# The Policing of Black Women's Hair in the Military

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**Abstract**

Just like a shadow, the public discourse on Black women's hair is ever present. In 2009 comedian and actor Chris Rock examined the nuances of the Black hair care industry in his movie *Good Hair* (George, N. & Hunter, J.). The movie unearthed a potpourri of issues that Black women deal with on a daily basis as it relates to their hair. Since the release of Rock's film, the topic of Black women's hair appears to be a constant part of America's discourse. Even the United States Military has weighed in. The input from the military is significant as Black women account for a sizeable portion of their enlisted population. This article uses a qualitative approach to examine rhetoric of the US military's grooming and hairstyle policies to determine what's really being said about Black women's hair.

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## Introduction

Hair may seem like a trivial topic to some, but for Black women it is far from trivial. Weitz (2001) notes that hairstyles are essential cultural artifacts. Hair is public (available for all to see), personal (biologically connected to the body), and flexible as it can be altered or maintained to suit personal and cultural preferences (Firth 1973; Synott 1987). Hair is central to a woman's social position

and has historically been used to gain power (Weitz 2001). Weitz (2001) notes that the most common way women use their hair to try to obtain power is by utilizing strategies that minimize opposition. Hence, men are distracted by the woman's compliance to what is deemed is beautiful. Sullivan (2001) notes that adhering to the prevailing ideals of attractiveness, including hair, is a route to power for women in the areas of relationships and professions. Many women who dye their hair blonde are fully aware of this strategy.In 2009 comedian and actor Chris Rock examined the nuances of the black hair and its care as a means to be an informed parent to a Black daughter with hair questions. Rock's *Good Hair*(George, N. & Hunter, J., 2009) documentary was informative, humorous, and revealing. The movie revealed issues such as the types of products available, the cost that Black women are willing to pay to maintain their hair, the investment of time required, and the various styles worn by Black women. Since the release of Rock's film, the topic of Black women's hair appears to be a constant part of America's discourse.

There is much to be considered when it comes to Black women and hair. Factors such as age, employment, social acceptance, and cultural identity are just a few of the issues that are a part of the hair equation. Black women in the military are no exception, yet most do not consider this population when discussing various challenges, they equally face regarding their hair.

**Black Women in the Military**

For men, the military has served as a launch pad into manhood and even a rites of passage worldwide (Higate, 2001). Although the transition from civilian to military life for women has not been deemed as transformative, women continued to enlist. Black women have long served in the United States military. According to the Buffalo Soldiers Research museum located in Indiana, Black women have been a part of every war in the history of America (Hicks, G. & Hicks, C. 2010). They worked alongside countless husbands and fathers as they comforted and nursed the afflicted. Black women even served as spies for their country. These women were skilled seamstresses, gardeners, cooks, folk healers, quilters, all while amassing an invaluable amount of communal and institutional knowledge (Schafer, 1996).

During the Civil War it was quite common to find Black women providing services such as nursing, domestic chores in medical settings, cooking for soldiers and doing laundry. When freed Black men enlisted in large numbers in the Union Army, their female family members frequently secured employment with the unit. These Black women were hired to raise cotton on plantations for the northern government to sell (Fowler, 1991). Harriet Tubman served her country during the Civil War as a Union spy, unpaid soldier, and volunteer nurse among other things. She was given the name "General Tubman" by enlisted soldiers. Following the Civil War she established the Boston Branch of the Women's Relief Corps. Tubman's memoirs were published in 1902 and provides the only written account of Black volunteer nurses during the Civil War (Hodges, 1995). In current times, Melin (2016) notes that Black women join the military at higher rates than men and other ethnic groups.

**Military Culture**

Yet, one of the challenges for women in the military is the culture. Military culture is instilled in all new personnel from the onset of their military career. Military life begins with some form of basic or initial training for active as well as reserve members. The training varies depending on the branch of service from 8 to 13 weeks (SAMHSA, 2010). This initial training is where service members are indoctrinated with the culture of the military. This initial training is essential as it is designed to teach discipline, focus, and control. During this training, military personnel learn "the history of their service, military customs and courtesies, proper wear of the uniform, military bearing, military values and ethics, and other information that is critical to their success in the service, including how to listen and follow orders and how to function within the military chain of command." (SAMHSA, 2010, p. 9) In essence, this initial training is where new recruits, both men and women, are taught to live their lives according to military standards. A key component of the military culture is that service members are expected to deny their humanity and their individuality (culture, gender, ethnicity, etc.) as they learn to be disciplined and focused.

> Service members are expected to be disciplined in their actions and words and to maintain control of their emotions and their physical selves at all times. Along with discipline and control comes focus. Focus is important to mission success, and the services teach young recruits how to focus in challenging situations – situations where they are lacking sleep, are physically exhausted, or are under unaccustomed and extreme stress. (SAMHSA, 201, p. 10).

This makes an examination of military policies regarding the grooming and hairstyle policies impacting Black women a viable space for exploration.

**Black Hair**

While not ignoring the fact that women of all ethnic compositions deal with the connotations associated with hair, it is important to note that Black hair is frequently the polar opposite of what society has deemed beautiful as it relates to hair (straight in texture and long in length) (White & White 1995). As a result, the hair of Black women in particular has been viewed negatively. Various scholars note that during the 15th century, the hairstyles of Africans would indicate one's marital status, wealth, age, ethnic identity, rank within the community, and religion (Byrd & Tharpe 2001; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Mercer, 1994). Before the transatlantic slave trade Black hair indicated cultural and spiritual meaning for men and women (Thompson, 2009). With the onset of slavery in America, the Caribbean, and Canada, Africans were forced to work all day and had little to no time for hair nor the tools appropriate for maintaining their hair.

"Treasured African combs were nowhere to be found in the New World, so the once long, thick, and healthy tresses both of men and women became tangled and matted" (Byrd & Tharpe, 2001).

African women were accustomed to donning elaborate hairstyles began to wear head scarfs to protect them from the sun and cover their unkept hair (Thompson 2009b). It was during the 18th

century that upper class White men wore wigs and the Africans that worked in the houses began to wear them as well (Banks, 2000).

Firth (1973) states that "hair differences in colour and texture create social differentiation."Social differentiation "(re)creates" and/or maintains a hierarchy whereby hair colors and textures are viewed and treated as lower or "Other," particularly when the hair belongs to a woman (Pivec, 2018).

> As we grow more comfortable with ourselves, what is on our heads should stop controlling what is inside, making us more tolerant of what others have done with their hair (Koppelman, 1987).

Mercer (1994) states that in societies where race configures social interactions of power, hair, takes on another symbolic dimension. In these instances, the negative attributes associated with race are extended to hair as it is as visible as skin color. The ideologies of race that used a symbolic system of color as it relates to skin, are also used to classify, i.e. black and white; and polarize human worth; superiority and inferiority. Hair is an organic matter, it is cut, groomed, covered or manipulated by human hands (Mercer, 1994). Nonetheless, hair has become the medium of messages; both intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature.

During the 18th century, the hair of Africans was associated with wool, rather than human hair (Martin, 2017). This sentiment continued to be echoed for generations in the work of many including Latrobe (1797), Ingram (1835), Olmsted (1850s); who all used the word wool (woolly) to describe the hair of Africans and their descendants. Sadly, this perspective and the rhetoric that perpetuates it, is still in existence.

Chastity Jones interviewed for a job at a call center in 2010 in Mobile, Alabama. After meeting the requirements, she was offered the position following the interview. When a human resources manager noticed her hair while she was completing paperwork for the position, Jones was told that Catastrophe Management Solutions (CMS) would not hire her because of her hair; they were dreadlocks (Wilkinson, 2016). In 2015, the host of a television fashion show, Giuliana Rancic, commented on the clothing worn by celebrities attending the Oscars and stated that the dreadlocks worn by Zendaya at the award ceremony must have smelled of "weed." This statement implies that the wearers of dreadlocks, i.e. those of African descent, engage in the illegal activity of using/smoking marijuana. Whereas, when those of European decent engage in the use of marijuana, the very same substance is viewed with acceptance and compassion, i.e. medical marijuana. That same year, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) reached an agreement with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), "to ensure that Black women are not singled out for pat-down searches of their hair" (Martin, 2015). Neuroscientist, Malaika Singleton, initiated the complaint with the ACLU, as a result of TSA agents checking her hair at a Los Angeles airport in 2013 as she traveled to the G8 Summit in London. Singleton's hair was again searched at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. She was wearing a braided style called sisterlocks. A TSA attorney communicated to the ACLU that the agency will retrain security

officers at Los Angeles International airport and Minneapolis with an emphasis on race neutrality. Further, TSA committed to track complaints by Black women to determine if excessive hair searches were problematic elsewhere (Martin, 2015). In 2017, high school twin sisters, Deanna and Mya Cook, attending Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Massachusetts, were reprimanded and threatened with suspension for wearing braided hair extensions. The school viewed hair extensions as a distraction and banned them (Mettler, 2017). An NBC local affiliate in New Orleans, Louisiana, interviewed a 29 year old nursing student who had to leave school because her natural Black hair was considered inappropriate. Jade Payadue stated that the grooming policy at the University of Holy Cross, considers her natural hair inappropriate (WDSU, 2018).

These are just a few examples of how corporations, the K-12 educational system, retail companies, and institutions of higher learning have regulated the styling and Black women's hair. The military is no different. In fact, they are known for regulating every aspect of their enlistees' lives. Each branch of the U.S. military has a regulatory manual containing specific instructions detailing, among other things, the grooming and hairstyles authorized for both men and women. Failures to follow these regulations are met with varying degrees of punitive consequences. This article highlights the grooming regulations and reveals that the authorized hairstyles for women are biased against the texture, length, and styles worn by Black women.

## Theoretical Framework

Alice Walker first used the term Womanist in 1979 in a short story titled *Coming Apart*, featured in the anthology *Take Back the Night* (Phillips, 2006). Womanist ideals provided a much-needed recourse for women of color who did not embrace or identify with feminist ideals that ostracized men and privileged race and class. Simply stated, feminism did not encompass the perspectives or the reality of African American women. Alice Walker provides a number or essays and short stories that demonstrate the ways in which Womanism is lived out through her various characters rather than presenting a manifesto that decrees what the theory looks like. It is Layli Phillips who unearths the particulars of Womanism and provides a comprehensive account of what is possible. Womanism is:

> A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension (Phillips, 2006).

This definition distinguishes Womanism as an approach that is grounded in the community. Community in this context (military, Black women), is significant in two ways. First, it speaks to the ordinary experiences of everyday Black women and other women of color (and by extension the communities in which they live), rather than being situated in the academies of higher learning. Second, at its most fundamental level, community is about a shared commonality. Merriam Webster (2018) defines community as a "unified boy of individuals such as:

A: the people with common interest living in a particular area broadly
B: a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society"

Black women in the military have shared commonalities which situates this population fittingly within the theoretical framework of Womanisim. According to Mankowski et al, (2015) the reasons women enlist in the military provides them with a shared or common reality from the onset. This same study identified the themes of opportunities (skills development, training, and college financial support), calling (sense of patriotism), and outcomes (unplanned/unintentional career) as key commonalities among women, including Black women (Mankowski et al, 2015). Unemployment and underemployment among Blacks has been well documented. The San Francisco based Tides Center launched the Equal Pay Today! Campaign on August 7, 2018, to denote that Black women are traditionally paid $.63 on the $1; meaning she must work until August 2018 to be paid what a White man earns by the end of December 2017. Simply stated, it takes a Black woman, with the same qualifications/credentials, about 19 months to be paid what the average what White man takes home in 12 months. As such, for many women, but particularly for Black women, the military is a means to an end.

Womanism equalizes all forms of oppression (gender, race, class) instead of establishing a hierarchical approach whereby one may be addressed only at the expense of the others. It identifies the race/class/gender matrix (Phillips, 2006) as the launching pad from which Black women speak regardless of the topic.

Womanism is a social change theory concerned with the impact of oppression on the lives of people of African descent. Womanism's unique contribution to this endeavor is that it values the everyday experiences of Black women. By doing so, Womanisim sees the Black woman as a conduit or extension of her community. This is pivotal because in traditional African societies women were responsible for childrearing and the teaching of culture was a significant part of that responsibility. Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe (2006) note that the childrearing responsibilities are so highly regarded that women in the extended family play significant roles as well. Nukunya (1992) contends that the extended family is a social contract whereby individuals have obligations, reciprocal duties and extended responsibilities to his or her relatives that are not part of the nuclear family. Surrogate mothers who may be a sister in law, mother in law from either side of the family make themselves available from the child's birth to assist in caring, nursing, nurturing, both the infant and the mother (Fapohunda&Todaro, 1988). The African traditions and culture were transferred from the mother and the other women in the extended family to the child, not by formal training but in the everyday experiences of life. It is the everyday experiences and how they are addressed that shape communities and nations. "The pedagogies of the everyday highlight the mundane and ordinary as powerful sites for learning and teaching (Trinidad Galván, 2006)." Womanism values the unsung teachable moments in the everyday experiences of Black women.

Womanism is an essential theoretical framework for this research because it values the transference of culture from one generation to the next. Although Womanism starts with the Black

woman's everyday experiences and methods of problem solving as a means toward social change, it does not end there. Womanism notes that Black women are the means by which much of Black culture is transferred. The pearls of wisdom from her lived experiences are not hoarded but shared for the edification of the entire community. As such, each person in the community, both male and female, plays a role in keeping the culture alive. The use of Womanism to explore the gender politics that surround Black women's hair is ideal.

From a theoretical position, Alice Walker's Womanism takes the discussion of Black women's hair as gendered politics to the next level as she identifies the race/class/gender matrix as the launching pad from which Black women speak regardless of the topic (Phillips 2006). A close examination of Black women and their hair embodies Womanism at its best. Further, I contend that the framework of Womanism also captures the unspoken or nonverbal communication of black women; which includes hair.

**Methodology**

A qualitative approach will be used because it emphasizes the significance of the social context as a means to understanding the social world (Neuman, 1997). Davis et al. (2010) states that qualitative methods are fitting for research seeking to "describe or understand communication and interaction patterns, possibly within and between texts, dyads, groups, cultures, and contexts; to understand the influence of society, relationships, environment, or interactions on behavior" (p. 320). Qualitative research provides rich details that cannot be captured by numeration. Kenneth Burke's cluster criticism will be used for this study.

The New York Times called Kenneth Burke, a philosopher of language whose criticism and theories impacted writers and thinkers in the 20th century (Lyons, 1993). For Burke (1950), rhetoric is "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce action in other human agents." Known primarily in academic circles, Burke's work focused on the true meanings and significance of language. Cluster criticism or cluster analysis as it is also known is "a method of noting what subjects cluster about other subjects in an effort to discover what goes with what and why (Foss 1984). Berthold (1976) notes that cluster criticism "offers an objective way of determining relationships between a speaker's main concerns, as well as a new perspective to rhetorical critics who desire to discover more about the motives and characters of speakers." Rhetorical clusters are a useful tool in defining cultures (Burke, 1951). This rhetorical method is significant in that it provides "insights into the meanings of key terms and thus a worldview that may not be known to the speaker," (Foss, 2009).

An analysis utilizing cluster criticism requires 3 key components. First, key terms in the artifact (text) must be identified. A term is identified as significant based on the frequency or intensity (Foss 2009). A phrase or term that is used repeatedly by the rhetor or originator is deemed significant due to the frequency. The intensity of a term is identified as a word or phrase that may not be used repeatedly but is noted to be pivotal to the point being made. Identifying a term due to the intensity also notes that it conveys feeling and the removal of the term would significantly alter the very character of the text.

The next step is to chart the clusters of words/phrases around the key term(s). There are various ways in which term(s) cluster. Locating each occurrence of the key terms and paying close attention to the term(s) in close proximity of the key term is one approach. Additionally, the rhetor or originator may establish a cause-and-effect correlation, between the key term and another. Finally, the analyst seeks to find patterns or linkages between the cluster and the key term(s). Burke contends that the linkage suggests the clusters reveal an in-depth or fuller meaning of the key term(s). This research will examine the text of the March 30, 2014 Army Regulation 670-1, and the July 11, 2018 NAVADMIN 163 /18, Section 3, Female Grooming Standards, using the key term professional

**Cluster Analysis**
**Army Regulation 670-1**

Chapter 3, Appearance and Grooming Policesbegin on page 4 of the 2014 Army Regulation 670-1 manual. Section 3-1, Personal appearance policies, notes that soldiers are to present a "professional image" while on and off duty. It further states that an integral component of the Army's "strength and military effectiveness is the pride and self-discipline that American Soldiers bring to their service through a conservative military image. It is the responsibility of commanders to ensure that military personnel under their command present a neat and soldierly appearance."

Section 3-2, is entitled, Hair and fingernail standards and grooming policies. This section begins with a note alerting soldiers that any violation may be addressed using adverse administrative actions. Subsection 3-2a(1) is for the general population and offers that the goal of the hair grooming standards is to maintain consistency. Section 3-2a(1)(a) alerts soldiers that it is the responsibility of leaders to judge the suitability of a hairstyle according to the headgear. According to this regulation, hairstyles that "do not allow Soldiers to wear headgear properly, or that interfere with the proper wear of the protective mask or other protective equipment, are prohibited." Section 3-2a(1)(b) states the following: "Extreme, eccentric, or faddish haircuts or hairstyles are not authorized." This section conveys that if dyes, tints, or bleaches are used, the soldier must use a natural hair color, so that it does not detract from a "professional military appearance."

Section 3-2(3) is titled Female haircuts and hairstyles provides guidelines for women soldiers. In keeping with the guideline provided for men, this section also states that the regulations are to maintain homogeneity while in uniform or in civilian clothing. "Female hairstyles may not be eccentric or faddish and will present a conservative, professional appearance."

**US Navy**
**NAVPERS 15665I**

The U.S. Navy has regulatory and procedural manuals as well. According to their publications and instructions website, regulatory manuals apply to everyone in the Navy and are designed to provide "broad, general rules that specify what must be done" (https://www.navycs.com/navypublicationinstruction.html). The U.S. Navy Uniform Regulations, NAVPERS 15665I, is the document that contains the grooming standards. The hair grooming policies for women in the Navy are detailed in the US Navy Uniform Regulation, NAVPERS 15665I. Chapter 2, is titled Grooming Standards and contains two sections within it (Section 1, general information and Section 2, personal appearance). Chapter 2, Section 1, begins with a statement under the heading of general that notes that the primary consideration is to have a "neatly groomed appearance" when the naval uniform is worn. It further states that the grooming standards are based on a number of factors including "neatness, cleanliness, safety, military image and appearance."

Section 2(1)(b) (1) titled Acceptable Hairstyle Criteria, provides the following particulars:

> Hairstyles and haircuts shall present a professional and balanced appearance. Appropriateness of a hairstyle shall be evaluated by its appearance when headgear is worn. All headgear shall fit snugly and comfortably around the largest part of the head without distortion or excessive gaps. Hairstyles will not interfere with the proper wearing of headgear, protective masks or equipment. When headgear is worn, hair shall not show from under the front of the headgear. Hair is not to protrude from the opening in the back of the ball cap, except when wearing a bun hairstyle. All buns shall be positioned on the back of the head to ensure the proper wearing of all headgear.

Chapter 2, Section 2(1)(b)(2) Titled Hairstyles notes that "Hairstyles shall not detract from a professional appearance in uniform."

**Key Term(s)**

The term professional was selected for the intensity it provides in both the Army and Navy manuals. The manuals reveal that these branches of military service hold the ability to display a professional image as an essential attribute for all regardless of their ranking or time of service. The Webster's New World Dictionary (2011) defines professional as a noun meaning "a person competent or skilled in a particular activity." Synonyms for this term include expert, maven, and authority. The term serves as the launching pad an understanding of what is required for Soldiers as it is contained in the very first sentence in Chapter 3-1(a). "Soldiers will present a professional image at all times and will continue to set the example in military presence, both on and off duty." The term is used again in Section 3-2(b) regarding hair coloring: "Colors that detract from a professional military appearance are prohibited." In the Navy manual, the first sentence in Chapter 2, Section 2(1)(b) (1) contains the word professional, "Hairstyles and haircuts shall present a professional and balanced appearance," as does the first sentence in Chapter 2, Section 2(1)(b)(2), "Hairstyles shall not detract from a professional appearance in uniform." At each use of the term

professional, the focus is on the aesthetic (professional image & a professional military appearance).

Using cluster analysis, the words around the key term professional reveal that the creators of these military regulation manuals subscribe to a belief that one's skill level or competency is directly correlated with their aesthetic (i.e. beauty). Essentially, how one demonstrates whether or not he or she is a professional, is only partially about the level of mastery. Neither, an Army Soldier nor a Navy Sailor could be viewed as a professional, i.e. skilled in a particular activity, if he/she does not meet the beauty, i.e. image or appearance, deemed acceptable. So, one that has demonstrated a high proficiency or levels of excellence in an area is not considered professional by the U.S. Army or Navy if he/she does not look the part or fit the mold of acceptable beauty.

For Black women in particular, this is quite troubling as the standard of beauty in America has historically and perpetually excluded any aesthetics associated with Blacks. It has been well documented that the rules of engagement regarding beauty in America was designed to favor people of European descent.

> "The European beauty standard is the notion that the more closely associated a person is with European features, the more attractive he or she is considered; these standards deem attributes that are most closely related to whites, such as lighter skin, straight hair, a thin nose and lips and light colored eyes as beautiful" (Evans & McConnell, 2003).

The rhetoric of these manuals reveals the presence of the prevailing ideology of the 18th century that deemed it acceptable, even normal, for those of European descent to refer to the hair of Blacks as wool. This was done as a means to associate Blacks with animals and substantiate Europeans as superior (White & White, 1995). Mercer (1994) contends that during this era any inkling that Blacks were proud of their hair would have challenged "white cultural assumptions." The powers that be would not risk revalorizing a natural feature that it had sought to devalue. Clayson & Maughn (1986) hold that to be considered the most feminine and the most attractive, women's hair should be long, curly or wavy, and preferably blonde; intentionally styled and different from a man. Here we clearly note a Eurocentric beauty standard, whereby all women including Black women are judged.

Because being identified as a professional includes an aesthetic component, the rules of engagement are unduly stacked against Black women. As a result, the military vilified 31% of their enlistees (Melin, 2016) by using a standard that by design was constructed to degrade. By excluding grooming and hairstyling approaches that simply made life manageable for a significant number of Black women, the military reinforced the notion of their inadequacy. By not taking into consideration the difference in hair textures, growth patterns, and length of the non-chemically altered hair of Black women, also known as natural hair; the military of these United States, perpetuated a racist ideology that othered Black women. The regulation manuals still contained the very ideology prevalent in the 18th century when the hair of Blacks was called wool.

Although in 2018 both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy have revised their policies to reflect the characteristics unique to Black women's hair, it does not eradicate or negate the reality that the manuals that regulate the behaviors and procedures of the enlistees, contained a design flaw; racism. As society progresses and seeks to eradicate the systemic injustices, it only makes sense that institutions such as the various branches of the military and the government, examine the foundations on which these policies were established.

**Recommendations**

The policies governing the various branches of the United States military are to consider the lived experiences of people from every sector of society. As such, it is recommended that those reviewing and composing the regulations must be a true representation of society and have historical knowledge various cultures. If these two areas are not satisfied, then more of the same is to be expected. The various branches of the military are very intentional about their specific military culture (values, traditions, ideologies, etc.). That same intentionality must be given to the existing cultures of their new recruits. Anything less is deemed simply as disrespectful.

Many of the aspects of society that have a direct impact on how the military functions, are constantly evolving (technology, personal identities, gender roles, etc.). Given these realities, it is recommended that the military review their regulations more frequently. And when policies are deemed to have a historical origin of discriminatory practices, (whether over or covert), such would be stated as part of the rationale for revision. The practice of ignoring the historical/societal wrong that was done, is insulting and degrading to those who have been directly affected by the policy. It is even more insulting to those who are serving in the military and are trying to balance the military culture with their own culture.

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