

## High heels – obligation or choice?

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High heels are hot news – and for all the wrong reasons. The UK government plans new guidelines for employers on work dress codes, after a parliamentary report found that the practice of forcing women to wear high heels in the workplace is widespread.

Unfortunately, the government decided against a legislative approach, including tougher penalties, despite a petition signed by 152,000 people. In my view, it should have tightened the law, because we have gone backwards on high heels in recent decades - and that is very painful for women's rights.

The parliamentary review was prompted by Nicola Thorp, a courageous young woman who went public after being sent home as a receptionist at PwC for refusing to comply with her employment agency's stipulation to wear 2-4 inch heels. She said her job required her to be on her feet for nine-hour shifts, taking clients to meeting rooms, and she could not do that in heels.

The notion that 'smart' dress for working women requires high heels has become deeply embedded. If you Google images for 'dress code working women', you'll see dozens of photographs of tall models in stilettos. There's even one in a hard hat, though high heels must be particularly hazardous on a construction site.

Wearing heels should be a matter of choice and practicality, but far too many women are being given no choice. Members of parliament who held the inquiry said they were shocked by the stories they heard of women having to wear revealing outfits, constantly re-touch their make-up, and endure painful shoes.

It's reminiscent of the disabling Chinese practice of foot binding, or the corsets of the Victorian era, both of which limited women's movement and confined them to decorative roles. Helen Jones, who chairs the petitions committee, said the attitudes that MPs encountered to women at work belonged to the 1850s rather than the 21st century.

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brush up a little closer to the glass ceiling?

Such attitudes are reinforced by celebrity culture and images of women in the media, especially the tabloid press. In the 1970s, when I started in journalism, there was a

cringe-making beauty competition on Merseyside called 'Miss Lovely Legs'. I thought we'd moved on. Yet even the most powerful women today are judged on their looks, their legs and their heels. Witness the ridiculous front page of the Daily Mail in March when a crucial meeting between Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon about the fate of the United Kingdom was reduced to a photograph and article (by a woman columnist) about their legs.

In response to a deluge of protests, the Mail said the coverage was meant to be 'light-hearted'. Not only was it demeaning to the politicians involved, it also conveyed a message to the paper's predominantly female readers that serious political matters are a little too weighty for them to absorb.

Many women enjoy wearing high heels, and that choice is our prerogative. Some women feel a greater sense of power when wearing them. But does being in closer eye contact with men really give us greater gravitas and credibility? Or does it merely enable us to brush up a little closer to the glass ceiling?

One sector where lots of women work and you don't see high heels is in health and social care. Doctors, nurses and care workers are on their feet all day and generally wear lace-ups with cushioned soles. Smart and sensible.

The advice from the College of Podiatry is that 'wearing high heels can cause long term foot problems, such as blisters, corns and callus, to serious foot, knee and back pain, and damaged joints'. So tightening the legislation to crack down on dress codes with high heels would save the government, in the form of the NHS, a lot of money.

Short of legislation, there are other ways to keep up the pressure on employers who impose sexist requirements on their female workers. One is to use the power of social media. After a fierce backlash, El Al, Israel's national airline, backed down in 2015 from a **new rule** obliging all female flight attendants to wear high heels on flights. Last year, a Facebook photo of the bloodied feet of a waitress in Canada who was made to wear heels went **viral**, forcing a response from the restaurant chain, Joey's.

After the Mail's 'Legsit' story, a mock front page did the rounds on social media, featuring a line-up of dishevelled-looking male politicians with their bare legs protruding from shorts. Humour is another great weapon, especially against the most entrenched out-of-date attitudes.