



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Centre for Human Rights  
Faculty of Law

## PRESS STATEMENT

# CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS CALLS ON ALL SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES TO ACT POSITIVELY TO ACCOMMODATE DIVERSITY

12 September 2016

---

The Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, is deeply concerned about the recent protests held by learners at the Pretoria High School for Girls challenging school policy that demanded them to straighten their hair. Even though the protests were aimed at questioning the school's policy on hair and physical appearance, they obviously represented much more than that. The policy has highlighted an existing institutional culture of exclusion and a lack of appreciation for diversity not only within the school but also alerted us to the more pervasive culture of negating diversity at our educational institutions.

The school's 2015/2016 Code of Conduct gives the impression that a certain kind of hair texture is the standard of acceptable hair (see Paragraph 6.4). For example, by expressly stating in the Code of Conduct that 'all hair must be **brushed**' and '...be tied back neatly in a **ponytail**', the school has failed to recognize and accommodate the wide variety of girls' hair textures – especially black girls' hair.

Such policy reveals a lack of transformation following 1994 and recalls the (now repealed) Population Registration Act 30 of 1950, which classified people into races using the very contentious basis of appearance. Under the Act, one way of classifying people was the 'Pencil Test'. Apartheid officials stuck a pencil in a person's hair to determine their race: if the individual's hair could 'hold' the pencil, they would be classified as non-white. Similarly, the Pretoria High School for Girls has by its hair policy set a standard against which others are judged – a standard that is non-inclusive and lacking in acceptance of diversity.

Centre for Human Rights  
Faculty of Law,  
University of Pretoria,  
Pretoria, 0002, South Africa

Tel +27 (0)12 420 3810  
Fax +27 (0)12 362 1525  
Email [chr@up.ac.za](mailto:chr@up.ac.za)  
Web [www.chr.up.ac.za](http://www.chr.up.ac.za)



We are concerned that the school policy potentially erodes the individual identity of the girls and conflicts with rights enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa. For instance, the right to equality prohibits direct or indirect unfair discrimination, against any person by virtue of their race, amongst others. Allowing a category of girls to wear their natural hair at school, while denying others the same opportunity is discriminatory.

An educational institution is meant to embrace diversity and be visibly inclusive in all of its policies. The notion that children are only meant to be seen and not heard has impacted on the manner in which the Pretoria High School for Girls has handled the grievances of its learners, when it called on the police to arrest protesting students. Again this was a violation of the right to demonstration provided for under the Bill of Rights.

As part of promoting a culture of inclusivity, school boards should hold dialogues with their learners before arriving at binding rules and regulations. This helps deepen democracy and foster a feeling of belonging and co-ownership.

This incident, sad as it may be, now presents South Africa with an opportunity to address institutional racism, exclusion and discrimination across all institutions of learning in South Africa. As such, we recommend that there be a systematic survey of all schools' policies in order to expose and review provisions relating to inequality, sexism, discrimination and homophobia. All efforts must be geared towards fostering social cohesion and inclusivity of all students regardless of colour or race and the values of the constitution must be held supreme at all times.

The idea that children only need to go to school, do their homework and earn good grades is misplaced. Their lives are a summation of their daily experiences, and these transcend pure academics. It is our responsibility as a society to make their memories of childhood those of appreciation for who they are and not placing on them the weight of struggles which were never meant to be their problem if only adults did the right thing.

These concerns are not limited to high schools. In addition to grappling with fee structures, universities also still grapple with accommodating and celebrating diversity within its student body.

The Centre for Human Rights is celebrating women's hair in their diversity. Attached is a collection of photographs depicting women's hair from the short to the curly, the straight, the dreadlocked and the Afro. All pictures were taken at Freedom Park, Pretoria, South Africa. All of the models are students at the University of Pretoria. Adebayo Okeowo and Chairman Okoloise, doctoral candidates at the Centre for Human Rights, took the photographs.