

I remember when the vogue for jeans that were strategically ripped at the knee and other places first appeared on upscale women, my perplexed mother could not quite get her head around the fact that women would pay good money for rags.

I explained to her they weren't rags: they were a "fashion trend." She didn't understand it. She said – and I have forgotten it because she hit the nail on the head – "But it's like making fun of poor people who can't afford nice clothes."

Poor people don't want to wear rags. Poor people with any self-respect want to wear clothes that make them look like they're not poor. Because even though it is no shame to be poor, it is no great honour either.

Only in a heavily ironized society, where transgressive inversion of traditional beliefs and mores are chic — like, say, a crucifix in a bottle of urine — could one arrange one's outward appearance to mimic the status of someone you would be horrified to be in reality.

Which brings me to sympathy for Krista Ford, niece of Toronto mayor Rob Ford, who had to apologize Thursday for the advice she gave to women on avoiding sexual assault. She said, "Stay alert, walk tall, carry mace, take self-defence classes and don't dress like a whore." If she had stopped at the word "classes," her life would be a whole lot easier. And her own clothing choices didn't help her argument. Instead, she was subjected to a barrage of criticism and was forced to apologize on Twitter. In her tweet she seems bewildered by the fuss: "I didn't mean to cause such an alarm and I apologize if I did. I just want women to be safe."

Many of Ms Ford's Twitter critics accused her of blaming the victim, just as the Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti was in January, 2011 when he counselled women to "avoid dressing like sluts" if they didn't want to be victims. Neither the constable nor Ms Ford, who don't understand the ironized ways of the culturally hip, deserve the blowback they got.

We all know what they were saying, and we all know they have a valid point. It is political correctness that fuelled the reflexive righteous anger. For of course it is a woman's right to dress like a whore, just as it is a woman's right to dress like a poor person. But the difference is that dressing like a poor person does not look like an invitation to a sexual advance, and dressing like a whore does.

Mark my words, please. I did not say dressing like a whore is an invitation to sexual assault. I said dressing like a whore – that is, dressing like the kind of woman whose professional sartorial fashion sense is premised on the need to maximize male lust – is to send a message that extremely high sexual interest from males is not only welcome, but very welcome.

So yes, a woman has the right not to be sexually assaulted. And dress codes don't prevent all assaults. But what if they prevent one or two? Isn't prudence good advice? I have the right not to be mugged, but there are certain areas where I wouldn't take a bankroll out of my purse and hold it so everyone could see it. It's my money and nobody has the right to it. But I also know it's not a good idea to draw potential muggers' attention to it. Likewise, if she has any common sense, a woman would not walk around in certain areas where dressing like a whore evokes certain kinds of ideas in certain kinds of men that are not evoked by women who project a well-groomed but sexually modest image.

Dressing like a slut – and nobody has to define it; we know it when we see it – may have started as an ironic fashion trend, the same as ripped jeans, but it has now become an activist costume, and strutting one's sexual charms in a mimicry of prostitutes' behaviour an act of political theatre.

What is forgotten in this "rights" performance is that real women — the ones most at risk of assault by men who crave their services but who have nothing but contempt for them as people — are being mocked. Most prostitutes would give their eye teeth to be "respectable" women wearing respectable clothing. They dress the way they do, because they have to. When women who don't have to dress like prostitutes do so anyway, they are mocking society's their most vulnerable sisters.

