

Hollins University

Hollins Digital Commons

Ann B. Hopkins Papers

Manuscript Collections

1-5-1992

Dressing For Power

The Washington Post

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/hopkins-papers>

 Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#)

Dressing for Power

DRESS, From C1

why Washington women (and men) wear what they do. In fact, Dress Correctness thrives wherever large numbers of women are competing for positions of power, money and prestige that were previously held only by men. Not suprisingly, Washington's chief industries—lawmaking and politics—remain more male-dominated than most American corporations.

"I don't think there are so many women here who have yet risen to the top levels," says Jane Morgan, an Washington-based attorney at Millbank, Tweed, Hadley and McCloy, who spends about half her time in New York. "In New York, I think women have made advances faster—more women partners, more minority women partners. So what you have here is a lot of women who are striving . . . You don't want to look too flashy, because that's intepreted in the wrong way."

And that is what leaves Washington women vulnerable to attacks about their appearance. "For women, it's a Catch-22," says Harvey Hornstein, a psychology professor at Columbia University who studies gender roles. "If they dress in 'feminine' ways, men don't think they're suited for the job. If women don't play the stereotypical role, then men complain they're not 'feminine' enough."

Exactly. And, of course, the truth about Dress Correctness is that it isn't really about prettiness or clothes. It's about power and control in the workplace. As Susan Faludi, author of the recent bestseller "Backlash," points out, "The subtext of this plaint is: 'If you want to be one of the Washington power brokers, we're going to remind you all the time that you look frumpy and unattractive.' It's not just working women's dress that's objectionable. It's the whole revolutionary change in women's participation in the working world."

In Washington, one might date the first battle over Dress Correctness from 1983, when Ann Hopkins, a mother of three, failed

to make partner at Price Waterhouse. Hopkins was obviously credible to clients of the accounting firm because she brought in more business than any of the other 86 partner candidates. When she was not promoted, her supervisor suggested the male partners might like her better if she would "dress more femininely, wear makeup, have her hair styled, wear jewelry" and go to charm school.

Never mind that Hopkins sued almost immediately, and that a federal judge in 1990 ordered Price Waterhouse to award her a partnership. The attack on Washington women's appearance continues, unabated by social history. Just two months ago, Vogue featured an article proclaiming Washington "a fashion twilight zone" where women's clothes are "the moral equivalent of invisible ink." Georgette Mosbacher, wife of the outgoing secretary of commerce, expressed sadness that more women had not imitated her "body-hugging designer dresses, high heels and jeweled leopard pins," which the magazine touted. "Women in Washington," Mosbacher concluded, "are certainly frightened of being glamorous or stylish."

Mosbacher, of course, has a conflict—she owns a cosmetic company. It's not in her interest to acknowledge that the history of female fashion is replete with examples of "stylish" dress designed not for comfort but to make women less threatening or competitive to men.

In the 19th century, for example, as industrialization changed the nature of work to define men as the wage earners in a family unit, women were thought beautiful if they were fragile beings of slight build and sensitive nerves. These proper ladies were considered too weak-minded to pursue higher education or earn a living.

Stylish feminine attire consisted first and foremost of a corset, laced so tightly a woman could scarcely breathe. Over that were layers of chemises, petticoats and crinolines, then a long dress with trains made of yards of silk or wool. Buttons, ribbons, bows, a bonnet and perhaps furs and feathers were added to make the costume "prettier." This outfit might weigh as

much as 30 pounds. Women's shoulders, chests and necks were bare and they wore no underpants—these considered immodestly imitative of male garments.

These women were truly fashion victims: Their ribs were permanently deformed and their back muscles atrophied by corsets—some to the point where they could not stand unsupported. Their breathing was constricted and many suffered chronic respiratory ailments due, in part, to their exposed necks and backsides. In fact, even in the late 1880s the "uselessness" of an aristocrat's wife or a mistress was a sign of the man's sexual prowess.

Corsets were abandoned in the 1920s, marking a decade of clothing reform for women. But other undergarments of female torture followed—the garter belt, the long line bra and the girdle. These later two items, almost as restrictive as the corset when worn together, were required for the no-hips, no thighs, no-stomach, no-butt look touted as "sexy" by the early 1950s.

During World War II, millions of full-bodied women worked in factories wearing shirts and dungarees—call it the first wave of Dress Correctness. But when the men returned to take their jobs, these women dutifully returned to their subdivisions and put on their girdles, high heels and tight sheath dresses. "The entire history of female fashion," Allison Lurie writes in her book "The Language of Clothes," "can be viewed as a series of more or less successful campaigns to force, flatter or bribe women back into uncomfortable and awkward styles . . . in order to handicap them in professional competition with men."

Twiggy, mini-skirts and the incessant promotion of calf-crippling spike heels aside, feminism and a booming labor market opened new opportunities for women. By the 1970s, an increasing number of female lawyers, accountants, scientists and business managers were demanding entrance to the corridors of professional power. Female clothing was forced to follow suit.

Or suits. In 1977, John Molloy wrote the best-selling "Dress for Success," in which he described a professional uniform for women—a dark colored, skirted suit, similar to the recognized suit men wear for business. Over a four-year period, Molloy tested this uniform, and various other outfits, which were worn to work by 347 women, who held management jobs or were competing for them.

Each day the women filled out questionnaires about how they were treated by their supervisors, co-workers, subordinates and by service personnel and whether their decision-making authority was challenged.

The subjects found that when they wore the uniform—as opposed to dresses or pants or a skirt and blouse—they were treated like executives more often and their authority was challenged less frequently by men. In one company, twice as many female engineers were recommended for promotion than in the year before they wore the suit.

Molloy predicted that if large numbers of women adopted the professional uniform, they would be "attacked ferociously," particularly by the fashion industry, which would no longer find a "malleable" market. And he was right. An onslaught of "frou frou," cat suits, transparent fabrics, thigh-high skirts and stories about how "women at work have reclaimed their sexuality," as Vogue announced (again) last fall, followed. But working women aren't buying it.

They're still buying suits. In a lackluster economy, USA Today reports that women's suit sales are up 24 percent, while sales of skirts, many ultra-short, are down nearly 17 percent.

This is no suprise to frumps. What Molloy discovered empirically, many professional women have learned again and again through personal experience.

Madeline Heilman, a professor of industrial psychology from New York University, has done several studies, more recent than Molloy's, in which she showed that—all things being equal—women who appear attractive face discrimination as they seek to advance themselves professionally. "When it comes time for promotion, they're not seen as capable. And even when they have been successful and you provide information of their success, people write it off," Heilman discovered. She also found that women considered "attractive" or "sexy" advance quickly only in non-managerial jobs.

So when men demand to know, as a male columnist did in this paper in 1989, "Where is the sexy Washington woman?" the answer appears to be: at the front desk.

One would hope that women elected to the highest offices in this nation might be above the practice of Dress Correctness, but this is

not the case. "I would love to be able to wear slacks, regular cotton socks and shoes," laments Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio). "But you'd look too unusual walking these corridors; you wouldn't be regarded as 'a professional.' Women up here have to work as hard as truck drivers and be camera-ready at all times."

This is a truth that Rep. Patricia Schroder (D-Colo.) was struck by in 1988, when she considered running for president and found her appearance the source of much debate. "People kept telling me 'You don't look presidential,'" she recalls. So she started wearing a gray skirted suit. "Then, I'd be out with my husband," she says, "and people would come up and begin talking about my hair, how I should change the style, make it softer, whatever. I would get mail about whether I wore blue or red. All of this focus on my clothing was really about gender. We don't have a uniform for a woman president."

Schroder says she's always tried to dress to brighten Congress's sea of blue suits, but she would never call herself an authority on fashion. Once, at an official Reagan administration function, she says, "Some woman walked up to me and asked, 'Whose dress is that?' and I looked at her like she was crazy and said, 'Mine.'"

One thing about Dress Correctness, as female members of Congress point out, is that it gives women a chance to focus on their ideas and goals. There is liberation in terminal non-trendiness. "I think that's one of good parts of living in Washington," says Val Cook, a vice president of Saks Jandel. "Most of the women in this town are a lot more interesting than what they have on."

Washington women may be drab, dowdy dressers who aren't good at making fashion statements, but their clothes speak volumes about their desire to be treated equally in the workplace. Style is in the eye of the beholder, anyway. Take the woman in the L.L. Bean blazer, who looked enraptured by a simple knitted jacket in the Donna Karan boutique in Macy's.

"I always shop when I come to Washington," said the woman, a foreign language professor who often comes here for conferences. "The selection is so much larger. The clothes are so . . . stylish."

Compared to where?
"Cincinnati."