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## Clothing and gender in the workplace

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### Letting go of the peacock routine

My working life has been marked by variation of location, employer and job type. In more than 15 years as a journalist and public relations practitioner I have been lucky to have a wide variety of experiences in many different places. One constant in all of this change, however, has been the consistently different approach to professional dress based on gender. Wherever I have worked, a much larger percentage of women have placed greater emphasis on what they wear as an expression of who they are, than men.

The vast majority of men with whom I have worked and observed wear some variation of the professional 'uniform' – suits, shirts and ties – while women are a much more varied bunch, with a significant number more likely to wear 'statement' clothing as part of their expression of self. Men may experiment at some level with their dress but in my experience it tends to be low key and not designed to distract from their work skills. Women's statement clothing is more likely to be designed to make another person notice the clothes and/or the body first. This type of clothing can be designed: to stand out from a sea of grey-suited men with a splash of vibrant colour; to reinforce a sense of individuality; to showcase a figure; or to indicate that the wearer is up to date with the latest fashions. Like a peacock, this show of feathers can be an overwhelming and distracting part of the first impression formed in a professional situation, particularly in the world of communications and public relations, where understanding the impact of visual image is an element of the job. It can also make gender a far more prominent part of the first impression.

### Dressing to stand out

When I first started working professionally in the early 1990s, the senior women in journalism and public relations had lived through the golden era of the shoulder pad in the 1980s and had survived in some tough, male-dominated environments. I cannot remember the number of times I was told to dress to stand out from the men, to show that, while I could compete with them in the workplace, I was not one of them and that my gender should be noticed. Marking our difference to men was important to these women, as if to make it easier to ensure that the world was noticing our progression in the world of work.

I remember sitting in the press gallery of the Western Australian Parliament as a very young journalist, looking down at the members of the Legislative Assembly and the overwhelming dominance of the sea of male grey and blue suits, compared with the array of bright patterned suits that the handful of women wore. I wondered then why we as women had to mark ourselves out by clothing when the real job of being there had a lot more to do with what was in our heads rather than on their backs.

### Women as ornaments

As time wore on and I had the opportunity to work in different cities I started to notice a different phenomenon. Maybe it was the *Sex and the City* effect, or just the overwhelming rise in the promotion of fashion as an 'important' part of our life, but the number of women dressing to showcase their understanding of fashion trends rose. Again, most of my male colleagues remained in the uniform of the professional – suit, collared shirt and mostly a tie – but some of the women I

worked with were wearing more and more variety of clothes and switching their 'look' with every season. Of course, men were also experimenting with fashion but in a much more low-key fashion – a tie, some interesting shoes, new glasses and hair product – but these touches did not distract from the overall impression of a professional valued for their expertise. Unfortunately, some women's dedication to expressing themselves through the cladding on their outer shell became more and more distracting and commentary on their latest outfit overtook critique of their professional abilities. They were relegated to ornaments by some colleagues, rather than valued team members. An example of this was a young colleague who had excellent event organisation skills, good writing ability and a quick mind. She also slavishly followed fashion, to the point that her outfits attracted daily comment. One afternoon she arrived at a client entertainment event wearing a very expensive, outlandish pair of very high stiletto ankle boots. Everyone noticed the shoes, however most of the clients also commented how silly she was for wearing them, because we were all about to go go-karting. With one ill-advised shoe choice that she thought was expressed her cutting edge fashionista, my young colleague stopped being seen as a young professional who had organised with event with proficiency and style, and was relegated to the ranks of a silly girl by an important group of clients.

While I don't dispute that looking good can make a person feel good, and fashion can keep dressing interesting, the acres of coverage given to 'what you should wear this season' keeps the focus on the surface image of who we are and provides no real clue to the abilities of a person to do a job. The world of public relations seems particularly susceptible to it, as we have a keen interest in image as part of our job. This type of image manipulation does not necessarily reflect the authentic person. It is again reflected in the public relations industry's desire to take any serious professional woman in the public eye and 'make her over' for the women's

magazines. It seems that being good at your job is not good enough, you have to look nice for other women too. How many male prime ministers have been given the full make-up artist and studio lighting treatment for the front cover of the *Woman's Weekly* (with the notable exception of Bob Hawke in bathrobe after he left office)?

### **Women as sexual objects**

In more in recent years an even more disturbing trend, particularly in younger women, is dressing in a style that emphasises their body and leaves the overwhelming first impression of women as sexual beings. More than once I have been in meetings where the neckline on a young woman's top was so low that even the other women in the room could not help but stare at a woman's chest because her cleavage was so obviously on display. In one situation I had to wrestle with figuring out a way to explain that a woman who had been identified by a company as a spokesperson in the time of a crisis would need to have a spare pair of trousers on hand because, her skirts were so short that they would be a distraction and bordering on disrespectful for the gravity of the situation that she would need to comment on. The acre of leg that extended from the bottom of the skirt shifted the visual impression from a company employee concerned for the welfare of her colleagues into a young woman. Not the message the company was trying to convey.

While our sexuality is undoubtedly a part of who we are, drawing attention to it in the workplace does not cement a woman's professional credentials. When I have had this conversation with women who think I am a prude and trying to limit self-expression, I ask them to recall the last time they saw a man wearing a very tight t-shirt or trousers to the workplace, or arriving at a meeting in lycra leggings. Dressing to emphasis the female form does nothing for the creditability of good communications advice in a professional situation. I have heard the argument many times that women start at a disadvantage and should use every weapon they have to 'get ahead'; my response remains that the more we draw attention to our femininity through our

dress and image, the more we create our own ghetto of difference.

Most of my experience has been in the heavily-male-dominated industries of investment and financial reporting. At times, the testosterone levels of situations in which I was providing advice was stratospheric. In order to be taken seriously, I had to be giving sound, evidence-backed advice in a manner and tone that indicated I had a valuable contribution to make. If I had walked into the room wearing a short skirt or a plunging neckline I would have undercut my creditability before I even opened my mouth, and been evaluated immediately as a woman, rather than as a skilled colleague.

While I am not suggesting that individual expression should be stamped out and we should all wear the same uniform, I would argue that less emphasis needs to be placed on the external image we create through clothes to make a statement and a greater emphasis placed on the quality of our communications work. The more women in communications who focus on their own 'surface', the more our industry will be judged as superficial. Good quality strategic and tactical communications can have enormous influence in all spheres of life and contribute in many ways, but as women we too must emphasise that content is king, rather than the emperor's new clothes.

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