

Advertising changes its view on women

 By [Emma Carpenter](#)

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Changing perceptions of gender from the inside out



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In the last year, we've seen moments of advertising brilliance indicating the industry is finally moving towards a new way of portraying women. One that is more representative of the way they see themselves and in doing so has raised questions that has emphasised the destructive nature of [unconscious bias](#). Brands have showed us the [human side of strong women](#) criticized because they do not conform to the status quo both from a diversity and a beauty perspective and marketing that has empowered women and challenged the [last taboo in advertising](#), but for every ad like this there are thousands that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexism and the [objectification of women](#).

We assume that we make unbiased, rational decisions, that we are able to judge people fairly and equally, but with millions of pieces of information to filter, our brains take shortcuts based on culture, knowledge and personal experience. This unconscious bias influences our perspective of gender roles and appropriate behaviour. From a young age we are exposed to media and advertising that has trained us to believe that women are less confident, less skilled and less important than men. In the advertising industry, it's not just men that think like that, women do too.

In a business where ads are still made by '[white guys talking to white guys](#)' unconscious bias and gender stereotypes are reinforced from the inside. In 2012, a [survey](#) found that only 3% of creative directors in the United States were women, the figures this year have risen to 11%, proving the rate of change inside the industry is glacial. Despite the mediocre improvement, in real terms this means 89% of female designers and copywriters have their work approved by a man.

From her experience, she perceives only men can be promoted to a senior creative leadership positions and she has no visible role model to suggest that her career path could be different. As well as the lack of positive reinforcement, exceptional women drop out of the advertising industry because of unequal pay, inadequate encouragement, minimal support in raising a family, exclusion from pitches, meetings, networking events, and the 'boys club'. We are only going to see a change in the portrayal of women when we inspire them to stay in the advertising industry, when they are proportionally represented as creative directors and when men and women inside these businesses positively champion females on their teams.

Women taking control

If advertising has the power to condition our thinking unconsciously, then it has an amazing opportunity to shape culture for the better. At [Cannes Lions](#) the trending topic was women and diversity. You couldn't fail to miss the conversation on stage, in the newspapers and at women's breakfasts. The introduction of the [Glass Lion](#) in 2015 put the spotlight squarely on inequality, prejudice and injustice by awarding campaigns that address issues of gender stereotypes. Despite this, Cannes has come under scrutiny for not being representative and this year increased the numbers of their female jurors from 31.5% to 40%.

Any positive discrimination highlights another slightly negative aspect in that those benefiting from it will never really know if they got there on their own merit. However, it does send a strong message, and more importantly demonstrates the industry's tolerance for sexism and gender inequality has finally reached a point where it can no longer be ignored. We're at a turning point where advertising is now regulated by an audience willing to boycott campaigns using hashtags #WomenNotObjects and #NotBuyingIt.

With the prevalence of ad blockers, consumers no longer passively absorb marketing messages, but are forcing advertisers to provide them with engaging content and experiences. As customers of both sexes are switching off they are also using their [collective power](#) to remove ads in public spaces that are not representative or inclusive. Get it wrong and brands risk losing their credibility, their customers and their bottom line.

Diversity is the bigger issue

Globally, clients are driving the change inside agencies, as they demand more female creatives work on their accounts. As [85% of all purchases](#) and financial decisions are made by women, brands realise that male-dominated studios are less likely to produce campaigns that speak directly to or appeal to women. In South Africa, the same problem exists but is compounded by the lack of diversity. In the advertising industry, English is the first language of business, but it's not the mother tongue of 91% of the population. To employ teams with little or no experience of the target audience they are marketing to, is exceptionally shortsighted as clients will seek out agency partners that better represent and instinctively understand their consumers.

Traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched in South Africa. It has a cultural heritage built on patriarchal hierarchies, but through it runs a rich seam of strong women celebrated for rising up and fighting against all forms of discrimination. The history of this country proves that radical change can be achieved through grit and determination, but despite the impact affirmative action has had on the advertising industry for good and bad, women of colour still form a tiny minority in agencies. The slow rate of change in advertising transcends borders and nationalities. Gender equality is a global problem that can only be solved at a local level from the bottom up using knowledge and insight to combat prejudice. South Africa isn't behind or following trends; it's finding its own way.

As brands take responsibility and [pledge to remove sexism](#) from their advertising, and female consumers demand accurate representation, the advertising industry must focus on positive reinforcement, not positive discrimination to increase the

ratio of diverse women in creative positions. Visible female role models inside the business and the adverts they create is key to changing perception. Building environments where women do not require [permission](#) but are empowered to lead will inspire the next generation of females to move the industry forward. As [Cindy Gallup](#) recently commented, 'you cannot be what you cannot see'.

ABOUT EMMA CARPENTER

Carpenter judged the 2016 Mobile Lions, which recognise device-driven creativity...

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