

Classism in South Africa: What's happening in our shops?

 By [Devan Moonsamy](#)

20 Mar 2018

Arguably one of the most feel-good movie shop scenes has to be in *Pretty Woman* when Julia Roberts' character returns to the shop where she was previously refused service and utters those famous words "You refused to serve me yesterday. You work on commission, right? Big mistake. Big. Huge! I have to go shopping now!" Don't we all wish we could have a moment like this when we are unfairly judged?



© Buena Vista Pictures.

The UN states that:

“ *Poverty is both a cause and a product of human rights violations.* ”

In some countries, such as India, the class system is so rigid and extreme that some people are treated as ‘untouchable’. There have been calls to end the system, but it is so ingrained that it will likely take generations to overcome. When those in the lower classes go shopping, others will not take money or orders from them directly. On a recent visit to India, whilst out shopping one day, I watched in horror as a “low class” customer had to put her money down on the counter first and wait for the upper-class shopkeeper or attendant to get around to serving them. My initial reaction was – how tragic that this is still happening in societies today.

Systematic discrimination

Closer to home in South Africa, systematic discrimination against people who are considered to be of a ‘lower class’ is less common, but it still happens. The caste system in India has been likened to Apartheid in South Africa. The laws of Apartheid are gone from our legal system, yet we know that racism still appears in practice, and the treatment of anyone who appears poor (and non-white, sadly) is not the same as those who are middle-class or rich (and white). It is sad that such socioeconomic discrimination still happens, and that in SA it is related to colour. These factors intersect in context to affect the way individuals are treated as customers.

It is perhaps more subtle but, for example, are customers profiled according to perceived economic status when they walk into stores in South Africa? Some experiences would indicate that this does happen. Unfortunately, we don't know enough about the problem because 95% of South Africans who have a bad experience while shopping does not complain (Jones, 2017). Thus, more data is needed.

However, there is anecdotal evidence revealing the types of reactions people can expect. One woman describes her encounter at a store in Edenvale, Johannesburg, selling goods typically bought by middle and upper-class people. She noted that there were no prices on any of the goods, not even for the 'bargain bin'. The salesperson first asked her which car parked outside was hers. She replied, 'Why do you want to know?' He said he was just curious.

She went through the store, looking for a few things with the salesperson tailing her every step of the way. She felt uncomfortable and frustrated that she had to ask for every price: 'Every time I asked, he went off into the back, and he came back with a number he didn't seem sure about. It was confusing. I couldn't compare prices because I couldn't remember them all. I am sure he just made it up based on what he thought he could get out of me'.

One price for everyone?

She later told a friend about it who said they had a strange experience at the same shop as well. For the friend, who drives a more expensive vehicle, it seems the prices were high, but she wasn't aware it was related to that at the time. The friend also said they made a huge fuss over her, but it only made her uncomfortable. This does seem strange. Surely there should be one price for everyone?

And everyone should receive the same treatment! What sort of treatment would a person receive if the salesperson knew they were struggling financially and just browsing? We need not wonder – a person who appears homeless or very poor will likely be treated in a way that presses them to leave. They will be watched very closely for fear of their stealing, but not be given assistance, while a person who at least appears middle class may be given some attention.

Many companies, especially the large chain stores which fill our malls like cell phone stores and major food retailers, serve all customers much the same. This is at least a step in the right direction. They have poor customers, but maybe it doesn't matter because there are many of them. Big food stores especially have little need to discriminate because everyone needs to eat. Where luxury goods are sold, and at upmarket restaurants, staff do seem to treat people according to their dress, manner, personal effects, age, etc.

But remember looks can be deceiving. People with money don't always dress in Prada. They may go for a 'hippie' look. And they don't enjoy being pandered to constantly, especially when it is insincere and they know others won't receive the same treatment. People with less money may still take extra pride in their appearance. It's never a given.

Government's lack of interest in service provision

In South Africa, what people in poor communities do complain about more commonly is the government's lack of interest in service provision including healthcare. This is certainly a more serious problem. The vast majority of service provision protesters are black, and many are poorly educated and unemployed. Service delivery is so bad that protesters have become frustrated, aggressive and even violent. Although we are increasingly affected by class notions as opposed to race, the two intersect in South Africa due to our history.

There is a small black elite, but the majority remain poor and in the lower classes. The organisation which should be the least prejudiced (the government) in serving its customers (the public) seems to be the most disinterested in serving its poor customers. Struggling with employment, a low level of education, and a darker skin converge as factors placing millions on the very bottom of the priority list. Some people with low socioeconomic status have promises of better service made to them in exchange for votes. Of course, the services don't materialise because those in poverty are not taken seriously by the government.

Some in government have been keen to follow a more customer-service oriented model taken from the private sector, which is having greater success. If this means treating everyone equally or prioritising the most urgent cases as necessary, it is the model for us all to follow, including in the more luxury goods market.

Unfortunately, classism, like racism, is very real and very much being practised in South Africa today. My advice to businesses, particularly retail as it is often that much more visibly evident, is to ensure your staff are trained to treat everyone they meet with the same graciousness and friendliness no matter what their perceived social status. The businesses that are able to get this right will ultimately be the ones that make it in the long term and help bring about the social change that we so desperately need.

ABOUT DEVAN MOONSAMY

Devan Moonsamy is the CEO of ICHAF Training Institute. ICHAF offers SETA-approved training in business skills, computer use, and soft skills. Devan specialises in conflict and diversity management, and regularly conducts seminars on these issues for corporates. To book a seminar with Devan or for other training courses, email devan@ichaftraining.co.za or call +27 (0)11 262 2461.

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