

PR stunts not what women need today, or any day

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TODAY is International Women's Day so, you know what that means: brands are going to support #empowerment — sorry #empowHERment — by adding the words “she” and “her” to other words, doing weird things with their logos, and then asking: Is this feminism?

It makes me feel great, on this special day, to know fast food companies care about me and my experience, as a woman. I, personally, cannot wait for all the tweets about how we're all brave SHEroes trying to mount a SHEcovery after a SHEcession.

International Women's Day, like most other holidays, has been co-opted by brands — sometimes the very brands that profit off women's insecurities, insecurities they've manufactured, in fact, in a wonderful closed-loop system.

In the weeks preceding this blessed day, corporate boardrooms across the land have strategic planning meetings, the subject of which, I'm guessing, is, “Oh yeah, *women.*”

Women exist in other months of the year as well, but March — which in the U.S. is also Women's History Month (which is in October in Canada) — is really our time to shine. And there's no better way to acknowledge the achievements, advancements and struggles of women than by mounting the kind of cringe-worthy publicity stunt that makes people ask, “Wow, do any women even work there?”

The year 2018 was, weirdly, a banner year for bad IWD marketing. That was the year McDonald's turned its famous golden arches upside down so that the M resembled a W — the W is for Women, get it? — and KFC Malaysia replaced Colonel Sanders with Claudia Sanders. MTV also did the logo flip for International Women's Day to become WTV.

Last year Burger King U.K. came under a charbroil flame for a marketing campaign stating that Women Belong in the Kitchen, with the tag “yet women only make up 20 per cent of chefs.”

My all-time favourite, though, is from 2020, when Shell briefly changed its name to She'll. At one gas station.

Some brands will throw some actual capital behind their campaigns, by way of charitable donations, scholarships, development grants and training programs — which is great.

But what do their own corporate structures look like? Who inhabits the corner offices? Do they pay a livable wage? Is “supporting women” a oneday- only thing, or is this

a year-round commitment? And could they support these kinds of initiatives without patting themselves on the back via a social media hashtag?

The co-opting by brands is not specific to IWD; we see “pinkwashing” during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and “rainbow-washing” during Pride month. Some of these campaigns are backed by material supports, but a lot of it is theatre.

Look, we don't want brands to make their logos into girls or swap their Ms for Ws or point out that you can't spell Hershey's without HER or SHE.

What we want is equal pay and affordable childcare. We want access to abortion. We want workplace flexibility so that we're not placed on the "mommy track" if we decide to have children. We want carework to be valued. We want support for women who are trying to flee from domestic violence. We want access to health care and to have our pain believed.

International Women's Day dovetails with the two-year anniversary of a pandemic that has been disproportionately punishing for women.

Women had to leave the workforce in droves, either because they worked in fields hardest hit by pandemic restrictions or because they suddenly found themselves doubling as their children's homeroom teacher.

Inequalities that existed before the pandemic were made worse; the gulfs in carework, for example, between men and women became chasms. Domestic violence has been dubbed a "shadow pandemic" owing to the rising rates of intimate partner violence. Women are impossibly burned out.

We want actual conversations, commitments and solutions. Anything less is pandHERing.

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