

Empowering women, one brand at a time

 By [Leslie Pascaud](#)

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Women are everywhere. No surprise right? They do, after all, make up 50% of the world's population. Smart brands are getting in on the conversation, but several are missing the mark...

And everywhere we look, women are a topic of conversation. Michelle Obama's outfit choices on a recent tour of Japan are proclaimed to break down female stereotypes. Sweaty, jiggling and fabulous women exercising on our screens chant 'This girl can'.

More soberly, a woman's mob killing in Afghanistan sparks a global [#JusticeForFarkhunda](#) movement. The banning of [India's Daughter](#), a documentary about the gang rape in Delhi, raises hackles across the globe while Ellen Pao sheds light on sexism in Silicon Valley.

Why so much activity stirring around the boundaries of gender, and why now?

With just a week to go until South Africa's Take a Girl Child to Work Day[®] initiative for 2015 on 28 May, we look at what brand consultancy, Added Value, has to say on the matter.



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Added Value's strategists see something more fundamental taking place which some people are calling the 4th Wave of feminism. Fed up with everyday sexism, forged by other forms of activism and empowered through technology, women are speaking up across all sectors, countries and societies.

This focus on women is indicative of a cultural movement that is bringing the diversity and complexity of women to the fore - within politics, culture and brands - tackling the thorny issues of educational and job equality, freedom from violence, bias and so much more.

Of course 'womanhood' in India versus Indianapolis is far from synonymous. One could argue that women in the established economies in Europe and North America have made tremendous progress in economic independence. For example, in the US, the gender pay gap is narrowing; [women-owned firms](#) now account for 30% of all enterprises, and this despite a relative lack of support - [just 6% of partners at VC firms are women](#).

The issues in some emerging markets like India, Turkey and Colombia are quite different, as women suffer both from inadequate economic and social opportunity. But the underlying global forces are shifting in similar directions.

Solidarity movements like #Heforshe are adopting a counterpoint narrative in order to progress public policy. The movement speaks to male leaders imploring every CEO to close the pay gap, encouraging every head of state to make sure there is no legislation that discriminates against women, asking every father to ensure that his girls go to school.

And smart brands too are getting in on the conversation - recognising and honouring the multi-faceted nature of womanhood and the fundamental ways in which its representations are evolving in culture.

Importantly, when [60% to 70% of women feel misunderstood by marketers](#), there is much to be gained by proving the contrary:

- Under Armour proposes a motivational mantra, reminding us that women athletes '[will what they want](#)' and affirming that 'the space between woman and athlete is no space at all'.

- Celine celebrates age and uniqueness via 80-year-old [Joan Didion](#), 'the new face of French fashion', taking a stand that a women's worth goes well beyond the superficial.
- Walmart promotes women makers and businesses through its newly designed '[Women-Owned](#)' logo on product packaging or online.
- Always redefines what it means to run like a girl.
- And then, of course, there is Dove: Dove Real women, Dove Self Esteem, Dove sketches and most recently, Dove curls. Note: even Dove's 'arch nemesis' - Axe (both Unilever brands) has changed its tune, moving from overt sexism to a subtler form of [seduction](#).

Yet for each brand getting it right, there are several missing the mark. Brands need to realise that 'femvertising' missteps represent a real risk for their future growth. Thus we propose a few points to keep in mind:

1. Ensure that the issue you are defending is coherent with your brand values and that you can 'own' it.

Two US brands have recently jumped on the gender diversity bandwagon, specifically with regard to the female STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) gap. Both are urging parents/teachers to encourage girls' love of science. Both offer up poignant advertising, which addresses a pivotal societal topic. Yet, one is likely to get more credit than the other because the issue is more closely aligned with its equity. Microsoft '[Girls do Science](#)' comes across as more legitimate, and this despite the fact that we find the Verizon '[inspire her mind](#)' ad more compelling.

2. Avoid clichés.

The Subway brand took heat last October for suggesting in their ads that women should try to get fit so that they can wear sexy costumes for Halloween. *Elle* magazine's response sums up the reaction: "How many eye roll-worthy moments can you fit into 30 seconds? Let us count the WTFs. Subway not only perpetuates the pressure for us to wear slutty costumes on 31 October, but also takes it one step further saying we should diet to do it."

3. Make sure your tone is consistent with your brand character.

Keds has been using Taylor Swift to promote 'Brave Girls' - an emotive message to empower young women. But what is the relevance to Keds? Can shoes make you brave? Is it believable when there is no evident link to Keds' brand character or values? Are they not diminishing the meaning of bravery? A 'brave' narrative is best told by a brand that is recognised for its own bravery. One which is doing this well is Brazil's [Cerveja Feminista](#), tackling the objectification of women in traditional beer advertising by championing a non-sexist beer culture.

Given the long road that remains to real gender equality, brands do and will continue to play an important role in supporting and even fuelling this societal shift. There are more ways than ever before to begin meaningful conversations with and about women.

Brands need to embrace the complexity of this topic, carefully choose the stand they seek to take and communicate with conviction and authenticity. The ultimate goal will be to get to a place where the need to promote women's empowerment becomes a relic of the past. But we aren't there yet by a long shot.

**Co-written by Emma Godfrey.*

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