**Law must be tougher over dress code discrimination, say MPs**

MPs conclude ‘troubling’ cases of sexism, including forcing women to wear high heels or revealing clothes, are evidence Equalities Act 2010 is inadequate

Rajeev Syal, Wednesday 25 January

[Women](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/women) who face demands at work to wear high heels, makeup or revealing outfits require a new legal framework to halt such discrimination, a parliamentary report has concluded. Two Commons’ committees have called for a review of current equality legislation after gathering evidence of sexist instructions issued to hundreds of female employees but not to their male colleagues. The findings published on Wednesday contradict reassurances from Theresa May that current equality laws are adequate. When she was women’s minister in 2011, the now prime minister [dismissed concerns over sexist dress codes](https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2011-09-06e.68710.h), saying “traditional gender-based workplace dress codes encourage a sense of professionalism in the workplace”.

The report was launched [following the treatment Nicola Thorp](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/11/receptionist-sent-home-pwc-not-wearing-high-heels-pwc-nicola-thorp), who reported for work in 2015 as a receptionist at the accounting giant PwC in flat shoes. She was sent home without pay after refusing to buy a pair with at least a two-inch heel despite pointing out that men were not required to wear similar attire. Thorp launched a petition calling for a law to stop firms from requiring women to wear high heels at work which attracted 152,420 signatures. As a consequence of her petition, the women and equalities committee and the petitions committee invited the public to send in other examples of discriminatory dress codes.

MPs said they were inundated with “troubling” examples which were evidence that the Equalities Act 2010 is not protecting workers. “We heard from hundreds of women who told us about the pain and long-term damage caused by wearing high heels for long periods in the workplace, as well as from women who had been required to dye their hair blonde, to wear revealing outfits and to constantly reapply makeup,” the report said.

“The government has said that the existing law is clear, and that the dress code that prompted this petition is already unlawful. Nevertheless, discriminatory dress codes remain widespread. It is therefore clear that the existing law is not yet fully effective in protecting employees from discrimination at work. We call on the government to review this area of the law,” said the report.

The committees examined overwhelming evidence dating from 1880 to the present day which showed “the direct causative relationship” between the protracted use of high heels and serious conditions including stress fractures and bunions. Requirements to wear makeup or skirts above the knee made some workers feel sexualised by their employer and deterred progress within the company, MPs found. Others were asked to dye their hair blonde.

The Fawcett Society told the inquiry that requiring women to abide by often sexualised dress codes sent out the message that their appearance was of more value than their skills, experience or voices. “There have been statements from women expressing that being asked to look ‘sexy’ in the workplace leads to the uncomfortable realisation that the business they work for is profiting from their bodies,” the campaign group said, citing examples of women being asked when working in a casino to carry a makeup kit to be used whenever using the bathroom, and others being criticised for wearing loose clothing on a hot day.

MPs also expressed concern that gender specific dress codes reinforced stereotypes which could make lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers feel uncomfortable at work. In evidence to the committees, the government argued that current laws should have been enough to stop the discrimination experienced by Thorp. But MPs concluded that employers are not expected to take dress codes such as high heels in to account while calculating health and safety risks.

Responding to the report, Thorp said she was “absolutely chuffed to bits” by the committees’ recommendations for a new legal framework. “This wasn’t just about shoes. It was about the treatment of women in the workplace,” she said. “The petition took off and I was very pleased to see the debate over heels grow to one about clothes, and continue moving on to other aspects about how women are treated in a work environment. We now need to see the government take these recommendations on board. The law should not just be changed but enforced.”

**Strict reality of women’s dress codes**

Reception services provider Portico was criticised last year about its dress code after Nicola Thorp, a receptionist, said she was [sent home for refusing to wear high heels](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/11/receptionist-sent-home-pwc-not-wearing-high-heels-pwc-nicola-thorp). A parliamentary report has now ruled that hundreds of female workers have faced sexism at work by being ordered to follow strict dress codes.

Here is an excerpt from the code Portico was enforcing:

**Makeup**

**What we want to see**Makeup worn at all times and regularly reapplied, with a minimum of:

• Light blusher.  
• Lipstick or tinted gloss.  
• Mascara.  
• Eye shadow.  
• Light foundation/powder.

**What we don’t want to see**• No makeup at all (unless for medical reasons).   
• Shiny faces.  
• Sparkle/glitter.

**Hair**

**What we want to see**  
• Regularly maintained hair colour (if individual colours hair) with no visible roots.

**What we don’t want to see**• Hair that looks greasy, wet or highly gelled.  
• Flowers worn as accessories.  
• Visible root growth.

**Tights**

**What we want to see**• Tights no more than 15/20 denier. Black or brown may be worn for darker skin tones and natural/tan for lighter skin tones.

**What we don’t want to see**• Thick opaque tights or patterned tights.   
• Laddered tights or bare legs  
• Bare legs.

**Shoes**

**What we want to see**Heel height normally a minimum of 2 inches and maximum of 4 inches, unless otherwise agreed by the company.

**What we don’t want to see**• Slingback or open-toe shoes.  
• Shoes with ankle straps.  
• Suede or patent shoes.  
• Loafer or ballet pump style shoes.  
• Shoes with gold/silver buckles, straps or bows.   
• Wedges.  
• Sandals.