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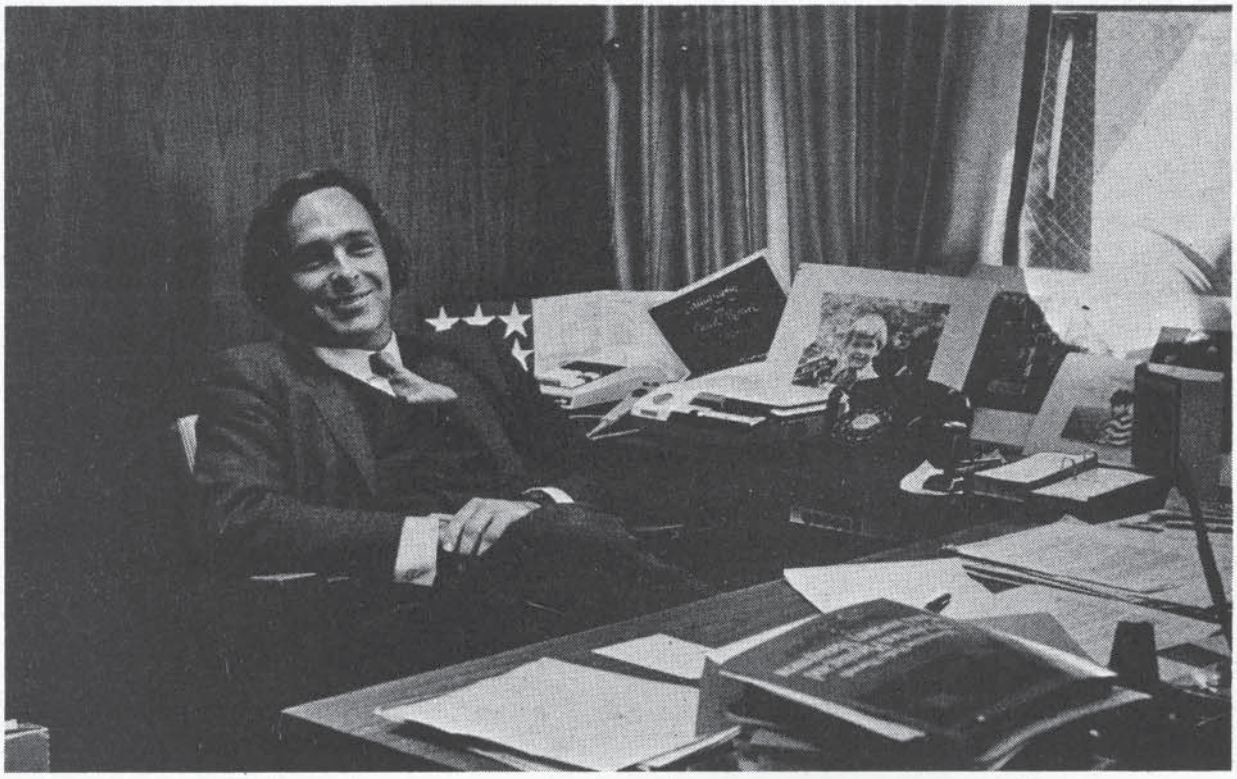
FASHION FASCISM



Pity The Poor Working Girl

a report on office dress codes

by John Grissim

It's an innocent looking booklet titled "What Shall I Wear To Work Today" — twenty pages of detailed "guidelines to good fashion and good taste and good grooming." Blueberry pastel lettering and vaguely psychedelic artwork give it a promising look.

"Just let your good taste take over," says page one, "like choosing fashions that are 'in' but not way out. To help you avoid mistakes . . . here are some recommendations. . . ." From page two on it's thinly veiled fascism in fashion. Some excerpts:

"The neutrals are more important than ever — black, browntones, beige and grays. . . . Basic dresses aren't dull dresses. . . . Add a scarf. . . .

"Save pant suits, pant dresses, culottes for another scene (yes, including those that do look like skirts).

"Jewelry — Yes, beads and chains that make the dress make the scene. Leave kookie, gaudy, over-size earrings for someone else.

"Fabrics too clingy, sweaters too tight, should be avoided, they're just not right.

"There are better styles than sweaters and the like for large busted ladies.

"Nylons for work, always. Yes, even when it's too darn hot. Light and neutral shades preferred . . . but very brights, very darks, patterns, textures are best forgotten. . . .

"To cover up the gaps when you sit, stretch or bend, wear pantyhose, the short skirt's best friend.

"Ponytails are for more casual times. Pigtails are for little girls, not business girls. Keep tieback hair scarves and headband clean to keep them charming.

"Long hair? Keep it hip, not hippie; worn in place, not falling all over your face. . . ."

There's more here than bad poetry and repressive advice. Good old-fashioned double-think crops up all the time. Under the heading "How high the hemline?" the word is:

"Skirts may be worn as short as 4" to 5" up from the floor when measured from a kneeling position. Any shorter, though, is too short. . . ." Looks great on paper but that works out to a hemline no shorter than 2½ inches above the knee.

The booklet's capper is a plastic overlay of three dress illustrations labeled "Nix": psychedelic Afro bouffant, ponytail culotte and hippie chick replete with beads and a pendant with the peace symbol (mistakenly?) drawn upside down. Lift the overlay and you find "Natch" — three atrociously

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square examples of anal-fastidious middle America.

The above guidelines would hardly be worthy of mention if they were used only by institutions like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. But the fact that these instructions were issued to the thousands of employees of the Bank of America places it in another realm entirely. Good old B of A — which, you may recall, recently decided to make its stand in Isla Vista — not long ago decided that office fashion was a problem. So it formed a woman's Advisory Committee On Appearance (15 members, mainly over-30-types), and came up with cheerful restrictions on everything from boots to BO. In so doing, the bank joined a rapidly growing community of terrified corporations which now equate rising hemlines with lower profits and loose morals.

There are thousands of working women whose very jobs are imperilled by bosses who (to re-write the old saying) don't know much about style, but know what they like.

Identifying the Cheapies

More than at any previous time every woman has unlimited opportunities to create a look that is distinctively hers. For the working girl this freedom has meant the abandonment of a host of workhorse uniforms such as the A-line dress in solid colors (topped with a cliche scarf) in favor of clothes that are shorter, better fitting, brighter, lighter, more varied—and sexier. The latter descriptive category is sufficient, for many employers persist in equating sexy office girls with cheapies who, by definition, have no taste.

Should a girl fail to qualify for cheapie status, she can still be labeled "a little too far out" or "unconventional" or — confidentially — a "hippie type." This by virtue of, say, Danskins, semi-granny glasses, too many rings, sandals, and now and then a crocheted shawl. None of these things in themselves manifestly signify anything. They just make a girl look different — which, in the eyes of office ogres, is a breech of good order and decorum. Surprisingly few of these arbitors of taste have been successfully challenged despite their absurd claims that, for example, girls in short minis or Technicolor tights are bad for morale.

The controversy shows no signs of abating. As women become freer and more expressive in their dress, management has lately dragged out an old patchwork of Puritanical no-no's and stitched them together with diplomatic lingo. It's called a *dress code* and it's been popping up everywhere, not just at the Bank of America, but in the offices of nearly every major American business enterprise.

Companies everywhere are cracking down on free spirits by putting the word out to supervisors, by posting detailed regulations on office grooming, by adding new insert pages to secretarial handbooks, and, in at least one instance, including a lengthy appearance checklist on employee evaluation forms. Thus, since late 1969, one never sees distaff Pacific Telephone employees with tinted stockings or IBM secretaries with hair at longer than shoulder length. Similarly, the First National Bank of New York refuses to so much as interview job applicants who wear pantsuits.

A Set of Unspoken Rules

Not every firm has a written dress code, of course. But most of them have got their rules. A counter salesgirl at San Francisco's I. Magnin department store: "It doesn't take a new girl long to sense that there's a set of unspoken rules about dress here. No one ever explains it; you're just expected to stay in line. For one thing, no minis. And they're serious about it. Last month they threatened to fire one girl if she didn't lower her hemlines."

Elsewhere, a receptionist at the New York brokerage offices of Dean Witter: "After awhile you can tell what's going to draw complaints even though nothing's written down. It's wierd, one time one of the senior partners mumbled something critical about a bright turquoise dress I once wore to work: 'Too flashy' or something. It seemed like there was a whole philosophy behind his remark, only he wouldn't come clean about it."

The personnel department of Schieffelin & Company, a Manhattan-based importer of wines and spirits, repeatedly insisted there were no rules, yet a spokesman kept saying "Well, we *are* an office" in the same unquestioning tone as a Mother Superior saying "We *are* a convent."

AT&T's New York offices have long ago dropped mere admonitions in favor of extensive training in good grooming practices for all female high school graduates who enter the company's training program. Miss Sullivan, ATT's personnel interviewer (her tone of voice forever smiling), reports that there is no written dress code or policy, however the girls are not allowed to wear pants, culottes, shorts or slacks. Beyond this it's mostly show and tell in the guise of a booklet which shows what well-dressed girls look like, complete with color charts and fun tips.

"After a short while the girls get the idea of what they're supposed to look like and how they should dress. . . . The company expects them to look nice . . . and most of the kids look real cute in their short, sleeveless summer dresses in pretty colors."

All is sweetness and light with mother at the throttle: "The youngsters we hire seem to readily understand and we've had no disciplinary problems."

Indeed, a kind of gentle paranoia pervades much of the official talk about dress codes. Company representatives begin to sound suspicious. Their smiles betray a certain wisdom gained from previous confrontations on the office battleground. When asked her feelings on the subject, a

UAL's new hubba hubba uniform

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dress codes

Saks Fifth Avenue buyer only admitted that "they were better than they used to be" but refused to say anything more — even anonymously — until she got an OK from the publicity department.

Over at J. Walter Thompson's office — still the world's largest ad agency — personnel director Jackie Tracy categorically asserts "there is not now nor has there ever been a company policy in print regarding dress codes." However, a former employee remembers being issued a sedate blue binder as part of The Secretary's Handbook. Inside was a list of clothing do's and don'ts.

Anonymous Oatmealization

"It was very clear that simple dark pleated or straight skirts and neat white blouses were the company way."

Another ex-J. Walter staffer recalls receiving regular memos requesting that members of her department (who were largely freelancing spirits) dress "so as not to be distinguished from the rest of the permanent staff." When informed that the agency's personnel office denies having issued written instructions on dress, a secretary still working there asked: "Is it paranoid to think that Personnel can carry out the oatmealization of an entire staff anonymously?"

The dress code hassle is not limited to the conventional business world. There are plenty of pockets in the creative arts where the regimentation can be downright frightening. Los Angeles' Art Center College of Design — from which many of New York's best commercial designers have graduated — is still trying to promote the image of clean-cut Young America. As recently as 1967 it officially insisted that all male students have regular haircuts, refrain from wearing T shirts or shorts, shave daily, wear socks and at all times keep their shirts tucked in. Rules of equal severity applied to women. Though the regulations have relaxed somewhat, photographs in the Center's most recent catalog show they are still promoting that image.

Ironically, the fashion industry is just as guilty, displaying a remarkable dexterity when it comes to explaining restrictive dress codes for employees whose livelihood depends on the eventual elimination of same. Perhaps no other industry has produced as many inter-office memos on the subject nor gone to such absurd lengths to cajole employees into voluntary submission.

A classic example is the October 28, 1968, memo from the personnel director of Fieldcrest, the fashion company that gave us Yves Saint Laurent sheets and towels:

Re: Office Grooming

The fashion magazines and daily papers have made it clear that this season's "new looks" are among the most imaginative and exciting of the past decade. Depending on personal taste and the occasion, any girl can switch from a Romantic Mood to a Dashing Mood, on to a Harem Mood . . . and so on.

A look into the closets of our own Fieldcrest girls would probably uncover at least one pair of gaucho pants, several jeweled vests, and a rackful of "seethroughs." Enchanting.

Irresistable as outfits like these are to the fashion-conscious shopper, they are generally not suitable for office wear. During orientation, new employees are cautioned about wearing the following kinds of apparel to the office, and the example we set for new girls makes a vital contribution to their adjustment:

Boots & casual shoes (leather, flats)

Culotte dresses, skirts

Patterned tights (flat texture and opaque stockings are acceptable)

Shabby cardigans

Excessive eye makeup

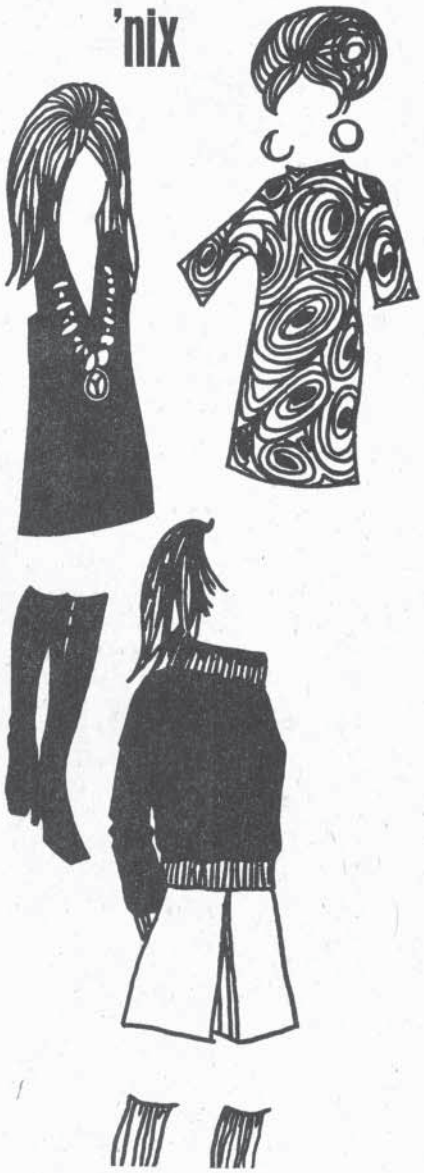
Straggly hair (if very long, hair may be pinned back or put up)

Predictably, hemlines have inched even higher than last year. Those girls who prefer the shorter length should be sure that their dress is still below the mini length; this leaves plenty of margin.

In the past Fieldcrest girls have exhibited a great sense of style, with a flair for "putting themselves together." Many visitors to our office have complimented us in your behalf, and everyone here is proud on this account. I hope we can continue to count on your cooperation.

Rosemary Fisher

While shabby cardigans and excessive eye makeup may be worthy of censure (we all know when things are "shabby" and "excessive," right?) it is easy to imagine young ladies wearing any or all of the remaining no-no's and looking perfectly stunning. As for veteran staffers setting an example for the new girls and



Do's & dont's from BankAmerica's "What Shall I Wear Today?" handbook

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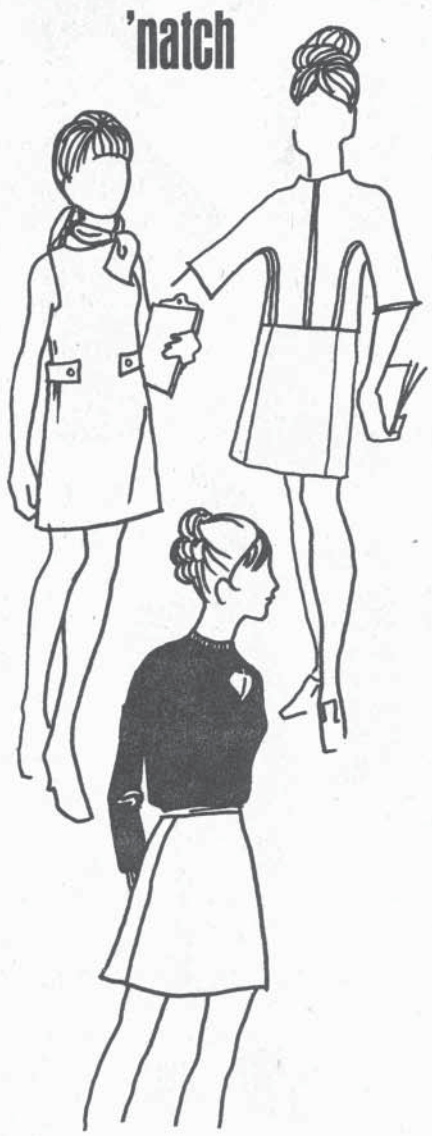

thereby making a "vital contribution to their adjustment," this amounts to nothing less than ordering the repression of healthy freedom and imagination in dress styles.

Granted, times have changed since late 1968, but more recent memos from Fieldcrest's personnel office have banned eyeglasses or sunglasses worn on the head, lipstick that was too dark or too light and skirts that are more than two inches above the knee. Lately the company boasts that it has eliminated the dress code section of its employee handbooks because. "Fieldcrest hires people who know how to dress. The secretarial schools have taught them."

A Ban on Levis

Over at J. P. Stevens, one of the fashion industry's largest textile manufacturers, a printed dress code is nowhere to be found. It hovers, rather, in a working atmosphere rampant with innuendo. One executive secretary in the sales division who requested to remain anonymous (as did most of the women interviewed for this report), complains that the higher-ups feel "it's OK to be costumed by Seventh Avenue but not by Sweet-Orr" (maker of overalls and denim work clothes among other things). Last month a memo was issued which specifically forbade the wearing of Levis by Stevens employees, even though the company has a contract with Levi Strauss for the production of denim yardage worth $3 million a year.

In all fairness, it should be noted that employees at the head offices of Levi Strauss in San Francisco were not permitted to wear Levis to work up until late last month. At that time a memo was issued relaxing the unspoken ban, provided the wearer did not look "too picnicky."

Another woman at Stevens adds: "I think the one statement on dress policy that made me angriest was 'If you work for a man, you should represent him in a manner that doesn't make him nervous.' Maybe that has less to do with fashion than with Women's Liberation, but it still makes me livid."

Regimentation at the Airport

Even uniforms have been causing trouble lately. Outside of the military, airline reservations personnel and stewardesses constitute the biggest single block of uniformed employees in the nation. And it's no secret that the problems of regimentation have long been a sore point. "Up until last year," comments a ticket agent at American Airlines' Chicago terminal, "if I felt chilly while working at the counter, I was not allowed to put on my sweater unless the other five of us did so, too. It was great for morale."

American Airlines has since then adopted a more progressive policy.

On the other hand, United Airlines has moved with deliberate speed to transform its stewardesses into fashion plates straight out of the silent Fifties. The adoption of UAL's new uniforms — which go into the airways this month — has triggered a howl of protest from stewardesses.

"They're the dumpiest uniforms I've ever seen," says one. "They make us look like police matrons. They chickened out and grabbed the first thing with a long hem they could get their hands on."

Several stews half-jokingly announced plans to wear hairnets and seamed stockings in protest. Most of the others have simply ignored the company regs and have already hiked the hemlines to four and five inches above the knee.

UAL's new stewardess uniforms are solid color straight line dresses which crash down to a hemline exactly two inches above the knee. It's an incredible throwback to an uptight decade. Oh, Pat Nixon, hubba hubba! The coats are midi-length, the shoes are modified Mary Janes, and stockings are basic black or off-white. For in-flight work the girls will wear sandwich board smocks, turtleneck sweaters and mandatory name tags pinned just below the neck. All in all, the uniforms will permit the exposure of less bare skin than at any time since the late Forties.

When asked about the new outfits, United Airlines' Appearance Counselor, Ilene Sage — who works with the airlines' 1300 stews domiciled in San Francisco — admitted that they weren't exactly knocking everyone out:

"We find that the new uniform is not going over extremely well with the girls right now. There's quite a bit of controversy, but I think many of the supervisors and the gals in the office seem to be going a little longer in dress length. But at the present time it's not going over in its fullest with the girls."

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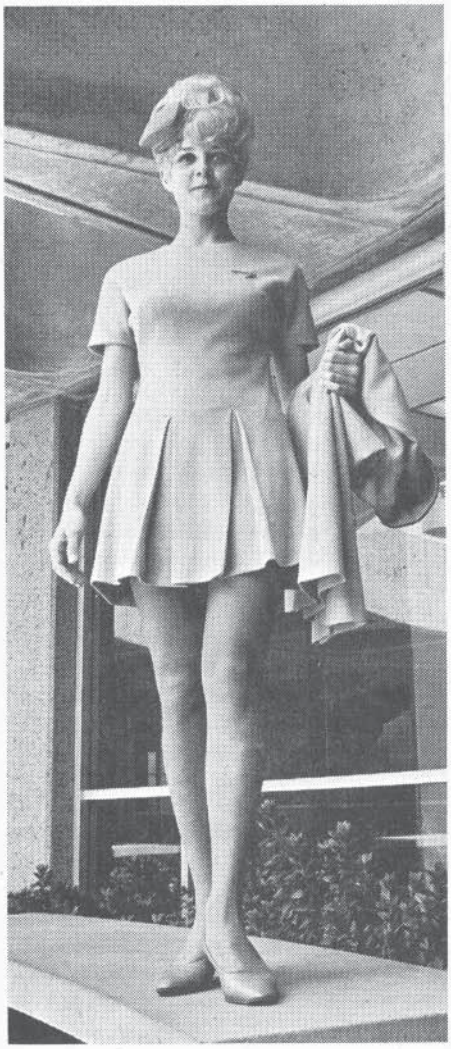
Jean-Louis Cops to Confusion

The new duds were dreamt up by Hollywood designer Jean-Louis, the same chap who developed the UAL's 1968 line (A-line dresses topped by engineer hats — real winners). In a gushy press handout on the subject of his new creations, Jean-Louis confides "part of the (design) problem was due to existing confusion on the length of skirts and coats." From there on it, it's all contradictions: "I abhor the thought of being called a fashion dictator . . . (because) . . . a woman should wear what she feels like and not what someone tells her to wear. . . . When I talked with stewardesses about what they might want in a new wardrobe, some expressed interest in pantsuits . . . but I had to remind them that a great many passengers are men and men do not like women in pants." So much for Jean-Louis' views on women wearing what pleases them.

PSA's better new cupcake



Horny Male Air Travelers

Happily not all the airlines are opting for a return to the dark ages. California's PSA (Pacific Southwest Airlines) has for sometime now outfitted its 400 stewardesses (known throughout the industry as cupcakes) in tightfitting, busty orange minidresses with ruffled bloomers in an effort to cater to commuting businessmen between Northern and Southern California. Because the concept is solidly based on the assumption that most male air travelers are horny and enjoy sneaking looks up dresses, PSA gets a lot of the businessman's business.

Currently, management is seriously considering a new uniform, this one a super mini (sub-micro?) two inches shorter than the current model. Tentatively pink and orange in color, it will feature a very abbreviated culotte in place of bloomers. Whatever design is finally accepted, PSA is pledged to the unofficial motto "Better cupcakes mean better business."

Color Coordination

As the dress code controversy continues to rage about them, an increasing number of American businesses whose employees traditionally do not wear uniforms are discovering that one way to avoid the whole hassle is to introduce so-called "career apparel" programs (read "uniforms").

For example, the First National Bank of Chicago now has its female tellers clad in "color-coordinated" dresses, its male tellers in blazers, and its pages with jumpers and blouses. The switch from personal clothes to company duds involves over 4,000 employees.

When the First National Bank changeover was announced last October, J. P. Stevens' (who manufactures most of the fabrics) division manager of uniform apparel, Edmund Senghas, announced that "there is no reason why a bank teller should not dress colorfully just as men and women in other types of work do. Color-coordinated clothing eliminated a feeling of regimentation one may get when wearing conventional uniforms. So all we're doing is putting color into the banking scene."

Senghas never explained exactly how a teller can avoid a feeling of regimentation by having three uniforms instead of one. He did report one of the advantages to corporate fashion: "Business firms can avoid problems created by individual fashion tastes — the length a skirt should be, for instance. . . . They like the concept for its control factor."

Revolt at CBS & Beyond

There are signs that a more enlightened attitude is beginning to prevail in some quarters, but policy changes usually only occur after a determined office revolution. Last January a group of 50 women office workers in CBS's New York headquarters showed up for work in pantsuits on the day following the circulation of a memo banning them. They were quickly joined in spirit by their counterpart at the CBS Paris bureau, who sent a wire of support which stated in part: "Rather than have anybody tell us what to wear, we would prefer not to wear anything at all."

Or, as the Bank of America pamphlet so nicely puts it: "What's the nicest thing you can wear? A smile."

In London last month a group of working girls publicly signed a declaration promising never to wear anything shorter than nine inches above the knee. Days later a delegation of 224 stockbrokers from the same city issued a warning that they will snip the skirts of any woman under 30 caught wearing a dress lower than eight inches above her knee. Back in San Francisco a billboard appeared with the message "Down with the Maxi, Up with the Mini."

At stake for millions of working women is their freedom to dress and groom with imagination and individuality, even when the exercise of that freedom may rub a few customers or supervisors the wrong way. To date that freedom has been curtailed drastically in the name of company image and profits.

But the assumptions underlying this repression are dubious at best.

After all, a woman who is allowed to express fully her identity through her selection of clothes (or who simply wishes to project a comfortable persona) is going to feel better, work better and relate more confidently with both the public and her fellow workers.

If an entire corporate office staff were allowed to feel that way, the results would surely show up in the annual earnings report and put to rest forever the absurd fear that freedom in fashion is bad business.