

The revival of feminism: are South African brands sleeping?

 By [Kirsten Clarke](#)

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Not since the bra-burning feminism heydays of the 60s has the world taken such an interest in the affairs of women...

What used to be a mostly first-world concept, feminism has become a popular movement in developing countries like India, Kenya and South Africa. This points to a significant cultural shift, a change in the way that women see themselves and their role in society, regardless of social status and income.



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Throughout the last century, women have fought for the right to vote, to an education, to a career and the right to decide when and if to have a family. Being a woman is complex, and our identities are constantly evolving. In 2015, feminism is about embracing the complexities and contradictions that define our womanhood and doing away with tired stereotypes and outdated societal expectations. Feminism is about being confident in our life choices, and not just accepting the complex traits that make us women, but celebrating them.

Globally brands are starting to tap into this trend. The [Cannes Glass Lion](#) award celebrates advertising that breaks through unconscious gender bias and this year honoured campaigns in countries such as India, Beirut and Dubai.

In South Africa, however, brands are struggling to adapt the way that they speak to female consumers, or even to recognise the importance of the female consumer in their market.

Statistically, South African women are responsible for an estimated 88% of day-to-day purchase decisions and are starting to purchase in categories that were formally the domain of men. For example, women now make up 33% of all car owners and 32% of whiskey drinkers.

In addition, women often play a more prominent role in purchase decisions in lower-income communities. Consider that some 25% of home loans are held by women but, in households earning less than R20,000 a month (the fastest-growing home loan segment), women make up 42% of all home loan customers.

Ignoring women, or worse, speaking to them in a way that is inconsistent with the way that they see themselves, is no longer an option. Yet advertising continues to show females in poor stereotypes with patronising messages.

Here are three ways to embrace the new feminism and celebrate women in 2015.

1. Celebrate diversity

South Africa is an incredibly diverse place, with women from a variety of ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. But, while the role of women is very different across the cultural spectrum, purchasing power does not change. Instead of assuming feminism is only relevant to certain groups, South African brands need to celebrate the diversity and power of women in all of our communities. The more challenges a woman faces, the more opportunities there are for brands to get on her side, and help her solve her problems. Regardless of culture or income, South African women all aspire to be celebrated.

2. Embrace contradictions

And drop the over-used female stereotypes. This is a prevalent trend in global advertising in 2015 and a powerful way to speak to the female desire for authenticity. A working mom is no longer the stereotypical suit-wearing, stiletto-toting women of the 90s. A working mom these days is anyone from a high-flying CEO who wears jeans every day, freelancers working from home in their pyjamas and domestic workers who wake up at 4am to catch their taxi.

Above all, women desire to be authentic, to be themselves, and are casting aside all the old labels that once told us what we had to be in order to be successful in our careers, in our families, in order to be feminine. Speaking to the contradictions that define our femininity is a powerful way to inspire and connect with women across all walks of life.

The #useyourand campaign from Gillette Venus encapsulates this sentiment so aptly: "They told you that you can be anything. A beautiful astronaut. A soccer-playing ballerina. Then, they said here's what you really are. With a label to size you up and box you in, if you let it. Step outside the box, outside the labels. When someone labels you, use your and to take a stand. If someone says you're smart say yes and? If someone says you're pretty say yes and? You are a polished nails and polished mind. Raw and refined. Shy and bold. Not just what you're told. You are warmth and wisdom and grace and guts. No ifs and buts. Just and." [#useyourand](#)

3. Build esteem

Advertising that promotes self-esteem is very effective in building brand equity and creating beautiful, impactful campaigns. The trick is to do it in such a way that is not superficial and speaks to your target female customer.

The Dove brand has built its entire positioning around building self-esteem and celebrating real beauty. Through a variety of activations and campaigns, including building entrances to a bank labelled 'beautiful' and 'average' in the Choose Beauty activation, Dove builds esteem and gives the gift of beauty to the every-day women.

Another great example is the Always 'Like a Girl' campaign. The sanitary napkin brand asked women what it meant to run or fight like a girl - with the expected results. However, younger girls ran and fought as hard as they could. The message is powerful. Somewhere between puberty and womanhood - the time when girls come into contact with the Always brand - they start to believe that they are the weaker sex (total hits on YouTube = 58 million).

Feminism is here to stay, and the role of the female will only continue to grow in the future. Celebrate diversity, embrace contradictions, build esteem - these are just a few ways to celebrate the modern woman, across cultures, and speak to her in a way that is inspiring, authentic and celebrates femininity. If your brand isn't speaking to women, it should be; and if it is already targeting women, the message needs to be right.

ABOUT KIRSTEN CLARKE

Quantitative Project Manager at Added Value, having joined late in 2014. Kirsten has a Business Science Degree in Marketing from UCT and has worked in both retail and consumer research. She has a passion for using numbers creatively, to inform brand strategy and transform businesses.
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