

Why Do We Wear What We Wear?: Female Schoolteachers' Activism Against Hegemonic Saree-Only Dress Policy in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

The longstanding expectation for female schoolteachers in Sri Lanka to wear sarees is primarily influenced by cultural norms and religious traditions. In November 2022, an organized movement of female activists began opposing this social imperative by wearing casual attires at school, making it the first organized movement of its kind. This paper analyses the island-wide protest led by female schoolteachers as a case through a case study interview with one of the leaders of the activist movement. A document analysis is utilized to examine the background of the saree-only policy. By doing so, a broader understanding of the movement against the saree-only policy and its impetus were gained focusing on how it influenced teacher identity development. The paper offers a critical overview of the control exerted over female schoolteachers, shaped by cultural, religious, and political influences, and how the movement in 2022 reimagined their identities through changes in attire. Findings indicate that female teacher activism challenges longstanding traditions and calls for a redefinition of "Sri Lankan female teacher" exercising individual and collective agency against cultural and religious hegemony despite resistance to change at many levels.



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1. Introduction

The attire of female schoolteachers emerged as a subject of considerable debate in contemporary education discourse in Sri Lanka following the introduction of Public Administration Circular 05/2022 on September 27, 2022 (Ministry of Public Administration, 2022). Issued during the COVID-19 pandemic, this circular pertained to the dress code for public office employees, permitting female personnel to opt for an alternative, appropriate, and modest attire instead of the traditional saree/osari. Mass media reported that this policy change was prompted by economic considerations, citing challenges female employees face in meeting the financial demands associated with saree. Given that this circular was not formally adopted by the Ministry of Education, a sense of perceived injustice began to resonate among female schoolteachers, particularly in the context of their relatively lower salary brackets within the government sector. This incident serves as the most recent impetus of the activism against the saree-only dress norm led by female schoolteachers, which can also be viewed as breaking the prolonged silence of being oppressed by a longstanding tradition of wearing sarees at school.

Before the beginning of the organized activism, the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU) made a formal written request to the Ministry of Education to grant the opportunity for female schoolteachers to wear more practical, comfortable clothes at school (Samarawickrama, 2022). This was quickly rejected. Thomas (2022) quotes the Minister of Education speaking at Parliament on November 8, 2022: "The saree and osariya are part of our culture. It is a part of our school system. We cannot and will not change this system" indicating government's strict adherence to saree-only policy. One of the critical points of this saree-only policy is that female schoolteachers are not obliged by law to wear a saree, as Circular number 2012/37 (Ministry of Education, 2012) on Female school teachers' code of conduct and common law recommends "decent, well-disciplined, and culturally appropriate" dress. Hence, wearing a saree to school is not a rule but a mainstream cultural mandate and an unwritten rule protected and defended by the male-dominant society and successive governments.

In response to this continuous dress enforcement at work, female schoolteachers scaled up their activism in 2022. They initially launched their activism through social media, mainly through a public Facebook group titled "End the Curse of Saree ." After that, as an organized activist movement, on November 21, 2022, a group of female schoolteachers island-wide showed up in casual attire at schools despite declared opposition by the Minister of Education and other provincial, district, zonal, and school-level authorities. As a part of the protest, teachers shared pictures on social media platforms in casual attire; photos were taken at work. This movement is the first organized activism by female teachers against the saree-only policy in Sri Lankan history.

1.1. Background of the study

1.1.1. Teachers' Dress Code

A dress code is a set of rules specifying the garb or type of clothing to be worn by a group or people under specific circumstances (Vera, 2020). Teachers' dress contributes to fulfilling role and professional identity (Workman & Freeburg, 2010). One of the critical concerns of discussions around dress is the level of formality required. Over the years, teachers' and students' dress has become more and more casual (Vera, 2020), as with other professionals. In the United States, teachers were among the first professionals to embrace this shift toward casual attire (Workman & Freeburg, 2010). Despite these trends, suitable attire for teachers is a debated topic, and the opinions vary depending on the country, its mainstream cultural beliefs, and the transformative nature of the education system. According to Vera (2020), a teacher must be distinguished by an elegant, modern, and sober wardrobe, so teachers must wear neutral colors that do not distract attention, avoiding tight, transparent, or

provocative garments. Many UK educational institutions enforce very strict rules on this matter. For instance, "extreme" fashion choices, including "visible" hairstyles, makeup, and body piercings other than those on the ears and nose, are prohibited. Referring to an Asian example, Japanese schoolteachers moved from kimono to casual attire after World War II. They came to find casual wear more appealing to professional environments (Jayasooriya et al., 2020). According to Namba (2008), this shift was not smooth; it started before WW II for various reasons, such as modernization, economic considerations, and practicality. Also, it cites the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 as one of the incidents that made the realization that traditional clothing is inactive. This example resonates with the Tsunami situation in 2004 in Sri Lanka, which caused more than 30,000 deaths and thousands of missing and displaced (Sumathipala et al., 2006). Kakuchi (2005) reports Sri Lankan women's situation during the Tsunami: "Many of the losses are being tied to gender roles and styles—such as women's long hair, confining saris, extreme sense of modesty[...]-that hindered their ability to escape".

Referring to Japanese schools, Jayasooriya et al. (2020) state that behavior and decency matter for a teacher at school rather than the dress being cultural/traditional or modern. Demands to "dress down" in fields other than education can be found worldwide. This was supported by literature that explains how approachability and familiarity are linked with casual clothing (Furnham et al., 2013; Slepian et al., 2015). Also, employee morale and quality of work have shown improvements as dress codes become more casual, and adopting more casual dress codes is meant to increase worker productivity, provide cost savings to employees, and improve work quality (Sharkey, 2000). In contrast, there are arguments against switching to casual clothing, which can lead to relaxed manners and morals (Singh & Kenneth, 2014). This shows a global trend to switch to decent casual attire at work, although opposition prevails, which also applies to schoolteachers.

1.1.2. *Sri Lankan Case*

Dress holds particular significance as a symbol, offering insight into how individuals and groups define and present themselves (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). It is a crucial tool through which groups assert, protect, and promote their preferred organizational identity narratives (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). In the Sri Lankan context, the role of clothing in defining teachers' identity is emphasized, encompassing various bodily practices such as speech, behavior, beliefs, and habits (Workman & Freeburg, 2010). More importantly, the saree represents an "embedded identity" (Tilly, 2002) in the Sri Lankan context, as it is intertwined with everyday practices and often reflects gendered expectations, which can imply instances of gender-based discrimination. The social and cultural expectations of wearing traditional dress are mainly confined to female schoolteachers, while male schoolteachers are free to wear Western clothing. Therefore, the hegemonic saree-only policy is not only a mere gender discrimination but also a fundamental rights violation as per Chapter III, article 12(2) of the Sri Lankan constitution, as the established dress norm unfairly differentiates between genders.

Despite its questionable legal basis, the saree-only policy has been deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan public discourse and defended by the government. Consequently, the movement against it is a landmark within the country's education system. Acknowledging the significance of this movement as a women-led endeavor, particularly a female teachers-led endeavor, this paper aims to examine the background of the dress code, the essence of the activism, and the response it garnered. More importantly, understanding the story of the movement against saree-only policy through the point of view of an activist serves as a key objective of the study. Through this analysis, I seek to understand how the identity of female schoolteachers was reimagined and reshaped by their opposition to the saree-only policy. Teacher identity studies are scarce in the global south (Rushton et al., 2023) especially the aspect of the dress code in the collective construction of female teacher identity has yet to be explored. Therefore, this

study, which focuses on teacher identity negotiation through activism against saree-only policy in the Sri Lankan context, seeks to bring to the academic attention the issue of dress of female schoolteachers beyond Sri Lanka, particularly South Asia.

The paper starts by providing a brief theoretical background contextualizing the concept of teacher identity concerning their dress code and an account of the methods of the current study. Then, the paper provides a background to the female schoolteachers' dress code issue explaining how saree is related to Sri Lankan schoolteachers and its impact before moving to the discussion of the results of the case study interview with a leader of the activist movement. Next, a brief note on media portrayals of the movement is presented. Finally, a discussion of results about concerning theory is presented before concluding remarks.

1.2. Saree and Teacher Identity Politics

1.2.1. Theoretical Framework

Stillman and Anderson (2015) define a teacher's identity as 'how she sees (and wants to see) herself. Nevertheless, teacher identity does not have a single agreed-upon definition. There are multiple understandings and theoretical frameworks on teacher identity. Teacher identity is influenced by various factors such as personal biographies and narratives, emotion, and social contextual relationships with others (Rushton et al., 2023). The Identity Triangle model defines identity as a process of interaction between three domains: psychological (life narrative), behavioral (roles and actions), and relational (perceptions of others, positioning) (Dugas, 2021a). According to Reeves (2018), identities are created by claiming identity positions in the context of assigned identity positions by external others, which can be complementary or contradictory. When external forces try to give identity positions to an individual at the same time that the individual uses agency to claim those positions, a negotiation of identities occurs due to the conflict between these two forces. Likewise, these identity narratives are contested and negotiated on multiple levels: individual, micropolitical, and larger sociocultural (Dugas, 2021). As highlighted by Humphreys and Brown (2002), the government and mainstream narrative surrounding the identity of female teachers is prone to fragmentation, contestation, and multi-layered complexities, making it a potentially unstable concept open to redefinition and revision by members of the organization. While the hegemonic female teacher identity narrative is predominantly tied to the saree-only policy, it increasingly contradicts the individual-level attitudes (or psychological domain of individuals) of the education system in Sri Lanka. Consequently, through the activism of female teachers, the dress code in schools has emerged as a focal point for identity negotiation.

This illustrates how a single garment has evolved into a symbolic nexus within identity challenge and conflict dynamics, operating at individual, organizational, and national political levels (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). In analyzing teacher activism, I draw upon Bernstein's (2005) concept of "identity development" to elucidate the strategic processes through which activists utilize their identities to effect political change. Bernstein (2005) posits that activists emphasize similarities to or differences from the norm because of the interactions among social movements, organizations, state actors, and opposing movements. He argues that identities are strategically deployed as a means of collective action to a) bring about institutional change, b) transform mainstream culture and its norms, values, and possibly its policies and structures, and c) transform the participants themselves or educate legislators and the public. As a political strategy, identity deployment involves expressing identity that shifts the focus of conflict onto individual persons, thereby subjecting individuals' values, categories, and practices to debate (Bernstein, 2005). In the workplace, identity deployment by lesbian and gay employees serves the dual purpose of challenging cultural norms and reducing stigma while seeking to change specific organizational policies and practices (Creed & Scully, 2000).

In light of the concept of "identity development," I aim to analyze how activism among Sri Lankan female schoolteachers leads to or necessitates identity development and how

identities are negotiated. Identity talk, occurring in the public sphere, is culturally constructed between the female teacher identity demanded by cultural hegemony and the female teacher identity demanded by female teacher activists who have started to exercise their agency against the saree-only dress policy.

2. Methods

The paper is based on a qualitative case study inquiry, which is well-suited to building extensive and in-depth descriptions of complex social phenomena (Baškarada, 2014). The study can be considered an intrinsic case study that aims to better understand the particular dynamics at play in this activist movement and, as such, does not attempt to build theory. The unit of analysis or the case considered is the movement against the saree-only policy, its impetus, and its process. Interviews are guided conversations that are often one of the most important sources of evidence for a case study (Baskarada, 2014). A case study interview with one of the movement's leaders was used to collect empirical qualitative data. A leader's perspective is considered vital as she represents her team and is aware of the stories of other activists. Her case is particularly selected as she was a person who led the movement, especially utilizing social media platforms, and was proactive throughout the movement. More importantly, she continues to stand for what they demanded from the movement, wearing casual attires at school starting in November 2022 amidst institutional and public resistance. She is a 37 years old young female teacher activist with 10 years of teaching experience in the government sector. The interview was conducted after obtaining informed written consent and was audio recorded and transcribed. The interview duration was two hours, and the transcript was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The key themes generated from the analysis are discussed in the paper, quoting from the interview where necessary to understand the case, and a pseudonym is used to refer to the interviewee (Thenuri). In addition, a document analysis too was conducted as a part of the case study. Accordingly, through analysis of policy documents/government circulars, media reports about the movement and existing research about teachers' dress norms, the issue's background and media's portrayal of the movement are explained. This analysis highlights the global relevance of the locally initiated female teacher-led movement.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Result

3.1.1. Saree-only Policy

Background

Saree is regarded as the national (Amin & Govinden, 2012) and ethnic dress (Ayachit, 2019) of Indian women. Traditionally, in Indian culture, it was customary for women to wear a saree after marriage. However, in the Indian context, as more women entered the workforce, wearing sarees became impractical, prompting the adoption of more convenient attire options. Referring to the Indian context, Amin and Govinden (2012) argue that the discourse surrounding the saree is an object that inspires obedience and respect for authority. Therefore, wearing a saree is an investment not in Indian identity but in an identity of authority, which also applies to the Sri Lankan context (Ayachit, 2019).

Likewise, the saree holds cultural significance in Sri Lanka, albeit its origins are not inherently native to the island. It is considered the nationally accepted, traditional, and cultural dress for most females in Sri Lanka, particularly Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups, constituting more than 80% of the total population. While the exact turning point when Sri Lankan women

began commonly wearing sarees as official attire remains unclear, the practice of women wearing sarees and men wearing sarongs has been associated with post-independence nationalist movements. They were regarded as symbols of nationalism (Fernando, 2007). Since then, the saree has been widely respected, recognized, and accepted in Sri Lankan society, serving as the predominant official attire for women employed in numerous government and private organizations, including schools. Notably, while female government schoolteachers and many private schoolteachers adhere to the convention of wearing sarees to school, some Muslim teachers opt for the Abaya, aligning with their religious beliefs.

The Rationale Behind Mandating Saree

What circular No 2012/37 (as mentioned above) describes as “culturally appropriate” and “decent” dress is limited to saree as a result of cultural and religious hegemony. It needs to be more clear how and where one draws the line between what is decent and indecent (Lahiri & Bandyopadhyay, 2012). What constitutes decency has always been controversial, and there is always a political dimension to who defines it. On the other hand, “appropriate dress” has always had different meanings for different generations (Vera, 2020).

The workings of binary logic can be seen in how the saree both veils and reveals, adorns and disrupts, and signifies contemporary chic or reactionary conservatism (Amin & Govinden, 2012). Referring to the Sri Lankan evolution of the saree (Lasni, 2016) shows that women’s clothing in the country has a significant attachment to half-nakedness. She further states that half-nakedness is an invisible imprint of women's cultural clothing in Sri Lanka. The term “cultural nakedness” is coined to define this half-nakedness in the saree, to which many people are blind, especially in the context where Western clothing is labeled as not modest (Jayasooriya, 2016a). Therefore, even though wearing a saree is considered to be culturally appropriate, it remains debatable if the saree is modest and decent enough to conform to Sri Lankan cultural values as it could be considered quite revealing compared to the casual (Western) clothing worn at schools by female teachers elsewhere (Jayasooriya, 2016b). It can be argued that the design of the saree itself is figure-hugging and can be worn in a sexually provocative way. Therefore, mandating saree as a teacher's official dress remains traditional.

Pressure to Conform

In South Asian societies like India and Sri Lanka, despite purported advancements, “what a woman wears marks her as a good or bad woman” (Lahiri & Bandyopadhyay, 2012). Concerning the notion of a “good woman,” there is a widespread inclination to adhere to societal regulations and traditions without questioning them, leading Sri Lankan schoolteachers to continue wearing the saree for decades even though it is discriminatory. This conformity to dress-related social norms is often driven by a desire for social acceptance and status (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) and a fear of negative repercussions such as social disapproval, mockery, and exclusion. Research suggests that in professional and non-professional settings, individuals invest considerable effort in understanding and adhering to dress codes (Bellezza et al., 2014). Therefore, the reason why the saree as a dress code for female teachers lasted long can be understood through conformity theory (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara, 2008).

The rules of conformity serve as a means of asserting control over women's bodies (Lahiri & Bandyopadhyay, 2012), as evidenced by the situation of female schoolteachers who are expected to adhere to traditional clothing while male teachers are free to wear Western attire. Consequently, only female dress norms are restricted by cultural and religious values, compelling strict compliance. Non-conformity, therefore, represents a form of resistance to prescribed gender role expectations, a rejection of their appropriateness, and consequently, a challenge to the existing organizational structure. Through the current female teachers' movement, female teacher activists have publicly declared their non-conformity to the saree-

only policy, which is, on one hand, a protest against gender discriminatory practices in their workplaces.

3.1.2. *A Leader's Perspective on The Movement*

Birth of The Movement

Thenuri was one of the schoolteachers who led the activism that went public on November 21, 2022. According to Thenuri (Personal communication, December 25, 2023) the protest began in response to the unequal treatment of schoolteachers regarding the relaxation of dress codes compared to other female professionals. On November 3, 2022, the general secretary of the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU) forwarded a letter to the Minister of Education. In the letter, he addressed economic issues, COVID-19 concerns, and transportation challenges amid fuel shortages, requesting permission for teachers to have the same dress code flexibility. This letter gained no positive response, but it was popular in the mass media. In response, four Buddhist monks appeared on TV, criticizing the proposed change and arguing that it would erode cultural norms, stating that the saree was the only suitable attire for teachers.

Thenuri explained that this response intensified pressure on teachers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis. She mentioned that the activist movement began by creating a WhatsApp group, initiated in response to a personal Facebook post she shared expressing the difficulties of wearing a saree and emphasizing the need for a change. According to Thenuri, as the post gained popularity, it attracted like-minded individuals to join the WhatsApp group. More members joined as the debate gained momentum on social media, leading to the creation of a Facebook group initially named '*End the Curse of Saree,*' later renamed '*End Enforced Saree.*' While the Facebook group amassed over 4000 followers, the WhatsApp group comprised approximately 100 female teachers. She further explained that the movement went public on November 21, 2022, the Monday that they started to wear decent casual attires to school with a plan to continue for one week. While many upheld this commitment for the entire week, some persisted, failing to face resistance and criticism. However, a select few, including Thenuri, have continued to wear casual attire at school, persisting with their protest against the saree-only policy until the interview.

Thenuri mentioned that before the organized movement, some individuals protested alone. She noticed a teacher who uploaded a photo on Facebook wearing a kurta top to school, stating, "I started the change because I like it, others too can start the change." Thenuri remarked, "We all took it positively." This illustrates the potential influence of social media in effecting change, and this movement resonates closely with the widespread "#Me Too movement" (Hillstrom, 2018), which did not gain momentum in the Sri Lankan context. The significance and historical importance of this teachers' activism lies in its first organized protest against the saree-only policy, despite female schoolteachers having worn sarees for decades. Although occasional isolated and individual oppositions existed, those voices were not sufficiently loud or heard.

3.1.3. *Impetus of The Movement*

Explaining the background of the problem, Thenuri highlighted the numerous difficulties female teachers face due to the lack of a comfortable and suitable dress code. She shared a few anecdotes saying that they have influenced each teacher to contribute to the movement against the saree-only policy. According to her, wearing a saree poses challenges, particularly in navigating congested Sri Lankan classrooms, limiting female teachers' mobility. She elaborated:

"We teach in remote schools under challenging conditions. Our classrooms lack basic amenities such as fans or air conditioning, with iron roofing and no ceilings.

Additionally, for approximately six months of the year, the weather is hot and windy. Due to the strong winds, classroom windows are often sealed shut with nails, turning the classroom into a furnace. Despite these conditions, we are expected to teach around 35 students at a time. Teaching in such circumstances becomes even more challenging when wearing an uncomfortable and intricate dress like the saree".

This illustrates that teachers in rural areas face unique obstacles beyond the general challenges of wearing a saree. She further explained that some teachers endure long hours of travel in overcrowded public buses, both in the morning and after school, highlighting the difficulty and danger of wearing a saree:

"Some teachers leave their homes as early as 4 am, waking up at around 2 am, and return home between 4 pm and 6 pm. Often, there are no available seats on the bus for up to two hours. Even pregnant teachers sometimes struggle to find a seat. The experiences of teachers on the road, in school, and the classroom vary greatly. Therefore, it is unreasonable to mandate a specific dress code for all teachers".

According to another teacher's experience, navigating crowded buses while wearing a saree can be difficult and dangerous as the pallu of the saree get entangled in random places, particularly if one is standing on the footboard, causing the fabric to fly in the wind (Thomas, 2022). This showcases that the movement resulted from continuous difficulties that female teachers endured for years due to the saree-only policy.

3.1.4. *Challenges to the Movement*

Despite support from many individuals and groups, this movement faced heavy criticism, and participating teachers, including Thenuri, encountered numerous challenges. She recounted an incident involving a teacher who chose to wear casual attire to school. In the incident, a male colleague has forcefully attached safety pins in the two openings of a female teacher's kurta top. This incident raises ethical concerns, as a man was involved in making decisions about a woman's clothing and touching her garment in a workplace setting. In another incident, Thomas (2022) quotes a teacher who wore a black high-neck kurta and white jeans, stating that in response, her principal warned her, "Come in a saree, or not at all."

Furthermore, Thenuri revealed that she experienced verbal and psychological harassment from pro-saree teachers at school during this process. She recounted:

"I faced verbal harassment at school, but I chose not to respond and requested that any complaints be provided in writing. However, no one did so, as they were aware that it could lead to legal action, since there is no legal requirement for teachers to wear sarees. Therefore, we normally face verbal and psychological accusations. Some teachers became mentally overwhelmed and stopped participating in the movement, but a few of us remained strong despite the harassment and bullying".

She also highlighted the Ministry of Education circular 21/2018 (2018), which permits pregnant female teachers to wear comfortable attire. However, she noted that many schools still refuse to implement this circular. She cited an incident where a pregnant teacher, following the circular, wore comfortable, business casual attire but was verbally and mentally harassed by the principal, who even took pictures of and humiliated her. These incidents constitute workplace violence.

According to Thenuri, most female teachers who wished to transition from sarees to comfortable casual attire did not join the protest due to fear of criticism, instead waiting for the government to announce the freedom for teachers to wear casual attire officially. Some criticism also came from female teachers, arguing that the saree is integral to their identity and personality as teachers (Hettiarachchi, 2022). When questioned about this, Thenuri explained:

"Students were delighted to see teachers in casual attire, surrounding us happily and expressing that we looked beautiful. They asked us to continue dressing this way. I

consulted with secondary students in advance about the possibility of wearing casual attire, and they responded positively, stating that clothing was not an issue. They understood the need for change, especially considering the cost of sarees and the cost of sewing jackets which they have learnt from their mothers. Most teachers also discussed this matter with students beforehand".

In her observation, opposition to the protest primarily came from Buddhist monks/religious leaders, many male teachers, and older female teachers, while students and parents were supportive.

3.1.5. *Popular Media Portrayals of The Movement*

Visual, print, and social media played pivotal roles in the movement led by female schoolteachers against the saree-only policy. While supportive articles and comments were present, opposition was also highlighted. Media reports indicated that Buddhist monks and predominantly men spoke out against the movement in public. One of the monks' main arguments was preserving Sinhala Buddhist culture, suggesting that adopting Western attire was inappropriate. They argued that allowing female teachers to wear comfortable and suitable clothing would compromise the exemplary 'teacher character' and undermine the reverence traditionally accorded to teachers in Sri Lankan culture, which is deeply influenced by Buddhism (Vaffoor, 2022). The monks also voiced an opinion contending that because teachers are treated like gods in the Sri Lankan cultural context, teachers should follow dress requirements in the same way as monks follow specific clothing guidelines (Vaffoor, 2022).

According to (Samarawickrama, 2022), a chief incumbent responded as follows to the call for alternate suitable clothing:

"Uniformed personnel, police, military personnel, schoolteachers, and Buddhist monks all have different uniforms. Any departure from this standard could have disastrous results. Women's and men's attire should be kept separate, according to the Bible's Old Testament. Disregarding this custom could have severe societal effects and be disrespectful to God."

This further indicates that religious beliefs support and defend culturally rooted beliefs. Arguments supporting the movement emphasized that professional attire should be determined by the nature of the work in parallel with education systems worldwide rather than adherence to ancestral clothing norms from centuries ago (Hettiarachchi, 2022). Arguments focused on gender-based discrimination highlighted that most criticism came from men, who enjoyed the privilege of wearing attire of their choice (Hettiarachchi, 2022).

3.2. Discussion

Borrowing from Bernstein's concept of identity development (2005), I posit that female schoolteachers spearheaded the movement against the saree-only policy as a campaign focused on female teacher identity development. This movement challenges the prevailing mainstream narrative of female schoolteacher identity based on attire, which is culturally affiliated, state-constructed, and male-dominated. Consequently, activist female schoolteachers advocate for rediscovering the female identity narrative, raising concerns related to financial sustainability, workplace safety, health, and ergonomics. Referring to the Identity Triangle model (Dugas, 2021), this activist movement can be understood as a conflict between psychological (life narrative) and behavioral (role and actions) on one side and relations (perceptions of others, positioning) on the other side. This provides an example of exercising teacher agency in negotiating desired collective identity even when relational pressure exists at the level of institutional power structures and cultural discourse.

Another key aspect of this movement is utilizing social media platforms effectively. According to Castells and Castells (2010), the emergence of a network society and structural alterations brought about by globalization are linked to the identities of social movements. Castells contends that individuals construct their lives and choose their conduct in the network society, representing the new power sources. This is demonstrated by the fact that, despite pressure to fit in, this organized group of female schoolteachers managed to create a movement and led it with the help of network society, particularly social media connections with like-minded individuals. Thus, this action demonstrates the potential of network society in identity development. Therefore, a more accurate conceptualization of this movement would be as transformative cultural activism.

4. Conclusion

The relationships between social media, identity, and social movements are increasingly significant in our interconnected world. The study demonstrates that a group of Sri Lankan female teachers effectively utilized social media platforms to collectively and remotely participate in the unprecedented activist movement against the saree-only policy. Motivated by solid arguments and a sense of injustice, these female activists ultimately stood up to the oppressive dress code. This can be recognized as an active involvement in reshaping and negotiating their identities through teacher identity development, which involves redefining their roles based on their duties and actions rather than conforming to traditions and cultural beliefs. At the same time, they voice against gender-based discrimination in deciding dress codes for teachers and interpreting government circulars in place which is relevant to teachers' attire in a discriminatory way. Although this activism has yet to change the cultural and religious hegemonic saree-only policy completely, its significance as the first organized movement to challenge the state and mainstream cultural dominance over female schoolteachers' dress cannot be undermined. Through this movement, female schoolteachers have started to advocate for a reimagining and reshaping "female teacher identity" based on practical and ergonomic considerations rather than religious and cultural grounds exercising their agency. Therefore, the research recommends that policymakers study the realities female teachers face due to the complexity of traditional sarees and take necessary actions to support female schoolteachers across the island, allowing them to wear suitable attires at school without limiting to sarees. This would enable them to do their jobs comfortably while eliminating gender discrimination regarding attire, thereby ensuring the fundamental rights of female schoolteachers in Sri Lanka.

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