

## History of Women's Trousers as History of Women's Emancipation



This attempt to reconstruct the history of women's trousers from the first preludes to fashion around 1800 to their establishment as functional and leisure wear, then as a common part of women's day and evening dress, shows that the process of establishing women's trousers did not primarily take place in the fashion sector, but in everyday life. The tolerance of women's trousers and their increasing generalisation can be seen as an expression of changed women's realities on the back of structural changes in society. However, finally it only became socially acceptable at the end of the 1960s, in a phase of rapidly increasing permissive, pluralistic tendencies in western democracies, which not only expanded the scope of youth considerably, but also led to gender categories increasingly being understood as constructed and deconstructed.

In the past, women who strove for equality often opted for the "male" form of expression in their dress behaviour, out of the motive of avoiding gender outrage. This was by no means, as is often lamented, a "masculinisation", but rather a withdrawal as a gendered being expressed in small language. The biological body was neutralised, so to speak. At the same time, women marked themselves as authentic, respectable and unaffected in the bourgeois male tradition. I am not a passive subject representing male projections, but an active, potent subject, was the message conveyed by her clothing; I am to be taken seriously as a partner equal to a man. These behavioural patterns, which come from the 19th century tradition, are still amazingly current today. A study on "How beautiful can a woman be if she wants to be successful?" conducted in 1985 by Thomas F. Cash and Louis H. Janda in the United States shows that attractive

women have a much harder time rising to management positions than their less attractive co-applicants. The reason: "Attractive women are attributed many desirable personal characteristics - except for all those necessary to break out of the predefined female role." Qualities such as strength, independence and decisiveness are being denied to them because of their good looks. The recommendation for ambitious women was therefore logical: "If a woman wants to succeed in a man's world, she had better not look too feminine." Success is masculine. Who would think of advising men to be less "masculine" in their dress behaviour?

With this demonstration of gender irreversibility, the circle closes. As long as men and "male" characteristics are clearly weighted higher in the social scale of values and women and "female" characteristics are clearly weighted lower, skirts will not equal trousers and women will not equal men, success-oriented women will inevitably follow male norms. But if the barometer of fashion is not deceptive, the signs have been pointing to change recently, as meanwhile it's not only women showing interest in conventionally masculine clothing, but men are increasingly showing interest in classically feminine clothing as well. The disproportionality of erotic dominance that has existed since the 18th century is beginning to become fragile, and the unity of biological sex/sexual orientation is also increasingly being questioned. Fashion today is de facto experimenting with many different identities.

The adoption of trousers by women is to be judged as a decisive step towards the dissolution of artificial, hierarchical, gendered differentiation, through which the strict demarcation between female and male dress codes was abolished. Understood in this sense, the history of women's trousers is not only an interesting phenomenon in the history of dress, but also a very revealing chapter in the history of female emancipation.

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