

Army Hairstyles

On March 31, 2014, the United States Army updated regulations to their official appearance and grooming protocol (AR 670-1). The changes establish tougher tattoo, fingernail, and hair and makeup rules, while also outlining how and when Army uniforms should be worn. Soldiers who do not abide by the policy face non-judicial punishment.

New hair regulations for women that were previously authorized are now unauthorized. For example, Chapter 3, Section 2 of the new document states: "Examples of hairstyles considered to be faddish or exaggerated and thus not authorized for wear while in uniform, or in civilian clothes on duty, include, but are not limited to, locks and twists (not including French rolls/twists or corn rows no bigger than a quarter inch); hair sculpting (eccentric directional flow, twists, texture, or spiking); buns or braids with loose hair extending at the end; multiple braids not braided in a straight line; hair styles with severe angles; and loose unsecured hair (not to include bangs) when medium and long hair are worn up."¹ Many of these unauthorized hairstyles are common among the Army's population of African American women, numbering 26,700 on active duty².

After 670-1 was published, thousands of soldiers and non-soldiers signed a White House petition calling for the president to order the Army to re-adjust the appearance and grooming policies. Critics cited that the policies were racially-biased against African American women. The updated appearance and grooming policies were also cited as "white-washed" and as unfairly outlawing natural hair.

Sgt. Jasmine Jacobs, of the Georgia National Guard, who created the White House petition, wrote: "Females with natural hair take strides to style their natural hair in a professional manner when necessary; however, changes to AR 670-1 offer little to no options for females with natural hair...the changes are racially biased, and the lack of regard for ethnic hair is apparent."³ Additionally, female members of the Congressional Black Caucus wrote this in a letter to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, "Though we understand the intent of the updated regulation is to ensure uniformity in our military, it is seen as discriminatory rules targeting soldiers who are women of color with little regard to what is needed to maintain their natural hair."⁴ In response, Army Officials have said AR 670-1 applies to all soldiers, regardless of race, maintaining that hair grooming standards are necessary to maintain uniformity within a military population. Officials also defended the process they used to devise the new appearance and grooming policies. Hundreds of women, including African American women, were involved in the process of developing the new female hair policies.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. If the Army is concerned about maintaining uniformity and professionalism, is it ethical to apply different policies for hairstyle for different gender identities? Should hairstyle policies be genderless?
2. Are the new hairstyle regulations discriminatory despite the fact they apply to all soldiers?
3. The Army requires uniformity for the safety and protection of soldiers when on the field. To what extent should the military maintain uniformity versus embrace ethnic diversity?
4. Could a regulation similar to AR 670-1 be applied in other circumstances? For example, should students, employees and/or athletes have a dress code?

1 http://www.apd.army.mil/pdf/files/r670_1.pdf

2 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/us/politics/armys-ban-on-some-popular-hairstyles-raises-ire-of-black-female-soldiers.html>

3 <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20140331/NEWS07/303310051/Black-female-soldiers-say-new-grooming-reg-racially-biased->

4 <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20140423/NEWS07/304230054>

