

Tyranny : Japanese Women Want a Law Against Mandatory Heels at Work

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More than 18,000 people in Japan signed a petition calling for a law that would bar employers from requiring women to wear high heels.

TOKYO — Japan is the latest battleground for women revolting against the tyranny of high heels, as a fledgling movement seeks government protection from workplaces that require the footwear.

Thousands of supporters have rallied behind the hashtag #KuToo — a pun based on the Japanese words for shoe (*kutsu*) and pain (*kutsuu*). It was started by Yumi Ishikawa, a 32-year-old actress who said she had to change career paths after having difficulty standing in heels for eight hours during training at a hotel.

She submitted a petition to the labor ministry this week, signed by more than 18,000 people, that called for a law barring employers from forcing women to wear high heels. As of Tuesday, there had been no official response to the petition, but Ms. Ishikawa said her efforts were greeted with skepticism by officials, who said it would be difficult to legislate the issue until the working world changed its culture.

“I guess the government and corporate communities don’t want to take a risk to change the society,” she said on Tuesday.

In Japan, a country of rigid gender roles, the government has tried with mixed success to empower women in the workplace, and the #KuToo movement is a reminder of what some see as a very specific obstacle in their path.

As in other countries, high heels are seen by plenty of women as empowering and attractive, entirely worth any discomfort. It’s a never-ending debate.

For some women, it’s a matter of livelihood, not optics. Those unable or unwilling to grin and bear the pain must divert themselves away from industries where the footwear is expected — but only expected for women, while men wear perfectly comfortable shoes.

Shino Naito, vice senior researcher at the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training in Tokyo, said high-heel requirements could be considered gender harassment, even if Japan lacks a specific legal definition of the term.

“Expecting or imposing a feminine standard at the workplace is the issue here,” she said.

Masako Shinohara, who trains job seekers and new employees on workplace etiquette, said she tells women that companies often expect high heels, even when the employees aren’t interacting with the public.

"This is not an ideal or acceptable work environment for many women," she said.

In 2016, Japan's then-defense minister, Tomomi Inada, apparently felt obliged to wear heels even on the deck of a visiting American aircraft carrier.

Yumi Ishikawa, who organized the petition drive, said her efforts had been greeted with skepticism by Japanese officials. Credit: Charly Triballeau/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In recent years, women in a handful of places outside Japan have gotten support from their governments on the issue. In 2017, the Philippines and British Columbia both passed laws that barred companies from forcing women to wear high heels at work.

Nicola Thorp, an actress in London, assembled more than 150,000 signatures backing a similar effort in Britain that year. Parliament studied the issue but stopped short of passing a law.

Women fighting back against high heels is one of the most consistent stories in modern history, as seen in a trip down the archives of this newspaper.

The first complaint about high heels registered in *The Times* came in 1873 — and it came from men. Requirements that soldiers wear high-heeled boots led to "many blistered feet" and induced "a most ungainly walk and ungraceful carriage."

But attention soon shifted to women. In 1881, a *Times* article referred to the "ridiculous absurdity to be condemned in wearing them."

"It is true that high heels make the instep seem higher; but surely no proper-minded person would be guilty of a sham," the article said.

In 1911, French doctors said the footwear led to "that tired feeling" and warned of what they said was a greater danger.

"Strong criticism is also made of women who, as soon as they return home from the theater or from some social function, give way to impulse and change their high-heeled shoes for a pair of soothing flat-soled slippers," *The Times* reported. "This remedy, it is affirmed, is rather worse than the ill itself, for it causes the foot to pass from one extreme to the other, which in the end is bound to produce persistent suffering."

And there were early attempts to seek government intervention, almost always unsuccessful. In 1920, the Massachusetts Osteopathic Society sought a ban from the state legislature on manufacturing, selling or wearing heels more than 1.5 inches in height.

A 1921 effort in Utah was even more drastic. A bill would have criminalized the possession of high heels, punishable by up to \$500 for a first offense and up to \$1,000 for subsequent offenses, along with possible imprisonment.

Ms. Ishikawa's first tweet on the matter, in January, was shared nearly 30,000 times, suggesting she had plenty of sympathizers. But she has not received much support from businesses. One advertising agency told her it would be in "a difficult position" if it spoke out, she said.

"Women don't even realize they are risking themselves, as this style has been deeply rooted in the work culture," she said. "We should take this situation more seriously."

Hisako Ueno reported from Tokyo, and **Daniel Victor** from Hong Kong.

P.S.

- The New York Times, June 4, 2019:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/world/asia/japan-high-heels.html>

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