

It's not just women who need to dress for success

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I wouldn't have noticed the woman's leopard-skin bra straps if she hadn't mentioned them. But she pointed them out in response to my advice to the room full of aspiring politicians at a campaign school. I had just acknowledged the sexist frames often used to describe high-profile women, and recommended that candidates consider avoiding displays of cleavage while on the campaign trail, in order to keep attention on their more relevant qualifications.

My questioner challenged this advice. She loved her body and didn't see why she should hide her bra straps or the body parts they were designed to support. "I think I look hot," she said – such a rare sentiment coming from a woman that it elicited scattered applause from her assembled colleagues.

As a long-time feminist who calls out slut-shaming and believes that the world would be a better place if all women loved their bodies, felt less restricted and had more choices generally, I thanked her and moved on to the next question.

But I've wrestled with the dilemma inherent in our respectful debate ever since.

On the set of a television news show later the same day, I wrestled with my skirt. The provided chair made the knee-length garment ride up my legs. Images trump words on TV, and I didn't think viewers needed the potential distraction. I wanted them to hear what I was saying.

My own first lesson in sexual distraction came as an 11-year-old. I was visiting a schoolmate whose family happened to be good friends with a certain pop star. I'd never heard of him, so our brief in-person introduction was his first opportunity to make an impression on me. It was a way too-much-information moment, forever linking in my mind "Sonny Bono" and "genital-hugging purple velvet bell bottoms."

Instructively, photos of Mr. Bono in later years, when he became mayor of Palm Springs, Calif., and then a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, show him wearing a business suit. Which is the point – if you want to get elected to public office, where the requisite skills include digesting policy documents, advocating on behalf of citizens and demonstrating your serious-mindedness about taxation and public services, conservative clothing is an asset – regardless of your party affiliation or gender.

Indeed, a man outside the entertainment industry who shows up at the office sporting painted-on pants or a see-through shirt is less likely to be fast-tracked for promotion or tasked with his employer's most challenging files than a man in more appropriate attire. That the same is true for women shouldn't lead to calls of sexism.

It's true that the cultural sea in which we all swim is still infected by centuries of retrograde attitudes about gender roles. This continues to make female candidates more likely to be described in the media in terms of their relationships or appearance – this is indefensible.

But it's also true that, having absorbed centuries of messages reinforcing the notion that our value is primarily sexual, some women are doing it to themselves. This works if you're Beyoncé, but it's a questionable blessing if you're looking to be taken seriously for your intelligence and management skills.

So at least for now, I'm sticking to my advice about saving cleavage (and visible lingerie, bare midriffs and upper thighs) for strictly social events. I suspect that Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, now the toast of the province for winning a majority against all odds, would agree. Last year, when she first assumed the job, she introduced a dress code at Queen's Park outlawing all of the above. My guess is she was less concerned about men's racing hearts (or boys' ability to concentrate in school) than just wanting to promote situation-appropriate attire.

Women are lucky to have such varied clothing choices, some of which give us a greater chance of getting hired at Hooters than even the most experienced male server. But

when we want constituents to see us as capable and worth electing, I don't see the downside to a default of "unmistakably professional."