

## How the Army ostracized me for my own hair

Written by Kristie Mitchell, MD April 24, 2014

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The Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia covers every aspect of soldiers' grooming and appearance — from fingernail length to tattoos. Last month, the Army [proposed updates](#)

to this regulation that scrutinize African American female hairstyles more than ever before. Previously AR 670-1 only briefly commented on uniquely African American hair styles. It banned "dreadlocks" for being "unkempt, twisted, matted...hair". While cornrows were authorized as long as "conservative".

Now, greater numbers of African American women are allowing their hair to remain natural, and the proposed regulation microanalyzes these hair styles (braids, twists, cornrows, and locs) and effectively eliminates many of the natural styles African American service women have been wearing for years.

I am an African American woman, a Psychiatrist, and a former US Army Major, and I am dismayed by this.

When I read the regulation and endured words like "unkempt" and "matted" used to define my natural hair, I was reminded of the pain and humiliation I, too, endured five years ago before I voluntarily departed the Army. Since then I've enjoyed the simple dignity of wearing my natural hair to work in a neat and professional manner.

### My Deployment

The Army recruited me during medical school. They paid for all four years of my medical school training. Then gave me world-class residency training at the flagship military medical centers of the time: Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center. All totaled, the military likely devoted close to one million dollars preparing me to provide expert medical care to its service members.

While I maintained my primary focus on my medical education, soldier training, and physical fitness, the nagging question that pulled at my attention day after day was 'how do I keep my tightly curled hair within Caucasian-based hair standards?' Though most African American service women struggle silently, it is a daily battle for thousands of these women trying to stay on the right side of an increasingly convoluted hair regulation.

For years, like many African American service women, I attempted a straight hair style, which

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required me to chemically and thermally straighten (i.e., relax) my curls on a regular basis. Other African American women attached hair extensions to their scalps to attain longer straight hair or braids. In either case we've dedicated time, financial, and emotional resources fostering an appearance we hope will escape scrutiny. Ultimately we've exposed ourselves to countless chemicals and techniques well-known to cause scalp damage. Many of these chemicals are now suspected of disrupting the normal functioning of our hormones. After years of straightening my hair into submission, and watching it fall out in retaliation, it occurred to me that I could attain peace by cutting my hair off.

The "big chop" as it is known in the African American community, allowed me the freedom to actually wear my hair in its natural state. But the compromise was that I could leave very little hair on my head. For years I wore my hair close to my scalp like my African American male counterparts and my hair became a non-issue – a very important thing, as my busy schedule in the hospital left no excess energy to devote to this hair riddle. Over time, though, I discovered a style that would allow my hair the dignity of its natural state and permit the styling flexibility my Caucasian female counterparts took for granted.

This began my journey with locs.

In the loc'ed state, my hair met all the Army's professionalism standards — it did not touch my collar, my Army headgear and masks fit properly, and my hair was as well groomed as any of my other female colleagues. I felt the riddle had been solved. So effortlessly did my hair fall within the Army hair regulations that I finally had no greater hair-anxiety than my Caucasian colleagues. I went about my true business of doctoring and soldiering with confidence and freedom.

Then I deployed to Iraq. In the midst of war, while I was doctoring in a combat zone, a lower ranking soldier identified my locs as "dreadlocked" and therefore, by Army definition "unkempt and matted" hair. He notified my supervisor who gave me an official (though somewhat apologetic) reprimand for not meeting hygiene standards. The bitter irony was not only did my hair fit all the required professionalism standards, but it was very easy to keep clean and neat.

After the reprimand, I made one futile attempt to hide my locs by covering them with a wig (an authorized option). But this was too distracting, and with temperatures soaring to 140 degrees daily, one could imagine that option did not last long. So I conceded. I cut off my locs. I returned to the neutral state where no natural hair was acceptable natural hair. But the peace was uneasy, to say the least.

### Coming Home

When I returned from war, I filed official requests to change the regulation. I wrote letters appealing my case, I sent pictures showing my hair firmly within regulation, but my efforts fell on deaf ears. It was not until I beseeched my congressman, Ciro Rodriguez, that I finally got a response from the Army. It came two years after I was forced to cut my locs and two months after I chose to leave the Army. I received a simple letter from the Deputy of the Human Resources Policy Directorate stating that it appeared that my loc'ed hair was not in violation

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after all.

The concession came too late. I had already left, already realized that I did not have to continue to suffer these indignities to practice my profession. While I loved caring for soldiers, the personal toll of being a psychiatrist for the Army was too great a burden. So now I'm using my training to serve the civilian healthcare sector, where no one is analyzing the strands of my hair to see if they are twisted or loc'ed or braided. I continue to maintain a high professional standard of appearance — as it is understood all professionals must. I spend my time honing my skill set and caring for my patients, with no complex and pejorative hair regulation weighing me down.

And I am not alone. I know of other female physicians who have left the Army for similar reasons.

I applaud the United State Army, for setting high standards for appearance and hygiene, and expecting all service members to achieve them. But, it must recognize that the Caucasian hairstyles these regulations are based upon are not the only ways to achieve this professional, hygienic appearance. The Army must embrace the ethnic diversity within its ranks and stop placing undue hardship on its African American service women. It must understand the impossible choices it's forcing upon its service women — either alter the structure of your hair with harmful chemicals, wear someone else's straight hair, cut all your hair off, or endure harassment from officers measuring the size of your braids.

As a psychiatrist and African American woman I am all too aware of the toll this needless expenditure of time, money, and mental energy has on self-esteem. This is a toll no other group in the Army must pay.

And it ultimately detracts from meeting the goals of the mission. Why must African American women fight these battles to serve this country? Whether purposely or not, the result of these pejorative regulations will be the loss of the very talent and skill the Army has spent so much time and money cultivating.

So, though I'm appalled at how far these proposed changes have gone, they have finally triggered the public outcry that may result in change. I am heartened to witness African American service women finally finding their voice in defense of their hair and raising it loud and clear against this injustice.

*Dr. Kristie Mitchell was previously a psychiatrist and Major for the United States Army.*