

Opening the glass door, embracing the sisterhood

By  Danette Breitenbach

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8 March is International Women's Day. We asked women at the top of their field in the creative industry and women who have been in the industry for a while or just joined, about women in the creative industry.



Image supplied. Fran Luckin is the CCO of VML.

Senior leader: Fran Luckin

Fran Luckin is the CCO of VML.

■ *Has the glass ceiling shifted, cracked, or collapsed?*

The reason it's a glass ceiling is because it looks like it's not there. Based on what I've heard in conversations with many women over the past year, I don't think the glass ceiling is gone at all.

■ *What still needs to be done?*

Maybe a place to start is to reframe our thinking around it [the glass ceiling]]. Perhaps if we stop thinking of it as a glass ceiling because that implies something that is just there, somehow beyond our control.

Concepts are powerful in the way they can shape our thinking and actions. If we think of it as a glass door instead of a ceiling, perhaps, then we've got a metaphor that has agency built into it.

A door can be opened, from either side. It reframes the notion, so that we acknowledge that unconscious biases and barriers exist - but by being aware of them we can work to make sure we open the door. (If that seems trite, then consider the global impact on humanity's thinking that resulted from coining the simple phrase "climate change.")



Image supplied. Siyamthanda Yokwe is the content director at VML

Professional: Siyamthanda Yokwe

Siyamthanda Yokwe is the content director at VML

■ *What attracted you to the industry?*

My attraction to the industry was purely by divine intervention, in other words just like every other suppressed creative whose parents wanted them to do a "serious" degree, I didn't find advertising, advertising found me.

There was a pop-up banner inviting people to join a free creative school called Umuzi Academy. I couldn't believe my eyes when I opened the website, an opportunity to get paid to learn how to make a career as a writer? I took the risk, didn't register for the semester and took the opportunity to become a creative, the rest is history.

■ *What has your experience been so far in the industry, as a woman? Does it along with your expectations or not? Please give an example.*

Being a woman in advertising has been quite the ride.

On the one hand, women leadership is such a norm in most agencies that I never really have to deal with bruised male egos when I'm the only woman in the room. On the other hand, we work with some clients in corporate environments who have not adjusted as well to a black woman leading the battle.

I never came in with any expectations as to how I would be received as a woman, but it does not shock me how some corporate clients will openly undermine you as a woman until your white male counterpart agrees with your idea.

Another thing that leaves a bit of an uncomfortable feeling in my heart is the tendency for women to be treated as mere checkboxes in the room when it comes to judging for awards. While progress has been made, there is still a significant distance to cover on the path toward equality.

What makes me smile is my fellow women in advertising have proven to be the most supportive people I have come across in life. As a woman, when you find a female friend in advertising, you find a sister.

I've never known love the way my closest fellow girlyies in agencies show me love. If a survey were conducted to determine the industry with the highest number of colleagues actively participating in each other's personal life events such as weddings, birthdays and even funerals, this industry would be top 5 and not five.

■ ***What would you like to change or see change as a woman in the industry?***

- Addressing bias in corporate environments that filter into the agency experience: Work towards eliminating gender and racial bias in corporate settings, ensuring that leadership roles are respected and supported regardless of gender or ethnicity. Challenge and change the mindset that may undermine women leaders until validated by their male counterparts.
- Intentional equality in Award Judging: Advocate for a more transparent process for awards, where women can put their hands up to be recognised for their merits rather than treated as checkboxes. Continue pushing for progress in this aspect, acknowledging the strides made while emphasising the need for further improvements.
- Supportive culture: Celebrate the supportive culture among women in advertising. Recognise the value of female friendships in the industry and promote a sense of sisterhood. Encourage mentorship and networking opportunities to further strengthen the bonds among women professionals, especially for those in agency environments where it is still pretty much a boss club.
- Recognition of diversity: Directly address and dismantle any remaining barriers that hinder the progression of women, especially women of colour, in advertising. Men and women need to stop whispering about what needs to be done and start speaking with more volume in their voices.
- Professional Recognition Beyond Personal Relationships: We need to strive for an improvement for an environment where women are acknowledged for their expertise and talent, independent of personal connections.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

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