



The University of Sydney

New Beginnings: Tackling the Problem of Lookism and the Role of Dress for Success

A Research Report for Dress for Success (Sydney), Report 1, 2013

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The research team for this project included Prudence Black, ARC DECRA Fellow, Gender and Cultural Studies and Diane van den Broek, Senior Lecturer, Business School, University of Sydney. However we would like to acknowledge the immense support and time provided by Dress for Success, in particularly Megan Etheridge and also the extraordinary time given by volunteers and clients of the service.

Executive Summary

This report provides a brief commentary on the issue of lookism and the problems this may present for many women seeking employment both in Australia and overseas. It then presents research on the organisation Dress for Success undertaken during 2012 and 2013.

For some time we have become aware that employee's looks are important aspects of recruitment and selection for firms, especially in the service industries, where presentation is quite literally part of the service. The academic literature, has already presented us with some important inroads to this phenomenon, often referred to as 'aesthetic labour'. In common parlance this term refers to the way firms employ on the basis of looks and general presentation rather than on more 'objective' skills and traits, such as technical or intellectual capabilities.

We have also become aware of the potentially discriminatory aspects of this phenomenon. For example, in many countries there is no discrimination legislation based on looks and physical appearance. However, in Australia the state of Victoria has formally recognised that discrimination can occur on the basis of an employee's physical features and under the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995 it is now unlawful to treat job applicants, contract workers and employees unfairly or discriminate against them on the basis of their physical features. While we won't assess the effectiveness of this legislation here, it is important to note that legislation is starting to keep up with the encroaching issue of lookism both in Australia and overseas.

What we can do however is share our research about the role of organisations like Dress for Success who provide an important buffer for those who may face discrimination. The following report is divided into three sections. The first provides contextual analysis of 'lookism'; the second section outlines the research methods used for the study and the third section presents our primary research on Dress for Success as an organisation including interview material with global affiliates; the referral agencies; the volunteers and of course the important clients that they serve. The concluding section summarises the findings and offers some recommendations. References are also provided at the end of the document.

1. Introduction: Definition, Context and Literature on Lookism

Lookism and Discrimination based on Physical Features

1. What is ‘Lookism’?

Lookism can be interpreted in a number of ways, however it usually refers to the preferential treatment given to what are deemed to be physically attractive people. As such it can include presentation and grooming as well as immutable attributes such as height and other physical features. While there are various interpretations about what is ‘attractive’ or presentable may represent, the term has come to describe the process where employment recruitment and selection is based on looks, rather than other more job related skills. While the phenomenon predates the term, for example see below for the use of ‘ugly laws’ (Schweik, 2009), it is often cited back to a *Washington Post* article in the late 1970s referring to discrimination based on looks. More recently the word and the phenomenon is more widely recognised and according to Tietje and Cresap, lookism represents an important form of ‘aesthetic capital’, which is distributed unequally within society (2005).

2.1 Why is Lookism an Issue?

Lookism has received significant scholarly attention from a range of researchers in cultural studies, anthropology, law and economics both in Australia and overseas. While researchers refer to their own disciplines for analysis, lookism often relies on preconceived notions of attractiveness based on social stereotypes of cultural, racial and gender roles. However two important implications of the phenomenon are noteworthy for this report. The first are the economic implications of lookism and the second is the discriminatory nature of the phenomenon.

2.2 Economic Benefits

For example, there is a lot of research arguing there is a ‘beauty premium’, suggesting that the *economic implications* of lookism include the question of income gaps based on looks, as well as increased or decreased productivity from workers considered beautiful or ugly by their co-workers. Longitudinal research indicates that looks do pay a considerable dividend. As Rhode (2010) notes, employer perceptions of employee appearance can influence judgements about job performance and work competence and, income, status and employment prospects. Good looks can translate into a better education, better jobs and bigger income. For example in the United Kingdom, Harper (2000) surveyed 11,000 33-year-old employees and discovered that unattractive men were paid 15% less and unattractive women 11% less, creating what some have called a ‘penalty for plainness’ (Warhurst et al, 2012, 78). Some years earlier, Hamermesh and Biddle (1994), used household survey data for over 10,000 Americans and Canadians, and found similar results and again in China similar results of a beauty premium were identified (Hamermesh, Meng and Zhang, 2010). In Australia, Borland and Leigh used a sample of 769 men (83% were employed), and 846 women (46% were employed) between the ages of 18 and 64 and found the financial return for physical attractiveness is around \$32,150 in annual salary, with men of above-average looks typically commanding \$81,750 compared with \$49,600 for men with below-average looks.

2.3 Discrimination

While looks can earn you extra income, it can also keep you out of employment as hiring decisions, performance evaluation, pay and career development can be affected. For some commentators

this is a legitimate criterion of employment (Postrel, 2003). However we disagree, because like sex and race, beauty is often immutable and should not be treated inequitably. Like racism or sexism, lookism can lead to significant discrimination. As such we concur that lookism may well represent the 'next frontier' in employment discrimination (Warhurst et al, 2009; Oaff, 2003).

However discrimination on the basis of physical features, as with all discrimination, is complex and difficult to identify. With respect to appearance and dress codes, managerial discretion allows firms to 'lay down rules' on appearance standards that control the way their employees are dressed or presented (Hay and Middlemiss, 2003, 69). Despite growing recognition of lookism there is no *federal* law in the United States protecting against discrimination based on physical appearance. As mentioned above, up until the 1970s several American cities had 'ugly laws' making it illegal for people with 'unsightly' disabilities to appear in public (Schweik, 2009). While protection and awareness of disability discrimination has improved since then, there is growing evidence that people make conscious or unconscious or conscious judgments of others based on looks and presentation.

While employee recruitment based on looks are used as an employer strategy to increase competitive advantage, some firms like Virgin Airlines and Australia Post as well as other high profile hospitality and retail firms, have been accused of discriminating on the basis of looks (see, e.g., ABC, 2006; Nickson et al., 2005; Spiess and Waring, 2005). We know that employee's bodies have become an important part of the product that corporations use to endorse their workplace culture (Black 2012, Mitchell, 2012). We also know that this is having an effect on rates of cosmetic surgery and the popularity of makeover shows and that confidence is an important part of gaining employment and 'getting ahead'. But what happens when people don't have access to employment and have limited tools to build confidence with their appearance to enter a workplace on an equal footing. This is where Dress for Success provides a distinctive and remarkable service.

3. How Does Lookism Influence Dress for Success Activities?

Dress for Success was started in 1997 when Nancy Lublin of New York City used a \$5,000 inheritance from her great-grandfather to establish what would become a global enterprise. Nancy wanted to honour his memory and legacy by using the financial gift to provide people greater opportunities and so established the organisation with three nuns from Spanish Harlem who each ran public service programs. Together, they built Dress for Success, New York and by 1998, there were nearly 20 Dress for Success programs. All Dress for Success organizations are not-for-profit entities, with Dress for Success Worldwide and its United States affiliates having 501(c)(3) charitable status and those outside the United States operating as registered charities. Dress for Success is an international not-for-profit organisation offering services designed to help clients attain jobs and remain employed. The founding premise of Dress for Success was for each client to receive at least one suit or outfit in preparation for a job interview. Clients are given the option to return for a second suit or separates when they find work.

2. Compiling the Research

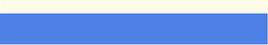
- 2.1 There are over 125 affiliates worldwide. Since 1997, Dress for Success has served hundreds of thousands of women in an ever increasing number of countries including the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the European Union, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Netherlands, Ireland and the West Indies to name a few. As such, the researchers were keen to understand how global affiliates relate to the work they do. We were also keen to talk with referral agencies that are associated with Dress for Success; the important volunteers that keep the service running and the clients that receive the service. While the Sydney service is currently based in Marrickville, they provide a range of outreach services that send clothes to regional areas, as well as several Correctional Service facilities in New South Wales.
- 2.2 The first section of this report presents a survey undertaken by the researchers to identify broad issues that global affiliates experience in their day to day running of their service, whether it is in Paris or Sydney. The survey was sent out via the New York office to just over a hundred affiliates around the globe, receiving 69 global affiliates responses to the survey and we present the full survey responses in section 3.1.
- 2.3 Dress for Success serves clients by referral although there are occasional exceptions to this. Clients are referred by a diverse group of non-profit and government agencies including job search agencies, homeless shelters, immigration services, job training programs, educational institutions and domestic violence shelters, correctional service centres, among many other organisations. As part of this research, staff from two Sydney based job agencies were interviewed and excerpts from these interviews are presented in section 3.2
- 2.3 Volunteers constitute the backbone of Dress for Service. For example, on her initial visit to the Sydney showroom, the client receives some very highly personalised services that cater for clothing needs but this may also include being provided with accessories including belts, bags, scarves, and jewellery. Advice may be given about the use of cosmetics along with sensitive advice about grooming and how to present. After a woman finds a job she can return to Dress for Success for additional clothing that can be mixed and matched to make several outfits, providing her with the foundation for a professional wardrobe. While they are best known for providing clothing and suits to women, Dress for Service also offers employment retention programs that help women on their journey towards economic independence; remaining employed and building a rewarding career. These programs might include interview skills and assistance with CV's. There are also classes giving guidance on personal presentation. Section 3.3 draws together the diverse range of tasks volunteers undertake every day within the organisation.
- 2.5 This report recognises the importance of Dress for Success in maintaining dignity for, and giving opportunity to, women from all walks of life and in a diverse range of predicaments. While Dress for Success state that they target women in need, their doors are open to any women. The clients interviewed here represent the diverse client base that find themselves inside the doors of the Sydney showroom. Section 3.4 provides several extracts from interviews with clients that were undertaken in 2013. Taken together the report is a select view of the important work that Dress for Success, Sydney carry out, however it does provide a sense of the activities and outcomes of a hugely effective organisation.

3. Research Findings

3.1 The Organisation & Global Affiliates.

This section reports on our web based survey returned from 69 global affiliates. The data here is presented as the survey was returned to us, however we could not include all the responses to the final question.

1. Out of the two factors listed below, which is the MOST important trait/skill you emphasise to prepare clients for work readiness? (select one only)

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Appropriate Dress		33	56%
2	Interview Skills		26	44%
	Total		59	100%

2. Out of the two factors listed below, which is the MOST important trait/skill that you think YOUR CLIENTS emphasise to prepare for work readiness? (select one only)

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Appropriate Dress		37	61%
2	Interview Skills		24	39%
	Total		61	100%

5. Traditionally Dress for Success used the suit as a staple garment for work readiness. Do you think the suit remains an important symbol of work preparedness?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Agree		33	54%
2	Neither Agree nor Disagree		15	25%
3	Disagree. If so, please explain		13	21%
	Total		61	100%

6. Do you think your clients feel that a suit is an important symbol of work readiness?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Agree		28	47%
2	Strongly Agree		10	17%
3	Disagree		8	13%
4	Strongly Disagree		2	3%
5	Neither Agree nor Disagree		12	20%
	Total		60	100%

7. Please rank these terms in order of importance in relation to what you are trying to achieve when dressing your clients?

#	Answer	1	2	3	4	5	
1	A Professional Look	27	25	6	2	0	60
2	A Presentable Look	3	15	16	18	8	60
3	A Neat and Tidy Look	2	6	30	18	4	60
4	A Fashionable Look	0	0	6	16	38	60
5	Confidence in Appearance	28	14	2	6	10	60
	Total	60	60	60	60	60	-

9. In your opinion, and through your experience working in the service, what percentage of your clients do you think may have experienced discrimination based on their clothes?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Not sure, can't say	20	33%
2	Under 50%	12	20%
3	Between 50-70%	22	36%
4	Over 70%	7	11%
	Total	61	100%

10. How do you think employer expectations in relation to dressing for work has changed over the past 10 years? (partial responses)

- First impressions still count and it may cloud the work readiness of a client if the first impression is a negative one.
- Many employers expect a less formal look than in the past, but still require respectful attire.
- In a tighter economy (and larger candidate pool) appearance has taken on more importance in decision making. Websites and social media also having an impact as they are such visual mediums.
- First impressions are key.
- Expect better dress due to more competition for jobs.
- The dress code is specific to where you are employed.

- *I think many employers want employees with less tats and piercings... and clothes that are more modest than current fashion dictates.*
- *Some use it as a screening tool in an economy when they have so many applicants. Others have relaxed the need for a professional look, but they still want the applicant to look good.*
- *Business casual attire is accepted but a neat appearance is paramount. An amazing outfit on a dishevelled person won't do.*
- *I believe that employers continue to expect that job applicants will dress professionally. With so many people seeking employment in this difficult economy, appearance is more important than ever as we all know that making a positive first impression may set the tone for the interview.*
- *It depends on the industry and the job. Financial, law firms and corporations still look for a professional look.*
- *Dramatically - confidence in your appearance and clean and tidy is confidence and pride in your job.*
- *Too relaxed. They have become way to comfortable with attire at work. They expect workers to dress appropriate, however, they don't feel comfortable telling them. That's what we do at Dress for Success!*

3.2 The Referral agencies

Referral agencies play a crucial role in connecting Dress for Success with the clients that use the service. For the report we interviewed staff from MTC Work Solutions, Marrickville and Job Services, Australia, Rozelle and asked a series of questions related to the importance of appearance and how they make the decision about advising clients to visit the Dress for Success showrooms. Some excerpts of their responses to our themes are presented below.

How important is aesthetics?

It's on-going with each person but we spend around 60% of what we do constantly reminding them to look good and interview techniques- even writing an email.

First impressions count

First impressions last.... companies have an image that they want to uphold...if you don't have that image then you won't get that job. It is one of the most essential things you have at an interview- they are going to look you up and down and what comes out of your mouth... they have already made their decision.

Mental health issues

95% of our clients have mental health issues.

Is there any discrimination about how people look?

People do expect a reasonable standard of dress for interviews. Some employers will say they don't want people with piercing. This will be related to the particular job.

Issues of delicacy and respect

Often the issue of getting the long term unemployed back into work is quite intractable. One referral agency related:

What they think looks good- it's like trying to overturn generations – 3 generations of women looking for work and the norm is that no one has ever said they needed to look into their appearance. It could take two to three years to get through and there could be lots on the background. We need to sort through first before we get to looks. It's building rapport first & then broaching the subject.

Clients will come in and say that they can't type. But they won't come in & say to you "my hair looks crap". As such broaching the subject is a very delicate operation that does depend on considerable trust.

3.3 The Volunteers

Volunteers play an enormous role in keeping Dress for Success the vital organisation that it is. By 2012 there were 200 volunteers in the Sydney office that worked hard and cheerfully to make clients 'feel valued, and ensure that what they do is meaningful to them'. These volunteers are often role models in their clients' lives and Dress for Success recognize this contribution by holding regular volunteer events in appreciation of their efforts (Etheridge, 2012). Volunteers could be dressing a range of clients including young school girls, women in the criminal justice system in correctional or transitional centres; newly divorced or separated women; migrants new to the country or any woman who is in need and each appointment is treated by volunteers with equal humility and respect for the clients predicament whatever it might be. This section presents feedback from several volunteers both in the showroom, at fundraisers and in a formal interview process.

The first issue that stands out when interviewing volunteers is that their commitment to the clients and to the goal of helping women overcome the real and perceived obstacles that stand in the way of their future opportunity. On arrival Dress for Success clients are allocated a volunteer called a 'stylist' who will help select clothes for them. The depth of this relationship depends on a number of factors related to the stylist and the client.

Initially, the volunteer selects a number of outfits for the client to try on. Sometimes, usually later in the visit the client may go to the racks and select clothes themselves. The volunteers never know the individual circumstances of why the client needs the service but they do ask what the clothes are required for. The usual fitting session can take up to one hour but while we were there one woman was selecting outfits for a number of events, and was there for two hours.

One volunteer we interviewed had been helping at Dress for Success for a year. She started when she was on sick leave through an injury at her work. Along with her current job, she also works as a personal stylist. As well as working in the showroom at Dress for Success she runs seminars, 'Image and Presentation' and 'First Impressions'.

From my presentation, they realise how important dressing is because 55% of someone's first impression is how you look, 38% is your presentation and body language, and only 7% is what you have to say and your qualifications...People don't realise that what they look like is a huge chunk of how people see you and it's awful. Our mothers always said, "Don't judge a book by its cover," but we always do.

Why the volunteer thinks Dress for Success is a 'terrific' organisation

It gives them [the clients] power; the confidence and the power to go for an interview, to achieve the job and earn money to support themselves and the family just through putting themselves out there and just feeling good.

What the clients think about the volunteers

Every single client we spoke to had a genuine affection and deep appreciation for the volunteers that guided them through the process with sensitivity and professionalism.

[They are] very respectful...they get to know your sense of style pretty quickly. Probably more so than any clothes shop I've been into'.

3.4 The Clients

Of course Dress for Success is all about the clients. Clients walk through the doors of Dress for Success with an infinite number of work and life experiences. They enter carrying a variety of fears, expectations and baggage from a life often they want to change. One of the most striking aspects of this research has been the rich diversity of the clients that use Dress for Success, and the incredible job that Dress for Success does in making these clients secure and comfortable by the time they leave the showroom. When one client visited the showroom with her daughter she reflected on both her and her daughters anxiety about their visit:

You're very nervous and it's embarrassing to ask for help, especially when it's such a basic need. Clothing is such a basic need... I think she (her daughter) was a bit ashamed, you know what I mean. I'm like, "You know what, it's work, you need to look your best."

As already mentioned Dress for Success take all clients referred to their service. Their only proviso is that the women have to be 'in need'. As such you quickly become aware that each day will bring different clients with different life experiences.

Dressing for court

A mother of three children under five came to Dress for Success to get clothes to wear for a court appearance for an offence that happened two years ago. She was referred by a community services agency designed for woman at risk with children under nine. She was extraordinarily shy and there was no doubt she was a little overwhelmed with the attention.

If you show up there [to court] dressed inappropriately, it's not going to look too good.

"I just need to get back on my feet"

A women originally from country New South Wales was referred through a women's refuge and Centrelink. She was living in a women's refuge with some of her 8 children as a result of domestic violence. She works as a mystery shopper – pretending to be a customer to assess customer service.

Referring to the other women in the refuge-

A lot of them, because they've come from backgrounds where they're being put down, they're being knocked down so many times, having nice clothes does make you feel a hell of lot better.

All women interviewed recognised the value of the service and many articulated a desire to give back to Dress for Success.

I want to help others especially now that I've been here. I would love to be able to one day down the track, maybe work with kids especially through PCYC, to

say it's not worth it, dropping out of school. Now that I've been there done that, I've had the horrible experiences I want to try and save others.

I'd love to be able to come back and volunteer here for everything, the organisation and for the treatment that I've received while I'm here, they've been so good, they've been so friendly.

Overcoming pride and asking for help

An Indigenous woman living with her teenage daughter and two toddlers in Sydney had moved from regional New South Wales to get medical help for her youngest child who was born prematurely, and has remained living in Sydney. She and her daughter went to Dress for Success; her daughter was part of an Aboriginal Employment Strategy with work experience at the Sydney Opera House. About the service -

Very, very lovely people. You're very nervous and it's embarrassing to ask for help, especially when it's such a basic need: clothing is such a basic need... I think she was a bit shamed, you know what I mean. I'm like you know what, it's work; you need to look your best, that kind of stuff.

Does presentation matter?

Oh big time, big time, how you're treated in shops, how you're treated in restaurants, how you're treated at a bloody Mackers (MacDonalds), you know what I mean? It's first impressions and then that reflects into jobs - your presentation.

As an Indigenous woman she is particularly conscious of how people judge others through what they are wearing. Her own daughter was grateful of the support of Dress for Success, as without their support she would not have had the clothes to wear for a full week's work as an intern.

You're going to have people - kids that are going to knock back traineeships because they've got no money to buy clothes. They're not going to ask their parents and put a burden on - what they think is a burden. Or they're going to turn up to work, take one look at what everyone else is wearing, you know what? They're not going to come back.

“This is clothes for a certain stage in my life”

A 22 year old was referred by a family friend, as she needed clothes during a break from university life to take up jobs she was applying for in retail and hospitality.

I'd like to think that people mainly assess you on your personality, on how you are, on how you speak to them - I'd like to think that. Unfortunately, I think that a lot of people do pick and make judgements about you based on your appearance particularly for jobs in hospitality and bar work, which is a bit of a shame really.

Getting the job

A young Fijian woman had recently received the position of Registration Clerk and was coming back for more clothes. She first used the service when she went for a job interview; at that time she had been out of work for some time and she didn't have any work clothes because she had sent them to her extended family in Fiji.

Actually, the ladies that were here gave me some outfits to try on, and gave me some advice on what type of things looked better on me, and [those] that didn't suit me anymore.

When asked if she thought clothes were an important part of the interview process she stated,

I felt like if I chose clothes for myself I would be unsure. Having someone to help you, especially because I haven't worked for a long time, helped, as I was unsure.

My boss noticed

One young woman started to use the service when she received work as an Aboriginal intern at a large organisation.

I did wear a cardigan yesterday to a very important meeting, my boss noticed it; she was very proud of me for coming into use the service.

Mentoring and programs

A single woman in her 50s came to Dress for Success at a very low point in her life, she had 'hit rock bottom' and considered taking her own life. She had been retrenched from her long-term 12-year job in a call centre in a country town and had relocated to Sydney. There is a strong sense that Dress for Success does more than dress women for work they provide a mentoring role for women in need. As she said,

That was one thing that was great about here. They were all my age, a lot of professional backgrounds; sort of all knew what it was like to be in this situation at my age.

And

I don't like going to government departments or even some service providers because they're all 18 year olds. They don't know what it is like for a 51-year-old to hit rock bottom and apart from that they've all got support from families, whereas I've got no family.

She took advantage of other programs that Dress for Success offered such as preparing resumes and presentation. Her confidence has grown and she has given a presentation at one of the Dress for Success fundraisers.

I gave the speech at one of their fundraisers and felt very comfortable. So it (the Dress for Success service) has helped me gain some self-confidence.

Through Dress for Success the client has received a scholarship to the Australasian Beauty Academy and her aim is to start a business specialising in beauty care providing a service for older people in their own homes or care units. The idea of providing a service for people in need is directly as a result of her experience with Dress for Success.

Beauty is the last industry I ever anticipated myself working in. Definitely. Definitely the last.

“You'll be amazed at what a small change can do.”

One really strong theme that came through all of our interviews with clients was this strong sense of transformation. The transformation wasn't just about getting a new outfit. It was just as much about the process involved in the fitting, choosing the clothes and the hour or two spent in the showroom with the volunteers and other staff at Dress for Success. This idea that someone else (usually the stylist) helps select clothes for a client and offers advice about colour and style choices reinforces the real value of Dress for Success. It's not just the client receiving the suit, it's the fact that a concerned individual provides an opportunity for a client to reframe old routines, try new colours, new fabrics and new presentation styles. It may not seem obvious to others, but to clients, and many Dress for Success staff, it's an important part of the process that unfolds and that helps clients to see the possibility of a new beginning.

One client in her late 20s has Tourette's syndrome. The first time she used the service she was in crisis care and the second time she came for clothes to wear to a job interview. She didn't get the job but at the time of the interview she was doing voluntary work as a secretary for the Tourette's Association. She had some events coming up and she needed appropriate clothes to wear to attend a range of functions.

When asked, did having the right look make her feel better about going for that interview, she replied,

It does. It gives you a really good confidence boost. It's like they say, when you look good, you feel good....Looking back at some of the items I got today, like I said, they're not stuff I normally would have looked at. So it helps break you out of those routines...If you tend to go for the same kind of colours and same kind of clothing, a service like this can help you break up the wardrobe and just to shake things up. You'll be amazed at what a small change can do.

Changing circumstances

A mother and her young son attended a client fund raising morning at the showroom. The mother had started using the service when she was undergoing a gender change and needed a whole new wardrobe to go for job interviews as a solicitor.

So up until the age of thirty I'd lived my life as a man, so I had men's clothes. Then there just came a point where I couldn't live like that anymore and it was like right I've got to go and get some new clothes. So I guess I've always felt, you know, that I need that support.

Another example of changing circumstances is highlighted in the following interview. A 21 year old woman had recently returned to Australia after living in Chile for nine years. Both she and her mother have used the service. Her mother had put on weight after the birth of two more children and was having trouble finding appropriate clothes to wear to work. Her daughter related the story,

So finally when she went to Dress for Success they said, yeah, it normally happens that people, after a long while that they haven't been working, they want to go back to work and it's very hard for them to start all over again - with their clothing, so she went to Dress for Success, they helped her. They gave her a suit for the interview and then for another interview and then she got a job.

A 21 year old offender who had used all the services available to her at Dress for Success. She reflected,

All of these courses, here at Dress for Success now, I might not use them tomorrow but in 12 months time I might go, "Oh! I remember this", just little things that are always going to be remembered. It will just help me and I've got the little booklets and I'm going to take them with me because they're references I can always look back on them and go, well I can change this and do this and that.

She felt,

I don't think I can put a value on this. It's helped me grow and change from the person that I was before I came into custody. That was my biggest thing because I don't want to be that person anymore. I want to be who I want to be and who I've always wanted to be. They have just given me the tools, just reminded me that I can do it and I can be the woman that I want to be.

Discussion and Conclusions

This report highlights that lookism, and the pressure to look and perform with confidence and presence, is an issue that affects a whole range of women as they prepare to enter the workforce or as part of their experience of regular employment. All workers face this issue, but women are subject to particular pressure as looks become important aspects of recruitment and selection for firms, especially in the service industries, where presentation is part of the service. Many recognise that soft skills, including general presentation and interpersonal communication and development, are at the very least as important or more important than 'technical or intellectual' capabilities.

There have also been important discriminatory aspects of lookism that this report identifies. Again, this confirms the essential role that Dress for Success plays in providing important services that might often be the only occasion when clients (often long term unemployed) get advice about the importance of soft skills including help with dress and presentation.

This report has identified several important actors in the Dress for Success story, all vital to the success of their effectiveness and success. These include the global reach that Dress for Success has; the importance of referral agents in directing clients in need as well as the incredible job undertaken by those employed by the service and the volunteers who keep it operating at the professional level that it does. Whilst compiling this report however, it became obvious to us that Dress for Success is not just a service that distributes clothes. It is a service that ever so subtly transforms lives. The appointment, the fitting, the clothes options and the discussion about what style choices work best for the client quietly steps toward a rewriting or a redirection for a women in need. Their visit to Dress for Success is about providing an opportunity for a client to reframe old routines through new colours, new fabrics and new presentation styles. It is about the possibility of new beginnings.

5. References

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