

How we empower young women in South Africa

By [Verusha Maharaj](#), issued by [Red & Yellow](#)

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This International Women's Day, managing director Verusha Maharaj unpacks Red & Yellow's pioneering initiatives in breaking down gender stereotypes in South Africa. Discover how we are reshaping societal norms, and why taking action now is the first step towards a more diverse and equitable industry. From impactful campaigns to leadership diversity, read on for how Red & Yellow empowers women, fostering a future of inclusivity and equality.



A call to action this International Women's Day

In South Africa, the challenge of empowering women remains a poignant issue, echoing the persistent societal norms that dictate roles and power dynamics. A complex history of colonialism, apartheid and patriarchy means that women and especially women of colour have been left out of conversations, and left out of opportunities.

This week, International Women's Day has given me the chance to reflect on what we're doing for our young women students and how we can use our position as educators to not only acknowledge the challenges they face, but how to actively drive transformative change. What real strategies can we put into place to empower the young women entrusted to our care? How can we give them more opportunities to grow professionally while at the same time the tools to dismantle the parts of a system designed to put them second? And, most importantly, when can we effect real change instead of making

empty promises?

At Red & Yellow Creative School of Business, we perceive this responsibility not as a burden but as an opportunity to alter the way the advertising and creative industries see diversity, inclusion and fair opportunity.

International partnerships to tackle local problems

South Africa, like many societies, grapples with deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that hinder the progress of women. This is especially true when it comes to educating young women, ensuring they have fair opportunities to launch their career, and don't face discrimination when in the workplace.

A vast majority of our student intake is women who are looking to forge a career in marketing, design or creative leadership. It's our job as educators to give them all the opportunities we can and empower them to become agents of change themselves.

Breaking the cycle of gender stereotypes requires holistic efforts that span education, collaboration, and societal engagement. At Red & Yellow, we have pioneered initiatives for our students that create even more opportunities for them as they pursue their education. Our strategic partnership with the [Unstereotype Alliance](#), convened by [UN Women](#), is not just a collaboration; it's a commitment to providing our students with opportunities that extend beyond the classroom.

In 2022, we took a significant step forward by participating in the Unstereotype Alliance's Out the Gender Box competition. This social media campaign marked a commitment to promoting diversity and equality within our communities. Four of our students won the competition with the highest engagement and reach, laying the foundation for Red & Yellow to contribute actively to societal change, and create the spaces so desperately needed to talk about the problems young women are facing when it comes to employment opportunities.

In 2023, we continued to build this partnership with the Unstereotype Alliance and turn our conversations into action. Teams of students were given the opportunity to identify ways that harmful stereotypes affect them on campus, and together we confronted problems faced by those with neurodivergence, different racial and socio-economic backgrounds, and more. We empowered them not to be powerless bystanders, but agents of change taking real action. We selected one campaign that demonstrated enormous potential in terms of its impact, and that was the Voice of Colour.

This campus-wide activation made use of physical space to shed light on the microaggressions faced by women of colour daily through examples of language and actions taken without thought. Over our 2024 Orientation week, new and returning students were directly confronted with the harsh reality faced by women of colour and were able to engage with their own bias by writing down instances where they either experienced a microaggression or participated in one. Students were encouraged to wear allyship bracelets to ensure this campaign lived on beyond Orientation.

Projects like these serve the urgent need to tackle biases and prejudices, both overt and subtle, and empower our students to confront these issues head-on.

Leadership from within: A model for the future

It's no secret that the advertising industry in South Africa – and beyond – is male-dominated. Male-centric views lead to [more instances of sexism in advertising globally](#). How do you reframe these views and create an industry where views are more balanced?

Our dedication to empowering women means setting an example right here on campus. Not only are the majority of our lecturers women, but with over 70% representation in our executive committee (Exco) and management positions, we are ensuring that women are represented as key decision makers across the organisation.

The effect of this is reflected in our students' attitudes towards a gender balanced working environment. We are dedicated

to creating a fair space, so that when students head into the working world, they can not only recognise a gender imbalance in their office, but work towards tackling the resulting bias.

Our women alumni, such as Camilla Clerke, exemplify the transformative power of education and the impact Red & Yellow has on our students. Camilla has gone on to work with clients like SAB, and produce campaigns that are creating even more social change, like their [Bread of the Nation campaign that won Gold at the Cannes Lions Festival in 2023](#).

Charting the path forward

The issue of women's empowerment in the workplace demands collective action, and as educators, we are uniquely positioned to drive meaningful change. Red & Yellow's initiatives stand as a testament to our commitment to shaping a future where gender balance is front and centre.

For everyone here at Red & Yellow, driving change is a part of everyday life. We're working on even more partnerships that will launch later this year to further empower young women on our campus and beyond.

We invite all educators to join us in this transformative journey, as we walk the talk and create lasting change year after year.

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