Problems With Dress Code: Is My Dress Inappropriate Or Your Mind

I was having a conversation with a friend of mine, who had an interview for an educator position in an all-boys Secondary School in Mauritius. She was telling me about how her interview and everything went, but there was something about the teachers' dress code she mentioned that didn't sit right with me. We've all heard, read or came across female students being disciplined for above knee-length uniform or off-the-shoulder shirts when it comes to school dress code be it in the form of uniform or civilian clothing. But the attention to detail of what female teachers wear and the policing of how they should dress came as a surprise to me.

"Since it's a boy's college, don't wear form-fitting pants, skirts and cut sleeve shirt or top showing cleavage; don't wear above-knee skirts and if you're gonna wear leggings make sure your blouse cover your buttocks lest a boy grazes his hand against it. It has never happened before and we don't want it to happen any time soon." This is a literal translation of what she was told verbally by the secretary, a woman seemingly in her 50s.

Baffled by such reasoning, I asked, "You didn't say anything!?" and she explained that she just got the position, so she didn't want trouble. I understand people accept at face value the answer, "it's against the dress code" without further questioning the logic behind it to avoid the probability of jeopardising their job. I bite my tongue each time I read articles about gender-discriminatory dress codes and refrain from reacting to them because a generation like mine - the millennial - is often bashed for getting offended easily. But I am oversensitive you may say or intolerant; it's a culmination of years of destructive stereotypical gender narrative reinforced, collectively fostered and normalised by our society and education system. So, here I am, a royally pissed Millenial with a platform to put my two cents in, in hopes that it will allow others to view things from a different perspective that might shift their way of thinking.

A business-appropriate dress code in every workplace is meant to ensure that professional decorum is maintained. However, the issue is not the dress code or the physical clothing per se, but the psychology behind an "appropriate" attire. While such rules are laid for female teachers, there are no such elaborate rules for male teachers. Why though? Because dress codes have deep-seated convictions of a larger societal issue: sexism and sexualisation of young girls and women, in a nutshell.

"Satan is residing in every man that makes them do things out of their control when they see a woman's body, that's why women need to cover themselves up to protect themselves from their lustful gaze," a female classmate from University argued during a candid conversation amongst two other classmates. Per her reasoning, the logic behind the imposition of dress code is that the sight of an exposed part of a woman's body creates a black hole of lust whose gravitational pull men can't resist. (My BS meter indicates that's some B to the S). So, to curb the force and rescue them, dress codes that dictate the standard of modesty is conveniently laid for young girls and women. Because female bodies are the problem and they need to be controlled, amirite?

You see the underlying problem?

I don’t blame that female classmate for her beliefs; it’s what was transferred to her at a certain age in her early childhood. Gender stereotypes and sexism are not something out of an evolved instinct; children don’t naturally gravitate but are pushed toward gender-stereotypical behaviours; they internalize what is okay and not okay; appropriate and inappropriate for their sex through gender-specific clothing, colours, toys, roles enforced by the family and social mores. So when children are raised with the idea that sexes differ in more than just biological terms and that they must conform to what is “appropriate” for their gender, they grow up to be adults who build on to the already laid out foundation of sexism.

When at school, we’re taught that above knee-length shorts are appropriate for boys while above knee-length dresses/skirts are inappropriate for girls, it does a disservice to either gender. Firstly, it implicitly places a perpetual assumption that the male mind is hardwired to have sexual thoughts due to a “biological imperative.” Men have a higher level of testosterone than women; a stronger itch for sex drive that they’ve no control over and are compelled to scratch, so it’s expected of them to view the opposite sex as objects for their sexual gratification. Secondly, it sexualizes body parts that are not even part of the sexual anatomy, hence body-shaming women by reducing them into a collection of inappropriate body parts that must be hidden for their own protection (Why are bare shoulders and legs sexualized? Oh wait, there was a time when ankles were considered sexually alluring. Now we’ve risen above the ankles).

When a school asks their female teachers to wear blouses over leggings or pants that cover their bottom, I can’t help but wonder what kind of boys are they teaching in their school and what are they teaching them? It makes women having curves and not covering them abnormal and a matter of incitement in the mind of young boys; it sends the message that the way someone dresses make it acceptable for a young boy to brush his hands against their crotch or butt. With that line of reasoning, the onus is on women to dress in an “appropriate” way to curtail any inappropriate behaviour and avoid subjecting themselves to potential sexual objectification and harassment at the hands of dress code infraction. While the idea seems benign, it underlies and perpetuates more malignant issues like the “she was asking for it” mentality; as though the clothing choices of a woman rationalize sexual assault and rape rather than the actions of the perpetrator.

Dressing “modestly” hasn’t stopped sexually derogatory comments thrown at women or prevented sexual assault in the past, nor it will in the future, because clothing isn’t the problem. It’s our mindset. So, how do we change “dress appropriately” to “behave appropriately” when sexism is deeply embedded in our minds from societal preprogramming and exercised through dress code?

It begins with schools making gender sensitive dress code policy along with sexual harassment policy; it starts with giving up the antiquated narrative of “girls need protection” because “boys will be boys” and adopting the mindset that irrespective of how someone dresses, it shouldn’t be made a matter of distraction or reason for anyone to act in a way that demeans them. We need to stop feeding into the idea that boys cannot be expected to be held accountable for their behaviour because a curse of testosterone is bestowed upon them. We all have sexual thoughts, but as humans, we've evolved to rise above our primal animal instincts and exercise self-control. We need to accept the responsibility to recognise sexist attitudes and call them out; be the guy to tell your friends that it’s not cool to call someone “slut”; be the girl to step in and shut down someone passing indecent comments; be the one to tell that relative that it’s not

your shorts that’s too short, it’s their mind that’s too narrow. Because, if we play along casual sexist comments ‘cause we don’t wanna come across as “too sensitive”, “uptight” or “someone who can’t take a joke”, we only normalise harassment and make it difficult to report sexual assault when it happens because it might be seen as an “overreaction”.

It might be easier to have someone change their clothes than changing someone’s mind, but when each one of us makes an effort to change our attitudes towards women and how their bodies are perceived in our family and social circle, we help shift the way they are treated in the educational and professional circle.