

Representation in action: ACA and Open Chair back 15 lionesses attending Cannes Lions Festival

As the global advertising and creative industries get ready for their annual migration to Cannes the French Riviera, 15 inspiring and talented South African women will be joining them - thanks to an incredible initiative from the Cannes Lions ERA (Equity, Representation, and Accessibility) Programme and local platform, Open Chair.

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Chosen from a pool of 78 applicants from around the country and across advertising, marketing, design, a communications, these women have each been awarded a festival pass valued at R105,000, with their flights and accommodation covered by their companies or sponsors. Their only requirement? A commitment to take up space where it matters most.

The Association for Communication and Advertising (ACA) is proud to have played a part in this initiative, with our executive director, Gillian Rightford, serving as an independent judge.

“This was a humbling and energising process,” says Rightford. “The depth of talent, ambition, and insight in the submissions made the selection incredibly difficult - they all deserved to be at Cannes. But it also left me with enormous hope. These women represent the future of our industry. They are brave, bold, and brilliant creative.”

The ERA Programme is a Cannes Lions initiative designed to create access for underrepresented communities in the global creative industry. Open Chair, founded by industry trailblazer Suhana Gordhan, seized the opportunity to not just send women to the Festival, but to send a powerful message: we’re not waiting for change, we’re leading it.

“At Open Chair, our mission is simple: access, visibility, and impact,” says Gordhan. “We exist to uplift, mentor, and inspire the next generation of women leaders. This initiative ensures more women take up

space, shape conversations, and redefine what leadership in creativity looks like.”

This collaboration marks a proud moment for the ACA, whose ongoing focus on transformation includes a number of initiatives aimed at developing future-fit talent and fostering inclusivity in leadership. From graduate programmes to its Women in Leadership advocacy, the ACA is steadfast in supporting industry-wide transformation that is meaningful and enduring.

“Women are a dynamic, driving force in our industry - not just here in South Africa, but globally,” says Rightford. “This opportunity gives these talented individuals a front-row seat to the world’s best ideas, the chance to build international networks, and the platform to be inspired. But perhaps most powerfully, know the women in our industry, they won’t just bring back inspiration, they’ll bring back impact. They’ll share what they’ve seen, elevate those around them, and help shape a more inclusive and innovative future for us all.”

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