

Panty-slapped: Cyberactivism and African feminism join forces

Bella Hwang

In many parts of Africa women go without bras and panties because they simply can't afford them... In many parts of Africa, simply wearing underwear can reduce the instances rape and helps stop the spread of infectious diseases. Underwear is not considered a necessity, so by having underwear it raises the women's social status making her less likely to be raped.

You can get involved by bringing us your grumpy bras and helping us spread the word. What better reason to clean out your underwear drawer? Gently used bras and new underwear can be dropped off at Nectar Lingerie during regular store hours. As a thank you for your support in our cause, Nectar will offer 10% off items purchased during a fitting on the day of your donation.

- Nectar Lingerie, Undies for Africa Campaign

On the evening of 29 October 2012, this email came through my inbox from a Canadian friend who has spent her life building community-based, women-centred programmes in rural Uganda with the subject heading "My Fav Corporate Marketing Campaign Yet" highlighting her outrage at this undignified corporate marketing campaign.

This marketing ploy disguised as a "warm-hearted" campaign was conceived by a company just 50 kilometres from my hometown in Canada, on the opposite side of the world, some 16 400 kilometres away from the place I now call home, South Africa. Shocked, offended and upset, being a Canadian-born, Chinese woman living now amongst powerful, but all too often disempowered African women the path of my response was not yet clear to me. As a seemingly thoughtless gesture, I forwarded the message to

a friend in Johannesburg who I knew would understand the irony. Little did I know that the power of the electronic world and online spaces would be able to spread this message far and wide, across the reaches of this continent, across the world, and back again in a matter of hours. Before I woke up the next day, simultaneous actions and multiple responses and outcomes had already taken place.

Shared online communities and virtual networks have gained tremendous momentum over the past couple of years, and have changed the ways society operates unlike anything before. It has not only supported businesses financially but has become a powerful engine in driving fundraising and mobilisation in advocacy campaigns. These communities and networks are a medium where ordinary people, experts, and reporters can debate ideas, motivate each other to take action, and trade ideas. Social media campaigns are tricky to intentionally launch because unlike traditional marketing tactics of “pushing” information to the audience, it is based on a “pull” approach. The participants are invested in the campaign and end up adopting it as their own. This story, one of many others that happened in parallel, is my firsthand experience of what a powerful tool online advocacy can be to mobilise women and men across the globe, with a common goal. Twenty-four hours of “armchair” activism is just what the doctor prescribed!

After receiving the email, my Johannesburg-based friend shared the “Undies for Africa” campaign on Facebook and upon reflection; this became the ignition point when the counter-“Undies for Africa” campaign began its journey. Multimedia and online platforms acted as a catalyst and cascaded to reach many individuals transnationally creating discussion, debate and most importantly action. The following day, the strength of collected voices, acting through the modest technology of email, became clear; people worldwide had written to Nectar Lingerie. The original campaign had provoked strong and diverse responses directed at the “Undies for Africa” campaign, calling for apologies and an end to this corporate ruse attacking basic human dignity. Many noted the structural issues inherent in rape, and suggested alternative campaigns that could be supported that address the roots of gender based violence as well as poverty. The counter-campaign was described by one participant as “certainly a transnational African feminist story, in the multiplicity of voices, responses and actions it invoked.” By midday, the power of this type of activism was apparent and included discussions on multiple

private and public online spaces. One example included the blog entry “Africa does not need your (dirty) underwear.”

Success... almost. By late afternoon, the Nectar Lingerie webpage was inaccessible and this apology email was issued.

In light of the recent barrage of incensed and rather threatening emails and Facebook posts regarding our Undies For Africa campaign, we would like to make it clear that we had no intention of offending anyone.

There are many reasons to have comfortable, quality undergarments and we are happy to reword things to reflect some of the other benefits. The information that is presented on our website was not only relayed to us in good faith by numerous individuals who live and work with women in various communities in Zambia but also from several other sources through research as well.

There is absolutely NO profit for us in this campaign and we, in fact, lose money in continuing with it. We will gladly post the hand-written letters we have collected in the past from women who have received the garments showing their appreciation.

Because of this, we have no intentions of ending this campaign as it has benefited hundreds of women over the last 2 ½ years. In the meantime, we will edit the mission statement so as to more accurately define the campaign and its goals.

kindest Regards,
Nectar Lingerie
October 31, 2012

Part of this armchair revolution included mobilisation from **Zambian women** but as one campaigner pointed out “the issue is not specific to **Zambian women**, it is an insult to all of us **African women**, trivializing rape and violence against women, through populist marketing of their products.” In support of this idea, this was my response:

Dear Shona,

It is nice that the recipients of your donated products enjoy them. I don't doubt that. Thank you for reconsidering your mission statement and purpose. I want to highlight some of the concerns with your campaign and why the West 'aiding developing countries' needs to be done with careful consideration of what the impact might be.

Making the oversimplifying claim that by providing underwear will reduce rape and infectious disease does help continue to disempower and build racial stereotypes. If there was a campaign from let's say South African women collecting gently used bras and new underwear for Canadian teens to help prevent STD, teenage pregnancy and drug abuse, I'm very sure there would be an outraged community of Canadian women upset that their complex issues were whittled down to such a simple answer. This is just one of many reasons why there are outraged African women upset with your campaign.

You are simply donating gently used and new undergarments to women in Africa. No doubt there will be people who enjoy free handouts. And also, as you can see, your CSR campaign does benefit your profit, when people come into your store to make a donation, your store receives marketing exposure and donors receive 10% off which they might use to spend money at your store.

Finally, one last note, there are multiple published reports about the detriment of sending charitable clothing to Zambia. Yes, people are able to receive virtually free or very cheap clothing, but over the last few decades, clothing sent from the west has completely collapsed the indigenous Zambian clothing industry. Handouts are not necessarily the answer to helping worldwide inequalities. 'Give a woman a fish and you feed her for a day. Teach a woman to fish and you feed her for a lifetime.' Please reconsider the campaigns and organisations that you choose to support and their impact and message that you send. October 31, 2012

Within just a few hours the campaign was taken offline, their email address was deleted, and their Facebook promotion for "Undies for Africa" was taken down. "Undies for Africa" was no more, thanks to the power of social activists around the world harnessing the power of the internet to act independently, but at the same time as a collective.

Nectar Lingerie is, granted, a small two-women show in an obscure part of Canada, but astoundingly they are not alone in their disregard of how these well-intentioned actions continue to heighten global racial and gendered inequalities. There are many others, such as

"Knickers For Africa," from New Zealand company Hotmilk Lingerie:

A wonderful woman whom we had the good fortune to cross paths with, ex-pat Zimbabwean, spoke with a local priest in Zimbabwe on one of

her trips to her home country and was dismayed to hear of the ongoing sexual abuse suffered by thousands of women and young girls there, particularly in the villages. When the priest explained that by simply owning and wearing a set of lingerie the perceived status of women is elevated, she was determined to do what she could. And so were we!

A funeral company in the UK sending panties for their “Knickers 4 Africa” campaign:

We read about women and girls in Africa who cannot afford underwear, which is considered to be a luxury, leaving them vulnerable to sexual abuse.

These campaigns completely fit with colonial discourses as another online activist pointed out. While poverty and violence may affect the lives of many women, the additional burden imposed by these campaigns is fundamentally, an attack on people’s human dignity. Lucky for us, one tool against this indignity will no doubt continue to exponentially grow as digital mediums and virtual communities continue to organically generate collective parallel, transnational change.