

Editorial Series: The racist and sexist hardships of female appearance

By Jordyn Austin

No heels, no makeup, no job

Your job is going well and you have not had any complaints so far. As you get ready for your job today, you decide to wear a simple black silk button down blouse, khaki dress pants and black flat shoes.

The shoe choice was a mistake.

Your boss calls you into the office and tells you that you should be wearing high heels. When you object, you are sent home without pay.

In 2016, this is what happened to British actress Nicola Thorp. She was hired through an outsourcing firm called Portico to work as a temporary receptionist for PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in London. One day, a temporary supervisor told Thorp that her flat shoes were not acceptable in the office. The New York Times reported that the supervisor told Thorp she “would need to get herself shoes with heels at least two inches high.” When Thorp refused, she was sent home without pay.

Under the Equality Act of 2010, workplaces are allowed to regulate male and female dress codes as long as they do not treat one sex more favorable than the other. However, clearly only requiring women to wear heels is more favorable for males.

About five months later, Thorp started a petition for a law to prohibit companies from requiring their female employees to wear heels. The petition gained over 150,000 signatures. Two years later, the British parliament released a report that finally concluded Portico's rules were unlawful.

Not only is it unlawful, but it's also painful to wear high heels everyday. From a medical standpoint, the American Osteopathic Association reports, "It's not unusual for people who spend lots of time in high heels to have low back, neck and shoulder pain because the shoes disrupt the natural form of the body."

Though Nicola Thorp's situation happened in Britain, cases in the the U.S. do exist. In 2003, Darlene Jespersen was fired from her bartending job at Harrah's Casino in Reno, Nevada for refusing to wear makeup. She had worked there for over 20 years. The court case reported that Harrah's "instituted a 'Beverage Department Image Transformation' program" that required both male and female bartenders to wear a standard uniform and "be well groomed, appealing to the eye, [and] be firm and body toned."

The new program even required women who gave birth to be back to their uniform size in 12 months. At the time, image consultants were hired to give employees an upgraded look that fit Harrah's "image."

The Chicago Tribune reported that Harrah's program official said the program was needed "as an antidote to the 'anything-goes' attitude of the '90s." The workers must uphold the "personal best" image they portrayed at the time of hire.

Within these requirements, were also gender specific ones. Men were required to keep hair and fingernails short. Women were to have their hair "teased, curled, or styled every day," and also required them to wear makeup every day. According to the court documents, "Make up (face powder, blush and mascara) must be worn and applied neatly in complementary colors. Lip color must be worn at all times."

The district court sided with Harrah's Casino, ruling that the company was not guilty of gender discrimination under Title VII, which protects employees from discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex and religion. Jespersen, the court decided, didn't present "evidence of economic, physical, and psychological harms to prove that a requirement that women wear makeup imposes an unequal burden based on gender."

Is this true? Many women who know how long it takes to apply makeup every single day surely disagree. Even some men agree that requiring a woman to wear makeup every day definitely

casts an unequal burden. “It’s absolutely absurd,” said Jeremy Seeden CEO of Cultured clothing brand in Akron, OH. “Companies should be embracing women’s natural beauty instead of requiring that they wear a fake face every day.”

The requirement to apply makeup every day does in fact impose an unequal burden on gender, because men weren’t required to apply makeup at all. The few rules for men — clipping nails and keep hair short — usually require only weekly upkeep, if that.

Requiring that a woman to apply makeup or wear heels every day, especially if makeup or heels are not part of her daily grooming routine, is sexist — period. If you are tempted to disagree, imagine making men wear skirts to work everyday. Let’s see how quickly controversy ensues.

This may strike you as ridiculous. Agreed.

The bigger issue, however, is the systemic and societal pressure for a woman to look a certain way to be successful in her career. This was rampant during much of the time Senator, Secretary of State and Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was in the public eye, running for office. Media professionals and television hosts regularly critiqued Clinton’s plain pantsuits calling them masculine and unfashionable, often before they ever reported her ideas. NBC reported that Clinton herself wrote that one of the reasons she wore solid, simple pantsuits often, as opposed to dresses and skirts, was to avoid any distractions.

“...Since there wasn't much to say or report on what I wore, maybe people would focus on what I was saying instead,” Clinton wrote in her book “What Happened.” Nevertheless, this was not the case. People still found a way to ridicule her attire. Bustle reported Project Runway’s Tim Gunn said Clinton was “confused about her gender” and late night television host Jimmy Fallon said if he had a boy, he would get Hillary’s “hand-me-downs.”

The fact that Clinton took precaution with her wardrobe illustrates the burden of sexist standards imposed on women. Both heels and makeup are typically seen as synonymous with traditional notions of femininity, but those traditions are not only sexist, but highly outdated.

NEXT: How workplace appearance policies affect minority women

We like you, but not with that hair

She just nailed an interview and the employer offers her the job, but under one condition: They want her to change her hair. When she refuses to change her hair, they rescind the offer.

It's not like her hair was neon pink. In fact, it reflected pride in her heritage. She walked into the interview confident, wearing a nice business suit with the goal of impressing the interviewer. She walked out, however, feeling as though she had been a victim of racial discrimination.

This was the story of a black Alabama woman, Chastity Jones, who interviewed for a customer service representative position at Catastrophe Management Solutions (CMS) call center. Jeannie Wilson, a human resources representative, told Jones dreadlocks “tend to get messy, although I’m not saying yours are, but you know what I’m talking about,” Wilson said. What exactly was she talking about? Wilson claimed the dreadlocks violated the grooming policy of the workplace.

Workplace grooming policies are seemingly more critical for female employees. First, Darlene Jespersen got fired for refusing to wear makeup at Harrah’s Casino in Reno, Nevada. Then, Nicola Thorp was sent home without pay from Portico in London because she refused to wear heels. Now, Chastity Jones’ job offer was rescinded because she refused to cut her dreadlocks.

Dreadlocks, or “locs” are the natural result of coily hair winding around itself to form knots until it is matted. After about three to four months, a “lock” starts to form — a dreadlock. Historically,

the Hindu god “Shiva” was depicted as wearing locs; anthropologists have also discovered ancient Egyptian pharaoh mummies with their locs still intact. In a spiritual sense, locs represent strength and power.

Over time, locs have developed a negative connotation of marijuana use, uncleanliness and criminal activity because of mere ignorance and lack of understanding for their history and meaning. Once locked, people usually grow them for a lifetime, just as other hair types are grown. So, locs cannot simply be “taken down.” They have to be cut off, leaving someone with little to no hair at all. It is quite obvious one of the reasons Chastity refused to cut her locs.

In an effort to fight this decision, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) sued CMS for racial discrimination. The court sided with the mobile company, ruling that discrimination is only applied when a person is denied opportunities because of race, sex, color, national origin and religion, all of which are immutable or cannot be changed. Hair, the court argued, is a personal choice that can be changed. The court ruled banning dreadlocks in the workspace is permitted.

Stories like these are far from rare, but Chastity Jones’ situation was one of the few actually covered by the media because of the ensuing outrage. These sexist workplace dress codes and grooming policies disproportionately affect women, but minorities have it even harder. Now cultural appearance traditions can be banned under workplace policies.

Even though the EEOC went to the U.S. Supreme Court with race in mind, appearance is the root of the issue. Race, however is central to that issue, because dreadlocks and braid extensions are more culturally common with black men and women. The root of the problem is based around the misconceived notion that an employee should look a particular way in order to be fit for their job.

The issue at hand, is the pressure to adopt professional and beauty standards that are typically consistent with white people, particularly women. Straight, silky hair has been the workplace standard across the board, and it is not hard to see that plenty of non-white women do not fit this particular mold. Shall we take away job offers from them all? That would be ridiculous.

In the case of Chastity Jones, CMS' hair policy said that an employee's "hairstyle should reflect a business/professional image," and "no excessive hairstyles or unusual colors are acceptable."

Who set this standard of professionalism? People who have never worn dreadlocks a day in their lives? Too many men, women, boys and girls are being targeted for hair types, textures and styles that are culturally representing who they are. If "grooming" is the real issue, what is the difference between a black worker who has dreadlocks and a white co-worker who frequently fails to wash their hair and opts for a "messy bun" instead? There isn't one.

We must take into consideration different cultures and races when creating these appearance and "grooming" policies. The pressure to conform to "normal" white-washed beauty standards is one that cannot continue in the workplaces that claim to embrace diversity.

NEXT: Sexist dress codes in schools

Blame the girls

Girls “pretty much ruin everything,” Jared Hensley, a high school athletic director in Tennessee said. “They ruin the dress code, they ruin well, ask Adam. Look at Eve.”

What was he referring to? In a video, he was speaking about Hamilton County Schools’ dress code policy against wearing athletic shorts to school. Hensley said boys at the school would probably be upset by the dress code, and if they wanted to blame anyone, they should blame the girls.

Apparently since the beginning of time, girls have been responsible for distracting and tempting boys.

Not only have sexist dress code policies invaded the workplace, they have also secretly crept into schools disguised as “rules.” In this case, the “rules,” and this director’s comments, were seen as misogynistic by many. Hensley’s comments “perpetuate victim-blaming and reinforce the rape culture that is so insidiously ingrained in our society,” Natalie Green, mother of a Hamilton High School student said.

Students from Indian Trail High School in Wisconsin have been fighting against dress codes that also target female students. The school banned leggings, yoga pants and tank tops — all clothes typically worn by most high school girls — because they were a “distraction” for boys. Female

students are regularly kicked out of class for wearing them. The students pointed out, however, the clothing of male students is consistently overlooked, Vox reported.

While all girls are targeted with school dress codes, black girls are singled out in greater numbers. The National Education Association (NEA) reports that black female students are punished for their clothes much more than white female students. One student told NEA that when she brought up this issue to a white administrator, the administrator told her it is “because white girls don’t have as much to show.”

Why is this adult male administrator concerned about what minor-aged girls “have to show?” Sexualizing teenage girls should not be tolerated.

In addition to dress codes, a lot of schools also implement “grooming policies” that ban certain hairstyles in the school. Hairstyles that are seen as excessive, unnatural and distracting are not permitted. A 6-year-old black boy was denied acceptance to a private Christian school in Florida because of his dreadlock hairstyle, The *Washington Post* reported. The father of the child listened to the employees of the school cite a dress code rule about “unnatural” hair styles.

What exactly about this little boy’s hair wasn’t natural? Who determines what is and isn’t natural?

In another incident, two black teenage girls were removed from the classroom at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Massachusetts for braid extensions. The *Washington Post* reported that administrators of the school claimed the braids violated the schools' dress code and the girls needed to take them down. Once the girls refused, despite parent intervention, punishments just kept piling up, including detention and removal from sports and extracurricular activities.

These girls are the adopted children of two white parents who have been fighting to get the school's policy changed ever since. The *Washington Post* reported that the parents are furious at the school's discriminatory rules.

These grooming policies, rules and dress codes in the workplace and school signal a much bigger issue, that is overlooked and seldom discussed: the societal fear that minorities and women are changing the traditional expectations of appearance.

This fear is racist and sexist.

The NEA reported that some critics of dress code rules refer to it as the "white male default," which is the idea that students should look like a typical white male would.

This statement is powerful, and hints at the larger issue.

Sending Nicola Thorp home without pay because she refused to wear heels, firing Darlene Jespersen because she refused to wear makeup and even the negative comments made about Hillary Clinton's pantsuits all had an unspoken motive. These women just didn't look "woman enough" for their establishments.

Sending female children home because of their clothes also had an unspoken motive. These girls look "too womanly" for the male students.

Refusing to accept a young black boy at a school because of his dreadlocks, rescinding Chastity Jones' job offer because of her dreadlocks and kicking two young black girls out of class for their braids also had an unspoken motive. These people don't "look like they should."

There is an unspoken expectation that one should look a certain way to not only be deemed professional, but to also avoid distracting other surrounding individuals as if we can personally control other people's gazes, thoughts and actions. To assume teenage boys are insatiable beings with uncontrollable thoughts is unfair to the girls and just plain insulting to the boys.

It seems as though the only people who need regulation are men like the administrator and athletic director mentioned earlier who can't seem to control their tongues.

NEXT: Are establishments truly embracing diversity?

We want you, just not all of you

You may have heard of it in one place or another. College syllabuses include a statement about it, workplaces try to implement it and schools try to teach about it.

Embracing diversity.

What made Abercrombie & Fitch think they would ever get away with not hiring a Muslim woman because of her headscarf? And if all of these institutions are making diversity such a priority, why are so many of them missing the mark?

It's simple. Establishments want diverse faces, but not necessarily everything else that comes along with them.

Though contradictory, laws that prohibit discrimination may be the culprit of this. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) explains that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “is a federal law that prohibits employers from discriminating against employees on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, and religion.” It also applies to public and private schools and universities.

The language of this federal law poses an issue. It says discrimination is only applied when a person is denied opportunities because of race, sex, color, national origin and religion, all of

which are immutable or cannot be changed. However, because hairstyles and clothes are a personal choice, they can be regulated and prohibited at the establishment's discretion.

Clearly some employers are hiring women and minorities simply because they are required by law, not because they have a true desire to educate themselves about embracing diversity.

Though Title VII says that race, sex, color, national origin and religion are all unchangeable matters of birth, one could easily argue that religion is a choice and can be changed.

In the case of Chasity Jones whose job offer was rescinded because she refused to cut her dreadlocks; didn't hiring a black person include their hair, too? Or let's say in the case of Darlene Jespersen who was fired because she refused to wear makeup; didn't hiring a woman include her natural face? What about the two black teens who were kicked out of school because their braids "violated dress code?" It seems as though Mystic Valley Regional Charter School may have only embraced diversity up to a certain point with them.

Are these establishments truly embracing diversity if they're only accepting parts of the people they encounter? The short answer is no.

The expectation of professionalism is wrapped tightly around fundamental errors. There is an embedded preference for white-washed western world beauty standards that disregards the diverse beauty of *all* people. Many people dislike appearances that don't look like their own.

In 2016, “The Good Hair” study by Perception Institute revealed that many white people have biases against the types and styles of natural hair worn by black people. Some participants described black hair as “less beautiful” and “less professional.” The study also revealed however, that this bias is learned and can certainly be unlearned.

Though the U.S. EEOC does not cover hairstyles under its racial discrimination clause, there is a need for it. If a workplace or school is banning hairstyles that generally only black people wear, it is discrimination. Various hairstyles, like braid extensions and dreadlocks, are worn for a number of reasons, including protection of natural hair.

“Natural hair” among the black community refers to hair that has not been chemically processed or “relaxed” to make it straight. One example of this is an afro. For years, black women in particular have been pressured to straighten their hair, or get it chemically straightened so it is accepted professionally. These chemicals are damaging and cause hair loss. Natural hair is worn because it’s a basic human right to do so. It is not unprofessional.

Accepting a black female student or employee also means accepting that for most of them, braids, twists, afros and other hairstyles are not only cultural, but their human right to wear them. An employer’s failure to understand this reflects their wilful disregard of diversity. One cannot pick and choose which “preferred parts” they want in a person and call themselves an advocate for diversity. The two cannot coexist.

So how do we unlearn these discriminatory biases that favor westernized beauty standards?

First and foremost, we can stop ignoring them, and start talking about them openly.

Establishments need to start giving more minorities and women a seat at the table. They should be given the opportunity to look over workplace and classroom policies and point out discriminatory rules. It does not make sense for a group of white males to decide what is and is not acceptable or professional for all employees.

Establishments can also start implementing diversity training as a part of the hiring process and academic requirements for everyone. Affirmative Action law suggests these trainings. Education helps start the process of unlearning racist, sexist and biased behavior.

This melting pot we call home is no longer completely dominated by white, straight males. We are going to walk into places and see, sit next to and even work alongside people who don't look like us.

It's OK, and it's beautiful.