The Sexism of School Dress Codes By Li Zhou *** The Atlantic

OCT 20, 2015

Maggie Sunseri was a middle-school student in Versailles, Kentucky, when she first noticed a major difference in the way her school's dress code treated males and females. Girls were disciplined disproportionately, she says, a trend she's seen continue over the years. At first Sunseri simply found this disparity unfair, but upon realizing administrators' troubling rationale behind the dress code—that certain articles of girls' attire should be prohibited because they "distract" boys—she decided to take action.

"I've never seen a boy called out for his attire even though they also break the rules," says Sunseri, who last summer produced Shame: A Documentary on School Dress Code, a film featuring interviews with dozens of her classmates and her school principal, that explores the negative impact biased rules can have on girls' confidence and sense of self. The documentary now has tens of thousands of YouTube views, while a post about the dress-code policy at her high school—Woodford County High—has been circulated more than 45,000 times on the Internet.

Although dress codes have long been a subject of contention, the growth of platforms like Facebook and Instagram, along with a resurgence of student activism, has prompted a major uptick in protests against attire rules, including popular campaigns similar to the one championed by Sunseri. Conflict over these policies has also spawned hundreds of Change.org petitions and numerous school walkouts. Many of these protests have criticized the dress codes as sexist in that they unfairly target girls by body-shaming and blaming them for promoting sexual harassment. Documented cases show female students being chastised by school officials, sent home, or barred from attending events like prom.

Meanwhile, gender non-conforming and transgender students have also clashed with such policies on the grounds that they rigidly dictate how kids express their identities. Transgender students have been sent home for wearing clothing different than what's expected of their legal sex, while others have been excluded from yearbooks. Male students, using traditionally female accessories that fell within the bounds of standard dress code rules, and vice versa, have been nonetheless disciplined for their fashion choices. These cases are prompting their own backlash.

Dress codes—given the power they entrust school authorities to regulate student identity—can, according to students, ultimately establish discriminatory standards as the norm. The prevalence and convergence of today's protests suggest that schools not only need to update their policies—they also have to recognize and address the latent biases that go into creating them.

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At Woodford County High, the dress code bans skirts and shorts that fall higher than the knee and shirts that extend below the collarbone. Recently, a photo of a female student at the school who was sent home after wearing a seemingly appropriate outfit that nonetheless showed collarbone—went viral on Reddit and Twitter.

The restrictions and severity of dress codes vary widely across states, 22 of which have some form of law granting local districts the power to establish these rules, according to the Education Commission of the States. In the U.S., over half of public schools have a dress code, which frequently outline gender-specific policies. Some administrators see these distinctions as necessary because of the different ways in which girls and boys dress. In many cases, however, female-specific policies account for a disproportionate number of the attire rules included in school handbooks. Certain parts of Arkansas's statewide dress code, for example, exclusively applies to females. Passed in 2011, the law "requires districts to prohibit the wearing of clothing that exposes underwear, buttocks, or the breast of a female student." (The provision prohibiting exposure of the "underwear and buttocks" applies to all students.)

Depending on administrators and school boards, some places are more relaxed, while others take a hard line. Policies also tend to fluctuate, according

to the University of Maryland American-studies professor and fashion historian Jo Paoletti, who described dress-code adaptations as very "reactionary" to whatever happens to be popular at the time—whether it's white go-go boots or yoga pants. Jere Hochman, the superintendent of New York's Bedford Central School District echoes Paoletti in explaining that officials revisit his district's policy, which has been in place "for years and years and years," "on an informal basis." "It's likely an annual conversation, he notes, "based on the times and what's changed and fads."

While research on dress codes remains inconclusive regarding the correlation between their implementation with students' academic outcomes, many educators agree that they can serve an important purpose: helping insure a safe and comfortable learning environment, banning T-shirts with offensive racial epithets, for example. When students break the rules by wearing something deemed inappropriate, administrators must, of course, enforce school policies.

The process of defining what's considered "offensive" and "inappropriate," however, can get quite murky. Schools may promote prejudiced policies, even if those biases are unintentional. For students who attend schools with particularly harsh rules like that at Woodford, one of the key concerns is the implication that women should be hyper-cognizant about their physical identity and how the world responds to it. "The dress code makes girls feel self-conscious, ashamed, and uncomfortable in their own bodies," says Sunseri.

Yet Sunseri emphasizes that this isn't where she and other students take the most issue. "It's not really the formal dress code by itself that is so discriminatory, it's the message behind the dress code," she says, "My principal constantly says that the main reason for [it] is to create a 'distraction-free learning zone' for our male counterparts." Woodford County is one of many districts across the country to justify female-specific rules with that logic, and effectively, to place the onus on girls to prevent inappropriate reactions from their male classmates. (Woodford County High has not responded to multiple requests for comment.) "To me, that's not a girl's problem, that's a guy's problem," says Anna Huffman, who recently graduated from Western Alamance High School in Elon, North Carolina, and helped organize a protest involving hundreds of participants. Further north, a group of high-school girls from South Orange, New Jersey, similarly launched a campaign last fall,

#IAmMoreThanADistraction, which exploded into a trending topic on Twitter and gleaned thousands of responses from girls sharing their own experiences.

Educators and sociologists, too, have argued that dress codes grounded in such logic amplify a broader societal expectation: that women are the ones who need to protect themselves from unwanted attention and that those wearing what could be considered sexy clothing are "asking for" a response. "Often they report hearing phrases like, 'boys will be boys,' from teachers," says Laura Bates, a co-founder of *The Everyday Sexism Project.* "There's a real culture being built up through some of these dress codes where girls are receiving very clear messages that male behavior, male entitlement to your body in public space is socially acceptable, but you will be punished." "These are not girls who are battling for the right to come to school in their bikinis—it's a principle," she says.

There's also the disruption and humiliation that enforcing the attire rules can pose during school. Frequently, students are openly called out in the middle of class, told to leave and change, and sometimes, to go home and find a more appropriate outfit. In some instances, girls must wear brightly colored shirts that can exacerbate the embarrassment, emblazoned with words like, "Dress Code Violator." Some students contend this is a bigger detractor from learning than the allegedly disruptive outfit was in the first place. "That's crazy that they're caring more about two more inches of a girl's thigh being shown than them being in class," says Huffman. These interruptions can also be detrimental to peers given the time taken out from learning in order for teachers to address the issue, as Barbara Cruz, author of *School Dress Codes: A Pro/Con Issue*, points out.

Dress-code battles can also take place at events outside of the classroom, such as prom. At Cierra Gregersen's homecoming dance at

Bingham High School in South Jordan, Utah, administrators asked female students to sit against the wall, touch their toes, and lift their arms to determine whether their outfits were appropriate. "Girls were outside the dance crying hysterically," says Gregersen, commenting on the public nature of the inspections and the lack of clarity around the policy. "We should not have to be treated like sexual objects because that was what it felt like." The incident prompted Gregersen to create a popular Change.org petition and stage a walkout with more than 100 classmates, but she says she never heard back from administration. (Bingham High School has not responded to multiple requests for comment.)

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Every year, Strawberry Crest High School in Dover, Florida, holds a Spirit Week right around Halloween, during which students wear outfits in accordance with each day's theme. One of the themes last year was Throwback Thursday, enabling students to dress up in ways reminiscent of a previous decade. Peter Finucane-Terlop, a junior at the time who identifies as gay, decided to come to school in drag as a 1950s housewife.

Wearing a knee-length, baby-blue strapless dress, a button-up on top, a wig, and some make-up, Finucane-Terlop's outfit, he says, wasn't only accepted by his peers—it also complied with all the school's dress-code rules: His shoulders and chest were covered, and his dress was an appropriate length.

But sometimes the ways that schools regulate attire have little to do with explicit policies. According to Finucane-Terlop, a school official commented on his outfit in the middle of the courtyard during lunch that day. Finucane-Terlop recalls him saying, "Why are you dressed like that?" and "You shouldn't do that. You're a boy—dress like it. What if little kids saw you?"

Finucane-Terlop says he mentioned the incident to his school counselor right after it took place but didn't end up getting a response from administrators. April Langston, Finucane-Terlop's counselor, and David Brown, his principal at Strawberry Crest, however, do not recall talking about or hearing of such an incident. Beyond this specific case, Emily Greytak, the research director at GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), says the organization has noticed that incidents like the one Finucane-Terlop described are becoming more frequent, when LGBT students are discriminated against either verbally, or via disciplinary action, for clothing choices that don't fall in line with either a dress code or dress expectations that starkly demarcate different rules based on gender. According to a recent GLSEN study, 19 percent of LGBT students were prevented from wearing clothes that were thought to be from another gender and that number was even higher for transgender students, nearly 32 percent of whom have been prevented from wearing clothes that differed from those designated for their legal sex.

"This isn't occasional; this isn't just some students. This is something that happens quite regularly," Greytak says. The discipline is sometimes informed by teachers' personal biases while in other cases, school policies discriminate against transgender or gender non-conforming students expressions of their gender identity.

As Emery Vela, a sophomore, demonstrates, eventually some students manage to navigate and help reform the policies. Vela, a transgender student who attends a charter school in Denver, Colorado, dealt with this issue when looking for footwear to match his uniform in middle school, which had different requirements for boys and girls and suspended students if they broke the rule. Despite some initial pushback, the school adjusted the policy after he spoke with administrators.

"While they're trying to achieve this goal of having a learning environment that supports learning, it's really disadvantaging transgender and gender non-conforming students when they have to wear something that doesn't match their identity," Vela says.

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Dress codes trace back to the 1920s and '30s, and conflicts over the rules have been around ever since, says Paoletti, the fashion historian: "Dress has been an issue in public schools as long as teenagers have been interested in fashion." Several cases, including *Tinker vs. Des Moines Independent*

Community School District in 1969, in which students alleged that wearing black armbands at school to protest the Vietnam War constituted free speech, have even gone all the way up to the Supreme Court.

The subjectivity inherent to many of these judgment calls—like the dress-code cases contending that boys with long hair would be society's downfall—is often what ignites conflict. As with the kinds of protests staged by Sunseri and Huffman, many of the larger movements to resist school attire regulations today echo a broader momentum for women's rights, pushing back against existing attitudes and practices. "We've seen a real resurgence in the popularity of feminism and feminist activism, particularly among young people and particularly in an international sense, facilitated by social media," says Bates, who sees dress code protests as one key everyday impact of such trends. "I think that one of the striking elements of this new wave of activism is a sense of our entitlement and our courage to tackle the forms of sexism that are very subtle, that previously it was very difficult to stand up to, because you would be accused of overreacting, of making a fuss out of nothing."

Similarly, Greytak says these conflicts are also an indicator that LGBT students are feeling safer in their school environments and able to criticize them: "It's very possible that we are hearing more and seeing more about these cases because before less students would even feel comfortable being and expressing themselves."

As this issue has gained exposure and traction, students have also derived inspiration from the actions of their peers, including Sunseri, who's now in the process of negotiating changes to the dress code with her school administration, "If high-schoolers across the country were standing up for what they believed was right, why shouldn't I?"

According to students, the best solutions for remedying these issues entail more inclusive policy making and raising awareness about the subject. And students and administrators tend to agree that schools should involve students early on in the rule-creation process to prevent conflicts from popping up. By developing a system like this, they have a stake in the decision and are significantly more likely to both adhere and respect the final verdict. This also helps reduce some of the subjectivity that shapes the rules and acknowledges how touchy the topic can be for all stakeholders. "It's sensitive for the students, it's sensitive for the parents, it's sensitive for the teachers," says Matt Montgomery, the superintendent of Revere Local Schools in Richfield, Ohio. "You're in a tough position when you're a principal evaluating the fashion sense of a 15- or 16-year-old female. Principals are doing things like engaging female counselors and other staff members to make sure that everything is okay."

Similarly, when conflicts do arise, maintaining an open dialogue is critical. "I always tell administrators to not be on the defensive, to hear students out, to hear families out, and then to have a well-reasoned explanation and if at all possible, to look at some of the research and be able to cite some of that," says Cruz, the author. "Most of the time, school administrators are basing their decisions more on anecdotal evidence rather than empirical research. They need to be able to explain their rationale."

Huffman, too, highlighted the importance of student involvement."Adults aren't going to be shopping at American Eagle or Forever 21," she says, "They don't know that it's not even possible to buy a dress that goes to your knees." Like Huffman, Kate Brown, a senior at Montclair High School, in Montclair, New Jersey, met with school administrators after organizing a protest, helping secure many of the policy changes her campaign had sought: removing words like "distracting."

After all, teachers and administration don't always realize that their policies are offensive—and this is where more education comes in. "Even for a lot of teachers in 2015, they have never had a trans student or a gender-nonconforming student where they've had to deal with this," Finucane-Terlop says. "It's new to them, so I understand that they might not know how to react."

Ultimately, such rules could be the wrong way to handle some of the issues that they purport to cover. Since so many have previously been used to address the potential of sexual harassment in schools regarding male students paying inappropriate attention to female students, it's clear other practices, like courses on respect and harassment, may be needed to fill this gap. These initiatives would shift the focus of school policies. "Is it possible that we can educate our boys to not be 'distracted' by their peers and not engage in misogyny and objectification of women's bodies?" asks Riddhi Sandil, a psychologist and co-founder of the Sexuality, Women and Gender Project at Teachers College at Columbia University.

"I think we live in a culture that's so used to looking at issues of harassment and assault through the wrong end of the telescope," Bates says, "that it would be really refreshing to see somebody turn it around and focus on the kind of behavior that is directed at girls rather than to police girls' own clothing."

There's a growing interest in making dress codes as gender-neutral as possible as a means of reducing sexism and LGBT discrimination. But even beyond policy changes, students say there needs to be a fundamental shift in admitting that teachers and administrators come in with their own set of biases, which they may bring to creating and enforcing school rules. "I feel like there's this misconception ... that you can separate your prejudice from your profession, because so often prejudice is unconscious," says Vela. "The biggest piece of advice I can offer is to recognize that." In order to combat latent prejudices, schools must first acknowledge that they exist.