

Black women take issue with new Army rule on hair

By The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.09.14

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Jasmine Jacobs poses for a portrait at her home in Atlanta, April 2, 2014. Jacobs, six years into what she thought was a promising and long military career, said she was finally done in by the one thing that was always natural to her; her hair. Jacobs railed against a new policy that places heavy restrictions on how women can and cannot wear their hair in the military. Photo: Hyosub Shin/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/MCT

ATLANTA — Jasmine Jacobs, a soldier in the Army National Guard, knew that however she decided to wear her hair, it had to be neat.

So, four years ago, when she decided to stop straightening her hair and wear a more natural look, she figured it would make her a better soldier. It would require less care, especially on maneuvers and drills.

“I never had anyone say anything to me about my hair,” Jacobs, 25, said. “It’s never been out of regulation or interfered with my headgear.”

That changed in April when the Army issued rules about how women in uniform can wear their hair, along with regulations about tattoos.

The rules ban certain hairstyles, including twists, large cornrow braids and dreadlocks, that are popular among black women. That hit a nerve already made sensitive by generations of debate within the black community over what is “good” or “bad” hair.

Petitioning The White House

Jacobs, who wears two-strand twists, launched a White House petition to cancel the ban. She argued that it punishes the more than 26,000 black women on active duty in the Army.

The changes are “racially biased, and the lack of regard for ethnic hair is apparent,” the petition said. It received more than 17,000 signatures but failed to get the 100,000-signatures needed to trigger a response by the president. But it did get the attention of the Congressional Black Caucus, made up of the black members of the U.S. Congress, who asked Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to rethink the hair rule.

“The Army recognizes the concerns expressed by soldiers who believe they are restricted by the number of natural hairstyles authorized by the Army,” said Army spokesman Troy A. Rolan Sr. “We are committed to providing our leaders and soldiers a clear, concise standard on wearing a hairstyle, which portrays a professional, conservative image. The Army continues to review uniform policies for improvement.”

The new regulations coincide with the Army’s efforts to reduce its numbers from 520,000 to 440,000 soldiers.

The policy outlaws tattoos on the face, neck, lower arms and hands, and bans other women’s hairstyles that are not associated with any racial or ethnic group.

The Army says the rules are needed to ensure a “uniformity” of appearance as well as soldiers’ ability to wear headgear unimpeded by their hair. The rule bans “extreme, eccentric or faddish” styles.

That judgment has re-opened centuries-old wounds stemming from arguments over how black women wear their hair and why they wear it that way.

“I just think I said what everyone else was thinking. I didn’t have any options of what to do with my hair,” said Jacobs, whose twists barely reach her collar. “At the end of the day, it hit so personally, because it was offensive and insulting. To be quiet would have been the greatest insult.”

Racism, Or Cultural Blindness?

Tarshia Stanley is the chairwoman of Spelman College’s English Department and an expert on the black female image. She said that before girls can even voice what it means, they are bombarded with political, social and cultural pressure to mimic white women’s hair.

“We have been told for so long and from so many sources that our hair is not good enough and that it must be straight and long,” Stanley said. “The relationship between women and their hair has always been deep. But with black women, it has also been a very complex relationship.”

Nevertheless, Stanley stops short of calling the Army’s policy racist.

“I think it has more to do with cultural blindness,” she said, adding that when she started growing her dreadlocks in 1996 she got criticized mostly by blacks. “It would seem to me that the Army would want to stay away from policies that would be considered historically and culturally significant. To tell black women that their hair isn’t good enough is hurtful.”

Under the guidelines, hair extensions and wigs are authorized, as long as there are no obvious distinctions between the artificial hair and the person’s own hair. That particularly irks Jacobs.

“Having to chemically alter my hair or getting a damaging weave doesn’t make sense,” she said. In a weave, fake hair is woven into a person’s real hair usually to make it look longer. “They want us to have a white hair standard.”

Hair Talk At The Zen Den

On a recent Tuesday at The Zen Den, a hair salon in Atlanta, Ayo-Keisha Smith worked diligently — and gently — on Key Glover’s head, putting in braids.

Smith’s sister, an Army captain, was forced to cut her twists by the new rule.

“Now her hair is really short. She loves it, because she is beautiful anyway,” Smith said. “But she feels bad that she had to be put in the position where she was made to do this.”

Jacobs said she stopped straightening her hair after chemical relaxers burned her scalp and she lost patches of hair. She figured going natural would be healthier, safer and easier to maintain.

Although her petition has gotten national attention, she’s not optimistic that the Army will relent.

“In order for the military to make changes, they have to admit they were uneducated, and say they made a mistake,” Jacobs said.

However, on Tuesday, Hagel directed the military to rethink the new policies.

“I want to assure you that, while none of the Army’s revised grooming and appearance policies were designed or intended to discriminate ... I take your concerns very seriously,” Hagel wrote to the Black Caucus.

Quiz

- 1 What are some women doing to protest against the new Army hair rule?
 - (A) They have started growing dreadlocks.
 - (B) They have stopped straightening their hair.
 - (C) They have initiated a White House petition.
 - (D) They have pleaded with the military to rethink the new policies.

- 2 Why does the new Army rule want women to wear their hair in a particular way?
 - (A) so women won't waste much time in hair care
 - (B) so women can concentrate better on military drills
 - (C) so women will have a uniformity of appearance
 - (D) so women don't have to spend huge amounts of money to style their hair

- 3 Why do some black women have a problem with the new Army rule on hair?
 - (A) more than 26,000 black women serve in the Army
 - (B) they don't want to sport the proposed hairstyles
 - (C) the new rule bans their preferred hairstyles
 - (D) they think the rule is racially biased

- 4 Select the paragraph from "Racism, Or Cultural Blindness?" that describes the conditions under which some styles are permitted under new regulations.

Answer Key

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Paragraph 17:

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