Sexist dress codes for women in the workplace are still imposed by too many employers and should be punished by law, MPs told the government. According to a report by two parliamentary groups, including the Women and Equalities Committee, laws banning discriminatory dress codes and enshrined in the Equality Act 2010 are not being enforced.

Nicola Thorp, the London receptionist who was sent home by her agency, Portico, without pay because she refused to wear high heels, started a petition calling on the government to outlaw sexist dress codes. That petition instigated a House of Commons Petitions Committee inquiry into the issue, to which the TUC gave evidence, and today the committee has [published its report](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpetitions/291/29102.htm).

In summary, it concluded that not only are such dress codes foolish, and deeply sexist but they are also against the law.

The report took seriously evidence provided by the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists (and they know a thing or two about feet) that:

“…on average, women report pain after 1 hour, 6 minutes and 48 seconds of wearing ill-fitting high heels – with a fifth of respondents reporting pain after 10 minutes’ wear”

The committee took on board the evidence provided by women workers that, leaving issues of impracticality or health implications aside for one moment, dress codes involving high heels, tight skirts, and make up, made women feel demeaned and objectified.

Much of the TUC evidence to the inquiry hinged on how women can challenge discriminatory dress codes when the cost of taking a bad boss to a tribunal is a whole lot of stress and a £1,200 fee. The committee took this on board and noted that the awards in such cases are so low that they are often less than the fee itself – so a woman could potentially be out of pocket even if she wins her case.

A simple solution to this problem would be to scrap employment tribunal fees. The fees which were introduced in 2013 have led to the number of discrimination claims plummeting.

The Petition Committee’s recommendation that awards should be increased in cases of sex discrimination is all very well and good. But if women can’t afford the fees in the first instance, it doesn’t represent a very practical solution.

The law isn’t the only solution. The collective bargaining power of unions can be far more effective than the law in keeping bad employers in check. Just last year [Unite successfully challenged British Airways’ sexist dress code](http://www.unitetheunion.org/news/british-airways-joins-21st-century-and-drops-trouser-ban-for-female-cabin-crew/) and won the right for women cabin crew to wear trousers. The RMT has similarly taken employers to task over sexist train crew uniforms.

Women working in sectors where this is imposed on them are less likely to be in a union, less likely to know their rights and less likely to have a spare £1,200 lying around to take their employer to tribunal.

Beth Farhat

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