

DISCIPLINING WOMEN THROUGH 'RESPECTABLE' ATTIRE: A STUDY AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to study the gendered nature of these dress impositions on women undergraduates, the processes by which these women are coerced into upholding these practices and to explore the ideological and theoretical reasons for these behaviours. This is a qualitative study based on ten in-depth interviews among male and female university students from three universities. The students were undergraduates of Medical, Arts, Science and Management faculties within the age range of 21 to 25 years. The students were from both urban and rural areas of Sri Lanka. The undergraduates were asked to narrate their experiences related to the dress code, with a focus on the dress code for women at different points of their university career. They shared their experiences on ragging and harassment including sexual harassment. Therefore, this study concludes that the instilling of a dress code at university cater to the age-old patriarchal expectations on womanhood where the woman is expected to represent the values of respectability through her body and sexuality. She is vilified and treated in a derogatory manner by the dominant society when she transgresses the normative expectations of representing a cultural femininity when she does not subscribe to the expected dress code.

Keywords: disciplining, harassment, womanhood, cultural femininity

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Lajja nadda oka adan campus enna, apita pennada oka adan inne?”

(Aren't you ashamed to wear that to the university? Are you wearing this to entertain us?)

“Lajja nadda?”

(Aren't you ashamed?)

Women enrollment in higher education in Sri Lanka has gradually increased over the years. The numbers have reached a significant 62% of female students and 38% of male students at all the local universities in the country (University Grants Commission, 2016). However, these numbers do not necessarily indicate that, both female and male students have gender equitable treatment. This lack of gender equitable treatment is highly visible within the university subcultures which impose dress codes on students that particularly lead to the discrimination of female students. Though certain dress codes are also imposed on male undergraduates, the gendered nature of this imposition on female undergraduates is

imperative as it works in subtle ways to control, regulate and discipline the female body and sexuality by subjecting her to sexual objectification and harassment.

The aim of this research is to understand the gendered nature of these dress impositions on women undergraduates, the processes by which these women are coerced into upholding these practices and to explore the ideological and theoretical reasons for these behaviours.

There have been local studies carried out describing certain aspects of this phenomenon through research on ragging. However, this study particularly focuses on exploring the ways in which the gendered politics of discipline and respectability are imposed on the woman's body and her sexuality. The dominant ideological expectations of the university subculture, the frameworks of respectability, the motif of 'women-as-nation' and the discipline, surveillance and regulation of women undergraduates are studied in this research via a feminist perspective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The gendered politics of discipline and respectability which are prescribed on the woman's attire have been explored through previous research. These include examinations of 'the motif of woman- as-nation' (Silva, 2004, p.97) among war widows, Free Trade Zone (FTZ) women, migrant women and female representations in theatre and literature (de Alwis, 2002; Hewamanne, 2003; Hewamanne, 2006; De Mel, 2001).

Wijewardena (2016) reports in a study that, 78% of male undergraduates at state universities indicated "they do not want their wives or girlfriends [to] wear trousers or sleeveless blouses". This is an alarming figure the causes of which are a little researched area. However, the available studies on gender in higher education in Sri Lanka have not particularly focused on attire as means of controlling and regulating the woman undergraduate via discipline and respectability.

Prior research on gender in higher education in Sri Lanka are based on exploring and critiquing the gender-neutral arena in higher education which only gives precedence to the ensuring of the

quality and accessibility of education to all. Gunawardena et al (2006) claim that, despite the increased numbers of women participation in higher educational institutions, they do not indicate "empowering women" in university education, both as students and as staff (p. 563).

Ruwanpura (2011) bases her study at the University of Kelaniya to examine how sexuality of students is constructed and how cultural and social expectations of respectability are expected to be upheld by the women undergraduates "to maintain, produce and reproduce social norms which will mark them as respectable and chaste women" (p. 1). She particularly identifies the traditional dress which is imposed on university students to wear during the ragging period during their freshmen year as "long skirts and blouses with sleeves and a high neckline" to explore how the women who ascribe to this "ideal attire" are treated kindly and the harmful consequences faced by women who "transgress" these boundaries (p. 116).

Liyanage (1997) in her paper narrates the experiences of ragging undergone by women undergraduates at universities by

particularly focusing on the “sexual overtones” of these traumatic experiences. Her findings differentiate between the physical harm male university undergraduates experience as opposed to the psychological harm of ragging which women experience during the season of ragging at university. She particularly refers to the ridiculing women were subjected to where they were made to feel a “deep humiliation [for] being [a] women.” Liyanage also focuses on the punishment faced by women undergraduates for any form of resistance towards ragging such as expressing opinions against the established university subculture and reporting to the warden and lecturers about the harassment they have undergone. The need for student organizers, administrators and educators to seriously consider ragging as “a pervasive social problem in universities” which needs to be overcome is reiterated through her work (p. 31-52).

Silva, Sivayoganathan & Ratnayake (1998) identify ragging as a counterculture which “perpetuate highly unequal gender relations within the undergraduate community” instead of being a “social equalizer” and “egalitarian

in ethos.” A combination of qualitative and quantitative data is used in this study. Data from semi-structured interviews with 60 purposively selected persons and a quantitative survey covering a sample of 312 third year undergraduates from the Arts and Medical Faculties at the University of Peradeniya have been analysed. The research findings indicate that, the students favorable to ragging comprise of more male students compared to female students, more arts students compared to medical students and more rural students compared to urban students. It establishes that, ragging provides “an environment within which senior male undergraduates are in commanding position vis-à-vis female students in the new batch” (p. 1-10).

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on ten in-depth interviews among male and female university students from three universities. The students were undergraduates of Medical, Arts, Science and Management faculties within the age range of 21 to 25 years. The students were from both urban and rural areas of Sri Lanka.

The undergraduates were

asked to narrate their experiences related to the dress code, with a focus on the dress code for women at different points of their university career. They shared their experiences on ragging and harassment including sexual harassment (e.g. obscene remarks) they underwent due to the imposition of the expected dress code at university. They also shared their opinions about the reason for imposing such a dress code at university, why certain students adhered to it and how they were treated by their batch mates, senior students and even academics when they opposed to these “rules.”

Each interview took approximately half an hour to one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the principal investigators and a qualitative content analysis was carried out.

A limitation of this research was the position of the principal investigators as university academics which may have prevented the undergraduates from sharing certain experiences. However, given the sensitive nature of this study, a certain degree of trust had to be present for undergraduates to be able to relate their experiences. The investigators being academics was beneficial as the students were

confident about the researchers maintaining the anonymity of the given information.

One of the challenges of this research was accessing the perpetrators of ragging mentioned by the students, as the researchers had to maintain the safety and discretion of interviewees who shared their personal experiences.

Informed verbal consent was obtained from the participants of this research. Any information that leads to the identification of individuals and universities have been anonymized.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The incessant obsession of clothing and imposing dress codes on women have been present since colonization (De Alwis, 1997). Wickramasinghe (1992) offers a detailed study of dress and nationalism in Sri Lanka from the pre-colonial times to the modern context. She explores the various changes throughout history by focusing on the saree and jacket combination “worn by women of all classes throughout the island” which later becomes the national dress in Sri Lanka. She also explores how the dress is a “sign of social class” in Sri Lanka which

depicts hierarchy in the public setting and the notions of ‘shame’ and the “moralistic discourse” that are associated with the dress (p. 3).

De Alwis (1997) extends Gananath Obeyesekere’s formulation of the Sinhala practice of *lajja-baya* which is glossed as shame-fear to “respectability.” She says even when performing “public roles” women are “constantly under surveillance and vulnerable to being sexualized and shamed i.e., being labelled *lajja-baya nati* (loose and immoral) and therefore subject to the unmaking and unmasking of their ‘respectability’” (p. 143). Obeyesekere (1984) says *lajja-baya* is a part of the conditioning process of the child of a Sinhala family and says that, “[b]aya when conjoined with *lajja* means ‘fear of ridicule or social disapproval.’ So the Sinhalese must not only have a “sense of shame” but also be “sensitive to the reaction of others who may shame them” (p. 504). The interviews which were carried out for this research focuses on the notions of *lajja-baya* and the gendered politics of respectability women undergraduates are subjected to at university. It focuses on how the women who do not subscribe to the expected dress

code at university are subjected to ridicule and vilification by the dominant sub-groups of the university.

De Alwis (2002) scrutinizes the role of the Sri Lankan woman to establish that, “Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim, continue to be constructed as reproducers, nurturers, and disseminators of ‘tradition’, ‘culture’, ‘community’ and ‘nation.’ These gendered notions establish the motif of ‘women-as-nation’ as the accepted dominant ideology. There are problematic ideological perceptions behind the dress code as women undergraduates who do not cater to this imposition are subjected to abuse, vilification and ridicule (p. 675).

Althusser (1970) establishes ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.” He also introduces the concept of ‘interpellation’ to say that, “ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects.” It is the dominant governing ideologies which perpetuate the hegemonic values and expectations of the normative mainstream society. Thus, the

dominant ideological perceptions of respectability which are inter-linked and inter-connected with the imposition of a dress code are those which are unconsciously interpellated by subjects (p. 142-164).

Foucault (1977) explores the relationship between systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation using the Panopticon as a metaphor. He explores the power-knowledge concept where power and knowledge are generated by simply observing others. A disciplinary power is generated subsequent to the supervision of every movement and the recording of all events. The result of this continuous observation was a docile acceptance of the regulations. With time these became the norm with everyone conforming to these regulations due to the threat of being disciplined. The real danger for Foucault was not necessarily that individuals are suppressed by the social system but that they are so carefully ensnared in it and that it penetrates and permeates the behaviour of individuals (p. 224).

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The information obtained through the interviews were analysed and the emerging themes were identified and presented as follows.

Types of acceptable clothing

During the first year at university students are expected to undergo a rigorous dress code as a part of student subculture at university.

“We are expected to wear long, flared skirts and dresses which go beyond the knee in length. We are not allowed to wear wrist watches, necklaces or any type of jewelry. We had to wear rubber slippers and there were some seniors who told us to plait our hair and come.” (Saumya, 22)

“For Muslim students the acceptable form of clothing is the black abhaya, they [Senior Muslim boys] say that since the others [the Sinhalese] also have a dress code we should have one too. For Tamil and Hindu girls only the shalwar is allowed during their first year.” (Nazreen, 23).

After the ragging season some of the rigid rules are relaxed but these impositions continue in some faculties. Women

undergraduates of Faculty X do not appear to be subjected to the ragging that other students complained of. They are however not allowed to wear trousers throughout their undergraduate years. For other undergraduates a general rule is that only full-length trousers are allowed inside the campus. Sleeveless tops and track bottoms are also discouraged. An interesting feature noted in Faculty X was that students are mailed a set of instructions on the appropriate dress code with the other documentation necessary for admission to the university. The preamble to the set of instructions states “[k]eeping in touch with the rich traditions of our culture, the Faculty X has to adopt strict clothing guidelines for students”. Specific instructions on what is recommended for girls does not include trousers and “specifically states that that skirt must extend well below the knee and should not be too tight”. Imposing such regulations through administrative structures effectively institutionalize these dress codes which promote a ‘cultural femininity’.

Respectable women

Sri Lankan culture glorifies the woman who has “lajja-baya”

(shame and fear) as the respectable woman and the universities too are proponents of this culture.

“During my first year I remember I once wore a black skirt (up to my knees) and white blouse for presentation as we were told to dress formally for them. After the assignment I was sitting on a bench with a friend of mine. Then four senior girls approached us and started insulting me for what I was wearing. They asked me, “Dakke nadda hamuduruwo kenek yanawa lajja nadda kakul deka holla holla inne?” (Didn’t you see a Buddhist monk passing by, aren’t you ashamed to sit there shaking your legs?)

I didn’t even see the monk and I doubt he saw me but I knew these girls were looking at us from a distance and wanted to pick on us. I found it very unfair.” (Shamara, 22)

“There was this instance when a girl was wearing jeggings, and it was so tight, and she was wearing a short Kurtha, so I told her it is shameful to wear such things to university” (Praveeni, 23)

Praveeni, an undergraduate who was particularly vociferous about the discrimination of

women by imposing dress codes admitted having on a few instances reprimanded others for not conforming to them as she felt it was important that one dressed respectably and some attire was 'not respectable' by her standards.

This pattern of normalization of dress codes and shame culture was also apparent in many women interviewed. Their notions of respectability seemed to be fashioned by the hegemonic ideologies of the rest of the society, where women were chaste, feminine and modest and did not attract untoward attention to themselves.

"Whatever said and done it is not nice to wear short skirts since there are boys." (Nazreen, 23).

"It's not nice to come to the university like that, wearing extremely short clothes. It is disturbing for the guys also." (Suramya, 23)

University undergraduates usually inquire about the dress codes that are practiced within the faculty long before they attend university formally. Upon entering the campus these rules are impressed upon by senior students and in some instances by

academics too. The students, particularly the female undergraduates are expected to adhere to the dominant ideological expectations on dress codes to discipline themselves as 'analyzable' and 'manipulable' 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979, p. 136).

These gendered dress codes particularly apply to the women undergraduates as the patriarchal discourse within Sri Lanka expects women to be perceived as the "reproducers, upholders and signifiers of their "culture" and "tradition." The imposition of modest clothing such as wearing long skirts and plating hair during the rag season and the accepting of wearing skirts up to a knee length after the rag season as opposed to three quarter length trousers can therefore be regarded as attempts to impose a very cultural femininity. The women are thus expected to conform to the "heteronormative roles of docile daughter, chaste wife, nurturing mother, or sagacious grandmother." Women undergraduates who do not conform to these 'respectable' stereotypical representations through their dress code are thus "open to censure, ridicule, and

even punishment.” (de Alwis, 2002, p. 679).

Disciplining women

A recurrent remark made by undergraduates was that they were ‘scolded’ if they did not adhere to the stipulated dress code. The “scolding” involves verbal harassment that students are subjected to. These take place at public meetings held for juniors by the seniors and even in small groups. The offensive language used against women is sexual in nature as women who do not adhere to the expected dress code are considered immoral and thus deserving of the harassment. They are thus subjected to derogatory Sinhala hate speech terminologies particularly by the senior male students. Terms such as “wesi” (woman prostitute) and “huththi” (derogatory term with sexual overtones) are commonly used.

Women undergraduates are also subjected to various other forms of humiliation for not adhering to the dress code by being subjected to sexual male gaze. In one instance Subodhi (22) shared that, when she wore a skirt that was shorter than the stipulated length during her first year at university she was asked by a

senior male student, “*umbata lajja nada oka adan university enna? Apita pennada oka adan enne? Lajja nadda?*” (aren’t you ashamed to wear that (the skirt) to university? Are you wearing it for our viewing pleasure? Aren’t you ashamed?). She was then asked to put her finger on her mouth, direct her gaze at the floor as if she is “*lajja wela*” (ashamed or humiliated) and walk away from the senior male student.

The university subculture can be regarded as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) which governs “massively and predominantly by ideology” (Althusser, 1970, p. 141). The students who resist the dominant ideological expectation of the university subculture are called “*alayo*” (potatoes- a term used to mean outcast in university language). Being labeled as “*alayo*” or the process of “*ala weema*” (becoming an outcast) can be disastrous for the student as it means the student is useless and serves to marginalize and outcast the student. A male student shared his opinion about this process by saying,

“If they don’t conform then they will become ala. And you know what happens to alayao. They don’t

even get to come to the canteen, they have to go to the ala canteen, Ey gollanwa kon wenava (They are treated as outcasts)” (Lakshan, 21).

However certain departments at universities are regarded as *ala* departments by the dominant university subculture. This is because the students of these departments frequently oppose the rag culture. The students of these departments in various universities consciously resist the university subculture and undergo the cultural process of reappropriation to reclaim the derogatory meanings associated with the term *alayo*. By reclaiming the term such students encourage alternate practices and different perceptions and identify themselves as anti-raggers who oppose to the dominant ideological expectations of the university subculture.

“During some lectures the lecturers make jokes about the length of the girls’ skirts. Even seniors make a big joke about it. We are not allowed to wear pants at any time of the day. Of course, we wouldn’t want to defy the rules, we don’t know who is watching, and if they rat on us, we might get in trouble” (Praveeni, 25)

“After the episode of wearing the skirt and all that happened afterwards I was so careful about what I wore, even now I am, I wouldn’t want to go through it again, I even felt like leaving the university. Mawa hondtama charter wuna, naththatama nathi wuna (I was utterly outcasted, I was completely miserable)” (Lakna, 22)

The sense of surveillance that women feel they are exposed to is palpable from these narratives. This notion of being watched over leads to them conforming to the dress codes at all times as they fear the repercussions of non-adherence.

Hasini (23) is a third-year undergraduate at university. One day she was wearing jeggings and a baggy top to university and the guards refused her entrance under the pretext of ‘protecting’ her from hearing something ‘offensive’ from the senior male students. The guards had then ushered three girls who were nearby the gate and after confirming they were from the same faculty as Hasini, had proceeded to ask them, “*mehema university ekata adagena yanna denawada?*” (Are you allowed to dress like this to university?)

“I was able to tell from their faces

that those girls knew the guards expected a certain answer from them. They asked me, “naa mehema adan yanna baa, nangi danne nadda mehema adan enna baa kiyala? Oyata lajja nadda mehema adan enna?” (No, you cannot dress like this. Younger sister, do you not know that you cannot dress like this? Aren’t you ashamed to dress like this?). Though I kept on saying I need to go for my lectures they refused to let me in and finally I had to go to my friend’s boarding house and change into a pair of loose pants. When I came back to university I saw that all the security officers were watching me, and they were laughing, some had smirks on their faces. That’s what made me so mad. They are security officers and though they have the right to tell you what to do they have no right to prevent a student from going for their lecture.” (Hasini, 23).

*“I remember one day when I was going to a lecture with my friends I was wearing a skirt above knee length. Then a bunch of senior guys started following us and were calling us names and the usual shit...but there was one guy who came close to me and whispered the word *vesi* (woman prostitute) in my ear. I wanted to slap him, but I*

couldn’t do it. I felt so angry and felt like crying but we kept on walking” (Dinesha, 23)

As narrated by these students those that do not maintain the image of a respectable woman are disciplined in various ways. The authorities of discipline are in most instances men from senior batches or even from within their own batch. However, women too are involved, often performing a passive role in the harassment but on some occasions engaging in the verbal harassment.

Men are the protectors of women

Based on the ‘the motif of woman- as-nation’ (Silva, 2004, p.97) if women are the “reproducers, upholders and signifiers of their ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’” (de Alwis, 2002, p. 696) that would automatically make men the protectors of the nation and its cultural values and expectations. Within the university the male undergraduates both self-identify and are represented as the protectors of their female batch mates.

“The boys are equally scared as the girls...the boys would look at me and say “oya baya nadda mehema adagena enna”, “dannada oya

mehema adagena awahama api thamai oyawa balaganna oney (Aren't you scared to dress like this? Don't you know that when you dress like this, we have to look after you?)” and I would tell them “You don't need to look after me I would look out for myself” (Sarala, 23).

Men are responsible for the disciplining of women and if they do not they are targeted and physically abused by the raggers.

“Ganu lamai skirts adan awe nathi wunama aiyyala apiwa hostel ekata aragena gihilla gahanawa.” (Thimal, 22)

(When girls do not wear skirts, we are taken to the hostel and beaten up by the senior boys).

“Mama slit ekak thiyana skirt ekak andahama, hamoma man diha balagena hitiya. Passe mage batch eke inna kollo pas denek awilla mata kiwwa, senior aiyyala kiwwa kiwala, umbalage ganu lamai tika hadaganna umbalata barida” (Lakna, 22)

(When I wore a skirt with a slit, everyone was staring at me. Then, five boys from my batch came to me and told me, the senior boys asked them whether they cannot properly discipline their own

female batch mates).

Foucault (1979) identifies the power of the disciplining gaze which operates within societal institutions. He posits that, power is a “faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network.” (p. 214). It is this disciplining gaze which is imposed over the woman for the purposes of regulating and controlling her attire. In the university as the male students are expected to embody their role of being the ‘protectors’ of women, they are also expected to become the ‘discipliners’ of women.

“One day I was told to tell my friend (a girl from the same batch) not to wear jeans by the senior aiyyas (senior boy) and they threatened to hit me if she does not adhere to the dress code prescribed for first years. I felt very uncomfortable to tell her what to wear. Who am I to say that? Who am I to tell her what to do and what not to do?” (Dilan, 22)

“We tell them to dress in a particular way so that we can identify them to be from our own faculty. We are a faculty that does

not 'physically rag', so we wouldn't want them to get into trouble with others in the university. If they are seen behaving inappropriately then we are informed by the other faculties, and then we can correct them, we do this because it is our responsibility to protect them" (Lakshan, 24)

This disciplining gaze is particularly dangerous as women undergraduates self-discipline and self-regulate themselves to cater to the expectations of imposed university dress code.

"I wanted to avoid being ragged and being called vulgar names by the senior male students as much as possible, so I wore long skirts throughout the ragging period though I hated to wear them" (Saumya, 22)

Many narratives indicate that most of the perpetrators of the "disciplining" are men from rural areas coming from less privileged backgrounds who possibly have been and continue to be the subjects of social emasculation. It is possible that as a result they feel the need to play the role of an 'authoritative male' who is in control of the situation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The dominant ideological expectations of the university subcultures expect the woman undergraduate to cater to the cultural feminine ideal through her body and sexuality by the imposition of a dress code both officially and unofficially at university. She is expected to properly regulate and discipline herself and cater to the values of respectability which are imposed on her body by the hegemonic and conventional patriarchal assumptions on women.

The instilling of the 'appropriate' dress code is not only a key component of the ragging period but is also given priority during the subsequent years of a student's undergraduate life. Dress codes can vary depending on faculty as well as the seniority of students. The 'policing' of clothing occurs throughout the campus with more prominence given to first years and more often to female students. The undergraduates are expected to adhere to these dress codes irrespective of whether they attend lectures or not.

The in-depth interviews found instances where the woman undergraduate was 'disciplined', openly 'ridiculed' and 'humiliated'

when she did not adhere to the expected dress code. This was not only done during the season of ragging during the first year but also throughout the subsequent years by senior male as well as female students and at times by security officials at university who denied entrance to the woman undergraduate if she was not attired in 'respectable' clothing to university.

A recurring theme given as a reason for the imposition of such rules is that, it ensures 'respectability'. While some men and women may attempt to circumvent the rigid rules, such instances are rare. Those who do violate and transgress these dress codes, particularly the women undergraduates undergo 'discipline' by facing verbal harassment which can also be sexual in nature, derision and humiliation by those who impose them.

Therefore, this study concludes that the instilling of a dress code at university cater to the age-old patriarchal expectations on womanhood where the woman is expected to represent the values of respectability through her body and sexuality. She is vilified and treated in a derogatory manner by the

dominant society when she transgresses the normative expectations of representing a cultural femininity when she does not subscribe to the expected dress code.

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