



UN Women, Unilever, and AIDS-Free World

In February, after learning that the corporate goliath Unilever had entered into a new partnership with the UN through the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (better known as UN Women), we wrote to Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women.

Our [letter](#) pointed out that Unilever, a British-Dutch multinational, is responsible for products like Fair & Lovely, a “skin-lightening” cream that is enormously popular in India, other parts of Asia, and the Middle East. Unilever has consistently undermined the mental and physical health and welfare of women and girls through the production, advertising, and sale of such skin-lightening creams, contributing to colorism and racism in many countries, we wrote.

We noted that Unilever is engaged in a classic example of “bluwashing,” the corporate practice of associating with the UN in order to project a reputation for social responsibility that has not been earned.

The relationship between UN Women and Unilever is not new. In 2017, the two came together to found the “Unstereotype Alliance,” which was described in a [press release](#) as an initiative to “unite leaders across business, technology and creative industries to tackle the widespread prevalence of stereotypes that are often perpetuated through advertising.”

The press release quoted a senior Unilever official saying he hoped “we never see an ad that diminishes or limits the role of women and men in society.”

Our letter asked UN Women to sever its relationship with Unilever.

// Three months later, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka [responded](#). “UN Women ... believes that collaboration with the private sector is essential to achieve the rights of women and girls,” she wrote. While “we understand the concerns you raise,” the partnership with Unilever has both “advantages” and “risks,” which are “inherent in private sector engagement.”

// AIDS-Free World went public in June, after Johnson & Johnson, a competitor of Unilever, announced that it would no longer produce its two lines of skin-lightening products marketed in Asia. The products, the company conceded in a [statement](#), “represent fairness or white as better than your own unique skin tone.”

Unilever made no similar announcement.

In a June 23 [statement](#), we asked UN Women, this time publicly, to cut ties with Unilever. "Our hope is that now, in this critical moment of global dialogue on race and discrimination, UN Women will be stirred to reconsider" the noxious partnership, we wrote.

We described how Unilever invests vast sums of money to convince millions of women that they need to buy skin-lightening creams to become white, fair, and beautiful, and that this beauty, in turn, will make them worthy of love and attention.

"It is a profoundly anti-feminist and racist message," we wrote.

// We issued a [second](#) public statement on June 30, after learning that Unilever, in the face of the bad publicity, had decided to rename and repackage one of its several brands of skin-whitening products. Fair & Lovely would now be Glow & Lovely.

"Unlike competitor Johnson & Johnson, which announced that it would stop selling skin-lightening creams, Unilever has brazenly chosen to insult women everywhere and to show unfettered contempt for those calling for real change," we wrote.

We repeated our call for UN Women to end its association with Unilever.

“UN Women’s continuing silence as this issue evolves and worsens,” we wrote, “is a new, separate affront.”

// On July 20, *Buzzfeed* published a [story](#) by Megha Rajagopalan that revealed how Unilever (and other companies) use strongarm tactics against anyone in the fashion and beauty industries who criticizes skin-whitening products.

Among those targeted was Kinita Shenoy, the editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan’s* Sri Lanka edition from 2017 to 2018. After Ms. Shenoy criticized skin-whitening products in an Instagram post—“Aren’t we past the point where we tell wonderful, melanin-popping Asian women that they need to make their skin look whiter?”—she was subject to a pressure campaign by Unilever. Two of the company's executives demanded that the magazine either fire her or publish positive stories about its skin-

whitening products, according to Shenoy. When neither happened, Unilever pulled its advertising from the publication.

The ads eventually returned but Shenoy was driven from her job.

"I was a woman on my own," she told *Buzzfeed*. "I had to pay my rent and medical bills with my salary. I had no safety net. Unilever knew what they were doing by threatening me, and that stuff stayed with me and was the reason I shut up for two years afterward. Even now I am speaking up but I am afraid. I am afraid of what will happen—what they will do."

// UN Women is not the only United Nations entity that partners with Unilever. The corporation has relationships with the likes of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). In April, Alan Jope, Unilever's CEO, [appeared](#) with Amina Mohammed, the deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, to discuss corporate responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I think that noise around corporate standards of conduct," Mr. Jope said at one point, "is only going to be amplified as a result of this crisis."

Mr. Jope can be assured that the "noise" from AIDS-Free World will not cease as long as the scandalous partnership between UN Women and Unilever continues to exist.

Updated August 6, 2020