

# High heeled shoes shouldn't be mandatory

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The two stars' red carpet behaviour was a study in contrasts:

Hugh Jackman, resplendent in a crisp, dark suit, bounded energetically down the queue of screaming fans lining Yonge Street, clasping hands, posing for selfies and signing autographs.

Sandra Bullock, arriving for her own premiere, was equally stunning in her designer dress and killer heels. But no bounding occurred. Her precarious footwear confined her to joking with the lucky keepers who'd arrived early enough to score a prime spot close to the theatre entrance.

I'm reminded of these very different scenarios every time I enter a restaurant featuring male and female wait staff wearing scaled down versions of the stars' attire. The guys are usually dressed in black pants, dress shirts and unremarkable (except, no doubt, for their comfort) shoes. In contrast, the women are often wearing skirts or dresses barely long enough to cover their butts, and the kind of high heels that women working in an office immediately remove once seated at their desks.

Having waitressed my way through both high school and university, I wince on the female servers' behalf. Acting as the human conduit between kitchen, bar and table is hard work. On the up side of being on your feet all day, you have no difficulty amassing the requisite 10,000 steps apparently required to stay in shape. On the down side, your exemplary step count often comes with chronic feet and back pain.

Food quality, service speed and friendliness are key to the gratuities waiters earn. Diners expect servers to be appropriately dressed, but restaurant reviews, from Yelp to Zagat, generally don't focus on staff's clothing. So it seems punitive in the extreme for a company to saddle half its workforce with mandatory apparel that compromises their

comfort and hampers their ability to deliver food while it's still hot.

Are they catering to a small minority of male customers who patronize their restaurant and shower largesse on the female wait staff because of their clothing – or what it emphasizes? Do they justify such dress codes because the women on the receiving end of such benefits appreciate the extra cash, even if it is sometimes accompanied by leering?

This sounds like institutionalizing the commercial exploitation of female employees to me, and it's not a trend anyone should be supporting. Nor is it a simple matter of "Don't like it? Don't work there." Because waiting tables generally pays much better than many other jobs open to students with no formal credentials or work experience. I paid my way through university without a loan or debt – a feat that was easy for my male friends who did manual labour at union rates, and impossible for my female friends working retail.

When I asked the young woman serving me recently about her footwear, she told me she never wore heels outside of her job, and her personal strategy to combat the inevitable pain was to switch her shoes midday. But some of her colleagues, she said, liked wearing heels. I get that. It's not dissimilar to teen smokers who like the head buzz and cool sophistication they think cigarettes give them, and are willing to suffer the associated costs and lingering stench.

But I still found myself wondering why it isn't against the law for a company to insist that its female staff wear clothing that is actively discouraged by health professionals familiar with the osteoarthritis, nerve damage, plantar fasciitis, hammer toes and bunions that heels are known to cause.

As it turns out, the Ontario Human Rights Code expressly forbids such practices. It stipulates that dress code requirements must be made in good faith and genuinely required to do the job. (Steel toed boots on a construction site come to mind.) But it expressly states: "It is discrimination based on sex to require female employees to wear high heels, short skirts and tight tops."

Our server explained that her heels were, indeed, dictated by management. And she said the reason given was that “people come to the restaurant to celebrate, and our clothing needs to reflect that.”

Here’s something I think is worth celebrating: the equal rights legislation in this country that prevents employees from being discriminated against on the basis of their gender.

So here’s my recipe for change: Next time you’re at a restaurant and you notice that the female wait staff are suffering the modern-day equivalent of Chinese foot-binding, share what you now know about the human rights code with the manager. Question whether it makes sense to risk the increase in insurance premiums likely to result from a higher incident of ankle injuries. And suggest that you’re inclined to celebrate elsewhere until the establishment demonstrates that it values the health and safety of all its employees.

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