

Safety Or Control? The Policing Of Women's Clothing In Indian Educational Institutes And Its False Grounds

Recently the Vice-Chancellor of Tamil Nadu National Law University reportedly stated that women students wearing shorts “invite sexual harassment”

By [Sumit Baudh](#) Apr 23, 2026



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On 15 April 2026, at a Class Representatives' meeting in Tamil Nadu National Law University, Prof V Nagaraj, the Vice-Chancellor reportedly stated that women students wearing shorts “invite sexual harassment” and “distract” both faculty and fellow students. The language is familiar, almost rehearsed. It echoes remarks attributed to him a decade earlier at the National Law School in Bengaluru—remarks that, at the time, triggered student protests and an eventual apology. What is striking now is not merely the repetition but the insistence: the position is not retracted but reaffirmed, even taken pride in. This is not a lapse in judgment. It is the persistence of a way of knowing.

What “Distraction” Really Does

To say that women's clothing “distracts” is not a neutral observation. It is an epistemic claim about causality, responsibility, and the body. It suggests that the problem lies not in the gaze that sexualises, but in the body that is seen; not in the failure of self-regulation, but in the presence of the other. When an institutional authority invokes

“distraction,” he does more than describe a reaction—he normalises it. The statement quietly relocates the burden of discipline: from the faculty member who is “distracted,” to the student whose clothing is said to produce that distraction. In doing so, it transforms a personal failure of restraint into a general rule for regulating others.

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Feminist scholarship has long challenged such reasoning. As Sandra Harding and others have argued, those who experience structures of vulnerability—here, women navigating the threat of sexual harassment—are not merely passive subjects but knowers of those structures. From this standpoint, the claim that clothing “invites” harassment is not only empirically false; it is a denial of lived knowledge. Yet what we see in statements such as these is not simply a refusal to listen—what Miranda Fricker would call testimonial injustice. Something more forceful is at work: an institutional assertion that replaces lived knowledge with an authoritative fiction and circulates that fiction as common sense. It is this deeper harm that may be described as epistemological injury.

If the claim about “distraction” appears, at first glance, to be about women, its logic extends far beyond them. I am reminded of an incident from my own time as a student at the National Law School in Bengaluru, when the same faculty member taught labour law. What remains with me is not a dramatic confrontation, but something quieter and more revealing. A classmate—male and widely read as gender non-conforming in his mannerisms—would occasionally wear tight, spandex-like shorts, a few inches above the knee. There was no formal dress code prohibiting such clothing. Yet his attire became a matter of intense discomfort among a section of male students in the hostel.



This discomfort did not remain informal. It acquired the language of propriety and discipline. The matter was discussed, escalated, and eventually taken to hostel authorities. What stands out is not merely that one student's clothing became a subject of scrutiny but that it did so in a context where the usual justificatory frame—protection of women from harassment—was entirely absent. No such risk was invoked; no such claim could plausibly be made. And yet, the impulse to regulate persisted. Clothing, once again, became a problem to be solved.

Not About Safety, But Normativity

This reveals the limits of the Vice-Chancellor's claim. If "distraction" were truly about preventing harm to women, its logic would not travel into spaces where no such harm is even alleged. What the hostel incident makes visible is that the object of regulation is not safety but normativity. Certain bodies, and certain ways of inhabiting them, become unacceptable not because they cause harm, but because they disturb settled expectations about gender. The language of distraction is less a description of experience than a mechanism of enforcement—it marks the point at which discomfort is elevated into a rule.

Seen this way, statements such as these do more than misattribute the causes of sexual harassment. They reorganise the field of responsibility. By locating the source of "distraction" in women's clothing, they produce a world in which the failure of men to regulate themselves is pre-emptively excused, even legitimised. Put differently, what is presented as a general concern about institutional decorum is, in fact, a projection of individual discomfort—one that is then universalised and imposed as a norm.

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This has consequences that extend beyond rhetoric. Universities today are equipped with formal mechanisms to prevent and address sexual harassment—internal complaints committees, codes of conduct, and sensitisation processes. These mechanisms are premised on a basic principle: responsibility lies with the perpetrator, not the victim. When institutional authorities publicly suggest that clothing "invites" harassment, they do not merely express an opinion. They dilute, from within, the very norms these mechanisms are meant to uphold and risk legitimising the very impunity they are designed to counter.

What Is at Stake

To return, then, to epistemological injury: what is at stake is not only whether women, or gender non-conforming students are heard or believed. It is whether their experiences can count as knowledge at all in the face of institutional assertions that claim to know better. When authority speaks in this way, it does not simply ignore lived reality—it replaces it with a narrative that redistributes blame and reshapes what can be known.

In this sense, the controversy is not about a single remark, or even a single individual. It is about how universities, as sites of knowledge production, shape what can be known about bodies, gender, and harm. When that knowledge aligns itself with discomfort rather than justice, and with norm enforcement rather than lived experience, the injury it produces is not only social or moral. It is, fundamentally, epistemological.

An alumnus of the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, Dr. Sumit Baudh is currently Professor of Law at O.P. Jindal Global University. Views are personal.

About the author(s)



Sumit Baudh

Professor Dr. Sumit Baudh (they or he) teaches Constitutional Law, Critical Race Theory, Caste Law and Representation, and Intersectionality. The writer posts on X @BaudhSumit