



Denise Norberg-Johnson, CCA
NAWIC President

Why I Don't Wear Dresses

It started for practical reasons. I wasn't thinking about Breaking The Glass or changing the world. My company made staircases, and climbing around on job sites in skirts and high heels didn't make much sense. Then, I discovered the benefits of wearing pants when I traveled.

I took fewer clothes, less silly underwear, and could move through airports faster and sit more comfortably on airplanes. Traveling light took on a new meaning.

There were times when I got the usual advice about "proper attire" at industry meetings and speaking engagements. I'd read John Molloy's *Dress For Success*, and I believed, as many women did, that only a skirted suit with the proper blouse and scarf would create the image of executive power and presence I sought. Somewhere along the way, though, I decided not to play by the "Old Boys' Rulebook." At some point, I believed I'd established enough of my own power and credibility to break out of the glass house of women's fashion.

What changed me so completely? I started noticing how I walked, sat, and behaved in a skirt or dress, and it felt less like business and more like dating. I started listening carefully to the words chosen by fashion "experts." In the fashion press, we're counseled to be "sexy," "feminine," "flirty," and none of these described either the corporate or personal image I craved. I started watching how women were received when they dressed in certain ways. And I noticed a distinct pattern.

Women are advised to dress for men and their world, plain and simple. We're judged (it's been measured by experts) more harshly on our fashion choices in the workplace than men are. And yet, by showing legs, cleavage, or even too much bare arm, we wrestle with the lingering vestiges of courtship behavior in the workplace. We're still some part sex object, and more so when we show more skin.

So I stopped. I feel more protected and more powerful in pants and low heels. I walk differently, and I do my work without relying on the old concept of "femininity." I don't try to cope with nail polish because I can't find any reason to wear it, and it takes a lot of time to put on and limits how I use my hands. I wear less makeup, and I'll never again bother with long hair. For me, it all just gets in the way of a more active life. I choose to be a person first, and a woman second.

I realized along the way that there is something a little sinister about word choices. Adapting to someone else's concept of "femininity" is not the same thing as being "female." Acting "like a lady," means something deferential and subordinate to many people. These traditions often mean that we lose power and control in a given situation. And in the con-

struction industry, that is unacceptable to us. It's just another way to keep us in those glass cases where valuable baubles and trinkets are displayed.

For now, I choose to rely on my talent and my intellect, not my choice of attire. Women are lucky today — we can choose what works for us, without being pressured by Paris, Milan, or the local wolf whistling out of a car window. Being a woman in construction is about what we contribute, not what we wear.

I don't find that my credibility has suffered because of my choice to break the fashion glass. If other women find my choice threatening, I'm not aware of it. There's no great truth that dictates women should wear skirts or dresses instead of pants. So I've decided that life is about what makes me feel secure, capable and businesslike. I have a husband who doesn't care if I show my belly button or my legs, or pierce anything other than my earlobes (the earrings stay on better), and I don't care what the rest of the world thinks. As people, not just women, we do have choices. If that means Breaking The Glass of the dress code, well, that's just another blow with the hammer; and we're already swinging, aren't we? ■