

66 THE FORCED REQUIREMENT THAT GIRLS WEAR SKIRTS AND DRESSES UNDERMINES THE MESSAGE THAT GIRLS ARE POWERFUL AND POISED FOR LEADERSHIP.

DR AMANDA MERGLER, CO-FOUNDER, GIRLS UNIFORM AGENDA



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Blain is a gender equality advocate with extensive experience in both government and not-for-profit sectors. Amy is passionate about working with young feminists, excited by their energy, creativity and risk-taking and their different perspectives on issues and solutions. She is actively involved

in community-led initiatives, including as the co-lead for an ACT-based Community Engagement Advocacy program, *Young Women Speak Out* and as the ACT representative for Girls Uniform Agenda.

GIRLS WEAR PANTS TOO

BY AMY BLAIN



A movement born from two women wanting better options for their daughters to an Australia-wide mission. Girls Uniform Agenda (GUA)'s aim is for all girls, in all schools, to have the choice of wearing pants and shorts as their everyday uniform.

GUA co-founders, Simone Carris and Dr Amanda Mergler, know that having choice is still very much a live battle for far too many girls and parents across Australia. GUA has grown into a powerful collective of nine state and territory representatives taking up the challenge of changing uniform policy, school culture and tradition that currently limit Australian schoolgirls.

What's the problem?

When schoolgirls don't have the option of wearing pants or shorts as part of their daily uniform, schools are enforcing dress codes that are inherently sexist and discriminatory. A greater emphasis is placed on the need to 'look smart' (read 'look like a girl/look cute/look pretty'), than on their comfort. Schoolgirls continually tell us that they are policed on how to wear skirts and dresses (hemline measuring); warned about 'preserving their modesty' (not showing underwear when sitting cross-legged and playing) and held responsible for 'distracting' boys and male teachers.

We know that skirts and dresses (either too short, or too long) get in the way of physical activity and that we need girls



Co-founders Dr Amanda Mergler and Simone Carris

66 LET CHILDREN EXPERIENCE EQUALITY AND NOT DISCRIMINATION WITH SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS SCHOOL UNIFORMS.

SIMONE CARRISS, CO-FOUNDER, GIRLS UNIFORM AGENDA

to be on the move for longer than their sports lessons.

Looks are everything

Schools that allow only skirts or dresses are telling girls that what they look like matters more than anything else. We know young girls already feel they are **not treated equally to boys, including at school, and feel judged on their appearance.** If no girls wear pants or shorts where it is an option, it's often because they're badly designed, they're being offered the 'boys uniform' or the stigma is such that no-one other than

the brave 'lone uniform warriors' want to be stared at.

We need schools, P&Cs, boards, parents and students to realise that by offering only dresses/skirts they're not valuing girls. We need schools to teach boys and girls about the importance of valuing girls and women, that objectification is not okay and that gender stereotypes limit both boys and girls.

Getting physical

Boys have options that are practical, comfortable and allow freedom of

movement. We want the same for our schoolgirls so that they too can focus on their education and being active.

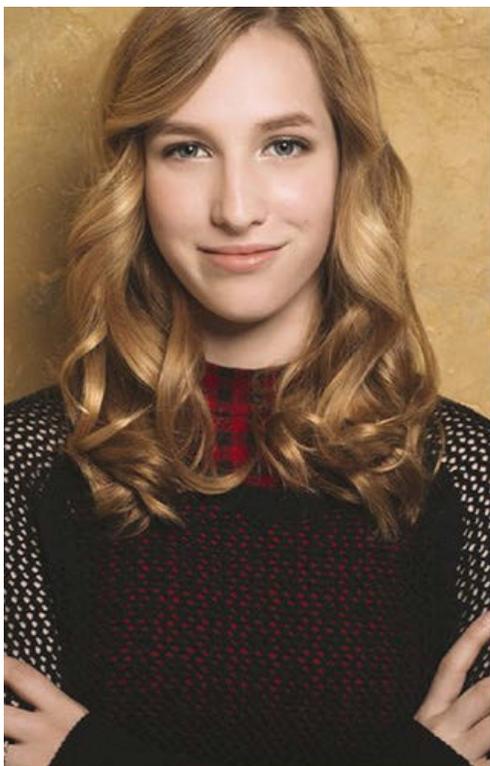
Primary-aged girls do significantly less exercise when wearing a school dress than when wearing shorts. Young women do significantly less physical activity than young men. Young women fear being judged or ridiculed and face the pressure of having to appear feminine and attractive rather than sweaty, muscular and active.

We know regular physical activity and exercise are really important for girls, particularly given links to improved school performance, greater sense of personal responsibility, group co-operation, and reduced drug and alcohol consumption.

Preparing for the future

Workplaces are not allowed to discriminate and enforce skirt or dress-only policies for women, dispelling the notion that uniforms prepare girls for the world of work. We want the same for our schoolgirls. If girls do not have the option of pants and shorts, are we preparing our girls for a future where they accept gender inequalities? As OurWATCh CEO, Mary Barry says:

"It is seemingly 'small' issues like school uniforms that, taken together, create a broader landscape of gender inequality across our society."



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How can students or their parents trust schools that are so outdated that they prioritise girls' appearance over their health, when these are the very institutions that are supposed to educate, equip and prepare children for the future?
I ask all schools with gender-specific uniforms: the war against gendered uniforms is here. Why are you still fighting on the wrong side?
”

Jacqueline (Jax) Rousselot- Year 12 student, Plan International Australia Ambassador





"It is seemingly 'small' issues like **school uniforms** that, taken together, create a broader landscape of **gender inequality** across our society."

MARY BARRY, OUR WATCH CEO



What's GUA doing?

GUA includes parents, academics, educators and public health executives. We aim to:

1. Campaign for legislative and policy change.
2. Support parents and girls seeking uniform policy changes.
3. Encourage school leaders to recognise girls should be offered a range of suitable formal and informal uniform options, including shorts and long pants.
4. Work with uniform suppliers to increase the range of girls' shorts and pants options available.

Making a difference

GUA has chalked up some impressive achievements since forming in February 2017:

- 21,000+ signatures to GUA's Change.org petition.
- State government policy changes announced in Victoria and Western Australia.
- Young uniform activist, 8-year old Marlie, took on Steve

Price on The Project and won, having already persuaded her principal to allow shorts.

- Queensland Teachers' Union passed an unanimous vote in favour of girls being able to wear shorts/pants.
- GUA NSW representative, Alison Boston, working with Greens MP Mehreen Faruqi, on an open letter (with 350+ signatures) to NSW Education Minister.
- 23 incredible supporters including Plan International Youth Ambassadors, sports stars and leading academic and education specialists.

Non-state school dress

In Victoria alone, 170,000 girls go to private, independent, or Catholic Schools, an overwhelming number of which continue to enforce skirt/dress only uniforms. Equality in uniform choice is vital across the education system. It's fantastic to see schools showing great leadership and leading uniform change. Western Australia's private Guildford Grammar School announced changes to their uniform:





ACT's Merici College is introducing shorts for all girls.

MERICI SCHOOL UNIFORM JUNIORS YEAR 7 - 10

DELUXE SHORT SLEEVE BLOUSE
YEARS 7 - 10

WINTER DELUXE LONG SLEEVE BLOUSE
YEARS 7 - 10

KNITTED PULLOVER
ALL YEARS

SUMMER PLEATED DRESS
YEARS 7 - 10

BACK PACK
ALL YEARS

WINTER PLEATED CHECK SKIRT
YEARS 7 - 10

TAILORED SHORT
YEARS 7 - 10

WIND PROOF JACKET
ALL YEARS

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Challenges ahead

If we leave uniform policies down to individual schools, P&Cs, parents and schoolgirls, or wait for consultation with the school community we delay what should be a quick resolution. We should be asking what sort of pants or shorts girls want, not if they want them.

We need state school uniform policies to be clear: to explicitly say girls must be offered choice for their daily uniform of girls' pants and girls' shorts. Schools that wish to continue favouring skirts or dresses find ways around poorly-worded

policies: adding the qualifier 'if required'; offering special exemptions; offering the boy's uniform; saying they offer shorts when that's only on sports days; not announcing a pants or shorts option and shaming lone uniform wearers for 'letting the school down' or 'being out-of-uniform'.

We know girls and parents have been penalised, called-out, and ostracised. Even when there appears to be choice—**is there really?** Dresses and skirts reflect an unequal society that holds our girls back—**can you imagine a world where we didn't?**