

We still live in a made-up man's world where real women don't fit

By [Bathobile Chime](#), issued by [Catchwords](#)

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Reference Man was the mythical standard for humanity in the 1970s, and his influence is still felt in offices and urban environments to this day, ensuring anyone who doesn't fit this mould simply doesn't fit - particularly women.



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For a long time women have been held back by the glass ceiling, but what about the glass staircase?

Back in the day – in the twentieth century – in many so-called first world countries grown women were banned from voting, from working after marriage, from education, from opening bank accounts, from taking loans, from being legally responsible for themselves, and this situation continues in some countries to this day. However, in 2023, women largely have equal rights and so surely, by default, equal opportunities and a level playing field.

Cue laughter from women everywhere.

Yes, the law may have changed, and South Africa undoubtedly has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, but legalities cannot change attitudes nor the

very real lived experience of women.

Fact is, the modern world – our cars, our offices, our cities, our public bathrooms, our lived environment – was built for men. Not just any male though, but a very specific male: a supposed average five-foot-seven Caucasian male aged 20 to 30, weighing in at 70kg, also known as Reference Man.

“ *Whoever thought clear staircases was a great idea or steps with gaps obviously wasn't wearing a skirt.* ”

Cushman & Wakefield in the Netherlands commissioned a research series investigating the working experience of women, and realised that this Reference Man was core to the development of much of modern society.

Created in 1975 by the Task Group on Reference Man, this skinny white lad's initial purpose was to assist in calculations of radiation safety. However, his statistics were then applied widely across numerous industries: he was used as a crash test dummy, in office design, and in scientific research models of nutrition, pharmacology, population, and toxicology. As 'the norm', drugs were created for him, environments were crafted for him, offices and cars, calorie counts and medication, and anything a man might come into contact with were made with Reference Man in mind.

But not only is Reference Man dated physiologically, he was never an actual average human being at all. He never existed.

As for Reference Woman, when she was finally created in 1995, she was a 60kg white woman, 1.63m tall and aged between 20 and 50. We have her to thank, or curse, for lower kitchen counters, short-handled prams and other such wonders in traditionally female arenas.

Meanwhile, anyone who didn't fit in either model, simply didn't fit into the modern world.



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In urban spaces, the way we designed cities in the past has perhaps unintentionally limited women's opportunities and even safety in those urban spaces, states the Cushman & Wakefield report. It has been well-documented that women experience gendered microaggressions in the workplace, leading to overall lower opportunities than men in those spaces.

Whoever thought clear staircases was a great idea or steps with gaps obviously wasn't wearing a skirt. No doubt the person who thought metal grids outside offices or cobbled walkways were clever wasn't wearing kitten heels either.

Things as apparently simple as public bathrooms can be an issue, often with equal numbers of stalls for the sexes, even though men have urinals and may only have to sit down once a day.

Also, women often freeze all year around with icy aircon in summer or under-heating in winter. On the flipside, perimenopausal women are regularly overheating.

Yes, women may have the pill, we may have theoretical equal pay, but urban environments are still often centred around that mythical Reference Man. These environments are not serving women. The problem is not women though: it is the fact that a standard office environment is regulated to suit a 40-year-old white man.

Even voice recognition software responds better to a male voice!

Still, women and other non-Reference people often try to fit unobtrusively into this man-shaped world for fear of being told that they don't belong.

Women's careers and educational levels have only started improving exponentially over the last 100 years, says the Cushman & Wakefield paper. However, their role as primary caregiver and housewife has not adjusted accordingly. Societal norms and legacy gender roles continue to fuel the disproportionate amount of unpaid work completed by women in the home.

The Covid-19 pandemic has set working women back too, particularly mothers. While families may have tried to split the load of homeschooling, chores and childcare, the invisible emotional load of 'thinking for everyone' is largely absorbed by women and costs a significant amount of emotional and physical energy, the report points out.

A 2021 McKinsey study, Women in the Workplace, put the figure at five or more hours of extra work a day for some 60% of women, the equivalent of another part-time job.

When it comes to equality, we are clearly not there yet.

While all may theoretically have access to the same spaces – men, women, trans, gay, straight, of varied colours and cultures and abilities – there has not been a substantial shift in those spaces themselves. We are still picking up the leftovers from a patriarchal society.

Now is the time to consider the huge variety among people, and to start to create welcoming, working environments across the board, for all.

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