

Female burnout epidemic in advertising and media industry

At 33, I was on top of the world. By 36, I was in full-blown burnout. I had built and run a success marketing agency for over a decade. I was consulting for global brands, travelling internationally chairing organisations and hitting sporting milestones I had once only dreamed about.

 By [Laura Thomas](#) 6 Mar 2026



Laura Thomas, the creator of The Aligned Woman Co, says the advertising and media industry is not just experiencing female burnout; it is engineered for it (Image source: © 123rf [123rf](#))

On paper, I was thriving, but behind the scenes, I was exhausted.

My exhausted was exhausted! Hormones depleted—cortisol through the floor. My nervous system was constantly on the lookout for the next tiger to attack me. My doctor could not understand how I was even functioning.

The day I received my blood test results, I had just come from a heated Hiit class.

That is the power of willpower in advertising.

You can override biology for a while. But not forever. And here is what I now know: my story is not rare.

It is structural.

The advertising and media industry is not just experiencing female burnout. It is engineered for it.

The industry runs on overdrive

Advertising thrives on urgency.

One more pitch.

One more campaign.

One more late night.

One more weekend.

Years ago, there were peaks and troughs. Now it is peak after peak after peak.

I saw a LinkedIn post that blew up from a creative director (it's since been removed) who shared the workload behind a single campaign: hundreds of days, dozens of late nights, rewrites, takeaways, and shc days.

It was framed as pride and a proof of excellence.

Exhaustion rebranded as passion

In our industry, exhaustion is often rebranded as passion. Sacrifice becomes a badge of honour, and if yo are not stretched to breaking point, are you even serious?

The data tells a sobering story.

A significant proportion of advertising professionals report stress or anxiety. Redundancies are rising.

Restructures are constant. Economic pressure is relentless, and women are disproportionately absorbing the fallout.



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The impossible position women are placed in

Over the past few years, I have spoken to too many women in media and advertising facing impossible choices.

The account director returning from maternity leave only to inherit the most volatile client on the roster.

The strategist postponing plans to start a family because yet another restructure has left her covering multiple roles.

The female CEO is undermined by whispers that she is “difficult” or “a bully”, while her male counterparts displaying identical behaviours are called decisive.

The senior leader who quietly resigns, ashamed she “couldn't make it work”, when in truth the system was crushing her.

Women are taught to self-diagnose the problem. If you are overwhelmed, you may not be resilient enough

If you are exhausted, maybe you need better time management!

Meanwhile, workloads expand, deadlines compress, and expectations escalate.

We talk about transformation fatigue, digital disruption and market instability, but we rarely talk about burnout.

The economic shield

In 2025, “the unstable economic environment” has become a convenient three-word shield.

Margins are tight.

Clients are demanding.

Technology is reshaping everything.

All true. But economic pressure does not justify cultural negligence.

You cannot claim people are your greatest asset while structurally rewarding those who sacrifice their health to survive.

Employee assistance programmes help, and so does flexibility, but none of these fix a system built on linear productivity models that reward constant output and crisis performance.

That model may have been sustainable for a workforce designed around uninterrupted male careers.

It is not sustainable for women carrying both paid and unpaid labour.



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My breaking point

When I burned out at 36, I was not underperforming. I was outperforming.

I had fused my identity with achievement. Slowing down felt like death.

Like a shark. If you stop swimming, you die. So I kept swimming. Until my body stopped me.

For a year, I shut everything down. I spent thousands on doctors, therapists, functional medicine specialists and nervous system work.

I studied stress physiology, trauma, hormonal health and identity formation.

What shocked me was not just how sick I had become. It was how much I had never been taught.

No one had explained what chronic stress does to a female body, or the damage of constant high-cortisol levels.

No one had warned me that building a career off a blueprint designed for relentless output might eventually cost me my health.

We train women how to pitch, present, negotiate and scale, but we do not train them on how to regulate.

That gap is where burnout lives.



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Why advertising is the epicentre

Advertising amplifies every pressure point. Relentless deadlines, client unpredictability, revenue volatility, public scrutiny.

Layer on social expectations, unpaid caregiving responsibilities and the mental load disproportionately carried by women, and the equation becomes clear.

Women are not weak.

The structure is unsustainable, and yet we treat the steady stream of brilliant women exiting the industry as inevitable.

It is not inevitable. It is a design flaw.



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Leadership is a choice

Advertising prides itself on creativity, yet we have shown astonishingly little imagination in designing environments where women can thrive long term.

We can continue celebrating exhaustion as excellence, or we can admit that the system is burning through its best talent.

Leadership has always been about choice. The question is not whether women can survive this industry; the question is whether the industry is brave enough to evolve.

Real success should not cost women their health, and brilliance should never require self-destruction.



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The structural exit

What was birthed from my burnout was The Aligned Woman Co.

Not as a reaction. As a reconstruction.

The Aligned Woman Co is an education platform that teaches women how to not only succeed, but to do it a way that does not destroy their bodies in the process.

At the core sits the Alive Method, which is not self-care but a structural literacy. It is about understanding your internal operating system.

Learning to read your stress signals as fluently as a client brief.

And it does not ask women to leave advertising. It gives them the tools to stop leaving themselves inside it.

International Women's Day

International Women's Day is celebrated on 8 March, commemorating women's fight for equality and liberation along with the women's rights movement. International Women's Day gives focus to issues such as gender equality, reproductive rights, and violence and abuse against women.

ABOUT LAURA THOMAS

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