



From Archetypes to Authenticity

70 Years of Women on TV

For 70 years, ITV has been more than entertainment; it's been a mirror and a megaphone for British life. From the first soap to the latest hit drama, our screens have reflected not just stories, but the shifting culture around them. Few shifts have been as powerful as the way women have been portrayed on screen and in the ads that sit between our shows.

What follows isn't only a journey through history, it's the story of how women's representation has continually shaped perception, aspiration, and audience connection, with lessons that matter just as much today. In a market where growth is harder to find, seeing and valuing women's realities isn't just the right thing to do, it's a commercial advantage waiting to be unlocked.

CHAPTER 1

Breaking the Mould, The Trailblazers and The Archetypes (1950s - 1970s)

On one side of the screen were the familiar archetypes. In *Coronation Street*, which first aired in 1960 and is still Britain's longest running soap, women like Hilda Ogden embodied the post-war working class housewife: pragmatic, sharp-tongued, and defined by the rhythms of home life and smalltown drama. Characters like hers reflected the cultural expectation that a woman's world was domestic, even when written with wit and warmth.



Beyond drama, ITV's first cookery show, Fanny's Kitchen (1955), reinforced those expectations too. Fanny Cradock didn't just demonstrate recipes, she taught women how to be good wives and perfect hostesses, turning the kitchen into a stage for domestic performance.

At the very same time, trailblazers like Barbara Mandell (who made history as the UK's first female national newsreader, broadcasting on ITV's lunchtime news), or entertainers like Cilla Black fronting their own shows, were quietly rewriting the rules about where women could be seen and what roles they could own on television.

Advertising of the era mirrored these tensions. The early decades were dominated by housewife archetypes: **cheerful women extolling the virtues of soap powders**, frozen peas, cleaning products, often reinforcing the idea that a woman's role was to keep a spotless home. Yet even within these tropes, cracks began to show. Brands experimented with presenting women as savvy decision-makers, not just dutiful homemakers, hinting at the spending power and influence they wielded in households across Britain.

Together, these archetypes and trailblazers - both on screen and in advertising - set the template: women could reflect the world as it was, but also point to the world it was becoming.



SO WHAT?

Archetypes may feel safe, but they quickly date. Even in the 1950s, audiences connected most when women broke the mould. The lesson for advertisers: resist default stereotypes, because trailblazers are what capture attention and endure.



CHAPTER 2

Complexity and Relatability, Reflecting the Real World (1980s - 2000s)

As society changed, so too did the women on ITV. This was the era when female characters and personalities became more layered, relatable, and real. They showed strength and vulnerability, humour and independence, ambition and imperfection, in equal measure.

ITV's long-running soaps became cultural barometers of this change. In Coronation Street and Emmerdale, women were no longer just housewives or love interests, they were entrepreneurs, survivors, community leaders, and often the moral centres of the storylines. Few characters embodied this more than Corrie's Deirdre Barlow. Across decades of drama, scandal, love and loss, Deirdre became one of the most relatable and beloved figures on British TV precisely because she was complex, flawed, and deeply human.

The shift wasn't confined to fictional characters. In 1999, ITV launched Loose Women, a format that was groundbreaking in its simplicity: a panel of women, talking honestly about real life. These women brought unfiltered conversation into living rooms across the country, normalising women's perspectives in daytime TV in a way that was unprecedented. It didn't just reflect a broader cultural shift towards openness, it fuelled it.

Meanwhile, advertising also began to adapt. The era saw fewer glossy perfect housewives and more campaigns aimed at reflecting women's humour, resilience, and individuality. "Sex sells" was everywhere. Women were often depicted as trophies, objects of desire, or accessories to products aimed at men (cars, alcohol, aftershave). It was the heyday of glossy supermodel campaigns. Eva Herzigová in ["Hello Boys" for Wonderbra](#) (1994) is one of the most iconic "sex sells" ads of all time.





Female desire got a look in too. **Levi's Launderette (1985)**, while centred on a man, was groundbreaking because it flipped the script on the "gaze" in advertising, acknowledging female desire. It also signalled a broader shift away from purely domestic portrayals.

Brands began to experiment with portraying women not just as homemakers, but as busy professionals, multitasking mothers, and consumers with their own agency. The result was advertising that started to catch up with the complexity and nuance of women's lives that ITV was already showing on screen.

A NOTE FROM THE HUNS

**So basically
be a bit more
hun, hun.**

Click here to tap into your
100% genuine authentic self x

SO WHAT?

Relatability is a superpower. Women like Deirdre Barlow or the panellists on Loose Women resonate because they were messy, imperfect, and real. Advertising that embraces nuance - rather than glossing over it - earns deeper trust and longer-lasting relevance.



CHAPTER 3

The Power of the Female Lens, Creating from Behind and in Front of the Camera (2010s - Present)

The past decade has marked the most dramatic shift yet. We've moved from simply portraying women to actively empowering them. Women are now not only the protagonists of our biggest dramas, but also the creative forces shaping them from behind the camera. This has created a virtuous cycle: authentic portrayals inspire audiences, which in turn drives more inclusive, compelling and commercially powerful advertising.

Reality TV has been one of the defining arenas of this evolution. Series like *The Only Way Is Essex* and *Love Island* didn't just reflect cultural trends, they set them. Out of these shows grew the rise of Hun Culture: a distinctly British celebration of unfiltered glamour, relatability, and unapologetic femininity. Far from being a niche, **ITV's own research** shows this identity is a powerful connection point with huge audiences. It's proof that when you give women the mic, they don't just talk, they define the convo, hun.

At the same time, scripted drama has undergone a transformation. From Vicky McClure in *Trigger Point* to Nicola Walker in *Unforgotten*, female-led narratives have taken centre stage in some of ITV's most acclaimed and successful shows. These are not supporting roles, they're stories driven by women's strength, vulnerability, complexity, and resilience.



In advertising too, campaigns like **Sport England's This Girl Can (2015)** marked a turning point. Made by women, for women, it celebrated real bodies, sweat, joy and strength, challenging decades of objectification and showing just how powerful authentic female-led storytelling could be.

True progress means showing women in all their diversity, not just in terms of gender but in the full spectrum of lived experience. From Code of Silence star Rose Ayling-Ellis, who brought deaf representation and British Sign Language into prime time drama and even into advertising, to Alison Hammond, a Black British Brummie Hun who has become one of ITV's most loved presenters, as well as comedian Jordan Gray, whose new series Transaction puts a trans woman's perspective at the centre of comedy - audiences connect most when they see women represented in ways that feel real, varied, and unapologetically authentic. That truth is as vital to advertising as it is for television.

SO WHAT?

Who tells the story matters as much as the story itself. When women create, lead, and own their narratives - from **This Girl Can** to ITV's new 5 star hit **Frauds** - the result is authentic work that cuts through and is commercially successful. The opportunity for advertisers: invest in diversity behind the scenes as well as on screen.



What this means for Brands and the Future

Over seven decades we've seen huge progress in how women are represented, and have learnt many lessons along the way. Today, audiences are more sophisticated and media-literate than ever, and they expect to see themselves reflected in the stories they watch and the products they buy. For brands and agencies, that makes authentic representation not just a cultural responsibility, but a commercial necessity.

ITV and our partners get to engage with a legacy of storytelling that has always been entwined with social change. But the real opportunity lies in what comes next. The lessons of the past 70 years remind us that representation is never static, it must keep evolving. Our commitment is to take those lessons forward and ensure the next chapter reflects not just women, but the richness and diversity of all nuanced identities.

