On July 2nd 2010, two newspapers in Namibia published a sexist advert produced by the advertising firm Paragon Investments and commissioned by Metcalfe Attorneys. The almost full page advert featured the bare buttocks of a woman in a skimpy thong, with the imprint of a boot and the words ‘Still Kicking It’ on one cheek. Sister Namibia and other organisations as well as members of the general public were appalled and called for the immediate retraction of the advert and an apology from the responsible agencies. Although they were initially reluctant to retract the advertisement, Metcalfe Attorneys eventually replaced it with a less offensive one.

Sexism in the media – which in short could be described as the exploitation of a woman’s or a man’s body and sexuality for the purpose of selling a product or a story - is an issue on the pulse of which Sister Namibia has had her finger for a long time. In 2008, fed up with continued sexism in the media, Sister Namibia launched the “Green Ball Holder Award for Sexism in the Media” and commissioned an artist to design a provocative and controversial advert to gauge the public’s thoughts. The shock value of the advert attracted much needed attention and got both women and men talking about sexism, but Sister Namibia later decided to take a more subtle approach, as in a way their advert was stooping to the levels of the sexist advertisers. While in the past Sister Namibia’s cries for women’s bodily integrity has been a lone voice in the wilderness, the reaction to the Metcalfe advert showed that its small but insistent efforts to raise awareness have borne fruit.

Sister Namibia (SN) would like to see debates and discussions around sexism in the media to continue until positive changes are visible. The magazine therefore spoke to Robin Tyson (RT), a media personality and lecturer in Media and Information Communication at the University of Namibia on his views about the issue and in particular on his reaction to the Metcalfe advert.

SN: Why are people not responding strongly to sexist images and the stereotyping of women in the media, especially in advertising? Why such apathy?

RT: I am not sure if there is apathy - with the huge outpouring of comments and criticism from readers in the case of the quite repulsive advert of Metcalfe Attorneys. On the SMS pages in The Namibian newspaper there was a lot of intelligent response, pointing out to Metcalfe the connection between that kind of advertising and the increase in gender based violence. Maybe he did not realise this, but maybe he did and was doing it to provoke controversy.

SN: One could argue that this particular advert was blatantly sexist and therefore not too difficult to spot. In 2008, Trustco had an equally sexist advert on a billboard and in print, and Sister Namibia was the only organisation to speak out against it and confront Trustco. Why this big difference between then and now?

RT: You can look positively on this situation and say, maybe things have changed. Some years ago Trustco could get away with it, but now people are more conscious about sexist images in the media.

SN: Would you say that Metcalfe, The Namibian and Paragon Investments had the ‘guts’ to place such an advert, because very few people had spoken out against more subtle sexist adverts before?

RT: Yes - I suppose you could. Perhaps he WANTED to stir up that controversy.

SN: Why do you think are people not sensitised or conscious of the more subtle forms of sexist
UNAM Media Lecturer Robin Tyson

and stereotypical portrayal of women in the media?

RT: I guess we all need more education on the issue. I have personally never thought about it that ‘deeply’. Maybe we need to do more research on that.

SN: What is the responsibility of the newspapers that ran the advert? Who holds them accountable? They tried to justify their actions by saying that they were trying to spark social debate on the issue. Are they right in saying this?

RT: The Namibian has a woman editor, a woman sub-editor, a woman business manager, so you can’t say that it was done by a group of men who thought it was funny. If anybody could have stopped such a blatantly sexist advert from being published it would have been the editor and her female team.

But you must remember that it is a commercial newspaper and, excuse the pun, the bottom line is: Money talks. The Namibian got N$ 6 000 or N$ 10 000 for the advert, and with government having withdrawn all its adverts, I am sure the editor is under some commercial pressure.

The other thing is - and I am going to be a bit controversial now - that freedom of speech is freedom of speech. It does not mean that we should have sexually provocative images of women in our newspapers, but within reason, let us have a bit of controversy and generate discussion. Maybe Metcalfe did some good in a funny kind of way. By getting people so angry about the advert, he made it clear where the line is, even for the newspaper editor and her team. Next time they are considering running a similar advert, maybe they will be guided by their readers’ previous responses.

SN: Do you think that a regulating body should be established to regulate and check these kinds of adverts, and not just sexist ones, but racist, ageist and homophobic ones too?

RT: Well, we used to have an advertising authority in Namibia... but I don’t know what happened to it, it would be very interesting to find out. With the Metcalfe advert, there were complaints laid against the Law Society of Namibia, so there are bodies that complaints can be directed at.

But as a media person I am very reluctant to have these bodies telling you what you can and cannot publish. And do we really want an advertising body saying ‘don’t do that’, even before the media have put it up? I would rather have the controversial or offensive thing appearing and the public's reaction to it, than the controversial advert or story not appearing at all. We would run the danger of sanitising our media output. When we never see any signs of sexism or racism it will falsely create the impression that it does not exist, while it does. Whereas having a sexist advert – I am not saying it is a good thing - provokes responses in the way that the Metcalfe advert did. Rather have that than not having it at all.