



February 19, 2020

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka  
Executive Director  
UN Women  
220 East 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10017

Dear Dr. Mlambo-Ngcuka:

We wish to bring to your attention a matter of utmost importance.

It is with deep concern that we note UN Women's newly announced collaboration with Unilever in Tanzania, ostensibly to promote women's agency, health, and safety.<sup>1</sup> Unilever has consistently undermined the mental and physical health and welfare of women and girls through the production, advertising, and sale of various "skin lightening" creams, contributing to colorism and racism in many countries. These forms of discrimination cause mental anguish and create social stigma around darker skin and adversely affect the earning capacity and job prospects of darker-skinned women. By promoting and praising Unilever, UN Women by extension is condoning skin lightening creams and disregarding its responsibility to protect the rights of women.

A reported 250 million consumers across the globe use Fair & Lovely, Unilever's most popular skin lightening cream.<sup>2</sup> Unilever also rakes in profits from its extensive line of Pond's "White Beauty" skin care products. In recent emailed responses to investigative journalists, Unilever defended itself by asserting that it was simply filling a consumer need, since "even-toned and lighter skin is a common desire among many people across Asia, Africa and Latin America." It also claimed to have "established strict marketing principles that will not make any association between skin tone and a person's self-worth and achievement", standard language that Unilever deploys when its products come under fire.<sup>3</sup> Yet even a cursory glance at their product names and advertising provides examples of the fabrication in that statement.

Unilever works hard to convince millions of women that they need to buy 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. Unilever attempts to mitigate these criticisms by marketing Fair & Lovely and its other products as "lightening", "brightening", or "toning" creams, euphemisms for speaking plainly about color.

In your own country, South Africa, Unilever re-branded its product as "Even & Lovely," evoking themes of "a world where opportunities go beyond race," and proclaiming that "Once...South Africa becomes Even & Lovely...she will emerge victorious." Unilever claims that its skin creams will "empower African women" by giving

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women, "UN Women and Unilever team up in Tanzanian tea plantations to create safer communities for women", 31 January 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/1/feature-un-women-and-unilever-team-up-in-tanzania>.

<sup>2</sup> Unilever global website, "Our Brands – Fair & Lovely", <https://www.unilever.com/brands/?category=408114>.

<sup>3</sup> CBC, "Whiter skin in 14 days': Tracking the illegal sale of skin-whitening creams in Canada," 7 February 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/marketplace-skin-whitening-lightening-beauty-shadism-1.5454257>; Buzzfeed, "Some Of Your Fave Skin Care Companies Sell Skin Lightening Products", 10 October 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/scaachikoul/doves-gaffe-is-part-of-a-history-of-racist-beauty-marketing>.

them a “brighter complexion.”<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly, the box for that product speaks more plainly than their words – it simply shows a woman with noticeably lighter skin after using the product.

Unilever’s message is achingly clear: lighter skin is empowering. Lighter skin leads to opportunity. Lighter skin leads to success. Lighter skin leads to happiness. Lighter skin is better than darker skin.

Unilever has weathered controversies thus far because it is a master at pinkwashing, the practice of using feminist language and imagery to sell products that ultimately hurt women. Indeed, there is even a Fair & Lovely Foundation that provides educational scholarships to women, which it claims fits squarely with Fair & Lovely’s mission to “create a positive change in the society” by “helping women get the confidence to pursue their dreams.”<sup>5</sup> Unilever wants us to believe that Fair & Lovely is a force for good, inspiring women to succeed through the power of self-confidence. Although it acknowledges that real “physical and socio-cultural barriers” exist for women, Unilever never admits that one of these barriers is the structural discrimination upon which their brand relies to turn a profit. Along with pinkwashing, Unilever is now also engaging in bluwashing, the corporate practice of associating with the UN in order to project a reputation for social responsibility that has not been earned.

UN Women has lent its credible image to a company that has a deep history of anti-women practices.

We fail to see any ethical grounds on which UN Women can support a multinational corporation that exploits colorism and racism for profit in more than 30 countries worldwide. The discrimination and stigma suffered by women in these countries is exacerbated by Unilever advertising messages that boldly, relentlessly link lighter skin with women’s worth. This is a multinational that sells its wares by shattering the self-esteem of young women and girls and by reinforcing discrimination against darker-skinned women. And it is acutely aware that because its violations, adapted to countless markets, are spread across many countries, it is extremely difficult for consumers worldwide to unite in protest.

When the world’s women look to UN Women, they should not see a UN entity working hand-in-glove with a massive corporation that exploits sexism, colorism, *and* the United Nations for profit. They should find in UN Women a strong advocate that will stand up with them against Unilever’s racist, anti-women practices.

We respectfully urge you to sever a relationship with Unilever that works counter to the rights of women and brings UN Women into disrepute.

Sincerely,



Paula Donovan  
Co-Director, AIDS-Free World



Sharanya Kanikkannan  
Legal and Policy Advisor, AIDS-Free World

CC Emma Watson, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador

**Attachments:** Sample images and screen captures from Unilever advertisements.

<sup>4</sup> Unilever South Africa website, “Even & Lovely”, <https://www.unilever.co.za/brands/personal-care/even-and-lovely.html>.

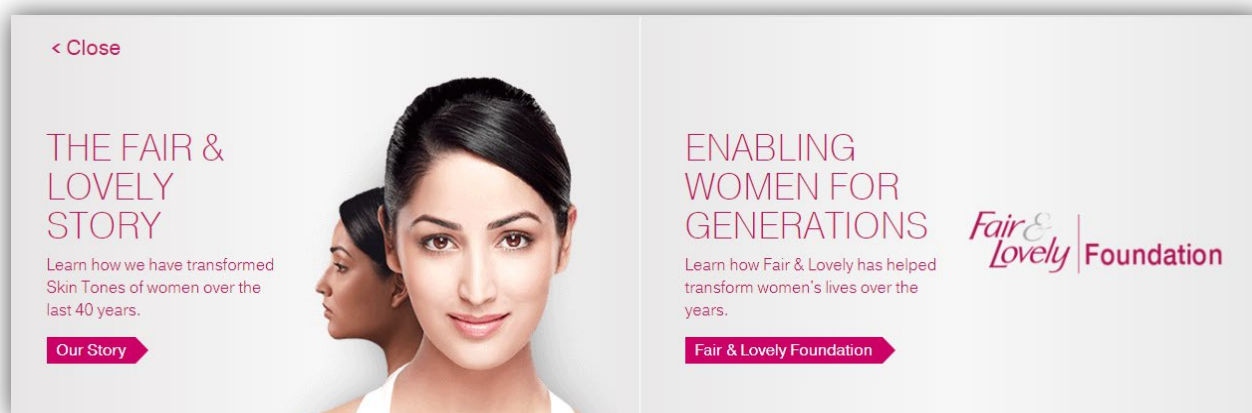
<sup>5</sup> Unilever global website, “Our Brands – Fair & Lovely”, <https://www.unilever.com/brands/personal-care/fair-and-lovely.html>.

Image 1: Unilever's Even & Lovely Marketing image for South Africa



(from Unilever official website, <https://www.unilever.co.za/news/news-and-features/2017/even-lovely-advanced-multi-vitamin-cream.html>).

Image 2: Unilever's Fair & Lovely marketing image for Pakistan



(from Unilever official website, <https://www.fairandlovely.pk/>).

Images 3-5: Screen captures from a Unilever Even & Lovely advertisement



(accessed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72iprPKUGZg>).