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Girl on the internet

BY

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Nicknamed the “Candace Owens of South Africa,” Siphesihle Nxokwana is an anti-feminist influencer playing to crowds already on her side.

Among the many grifters who’ve crawled out of the swamplands of social media, the anti-feminist woman influencer is arguably the most paradoxical. Largely based in the Anglo-American world, she makes money from slandering the movement that won her civil and political rights. With the freedom to chart her destiny, she laments the struggle for liberties that she’s never had to second-guess, denigrating generations of women who fought for these privileges. Despite being one of the most industrious careerists in the digital space, she claims to resent this ability to work. She insists that she wants a simpler life, yearns for a time when her responsibilities were confined to the perimeter of her white picket fence. Whether she’s the prolific conservative pundit who believes feminism has been the undoing of women (Candace Owens), the soldier-turned-trad wife supervising multiple online businesses (Aly Drummond aka @RealFemSapien), or the single YouTuber sermonizing about the value of marriage and arguing for the removal of the franchise for women (Pearl), the anti-feminist influencer is the product of a culture that continues to undermine and undo the achievements of women’s liberation.

In South Africa, a young influencer has fashioned herself as the local answer to her anti-feminist peers in the West. Known by the stage handle “@Sihleey,” Siphesihle Nxokwana is a 28-year-old content creator who has garnered attention for demanding that “women embrace their womanhood and not to be like men,” among other things. Much of Nxokwana’s appeal lies in the way she places herself at odds with among the most reviled women on the internet: “Instagram baddies” and feminists.

Indeed Nxokwana often portrays herself as an unflinching truth-teller, who wants to set women on the straight and narrow. Within the last year, she's released a string of videos on TikTok criticizing social media feminism for devaluing men, calling out baddies for promoting opulent lifestyle content, bemoaning the uptick in plastic surgery procedures such as Brazilian Butt Lifts (BBLs), explaining "both sides" of gender-based violence (GBV), and advocating for the return of chastity for young women and girls.

Yet for all her attempts to become social media's latest novelty, Nxokwana registers as a mere footnote in a country with a unique history of anti-feminism. Nxokwana isn't the first to treat gender essentialist tropes like they're blistering truths the world has never heard. Her attitudes toward women fit the description of what Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter called "formenism,"—the "belief in the inherent superiority of men over women [that is] constructed, endorsed, and sustained by women." Nadar and Potgieter originally used foremenism to investigate the Worthy Women's Conference (WWC), a Christian event led by Jill Buchan, the wife of the popular televangelist pastor Angus Buchan. Yet it's an ideology that applies outside of the evangelical right, cutting across the social, cultural, and political landscape of South Africa.

Despite the proliferation of women in government and gender equality laws passed after democracy in 1994, anti-feminism remains deeply embedded in society. For Shireen Hassim, many of the "representational gains" within the state and legislation obfuscated the grim realities facing the majority of women in the country, leaving them vulnerable to poverty, abuse, and violence. In addition, Hassim argues that feminism had "become tied to governance in ways that disabled [its] radical demands," rewarding women more for their "loyalty to factions within the ruling party rather than their commitment to shifting inequalities through the use of policy instruments." This was no more evident than during the rape trial of former president Jacob Zuma in 2006, where he received an abundance of support from the ANC Women's League, paving the way for him to become president of his party and the country.

Perhaps Nxokwana is too young to remember footage showcasing the "burn the bitch" posters outside the court, or recall reports of the home of Khwezi, the late accuser of Zuma, being torched to the ground. Maybe she is unaware of the sexist and misogynistic insults that have been leveled at women members of parliament for the past 30 years. But she is old enough to have witnessed the resurgence of feminist activism among the so-called Born Free generation (namely people born after the end of apartheid) that she falls into. Galvanized by the Fallist student protest movement that swept prestigious university campuses nearly a decade ago, these "Born Free" women brought feminism back into mainstream discourse, demonstrating against GBV, and speaking out against sexism and misogyny online and within their daily lives. While these efforts have had somewhat of an impact on how women are discussed and perceived in popular media, they do not eliminate the intense climate of chauvinism in South Africa.

This leaves Nxokwana with no major adversaries to spar with. She has no significant conflict that will legitimize her gripes, or any real or imagined cabal to contend with. Unlike her compatriots in the West, her anti-feminist beliefs aren't foregrounded in a cultural war that presents a potential existential threat to those who think like her. These conditions provide an enduring relevance to the likes of Owens and Pearl, who can situate themselves on the frontlines of the supposed battle between liberals and conservatives, modernism and traditionalism, censorship and free speech. In the absence of these tensions, Nxokwana is simply preaching to the choir.

At the moment, Nxokwana is one of the only women actively carving out a lane for herself as an anti-feminist influencer in South Africa. Before she migrated to TikTok, Nxokwana had a YouTube channel where she churned out videos in a standard video podcast format until she shut down the account due to changing her number. While she covered some of the same topics on both mediums, her style of engagement was less adversarial and combative. On her new YouTube Channel, however, Nxokwana is branding herself as a former "baddie with some sense" who realized that she had been duped by the fictitious lives of "girls on the internet." However, there is no guarantee it will translate into a sustainable career enjoyed by the likes of male podcasters MacG, DJ Sbu, or Penuel The Black Pen. The local content creator industry doesn't offer a stable financial future for any of its workers—even the lifestyle influencers whom Nxokwana despises.

South Africa, however, is a place that rewards reactionaries with employment opportunities. It isn't hard to imagine Nxokwana parlaying her TikTok notoriety into a gig at a TV or radio station, or playing the role of the brash provocateur at the pre-taped town hall debates. At the height of the xenophobic backlash against Chidimma Adetshina, the former Miss South Africa 2024 finalist who faced mass scrutiny over the validity of her South African citizenship, Nxokwana denied Adetshina's national identity through a concoction of race science, distorted rainbow nationalism, and colonial apologia. It was a move that could easily have served as a topic of discussion on a prominent news channel.

In many of her videos, Nxokwana warns her audience about the emptiness of online materialism. Yet there is something equally dreary about the life Nxokwana appears to lead. Her videos are sometimes shot from the front seat of a car in what looks like an office parking lot, or straight from her bed. While it's common for content creators to film videos from just about anywhere they find themselves, it's perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects about millennials and Gen Z. For two generations who've complained about burnout, anxiety, and the encroachment of work onto their free time, they don't seem to have much regard for it. It's not unusual to find "late capitalism" cited as the cause of this behavior. But millennials and Gen Z have also absorbed this callous attitude towards leisure, rejecting the idea of rest and hobbies in favor of something soulless and draining.

The thought of Nxokwana potentially leaving her office to sit in her car and eviscerate strangers for the amusement of the internet is quite depressing. That this kind of antisocial behavior has become a normal way for people to spend their free time, or forge a career as a content creator is a disturbing trend. That said, it's also not difficult to see its appeal. Instead of facing the bullies in your workplace or the enemies in your personal life, you can create fictional ones who are bound to lose in a game where you always set the rules. You can subject them to humiliations you wish to inflict on your line manager or dazzle them with sassiness you swallow in the presence of those more confident and outspoken than you.

There is no way of telling what kind of life Nxokwana leads outside her social media. Interestingly, her need to hold the gaze and the attention of South African social media makes her no different to other girls on the internet.

About the Author

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