

# "Our Hair Our Pride": The Contours of Hair Politics and High School Education in Ghana

Ernest Darkwa

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

**Abstract:** The paper explores the dilemma of hair shave and short hair norm and senior high school education in contemporary Ghana. The human hair comes as a very significant part of the body and as such plays a vital role in the life people. The hair is therefore an important dimension when dealing with hair and body politics. Ghana's education norm that requires that senior high school students shave and keep their hair short has over the years generated much arguments as some educationist and teachers have argued for the principle, with others arguing against it. For girls, the dominant argument given is that allowing them to keep their natural hair act to distract their attention in class, and limit their performance in class. Others have also maintained that girls will turn to spend a lot of time in the salon preparing their hair for school and this will take a lot of their time that would be required for studies. Recently in Ghana, two Rastafarian students who performed extremely well and gained admission into Achimota Senior High School in Ghana have been refused admission because of their dreadlocks. This is very discriminatory and infringes the rights of the students concerned. The dilemma here is that, on the contrary Caucasians are allowed admission into the schools without any hindrance. The paper therefore argues that the hair shave and short hair policy in Ghana is rooted in colonial policies that required Ghanaian students to keep a short hair in the Castle schools to distinguish them from the Mulattoes. It further maintains that educating students entails a holistic approach that requires the teaching and learning of relevant practices, including self-care and time management- as such making a rule that forces students to keep a short hair only forces them to conform to the requirement and does not necessarily prepare them for effective and efficient knowledge acquisition.

Keywords: Body, Cultural, Education, Gendered, Hair Politics, Hidden Curriculum, Human Rights, Natural, Norm.

## INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the dynamics of hair shave and the short hair norm for senior high school students in Ghana. The human hair occupies a very important part of the body and plays a vital role in the live of people. As such having self-confidence and the freedom to keep one's hair the way he or she prefers it is much significant for the growth, physical and socio-psychological development of students in high schools. Despite this significance, the hair shave and keeping of short hair could stand to be a political issue depending on context and situation one finds him or herself. According to Johnson and Bankhead (2014a: 90) "wearing a natural black hair stands as a political issue within itself; this may be dependent on the situation and or environment in question, and as such hair could be seen as politically and socially unaccepted". For girls in public high schools in Ghana, the authorities require that they always shave and keep their hair short and not to grow their natural hair. Similarly boys are also required to keep their hair short and not to grow and keep an afro-hair or any of the sort. This requirement prevents students from keeping their hair the way they would have loved to keep and maintain it. Recently in Ghana, two Rastafarian students who performed extremely well and gained admission into Achimota Senior High School in Ghana have been refused admission because of their dreadlocks. This is very discriminatory and infringes on the rights of the students concerned (Myjoyonline March 19, 2021). The decision by the school authorities comes as an act which violates Articles 21(1)(c), 25(1), 26(1), 28(3) and 28(4) of Ghana's 1992 constitution (Constitution of Ghana 1992). On this, the constitution states that, a

child on no circumstance should be denied of education on grounds of medical treatment, based on his or her religious affiliation or beliefs and culture (Constitution of Ghana 1992). The dilemma here is that Caucasian students within the same high schools are allowed to keep a long hair and therefore the norm does not apply to them. Also, in private high schools girls are allowed to keep their natural hair unlike the public schools.

The arguments for and against the hair shave and short hair norm has been diverse. For instance, most educationist and teachers in public high schools have argued that allowing students to keep their natural hair prevents them from concentrating in class during lessons, and as such distracts and limits their performance in class (Manfo 2018). On the contrary, those who argue against the norm have emphasized that training and educating students encompasses a holistic approach, and therefore subjecting students to comply to a short hair norm does not necessarily prepare them to learn and acquire time management and self-care skills, as they conform to the said rules and not have a significant change with regards to their education and overall development (Manfo 2018). It is therefore necessary to employ an effective and holistic approach in the upbringing of the students and not to enforce rules that deprive them of their rights and dampens their confidence in making any significant progress in their life cycle.

This been said, the paper highlights the following objectives:

- [1] To explore the dynamics of the hair shave and short hair norm and high school education in Ghana.
- [2] To examine the effects of the short hair norm on the development of students.
- [3] To identify and analyze the experiences of students in complying to the short hair norm.
- [4] To recommend policy measures significant for addressing the challenges of the short hair norm among high school students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Ghana's 1992 constitution makes it clear that all Ghanaians should have the right to access formal education (Constitution of Ghana 1992). Notwithstanding this provision by the constitution, public high schools require students to shave and keep a short hair before they are allowed to access this right. Students who do not conform to this requirement are for that matter denied access to education, and therefore not offered admission into the schools. This goes against the fundamental human rights of the students concerned.

The norm on the hair shave and short hair among the students is rooted in the colonial era. The norm therefore occupies part of the school's hidden curriculum in Ghana. Hidden curriculum in the sense that, it is not entrenched in the constitutional provisions but has been incorporated in the educational system as an aspect of norms and conventions that are embraced in the school's curriculum. Ghana's educational system introduced during the colonial era was characterized by a system of segregation within schools, as well as a feature of a controlled regulation and uniformity among students. This included a regulation on dress code and shaving of the hair. Girls for instance, were treated differently from boys- as the former were made to partake mostly in programs and courses in the home economics such as cleaning, baking and childcare (Barthel 1985).

Nevertheless, it has been observed that most girl in high schools when approaching the time of school vacation or when they are about completing their high school education, start to leave their hair to grow with the idea of preparing for keeping a long natural hair, and or styling their hair when they are home on vacations (Manfo 2018). They do this through taking steps to press the hair in order to hide the growth of the hair to prevent any sort of punishment from the authorities of the school. Girls for that matter were given strict regulations to follow compared to the boys. Girls who did not conform to such regulations of keeping short hair were made to go through stricter punishment unlike their male counterparts. This was as result of the cultural dynamics that placed women as subsidiary to the men and depicted the male-

dominant notions of the Ghanaian society that see men as more superior compared to the women. Despite current trends of modernization and development around the world, the short hair norm continues to linger in public senior high schools in Ghana and act as a challenge for many children in accessing the full benefits and prospects that comes with education (Manfo 2018; Omotoso 2018). This reinforces colonial notions and practices on hair shave and a consideration of the African natural hair as a kind of kinky and unkempt hair.

Shamara Lawrence for instance, has noted that "for black women within the African Diaspora, the choice of how one wears their hair is at times more than simply a personal choice- more often than not it is embedded with political and socio-economic implications that have critical effects on the life of the individual" (Lawrence 2017). Within history, narratives on aspects of Euro-centric standards of beauty has in most cases described black people's hair, particularly black women's natural hair characteristics as not professional and unattractive. The characterization of the black hair to a more compromised position has created a situation where women have to for example conform to certain norms in the society (Lawrence 2017), including high school students having to keep a short hair. This has been institutionalized with the notion that for one to fit very well and transform upwardly and professionally in the innumerable social spaces such as the school system, one has to conform. A case that can be drawn here is "the incident at the Pretoria Girls High School, which brought about massive protests and demonstrations from the students because of its discriminatory practice which used a language that described the afro-textured hair as messy" (Lawrence 2017).

It has been argued by Johnson and Bankhead (2014b:90) that the decision and choices that encompasses the desire to straighten the natural hair of black people has a psychological and historical motive. Black people who are not a mixed race happen to have a hair which is not straight naturally and does not necessarily fall in downward trend and as such, a key characteristic of black people's hair is that it has an upward growth. From this, it could be argued that each race has its own unique features which could be seen in terms of their hair growth and other skin characteristics.

Notwithstanding the fact that natural hair could be styled in a way for example by twisting it or braiding or plaiting to make it flow downwards, a black person's hair will in few instances flow down through the natural process. Irrespective of this fact in relation to black people's hair, and its natural look, processes and dynamics of globalization to an extent has subjected them to have a belief that keeping and maintaining more of a straight hair stands to make them accepted, as well as making them desirable and attractive to take positions (Omotoso 2018; Johnson and Bankhead 2014b), for example with professions. Ghanaians, particularly women have come to be convinced that having a straight cascading hair makes them look much beautiful and presentable for instance when they are in the presence of people and during occasions. Similarly, black people have been convinced to appreciate and believe that making and smoothening their hair and its texture soft makes them to move more easier in the society (Manfo 2018). Also, both black women and men in many instances apply hot chemical conditioning and mixtures to enable them comb the hair in a manner that makes it more like a silky European hair (Manfo 2018). In doing this they could almost burn their scalp in the course of applying the hot chemicals to their natural hair.

In the current pace of globalization and the speed at which communication and interconnections between country's across the world is emerging, new socio-cultural norms and principles are been transferred from one end to the other fast and easily. This in most cases is the influx of the Western norms and practices into the developing world and beyond. The American and European culture have for instance become very dominant in most parts of the World including African countries. Ghana is no exception to this. Giddens for instance, has argued that globalization encompasses "an influence from a distance" (Giddens 1999). McGrew makes a similar point by arguing that globalization entails "the Americanization or

Westernization of the world" (McGrew and Held 2007). This explains why despite the benefits of globalization, such as the sharing of information and development strategies between and across countries in the world, some critics of globalization including Graham Thompson and Paul Hirst, have noted that the idea of globalization have within it an element of socio-cultural imperialism through which Westernized cultural norms, belief and value systems have dominated and influenced that of the developing world (Hirst and Thompson 1999). The practice whereby African women including women in Ghana wear long wavy hair and weave-on that are artificially made, and not keeping to their natural hair have in this sense originated from their influence of the American culture. The belief and acceptance that the long-styled wavy hair is more beautiful and attractive have made many young women on the African continent and in the Diaspora to copy the foreign hair style rather than their natural hair.

### **CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS**

This section highlights and explains the concepts of hair politics and body politics and makes critical reflections on how it relates with the short hair principle within high schools in Ghana.

### **HAIR POLITICS AND THE SHORT HAIR NORM**

Hair politics highlights the discourses and belief systems that surrounds the nature and kind of hairstyle that people may keep and maintain, which is defined and underpinned by socio-cultural norms as well as economic and political structures. It may also be influenced by globalizations and dominant notions of what is believed to be the proper hairstyle or nature of hair and the requirement for seeking for work and education (Manfo 2018). The human hair depicts many different form of underpinnings, including identity and one's socio-cultural esteem in a society. The traditional Ghanaian hair and most parts of the African continent portrayed a functional characteristic which is rooted in its cultural beliefs, norms and identity (Omotoso 2018). This is however different from how the hair is viewed and interpreted in the contemporary Ghanaian society. The hair style that was maintained in the traditional African society embraced varying hairstyles and colors that were used by different groups and classes of the society without necessarily given attention for men and women (Omotoso 2018:6).

However, within contemporary times the influx of foreign Westernized norms and beliefs that have created notions in African societies on keeping a long-foreign style of hair has made many people, especially African women to have a preference for the foreign hairstyle rather than their natural hair (Omotoso 2018: 6). The requirement of work and employers for a particular kind of hair which is in this case the foreign Westernized hairstyle has also acted as a factor that influences people to embrace and keep to the foreign hairstyle. As a result of this, the hair politics in the Ghanaian society have made its people to employ different hairstyles and colors that are of a western nature and not the traditional African natural hairstyle.

Some women in Ghana and on the African continent as a way to eradicate the idea of a Westernized hairstyle have over the years resorted to maintaining and keeping a natural hair without applying hair chemicals to their hair. This has been done mostly with the view of portraying their sense of identity and belongingness (Myjoyonline November 27, 2019; Manfo 2018). It has also been used as a means of boosting their self-confidence and a way of empowerment.

For public senior high schools in Ghana, the requirement for students to shave and keep a short hair has been seen as a means by the authorities to ensure that the students maintain a short natural hair and avoid a long hair in schools. However, the requirement by the school authorities which in actual sense is not a law that is stipulated in the constitution or in the educational policy system is only a social norm by the school to regulate the students. Nevertheless, the requirement is not in most instances applied in private high schools as students in such schools are not forced to keep the short hair. In a recent case, where two Rastafarian students who had performed extremely well were denied admission into Achimota

Senior High School on grounds of their dreadlocks, the former member of parliament (MP) for Kumbungu, Ras Mubarak noted that, the school had not followed the provisions of the constitution of Ghana, as it states that no child should be denied education because of their religious beliefs and affiliations (MyJoyonline March 19, 2021). The former MP also added that the school may have its rules and norms but the rules should not be made to supersede the constitutional provisions (Myjoyonline March 19, 2021). Denying the students admissions is therefore a violation of the fundamental human rights and disrespect for the religious affiliation and beliefs of students.

## **BODY POLITICS**

Body politics explains the policies as well as the norms within societies or the state that makes measures in regulating the human body, and also people's struggles and resistance on having a control physically and socially over their body (Brown and Gershon 2016; Harcourt 2009); The hair is a very important part of the human body and is therefore necessarily to discuss the conceptualization of body politics and its underpinnings when dealing with the hair. According to Foucault (1990), the human body depicts a central facet that underpins and shapes power relations. As such, a complexity of non-visible bodies tend to be reproduced which is expressed in varying dynamics.

The human body can be described as occupying a nature that is constructed physically as well as socially. (Davis 2011) has noted that the human body is to an extent colonized and constructed in a social manner. The body in essence is significant when discussing issues that may relate directly or indirectly with the hair, coloniality and gender and plays a crucial role when analyzing and drawing conclusions on people's socio-physical, economic and political development (Brown and Gershon 2016; Harcourt 2009).

In critically studying and understanding the dynamics of the body been political in nature, it could be noted that the body interrelates with several discourses such as culture, norms, resistance, sexuality, and power (Harcourt 2009). This could be explained by making reference to the fact that the body may be shaped and influenced by notions and practices that are politically and socially marked and determined, which creates a condition of control and containment on people (Brown and Gershon 2016).

In the case of the short hair principle in high schools in Ghana therefore, the principle is seen as introducing a norm or rule that is used to control and create a sense of containment on the body of the students including their hair. As such, the body should be seen as encompassing a central position in relation to the complex operation, activities, and discussions on knowledge and discourses on human rights, power and resistance (Brown and Gershon 2016; Harcourt 2009). The use of the concepts of hair and politics are therefore important understanding on how the students have been controlled and contained, making relations with its historical roots, cultural underpinnings, gender, power relations and how this generates the inclusion or exclusion of students.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

The research with its qualitative approach employed relevant literature on the research topic and the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews with students of the St. Sebastian Senior High School in Adumasa, Ghana. A total of twenty students made up of ten boys and ten girls were selected for the interviews. The students were randomly selected for the interviews. An equal number of boys and girls were selected for the interviews to allow for a balance and degree of equality with regards to the responses from the students.

The responses from the students were grouped into two main thematic areas which allowed for arranging the information taken from the students on various issues that fall under the same area of discussion. The thematic areas included the narratives and awareness of the students on the hair shave and short hair principle or norm and the experiences and effects of the short hair principle on the students, and how the students handle and deal with the short hair principle in their daily lives.

## PROFILE OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Table 1.0 below shows the profile of the participants of the interview.

Research Participant	Gender	Age (Years)
1	Male	19
2	Male	17
3	Male	18
4	Male	15
5	Male	16
6	Male	15
7	Male	15
8	Male	20
9	Male	18
10	Male	17
11	Female	16
12	Female	17
13	Female	18
14	Female	19
15	Female	17
16	Female	18
17	Female	18
18	Female	15
19	Female	17
20	Female	17

Source: Author's Field Data

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section looks at the analyses and discussion of the research findings. The findings are grouped under two main thematic areas namely, the narratives and awareness of the short hair norm in high schools and the experiences and effects of the short hair norm on students.

### NARRATIVES AND AWARENESS OF THE SHORT HAIR NORM IN SCHOOLS

The findings of the study including both the review of the existing literature and interviews with the students has revealed that the short hair norm in public high schools in Ghana comes as a hidden curriculum. Officially there is no policy or law from the government or ministry of education that states that students should keep a short hair in school. The practice however is a norm that is used by authorities and teachers in public senior high schools to control and monitor students, on how they should keep and maintain their hair, by shaving it down both for boys and girls. All the students interviewed confirmed that they were aware of the short hair norm and the reasons why authorities require them to adhere to the norm. The reasons included ensuring uniformity on hair among the students, providing students with much time to concentrate on their studies, and not spending all their time on keeping and styling their hair in certain ways, such as braiding the hair, wearing weave-on etc. An 18 years old female student interviewed noted that;

"For us girls, the authorities made it clear to us that when we keep long hair and have the opportunity to style our hair the way we prefer, we will not concentrate in class, and on our studies but give more attention to our hair in class and even when we go home"

Furthermore, regarding whether the students agreed with the short hair norm and been comfortable with it, majority of the students interviewed made it clear that they were not comfortable with the norm but just have to adhere to the requirement by the school authorities in order for them to stay in school and

have their education. This to an extent indicates that students do not necessarily feel comfortable and agree with the short hair norm as a way of helping them gain holistic knowledge and education, but just have to conform to the rule to avoid been punished or sacked from school by the authorities. It was noted by a 17 years old male student during the interview that;

"We are forced to conform to the short hair norm although we are not comfortable with it; our friends in private schools still perform very and sometimes even better than us- if we are allowed to keep our natural hair, we can also perform if only we study hard"

This come in line with Manfo (2018), who has argued that education encompasses a holistic approach and that forcing students to keep a short hair out of their will does not necessary instill discipline, and enhances the knowledge and learning abilities of students but only makes them adhere to the rules. If we are to ensure and enhance the educational improvement, learning and performance of the students, then an all-encompassing approach that takes into key consideration time management, discipline, and leadership building will be significant for harnessing success in the educational pursuits of the students.

### **EFFECTS AND EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS ON THE SHORT HAIR NORM**

The effects and the experiences of the short hair norm for students in schools have been diverse. The study revealed that most of the students feel that their fundamental human rights are deprived from them, as they are not allowed the opportunity to keep to their own naturally given hair. Also, students feel that they are discriminated against, as in some other instances even though Caucasian students are allowed to keep a long hair in Ghanaian senior high schools, the native students from Ghana are not given that opportunity to keep to their natural hair. For female students, it was realized that they are closely monitored by the school authorities unlike the male students on keeping a short hair. A 16 years old female student stated during the interview that;

"I feel so sad when I see my friends in private schools who are allowed to keep their natural hair in school- I sometimes feel inferior, and not part of them when we vacate from school and I see my colleagues with their black natural hair; this makes me feel discriminated against".

On the experiences of students, it has been seen through the study that students who do not conform to the norm and allow their hair to grow a little long are punished by the school authorities, and in some cases suspended from school activities. It was also realized that in terms of the punishment given to the students for keeping long hair, the female students are more monitored and mostly given stricter punishment compared to the male students.

This confirms the earlier argument of the paper that, the short hair politics in high schools in Ghana is gendered in scope. This is due to the fact that, in monitoring and ensuring that students keep a short hair, it is seen that girls are policed, controlled and given much closer watch and strict punishment than the boys. Another argument to this stems from the socio-cultural norms and underpinnings of the Ghanaian society which is patriarchal in nature and as such, sees males as more superior to females and in turn subordinates the later to the former. This was confirmed by an 18 years old female student that;

"When girls allow our natural hair to grow a little long, we are strictly punished unlike the boys- the school authorities and teachers complain that keeping our natural hair long attracts us to the opposite sex and distract them from concentrating and performing well in school".

It could therefore be agued from here that gender bias and patriarchal notions of the Ghanaian society runs into the short hair norm in high schools in Ghana. With this, girls experience the worse of effects and discriminatory conditions on keeping a short hair in comparison with boys in the same school. Last but not the least, a woman's hair is a very vital part of her beauty and therefore forcing girls to keep a

short hair could in a way affect their social, physical, and psychological development in the society at large.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the nature of the short hair norm in Ghanaian public high schools. It has been realized from the paper that the short hair norm is a hidden curriculum, that is used in schools to ensure that students keep their hair short in a uniform way. The short hair norm is therefore not a written policy under the Ghana Education Service or the Ministry of Education. Students who allow their hair to grow a little long are punished by the school authorities, and in some instances prevented from attending school. Some students despite performing excellently in school are denied admission into public senior high schools if they fail to keep their hair short. The short hair norm is also gendered in a way, in the sense that in the schools, the girls are more monitored and policed compared to the boys. Also, the former are given much stricter punishment when they leave their hair to grow a little long unlike the latter. This reflects the socio-cultural norms of the Ghanaian society which is patriarchal in nature and tends to see men as more superior and rather silences the voices of women.

However, within the same school system, Caucasian students are allowed to keep their long hair. Further to this, private high school students are allowed to keep their natural hair unlike their colleagues in the public schools. The short hair norm to an extent infringes on the fundamental human rights of the students, as the norm prevents some students from accessing education in the country. A clear example of this as noted in the introductory sections of the paper is the case of the two Rastafarian students who had performed excellently, but were earlier this year denied admission to Achimota Senior High School in Ghana because of their dreadlocks. The short hair norm also dampens the confidence of particularly girls, and makes them feel bad when they are with their colleagues from private schools. In suggesting policy recommendations, it could be noted that education is a holistic approach and as such, providing education for students is not only about forcing students to keep a short hair with the view of ensuring uniformity and enhancing their performance. The education of the students should be made to encompass teaching and learning of relevant practices, including self-care and time management- as such making a policy that forces students to keep a short hair only forces them to conform to the requirement and does not necessarily prepare them for acquiring effective and efficient knowledge needed for time management, self-care, and their overall development. Students could be instead allowed to keep their natural hair, with girls braiding their hair into simple cornrows as suggested by the students interviewed. Future research could employ a mixed research method in making a comprehensive review and analysis of the short hair norm within senior high schools in Ghana. It could also make use of a comparative study of different high schools in the country to allow for a more vivid and detailed comparison of the different dynamics within socio-cultural, political and economic underpinnings that determines and characterizes the short hair norm in schools in Ghana.

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