

Additional Comments to Court Working Dress Paper

1. Rights of Women has noted the proposed revision by the Lord Chancellor's Department (now the Department for Constitutional Affairs) and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper.
2. Rights of Women is an industrial and provident society, which was founded in 1975 to promote the interests of women in relation to the law. We run a free, national confidential telephone legal advice help line for women. We specialise in advising in family law, especially domestic violence and Children Act matters. Rights of Women works to attain justice and equality by informing, educating and empowering women on their legal rights. We are a membership organisation and our activities include producing publications, organising conferences and training courses, and doing policy and research work.
3. We believe that the options we have selected – the most informal in each case – would help to increase access to justice by making Courts less alien and intimidating environment. We find that is particularly important for vulnerable witnesses and victims, many of whom call us for help and legal advice each year. This change should form part of a broader overall strategy to increase women's access to justice in England and Wales – for example, women experiencing domestic violence currently face an average bill of £2,000 to attain a non-molestation order if they do not qualify for Legal Aid, and we believe this actively endangers women throughout the country. We also believe that such changes should be accompanied by a major increase in sustainable funding for organisations supporting vulnerable female victims and witnesses.
4. Rights of Women believe that the Bar should be a modern, accessible and respected profession. Bringing court dress into the 21st century will greatly assist to that end. Court dress codes should be flexible enough to allow for appropriate cultural dress codes to be observable – for example, if a woman lawyer or judge needed to wear the chador or burqa, the court dress code should be able to accommodate this. Women in such roles in court should also allowed to wear either a skirt or trousers, as they so wish.
5. We have also found that many female barristers agree with Lady Justice Hales' feeling that wigs in particular suppress femininity. This is the case not least as the wigs worn are those which were designed for and worn by men, reinforcing the image of the profession as male. This exacerbates problems of discrimination or lack of respect experienced by women at the Bar.
6. We would therefore urge the Department for Constitutional Affairs to take this opportunity to make justice more accessible and a less

traumatic experience for vulnerable and disadvantaged women, and to make this a priority in future reviews undertaken by the Department.

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