

Uproar erupts over 'sexist, chauvinist' ads – in Women's Month – to promote reading

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Government 15.8.2019 06:00 am Uproar erupts over 'sexist, chauvinist' ads – in Women's Month – to promote reading Amanda Watson A picture tweeted by department of basic education spokesperson Elijah Mhlangu. Picture: Screenshot. 'What message are we sending out to girls that their bodies are to be used in this fashion?' portfolio committee on basic education chair Bongive Mbinco-Gigaba asked. The chair of parliament's portfolio committee on basic education, Bongive Mbinco-Gigaba, yesterday called for "drastic action" to be taken against the department's spokesperson Elijah Mhlangu. He was joined in his call by a "disgusted" ANC Youth League (ANCYL) task team. Calling his use of photographs of scantily clad women to drive a conversation around reading and the Read to Lead campaign a "thoughtless, sexist, chauvinist approach", Mbinco-Gigaba said the committee would take up the issue with the department at its next meeting. Tandi Mahambehlala, the ANCYL task team's convener, said: "We are disgusted that a public servant tasked with being the voice of basic education consciously chooses to use the imagery of semi-naked African women in a derogatory and sexualised manner to promote reading." According to the department's website, the campaign's focus was to "improve the reading abilities of all South African children", so it was uncertain why using overtly sexual images of women would contribute to a campaign aimed at children. Mbinco-Gigaba said Mhlangu had first tried to justify his tweets and then apologised. Mhlangu has since removed the tweets, and explained that he had used the images to promote the department's Read to Lead Campaign in 2016, 2017 and 2018 with no complaints. One picture was of a woman with oiled breasts and low cleavage and a book, another was a semi-dressed couple with a book. He explained contemporary audiences who consume media tend to be open about sex and sexuality, and while understanding the metaphoric meaning, he wanted to push the boundaries to promote reading in many settings. "This is not enough. We cannot be objectifying women, especially not in Women's Month. What are we teaching our boys in school?" Mbinco-Gigaba asked. "What message are we sending out to girls that their bodies are to be used in this fashion?" Mbinco-Gigaba said the images had to be condemned and Mhlangu's approach to the campaign had missed his target market completely. "South Africa has made big strides since the dawn of democracy in the emancipation of women. The comments and distribution of images of this nature by a person of Mhlangu's stature undermines many of these gains," said Mbinco-Gigaba. "We cannot but condemn these images of scantily-clad women, which attempt to promote reading by making it 'sexy'." Meanwhile, Mahambehlala said the ANCYL task team was outraged and called Mhlangu misogynistic for not only posting the pictures, but for doing so during Women's Month, and without knowing whether the subjects of the photographs had consented to their images being tweeted. "Women in general, and African women in particular, have been subjects of hypersexualisation and objectification. The unequal structure of society has often viewed women as nothing more than objects of sexual pleasure whose tangible contribution to the nation is negligible, particularly in a patriarchal society. "It is within this context that we call for the immediate removal of Elijah Mhlangu as the spokesperson for basic education." Mhlangu has maintained silence since his "apology" on August 12, and hasn't responded to questions from The Citizen. Yesterday, the Public Servants Association (PSA) "sharply condemned" Mhlangu's posts as "misguided, insensitive and inappropriate, especially in the face of Women's Month". The department launched the campaign in 2015, to improve children's reading abilities and ensure that all pupils would be able to demonstrate age-appropriate levels of reading by 2019. Mhlangu on Twitter posted messages and at least one suggestive image of a young woman seated on a couch "reading" a book with the #ReadtoLead hashtag. PSA spokesperson Tahir Maepa said Mhlangu, given his position as a prominent public servant, was clearly out of touch with reality and the challenges facing young

South Africans. “The posts could in no way be conceived as promoting reading among children,” Maepa said. Mhlanga’s boss, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, said she had not been informed the campaign would involve using images of semi-naked women, adding she would never have given permission, because “women were not objects”. “I distance both the ministry and the department from this naked display of chauvinism. “The objectification of women has no place anywhere in our society, let alone in our quest to promote reading,” Motshekga said. – amandaw@citizen.co.za; additional reporting News24 Wire For more news your way, download The Citizen’s app for iOS and Android.