? also interviewed 24 women working in public relations and 20 in journalism. Some [women](#) in PR still felt they were being treated as secretaries, she found. One was asked to go and make some tea and coffee during a meeting, and another was asked if she had "spray painted your jeans on?"

Provided by British Sociological Association

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