

Dress Codes of Female Employees and their Job Performances in Sri Lanka

U.G.L.B. Jayasooriya¹, Saliya De Silva², W.A.D.P. Wanigasundara³

Abstract

The historical evolution of Sri Lankan female clothing shows that Sri Lankans have been more concerned about nationalism and cultural beliefs in deciding a suitable dress for women. Saree, which is also called Osari depending on the style one may wear it, is traditionally considered as the most suitable and decent dress for Sri Lankan women at work. In contrast, dress codes of many countries have evolved in favour of comfort, preferences and job performance based on research while there seems to be no such studies based on Sri Lanka. Filling this knowledge gap this paper investigates the impact of dress code on job performance of female employees in Sri Lanka through a comprehensive literature review. The study shows that relaxing dress norms in favour of the convenience of employees results in increased efficiency, productivity and satisfaction. The findings suggest that a dress code could be decided to ensure maximum job performance based on scientific grounds and individual preferences, not merely based on cultural factors.

Keywords: Dress Code, Job Performance, Saree, Women's Clothing, Cultural Norms

Introduction

Dress and fashion are rich and varied fields of study. Some scholars refer to them as 'hybrid subjects' because they bring together different conceptual frameworks and disciplinary approaches, including those from anthropology, art, history, cultural studies, design studies, economics, literature, semiotics, sociology, visual culture and business studies (Melchior and Skov, 2008). Hence, it is essentially one of the main indicators of human civilization that symbolically represent gender, country, class, caste, wealth, ethnic group,

¹ Postgraduate Institute of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya

² Postgraduate Institute of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya

³ Faculty of Economics, Saga University Japan

religious affiliation, occupation, identity and moral values as these were constructed and expressed through clothing (Crane, 2012). Clothing not only provides protection, but also maintains modesty, while being a powerful means of socio-psychological expressions (Imo, 2013) and peer interactions (Wickramaarachchi, 2003). It also plays a pivotal role in maintaining social status, with different rules and expectations being valid depending on circumstances and occasions (Schliesinger, 2014). Therefore, clothing and fashion have gained an interest among researchers in multiple disciplines including sociology, business and psychology. Clothing patterns are widely distributed among different countries based on their cultural norms. Because of this reason, the dress codes for the same occupation might widely differ across different cultural backgrounds.

However, the best-suited dress code for the optimum performance of a given job may not simply depend on cultural norms. Despite growing interest in this field, the question of how clothing affects the occupation of an individual has not been explored widely.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic country situated in South Asia, which is home for more than 20 million people. Multiple invasions by diverse countries have significantly affected the clothing patterns and dress norms of Sri Lankans over the last few centuries. Therefore, the objective of this review was to trace the literature on the area of clothing, dress codes and job performance with special reference to the Sri Lankan context. Accordingly, the article explores how the dress of Sri Lankan women evolved gradually and if the selection of a dress code for Sri Lankan female employees has a connection to optimizing job performance as explained, based on scientific research findings worldwide. The Sri Lankan population consists of 74.9% of Sinhalese, 11.2% Sri Lankan Tamils, 9.3% of Sri Lankan Moors, 4.1% Indian Tamils and 0.5% of other ethnic groups (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Furthermore, Sri Lanka was invaded by three foreign nations, the Portuguese (1506- 1658), the Dutch (1658-1796) and the British (1796-1815), which resulted in an admixture of the Western culture in this country. The initial invaders ruled maritime provinces in their time periods but not the hill country and Kandy, however the British were able to capture Sri Lanka in 1815 and the whole country came under the rule of the British until 1948. Therefore, these colonial experiences have influenced to a great extent not only the politics and economy but also to the socio-cultural aspects of the country. Thus, female dress too has undergone many changes.

Dress Codes of Female Employees in Sri Lanka

Saree (Indian Saree, commonly called as *Saree* or *Osari*)⁴ is considered to be the nationally accepted, traditional cultural dress for Sri Lankan women (Fernando, 2007). It is also the official dress code for Sri Lankan women in a majority of government organizations as well as in a considerable number of private companies, and it is also recognized as the accepted form of dress for special occasions. It is a dress which consists of six yards of material that has to be intricately draped around the body with a fall, a jacket, an underskirt and as many safety pins as needed ranging from 5 to 20. Pins are used to keep the pleats neat and to attach the Saree to the jacket and the underskirt.

According to circular number 8/89 (Ministry of Public Administration, 1989) it is mandatory for female government employees of Sri Lanka to wear *Saree* or *Osari* to work. Nevertheless, circular number 13/2019 (I) emphasizes that the official dress of women may be Saree, *Osari* or any other appropriate dress (Ministry of Public Administration, 2019). Accordingly, majority of female employees of government and private companies wear *Saree* and *Osari*.

Evolution of women's clothing in Sri Lanka

The history of Sri Lankan women's clothing can be traced back to many years. Wickramasinghe (1935: p 11) has traced evidence for changing patterns of women's clothing in the history from the notes and records of the ancient travelers and explorers, and seen five stages in the history of Sri Lankan women's clothing pattern:

1. Not covering the upper part of the body
2. Using two pieces of clothes to cover upper and the lower parts of the body
3. Using a piece of cloth to cover breasts along with the breast bandage
4. Wearing a jacket to cover the upper part of the body
5. Wearing a jacket and a sari covering upper part of the body using the fall of the *Saree*

Furthermore, according to literature, the upper part of the women's body was often decorated with rich jewelry instead of a dress in the 5th century AD

⁴ Worn in different styles; Indian style mainly in the low country and *Osari* in the up country of Sri Lanka. The difference between *Osari* and Saree is not the garment but the way it is worn. *Osari* which is believed to be draped in Kandyan style, is considered to be much more Sri Lankan origin. Hereafter will be commonly named as Saree.

(Hewavissenti, 2014). Women who lived in the Anuradhapura era (from 377 BCE to 1017) to the end of the 19th century have used limited dress designs, especially to the upper part of the body (Wickramasinghe, 2013). Similarly, the paintings, sculpture and literary works such as poetry of Rev. Rahula, illustrate the ancient Sri Lankan women's dress as a scanty drape and a collection of heavy jewelry (Hewavissenti, 2014 and Wickramasinghe, 1935). One fine example can be extracted from the famous Sigiriya frescos: all the drawings of women are exposing a lot of their bodies. Moreover, Wickramasinghe (1935) says "Rohini Story" from *Dhammapadatta* Buddhist transcript which showed that the ancient Sri Lankan Sinhala women did not cover the upper part of their bodies at all. *Dhammapadatta Katha* relates an incident which took place in the tenth century when a lay devotee, Rohini, wore a blouse before Anuruddha Thero only to cover marks left by a skin disease (Fernando, 1992). This indicates it was still unusual for women to cover their body. Women's dress was then a cloth round the hip leaving the body bare from the waist upwards (Wickramasinghe, 1935).

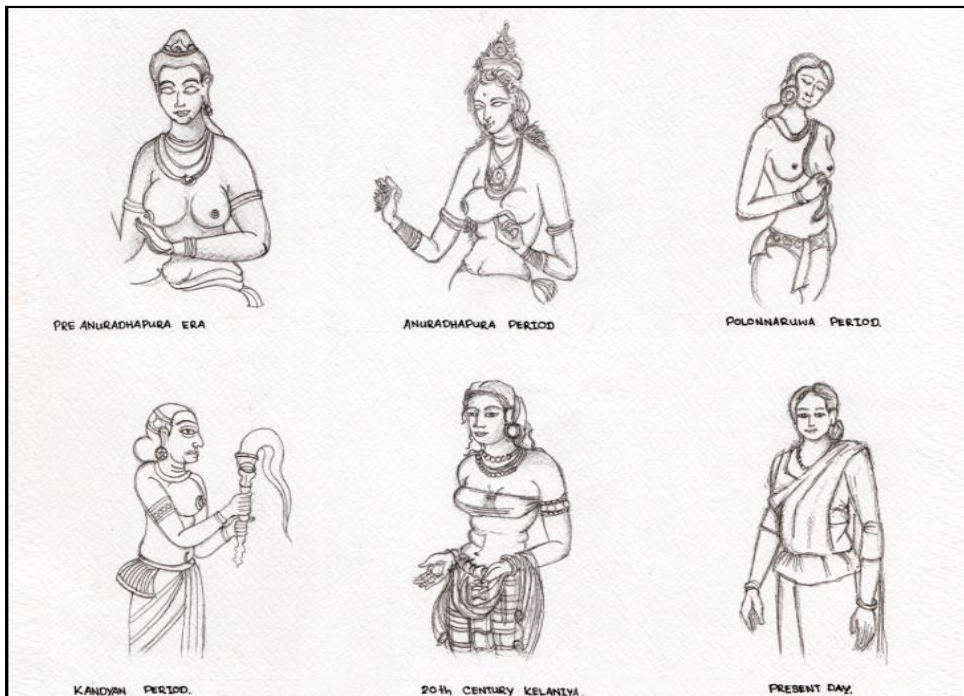
Further, it is important to mention that Wickramasinghe (1935) has given a visual illustration for women's clothing in Sri Lanka until 20th century. The researcher adopted it using Saree to represent present Sri Lankan women's clothing as it seems to be the culturally, traditionally and socially accepted clothing for a majority of Sri Lankan women. By observing Figure 1, it is fair to state, that the women's dresses from the past were found to be more revealing compared to the present situation. This proves that, the popular belief which is, Sinhala woman from ancient times wore modest dresses that covered her decently and was not sexually provocative is erroneous. Though the famous official dress of women today is Saree, it is difficult to trace the exact time period in which all Sri Lankan women started to wear Saree though some predictions can be made based on available literature. Providing some clues to this Jayawardana (2002) wrote that there is a strong case to suggest that restrictions on women's dress became prominent during the early 20th century, when the national movement against imperialism emerged along with Dharmapala⁵ severely criticizing the Western European dress. It is known that it was Dharmapala who introduced the Saree as the Sinhala national dress.

Furthermore, writings of Jayawardana and Alwis (1996) too support this idea. She stated that in the same way that Dharmapala wanted to purify

⁵ Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1934) was a Buddhist revivalist and a writer. He was the first global Buddhist missionary. He did a great service to uplift the Sinhala Buddhist thoughts to fight against westernization.

Buddhism, he wanted to purify the Europeanized men and women of Sri Lanka stating that, Dharmapala in many of his speeches and articles constantly ridiculed the Victorian hats and crinolines that were worn by the women of the *bourgeoisie* advocating the Indian *Saree* as a suitable garment for Sinhala women as it covered their black legs, navel and midriff.

Figure 1: Evolution of Sri Lankan Women's Clothing



Source: Developed from the art work by Wikramasinghe (1935)

Therefore, it is justifiable to suspect that, it was this period in which the dress “*Saree*” started to become the most suitable dress for women. Jayawardana (2002) writes that a woman wrote to *Mahajana Handa*, newspaper that “the security of our nation is on the hands of our sisters, and it is true that safeguarding our honor is also depending on our women. Our good customs declined and our national dress disappeared during unfortunate time of the last few centuries. Certainly, now it is time for us to pay special attention to what we wear. Women should wear *Osariya* but no other dress. It is very sad that especially female teachers are reluctant to give up wearing gowns (frocks)”. This even gives us a clue that female teachers in Sri Lanka wore frocks in the period (during Portuguese, Dutch and British occupation) before *Saree* became a nationally accepted dress.

Moreover, it is fair to suspect that wearing *Saree* must have been popular and given recognition during and after the period that nationalism rose. According to Fernando (2007) the inaugural meeting of the National Reform Society was held at the Ananda College on July 24th, 1931 had decided that men should wear the national dress and women should wear Saree. Women were encouraged and forced to wear to cover their body unlike the past Sri Lankan women. It is also stated that, men have switched to European trouser considering the convenience (Fernando, 2007). Especially, in this period nationalists have highlighted recommendations given in *Kavayashekaraya* which is one of the famous Sinhala Buddhist writings, to emphasize the way that the women should dress. It says not to dress to reveal your navel, cover up to your ankle, do not show your breasts, do not reveal your teeth when laughing). According to the *Kavayashekaraya*, a cloth that covers from navel to ankles, a blouse that is made to cover the breasts properly and covering that blouse by the fold of the Saree is the Aryan Sinhala *Osariya* dress (Jayawardena, 2002).

Dress Code vs. Job Performance

Literature on dress code and job performance discuss in detail the areas including communication, formality, comfort and motivation, conformity and productivity. Different countries and organizations worldwide have changed their dress policies focusing enhancement of productivity and efficiency.

Communication

Attire and appearance are forms of nonverbal communication that include an individual's values, attitudes, interests, lifestyle, social, personal relationships, wearer's identity authority, status and occupation (Sampson, 2016; Hughes, 2002; Kaser et al. 2009). Therefore, clothing has been identified as an important aspect of nonverbal behavior (Rosenfeld and Plax, 1977). While clothing promotes nonverbal communication, studies have been done to figure out if clothing affects communication positively or negatively. Though clothing reflects professionalism, identity and status, formal clothing might negatively influence interpersonal communication at the same time (Nath et al, 2016; Franz and Norton, 2001). Moreover, casual dress policies were recognized as a move towards eliminating the natural communication barriers between managers and employees compared to traditional business attires and they instill a sense of togetherness in organizations (Franz and Norton, 2001).

Formality

As per the available literature, formal clothing is related to psychological formality and social distance, whereas casual clothing is related to intimacy

and familiarity (Slepian, 2015). Furthermore, formal dress professionalizes a job role and follows norms to obtain respect and to maintain social distance (Nath et al., 2016 and Slepian et al., 2015). It helps to connect two findings: since formal clothing maintains psychological formality and social distance, it blocks natural communication flows whereas casual clothing promotes communication as they are related to intimacy and familiarity. The western, understanding the disadvantages rose from the social distance generated by formal clothing and also to overcome some other consequences business casual culture has been introduced. This is also known as 'Casual Fridays'. With its beginnings in Silicon Valley back in the 1980s, dress down work environments soon took off and quickly gained popularity throughout Corporate America (Sharkey, 2000) and many organizations now allow more casual dress (A comfortable less formal dress which is also called as business casual) during the entire week (Franz and Norton, 2001).

Comfort and Motivation

Prior research has given due attention to preferred attire based on comfort. It is not debatable that a dress code should have minimum difficulty in wearing and handling it. A recent study suggested that instituting dress codes can provoke employee complaints, demotivate staff and create risks associated with discrimination claims (Nath et al., 2016). Studies also reveal that dress code affects employee satisfaction and morale. According to Sharkey (2000), employee morale and quality of work improve as dress codes become more casual. It is also proved that formality or informality of a dress code is a decisive factor that affects satisfaction (McPherson, 1997). Therefore, this can be recognized as one of the crucial issues of dress code imposition as many do not have a right to voice opinions against it, though it is necessary.

In an organizational setting, employees can agonize over organizational appearance expectations particularly where they feel unable to voice their opinions or provide feedback on dress norms (Nath et al., 2016). Nevertheless, some research shows that if employees are dressed casually, they may perceive themselves as being in a casual, relaxed, and "laid-back" atmosphere rather than in an atmosphere that requires work, effort, and diligence (Franz and Norton, 2001). It is also believed that continually relaxed dress leads to relaxed manners, and relaxed morals (Singh and Kenneth, 2014). In contrast, it seems that less attention is given to comfort of a dress and motivation derived from dress of Sri Lankan female employees. There are no studies available that, address issues related to Sri Lankan dress codes and comfort.

Conformity and Productivity

As explained earlier, wearing Saree as official dress was not strictly imposed by law in Sri Lanka. Hence, Sri Lankan women wearing Saree as the official dress code can be seen as a dress norm. Many people were in line with the norm due to the strong motivation that they had to conform in clothing (Thinada and Rujirutana, 2008). Furthermore, in both professional and non-professional settings, individuals often put in a significant effort to learn and adhere to dress codes (Bellezza et al, 2013). Conformity to rules and social norms like for dress codes is driven by a desire to gain social acceptance and status (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004) and to avoid negative sanctions such as social disapproval, ridicule, and exclusion (Kruglanski and Webster, 1991). Willingness to conform is caused as people recognize that even small departures from the social norm will seriously impair their status (Bernheim, 1994). Hence, it is justifiable through the theory of conformity (Thinada and Rujirutana, 2008) the fact that, Sri Lankan women show conformity towards the social norm although wearing Saree is sometimes an inconvenience and a hassle. Furthermore, even though wearing Saree is considered to be a conformation to the culture it remains debatable if Saree is modest and decent enough to conform to the Sri Lankan cultural values as it is found to be a considerably revealing dress compared to European casual clothing worn at the work place by female employees of other countries and the female employees of certain private sector companies in Sri Lanka (Jayasooriya, 2016).

Most of the studies which consider the economic aspects have tried to figure out issues related to productivity in terms of quality and quantity of work performed by the employee. The productivity issues associated with quality essentially has relationships with sociopsychological aspects. Deciding a dress code itself is an economic action as it involves cost of the dress, weight, material, style and how the dress is worn which affect the comfort of the wearer. It has been revealed that clothing practices can have material consequences for individuals in terms of either helping or hindering their employability which can be discussed under ergonomics (Nickson et al., 2005). In industry, the key ergonomics issue is minimizing low human performance and productivity. Reduced productivity arises from several issues including the weight and bulk of the clothing, visual and tactile reductions associated with some clothing, and the heat stress in hot ambient environments (Bishop et al., 2013). This provides an insight for organizations to think about the material and weight of the clothing when deciding dress codes for the employees. Human resource and legal issues also arise in managing occupations subject to formal uniform policies, such as the emergency services. These policies often have consequences for display of body art or religious belief (Nath et al., 2016). In relation to the

cost of the dress, research reveal that employees also save money when they wear casual dresses at work because casual business wear is generally less expensive and require less professional care than traditional business attire (McPherson, 1997).

Time too can be recognized as one of the factors associated with productivity issues related to the dress code. In terms of time, that is time taken for dressing and time taken to perform particular duties wearing a dress are of main concerns. According to Gentile and Imberman (2010), some people takes hours to get dressed while if there had been a uniform it would have taken three minutes. Apart from the material, weight and the style of the clothes, safety aspects and religious aspects too need to be given due consideration in deciding a dress code.

The studies based on dress codes of doctors, nurses, teachers and lawyers prove that there is a close relationship between productivity, effectiveness and suitability of attire (Kaser et al, 2009; Gutierrez and Freese, 1999). While there are arguments on whether to dress up or dress down, evidence supports the claim that dress-down policies can increase worker productivity, open communication lines between staff and managers, provide cost savings to employees, and improve work quality (Sharkey, 2000). A sample of 1,540 certified public accountants illustrates that about 60% agree that “wearing casual clothing at work increases productivity” (Gutierrez and Freese, 1999). In another survey, 64% respondents have claimed that wearing casual dress made their work more effective (Hughes, 2002).

Conclusion

The evolution of female clothing in Sri Lanka has been mainly based on nationalism and culture. There is hardly any scientific evidence related to the dress of employees based on Sri Lanka whereas western countries have adapted clothing to enhance professional efficiency while valuing individual preferences. Nevertheless, it remains a controversial practice and belief to find that Sri Lankan culture rejects the idea of revealing the female body in their clothing and emphasizes on dressing modestly whereas revealing has been a part of Sri Lankan culture in the past as well as in present as the culturally and socially accepted dress for Sri Lankan females: *Saree/Osari*, reveals a considerable part of the women’s body. Hence, it is found to be illogical to criticize Western-type dresses as worn at work place by women which are modest when compared to *Saree/Osari*. Moreover, the dress norms of men and women in Sri Lanka seem to have evolved differently. Clothes worn by men have moved from traditional to western as they shift from wearing cloth to European trouser and shirt. It seems that nationalist

and cultural influence to the dress of men has not affected. Nevertheless, women's dress remains traditional and they continue wearing *Saree/Osari*. This shows that nationalist and cultural influences have been legitimated and socially established in case of women's dress. However, according to the research available worldwide, the dress of employees affects communication, satisfaction, productivity and efficiency at work. Studies in general have proved that, relaxing dress norms: moving from formal to casual dresses, have been successful at bringing comfort to employees, which eventually increases the productivity and efficiency of their work. Hence, it is clear that, decisions on clothing at work place should be based on scientific grounds but not merely cultural grounds. Accordingly, research worldwide and female dress norms worldwide set examples for Sri Lanka to rethink about female dress norms which are evolved only based on cultural grounds. Study also suggests policy formation related to clothing of women focusing convenience, efficiency and productivity at work. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct interdisciplinary research within the cultural context to individualize suitable dress codes for female employees. Future studies on gender discrimination in relation to clothing too are encouraged.

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