

The Soundness of Female Teacher's Dress Code Policy in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Clothing plays a crucial role in any society as an indicator to reflects the personality, culture, subcultures, religions, occupations, and moral values of individuals. The debate between formal and informal dress code in labor market is being a serious deliberation to many scholars. Especially, teachers are subjected to such discussions, because a teacher is considered to be a role model to students. In addition, the dress of teachers may have different implications than other professions. Since, the dress code replicates the set of principles in an organization comprising with the professionalism, such policies should be more important and proactive. Recently, different parties in Sri Lanka confronted with controversial ideas regarding female teacher's dress code. However, the existing policies were not reformed and not considerably measured the relationship between job performance and employee attire by relevant authorities in Sri Lanka. Thus, to examine the soundness of prevailing dress code policy, the study is surveyed the positive and negative impacts of job performance that female teachers encounter due to dress code policy in Sri Lanka. Further, the study identified certain best practices that could imply to modernize the existing traditional dress code policies. The study was carried out as a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with individuals and group discussions. Fifteen participants were selected as the sample based on judgmental sampling method while thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Based on the results of interviews, three themes were discussed as the outcomes of the study including effect of attire on professionalism, school culture and professional attire, and the challenges of wearing professional attire. The study emphasized the importance of adjusting existing dress code policy for female teachers in Sri Lanka by adhering the challenges on job performance by the attire..

1. Introduction

Clothing is one of the essentials of human civilization and one of the traits of revealing an individual's personality. Further, the choice of clothing can communicate responsibility, status, power, and ability of success (Kashem, 2019). Hence, clothing plays a crucial role in any society as an indicator of fashions and recent trends, along with the reflection of personality, culture,

subcultures, religions, occupations, and moral values of individuals (Wickramarachchi, 2003; Schlesinger, 2014; Bhui et al., 2008 as cited in Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundera, 2021). Clothing is considered as a subject of many fields such as sociology, anthropology, art, history, cultural studies, economics, literature, visual culture, and business studies (Melchior & Skov, 2008 as cited in Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundera, 2021).

In the labor market, clothing is considered to be a serious matter for both men and women. For instance, some companies have uniforms, and some are allowed a formal dress code while some other companies allow employees to wear casual clothing. Many studies have been conducted to find the best dress code for employees considering different occupations and the possible influences of dress code on their job performances. The studies have found various results as some of them revealed that the way employees dress either formally or informally, could not give a much impact to change their job performances. While some studies provided results as having a proper dress code policy could bring many benefits to the employees including comfort, increased camaraderie, better work environment, better attitude at work, greater spontaneity, improved relationships among employees, and ease tensions which could enhance the performances of employee's career (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020). By supporting the idea, many scholars have revealed that if employees wear casual attires, they may perceive to being casual, relaxed, and "laid-back" rather than being in an atmosphere that requires work, effort, and diligence (Franz & Norton, 2001; Singh & Kenneth, 2014 as cited in Jayasooriya, Silva & Wanigasundara, 2020). Nevertheless, some studies found that formal clothing could lead to the communication complexities, while informal clothing can eliminate communication barriers (Nath et al., 2016; Franz & Norton, 2001 as cited in Jayasooriya, Silva & Wanigasundera, 2021). Many studies explain that employees should be dressed appropriately and professionally because clothing is a tool for non-verbal communication, measurement of quality of work, and efficiency. Significantly, the employee's attire contributes to determining the performance at work.

Similarly, the teacher's dress may have different and vital implications compared to other professions (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020). Since, teachers associate with students from elementary to higher grades, and teachers could garner respect for themselves and their profession through their clothing, Simmons (1996, p. 298) posited that "*dress can send a strong message about who teachers are as individuals and as professionals*" (Shoulders & Smith, 2018). The school environment is complex and concerned with the dress of both teachers and students. Further, Henry B Maloney has defined the importance of teachers' dress as "*by gaining the right to dress as they please, have forfeited a few cubits in their stature as role models*" (Camburn, 2004, p.1). In supporting the idea, the dress of teachers has been argued to be formal which considers a positive assertion that affects students' attitudes and positive impact on student behavior (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020). Further, the policies of dress code for both teachers and students are compulsory and teachers are supposed to be role models for students. Several studies have expressed that dress code policies need to reflect the value of schools and thus, dress code decisions should be more important and proactive. However, a decision on the dress code in any organization has to be made with economic concerns as it involves the cost of the dress, weight, material, style, and comfortability (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundera, 2021).

Since dress could affect physical and psychological comfort at work and then again, a dress could either support or hinder the employability of individuals. Another study revealed that a teacher needs to maintain some distance from the student and it can be achieved through the way teachers dress unlike the students (Rollian, 1980). The decision of a dress code is giving a difficult atmosphere since it needs to consider many factors. Countries like Japan, Korea, United Kingdom which have certain seasons for a year should concern about a dress code that suits existing climates, and dress codes should be employee-friendly in order to enhance comfortability along with improving job performance and productivity at work. Significantly, the cost is another crucial determinant of deciding on a dress code (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundera, 2021) and a cost-effective dress could provide space to save money and time. Thus, country-to-country teachers' dress code could be differently associated with dress-down policies, cultural values, and preferences of higher authorities.

The debate on the dress code of teachers is a rising issue in many countries because the decision to dress depending many controversial factors. Countries including "Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, and Myanmar have not relaxed dresses for female school teachers" (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020, p.172), because these countries are holding many cultural values, and traditional beliefs themselves and thus, the dress code is determining depending on those key factors. In every society, the role of the teacher is recognized as "an upholder of traditional values implicating within the social construct" (Jeans, 2015, p.3), and the guidelines of clothing are created based on the societal pressure of traditional gender norms in any environment.

Sri Lanka is a country where these cultural values, norms, and traditional beliefs are still practiced in many areas. Similarly, the decision of school teacher's dress code has been decided based on Sri Lankan cultural grounds and has never changed with time until today (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020). Agreeing with this idea Vafoor (2022) explained that the teacher's attire has a history back to pre-independence: 75 years today because, the Sri Lankan work environment is not mainly depending on time, but it seems to play a major role in culture. Even if that decision is well accorded with the country's tradition, still there is a doubt about the performance of teachers with the way of their perception of clothing. A study by Jayasooriya et al. (2020) revealed that Sri Lankan female teachers who wear Sarees at school find certain difficulties which result in the decline of the perceived efficiency of their performances. Further, the study identified the majority of teachers (54%) prefer to wear casual dresses considering the comfort, time, and performances in the school. Similarly, Ceylon Teachers' Union in Sri Lanka expressed the difficulties female teachers face due to their dress code, including affordability because the current economic crisis made everything expensive, and transportation problems due to teachers having to travel a lot longer in public transport and it makes uncomfortable (Vafoor, 2022). Accordingly, the union has suggested any comfortable and modest attire other than a 'Saree' for female teachers which is currently existing. Further, the idea was supported by Jayasooriya et al. (2020, p.172) as "female teachers wear Saree unwillingly just to conform to the existing dress norm". However, there is a considerable debate between casual and formal attire for female teachers in Sri Lanka and still, there are various parties commenting on this topic differently. But, the studies carried out regarding this issue is at lower level. Thus, the study aims to discover the soundness of existing teachers' dress code policy and the job performance considering their efficiency, productivity, self-satisfaction, and economic benefits.

Research Question

The research question of this study has been identified similar to the study carried out by Jayasooriya et al. (2020). An overarching question was as follows:

What are the impacts of dress code policy of female teachers in Sri Lanka that confront to the soundness of policy?

Literature Review

In any society, clothing plays a pivotal role as a messenger and indicator that reflects one's personality, culture, subculture, religion, occupation, and moral values (Vafoor, 2022). Since every organization regardless of public or private, has a certain code of conduct that its employees must comply with all applicable laws and regulations at all times, the dress code is one of the principles in an organization that represents their professionalism. Golubeva and Kanins (2017) explained the codes of the organization as expressions of the profession's values and principles. Further, codes are strengthening the ethics of a particular profession and improve the quality of work. Thus, the dress code of teachers determines by reviewing the particular code of conduct and ethics of each country.

One of the specific attires worn by teachers has a crucial place in society because a teacher in any country is a role model to students and they represent a particular culture, religion, and beliefs of one country. However, a teacher should be given a positive impression by wearing professional attire. "*The entire school environment educates*" is a maxim taken by the dress code policy of Saint Jeanne de Lestonnac School and the saying is exactly fit with the study since the dress code of both students and teachers provides edification to the entire society. Similarly, Rollian (1980) explained that teachers should maintain a distance from students and this can be achieved by dressing that, unlike the students. In contrast, another viewpoint comes along with the dress code of teachers as the attire becomes more casual, the morale and quality of work could be improved (Sharkey, 2000 as cited in Jayasooriya, Silva & Wanigasundera, 2021). Consequently, the debate over teachers' dress code is generated a controversial topic in many countries.

Every country has its own policies regarding the attire of teachers and most of them are accepted a dress code that is more professional and looks according to the culture that considers. The teachers of European countries should dress, speak and behave appropriately under their code of conduct, and mainly their dress is formal as male teachers with shirts with ties, dress slacks, jackets, and brown or black shoes, and female teachers with Blouse and knee-length skirts and blazer, low-heeled brown or black shoes (Shoulders & Smith, 2018; Golubeva Kanins, 2017; Deady, 2013). However, in the Asian region, the dress code of teachers, mainly the female attire could be different. For instance, Japan promoted their traditional dress (Kimona) for teachers, but in the post-world war period, Japan shifted to formal dress and to casual dress at present which is more relaxed than the traditional attire (Francks, 2015 as cited in Jayasooriya et al., 2020). In South Korea, teachers should wear respectably and maturely, further, every school has its own specific requirements for dress code and it is not solely established based on culture (Wasserstein, 2021). In Thailand, being a teacher is a prestigious position and Thai people tend to place a high value on appearance (John, 2013), thus, teachers in Thailand are getting higher respect unlike in many other Western countries. Notably, Thai People consider that teachers of public schools are members of the government and

servants of the king which is taken as a great pride. The author further explained that on special occasions, a Thai teacher wears a dress that resembles a high-ranking military officer. The most common attire of Thailand female teachers wear a smart collared shirt or blouse, a skirt that covers the knees, and a dress that covers the knees and shoulders which means more formal and appropriate to their culture (John, 2013). Apparently, every country has its own requirements for teachers' attire, especially on the female side even though teachers wear them unwillingly just to conform to the existing dress norms.

Sri Lanka is a South Asian country with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. Generally, the female population follows global trends and traditional clothing patterns in their typical activities. According to the circular of the Sri Lankan government, female officers on duty could wear a Saree which is a traditional dress of many South Asian countries, or a modest and appropriate attire which is more formal and professional to preserve the dignity of the public service (Vafoor, 2022). The dress code of private sector officials could be different from the aforesaid circular because many private sector organizations tend to shift from Saree to casual or more relaxed attire which is preferred by many employees and improve employee efficiency and productivity at the workplace. Since Sri Lanka is a country that is grounded in cultural, ethnic, and religious values, the way people dress is considered the main tool for representing their deep-rooted culture. Thus, while many Asian countries including Japan, China, and South Korea have shifted to formal dress or casual dress in many professions, countries like Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh have not yet been able to shift from their traditional attires. Similarly, Sri Lankan government and the general public still believe that the dignity of public service depends on an official's dress.

With the recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka, Ceylon Teacher's Union (CTU) stated the circular issued by the ministry of public administration on 27.09.2022 regarding the attire of public officials should be allowed to school teachers especially female teachers too should be allowed to wear a modest and appropriate attire described by the circular (Vafoor, 2022). Besides other public officials, teachers are having difficulties affording Sarees within the current situation in the country and the author further explained that the circular guidelines have not been applicable to the school teachers, thus, it has been a debatable topic of the country recently. Though there are various opinions by different parties including the government, teacher's union, group of Buddhist monks, and the general public regarding the existing dress code of female teachers, still there is no effective solution to improve the job performance of teachers which is affecting by the prevailing dress policy in Sri Lanka. Hence, the study considers the positive and negative views of the current dress policy toward the job performance of teachers in Sri Lanka.

Positive outcomes of dress policy on job performance of teachers

Paperap website (2019) discussed that teachers' dress codes should emanate a positive attitude through their physical appearance because, in any context, teachers suppose to serve as role models for their students. Thus, teachers should exhibit professionalism and respect for their fashion choice at work, not a current fad. Similarly, Kashem (2019) explained from the student's side, their judgment of formally dressed teachers represents competency and creates a learning impression in students' minds at first sight. The author further agreed that formal clothing has importance in not only following the norms but to get respect, professionalism, and maintenance

of social distancing. Likewise, many studies identified that wearing the professional dress by teachers provides a positive impact on the school climate (Ivery, 2019; Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020), however, with time, people have begun to work in whatever clothing that they feel acceptable and comfortable in order to enhance their performance at work Mosca & Buzza, 2013 as cited in Ivery, 2019).

Saree is the nationally accepted, traditional, and cultural dress code that the majority of female officials used to wear in Sri Lanka. Hewa (2022) explained the dress code of teachers as “*supposed to be signified cultural values and educative role in schools*”, and in Sri Lanka, the Saree is said to inculcate discipline in students. Further, the author explained that male teachers are not requested to wear a corresponding cultural dress in Sri Lanka which is the national dress called ‘*Jathika anduma*’ as females for the purpose of disciplining students. According to the country’s cultural norms and values, Western dresses for female teachers are supposed to exert a corruptive influence on students. In order to enforce such norms into the country’s law, the circular 2012/37 enacted by the Ministry of education described that ‘*the female teacher’s code of conduct and common law recommend a decent and culturally conform dress at workplace*’ (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2021). Nevertheless, the teacher’s role in school is critical and it is a significant factor in determining the student-teacher interaction. Ivery (2019) revealed that schools and classrooms are shaping the character of students while teachers’ attire may in turn influence students’ attitudes toward their teachers in today’s society. Since teacher performance depends on students’ learning outcomes, teachers should maintain a professional image, and Miller (2004) further addressed the significance of appropriate attire that can make difference between competent versus incompetent on the job, while facilitating teacher-student interaction.

Since the Saree for female teachers is assigned by the culture and the educational policies from the beginning, there is a higher influence of teachers’ clothing on the perception of the general public (Shoulders & Smith, 2018). In contrast, the author identified that students preferred teachers who dressed in casual attire because they seem as approachable and flexible, but not well-respected. Further, casually dressed teachers are more likely to experience misbehavior from students (Roach, 1997 as cited in Shoulders & Smith, 2018). By agreeing to the statement, the administrative view of the teacher’s attire has revealed that formal dress could create a positive assert that affects student achievement considering the strong dress code beliefs do exist among many officials (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundara, 2020). In Sri Lanka, considerable dress code beliefs were displayed with the recently emerged discussion of teachers’ attire. A group of Buddhist monks opposed the request of the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) regarding the change of the existing attire of female teachers. According to their statement, Sri Lanka is a country that carries 2,600 years old Buddhist culture and identity, thus, if the change of attire is allowed by the government, it is bound to be a great disaster’ (Vafoor, 2022). Further, they continuously presented their criticisms of changing the Saree in place of another comfortable or suitable dress by stating that CTU’s option is ignorance of customs and insult of god since the old testament of the Bible, clearly states women’s and men’s clothes should not be changed.

Negative outcomes of dress policy on job performance of teachers

Together with the education system, dress code has been taken into a serious talk in current days, primitively, to establish and fortify the sense of professionalism among teachers. Accordingly, the

dress code policy established in each context believes to address the growing need of its formality among the students (paperap.com, 2019). In Sri Lanka, a Saree is used to believe as the most common dress of females as the professional attire and is promoting Sri Lankan nationalism and culture. According to Jayasooriya et al. (2021), Saree is contained with a material of six yards which has to wrap around the body with several safety pins. A decision of dress code should compromise with economic factors including the cost to dress, weight, material, and the comfort of the wearer. Similarly, the employability of an individual is determined by his/her dress code as one of the factors. In supporting the idea, Jayasooriya et al. (2021) identified that physical and psychological comfort of dress at workplace which influence to the human performance and productivity should be taken into the consideration when deciding a employee friendly dress. According to their study, the findings revealed that majority of female teachers are preferred to wear a employee friendly dress in order to enhance their productivity and save money since Sarees are associated with a considerable cost. Correspondingly, Jayakody (2022) stated that female teachers are favored to change their current dress code to a casual attire which support to the dynamic roles in school while ensuring self-satisfaction, safety, economic benefits while saving money and time.

Though there is a debate on female teacher's attire for decades among educators, politicians, journalists and public at large (Joseph, 2017), the government of Sri Lanka has not yet reconcile the request of female teachers, even the ministry of education did not seem to bother to conduct a survey to find out whether this problem is influencing to the performances of teachers who build the future of students (Jayakody, 2022). Apparently, the current economic crisis in country has been expanded the struggle faced by female teachers. Furthermore, teachers have to travel by public or private transport which makes uncomfortable with their dress and Vafoor (2022) examined that teachers would engage with children much easier with wearing a comfortable and modest attire other than the Saree. Similarly, Hewa (2022) explained wearing a Saree in every morning is undeniably the most time consuming thing and it creates a frustrating morning chore. However, the Sri Lankan culture has a way of hiding such an obvious incompatibility faced by female teachers. Accordingly, the female teachers of Sri Lanka are visualized with a Saree and it is hard to imagine female teachers wear another suitable attire except a Saree.

2. Results

An appropriate dress that accepted by the society, promotes a professional image. Additionally, a proper dress should be comfortable to perform their job and many respondents were preferred to another professional dress over a traditional dress. One participant commented that,

"Saree is a very uncomfortable dress to wear and perform our duties after being dressed and we have faced several accidents due to the traditional dress."

Since Sri Lanka is bounded by a traditional culture that existed from ancient times, both government and private sector organizations continued to follow the traditional dress code mainly for female employees. With the time being, the dress code has been changed in majority of private organizations to professional dress codes which were adopted by Western countries. But, for the governmental organizations, the traditional dress code mainly a saree for females, is continued to the date. After some of controversial discussions during the pandemic and economic crisis period

some of governmental organizations were permitted to wear casual dress or professional dress apart from the Sarees. A respondent stated that,

“After the economic and political unrest, the many public sector employees including central, provincial and local governmental levels were started to wear uniforms (A T-shirt with organizational logo and a trouser or a skirt) or another preferable attire. Even in the difficult time, female teachers were not allowed to wear any other dress apart from a Saree.”

Similarly, another participant expressed that the teachers are not only teaching in a classroom, but they also involve in extra-curricular activities. Thus, the attire of teachers should be more comfortable and flexible. The same respondent further explained that,

“The dress code of teacher is a sensitive topic which cannot decide from one night. As modern citizens who live in 21st century should be more passionate about the changes and evolutions of the rest of world instead of depending on the tradition, culture and other values.”

Another respondent revealed that,

“As a pregnant teacher, we are not allowed to wear a comfortable and modest maternity frock in the schools. There was a discussion, but it was met with wide criticisms and not being continued the talk afterwards.”

Any policy that formulates and implements by the government and any other organization should be feasible and proactive. Hence, the dress code policy of Sri Lankan school teachers has certain drawbacks which should be taken into the consideration. Conversely, the economic crisis has impacted on attire as the cost of Sarees has been increased tremendously compared to the average salary of a teacher. Majority of respondents were criticized the existing dress code policy which is not viable to the situation of country and in the sensitive concerns such as maternity periods, accidents and other relevant conditions.

As any debate has both positive and negative ideologies, the respondents had different thoughts regarding the soundness of Sri Lankan dress code policy for teachers. One participant stated that,

“A dress is not just exhibiting only the fashion choice but, it reflects as a source of non-verbal communication. The professionalism, behaviour and the culture of setting.”

On the top of that, a dress code replicates the set of norms, standards, order and decorum. Thus, the education system should adopt a dress code which is commonly accepted by the society at whole. A participant stated that,

“Teachers wearing the saree have become a major indicator of the Sri Lankan school setting and Saree is symbolising the identity of teachers. Further, the dress code of female teachers is conveying the Sri Lankan tradition, norms and professionalism to next generation of the country from a long period of time.”

Consequently, the Saree has been identified as a prevalent and dominant attire which evolved as the most appropriate dress which could promote the nationalism and cultural conformity. Further, the majority of respondents explained that school dress code for teachers plays a major role in the education system including the improvement of student's discipline, attitudes and respect towards teachers.

3.1. Discussion

Since the dress code of Sri Lankan female teachers has initiated to a controversial discussion in recently and represented various opinions. However, the soundness of a policy depends on its efficiency, effectiveness and its prolific outcomes. The performances and job satisfaction of teachers are directly affected to the students. Consecutively, the teacher's attire could impact to both student's learning environment and the efficiency, effectiveness and satisfaction of their job. Because the attire is associated with one's psychological, sociological, economic and safety-related implications (Jayakody, 2022).

The current dress code of teachers is recognized with certain pros and cons that includes difficulty of handling and on the same time the decency of dress is concerned. Although the Saree is pleasant to others, promoting the professionalism and reputation, it is inconvenient as difficult to travel, reveals the body, time consuming, affordability problems, reduces the efficiency, and dissatisfaction. As per the literature and the results from respondents identified that the current dress code was not decided based on rational and logical background. The Saree was selected mainly based on Sri Lankan culture which accepted as the most decent dress for working women especially for teachers. As the soundness of this dress code policy has a clear doubt as feasible policy could comprise with objectives, outcomes, applicability and viability. Eventually, it is learned that the Sri Lankan dress code policy is a reflection of its people's strong enthusiasm to the country's beliefs, values and practices (Jayasooriya, Silva, & Wanigasundera, 2021). Thus, Sri Lankan tradition and culture play a prominent role in determining such policies.

Based on the findings of the study, many teachers prefer to literally a comfortable dress which they can perform their job without worrying about their attire. However, due to social reputation and the fear of being rejected from the society instead of physical comfort and productivity in work, the school dress code policy of teachers is decided and not yet modified even different parties remarked the unfeasibility of prevailing dress code.

4. Conclusion.

The image of teacher socially constructed by the attire in Sri Lanka, thus their dress is viewed as the expression of professionalism (Jeans, 2015). It is recommended to upgrade the existing dress code policy which is identified as a reduction factor of satisfaction, efficiency, effectiveness and the productivity of teachers. Further, if it is difficult to change, it is appropriate to introduce flexible and professional attire just for other dynamic activities that teachers are engaging. The modification of the dress code policy could ensure the time and cost saving, self-satisfaction and the performances. In advance, in the period of maternity, female teachers should be allowed to wear a comfortable outfit as it is a sensitive concern. Subsequently, a policy formulation should be done with addressing the whole scope of environment.

Even the teachers have no satisfaction with the current dress code and preferred to a casual dress, the Saree has been established as the most suitable dress which portrays the personality of teachers, dignity of the profession, the family background, and their social status. The study suggests to modify the dress code that could make an impression on students, their parents and society. For any policy initiation that associated with country's culture may arise several criticisms and arguments in the beginning. However, without implementing such controversial policies, the

anticipated outcome cannot be achieved. Further, the change of dress code should not only focus on the comfortability of teacher, but it should have a potential to make a significant impact on the field of education. Thus, the soundness of dress code policy of teachers could be ensured by enhancing their efficiency, productivity, safety and satisfaction.

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