

## COMMENTARY



**RUSSIA GENOCIDE:** Members of the Ukrainian community in Rome attend a demonstration Sunday on the occasion of Ukraine's Independence Day. **VIA AP**

I want to make it very clear that if the Maduro regime launches any attack against the Guyanese people or invades Guyanese territory and a request is made by the American government for access to Trinidadian territory to defend the people of Guyana, my government will unflinchingly provide them that access.

Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister



**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION**

THE DECISION to wear one's hair in a particular style is deeply personal, reflecting culture, heritage, religion and identity. For many it is not just a matter of fashion, it is an expression of who they are. Yet individuals continue to face unfair treatment because of their natural hair textures that reflect their racial, ethnic or cultural identities.

While there is no specific legislation that addresses hairstyles directly, the Equal Opportunity Act Chap 22:03 prohibits discrimination in the category of education based on race, ethnicity and religion, under which this issue may fall.

Discriminating against students based on their hair or hairstyle can negatively impact their mental health, self-esteem and overall well-being. While educational institutions have a legitimate interest in maintaining standards of dress and grooming to promote a positive environment, these policies must be applied equally, fairly and inclusively.

The Equal Opportunity Act prohibits educational institutions

Every strand matters:

## Right to learn without losing your identity

**'...a blanket ban on dreadlocks, without any religious exceptions, may be discriminatory if the hairstyle is a fundamental part of a student's Rastafarian faith. Similarly, other hairstyles may be essential to an individual's cultural identity'**

from:

- Refusing admission;
- Applying unequal terms or conditions of entry;
- Denying access to benefits, services, or facilities; and
- Expelling or penalising a student

...on the basis of characteristics tied to race, ethnicity or religion, which may include natural hair textures or cultural hairstyles.

It is therefore critical that school policies be inclusive and non-discriminatory, reflecting the diverse society that is TT. When drafting or reviewing these policies, institutions must ensure that they do not disproportionately affect students from a particular background. For example, a blanket ban on dreadlocks, without any religious exceptions, may be

discriminatory if the hairstyle is a fundamental part of a student's Rastafarian faith. Similarly, other hairstyles may be essential to an individual's cultural identity.

While it is important to safeguard students' rights to express their cultural, racial or religious identity, this does not mean schools cannot establish and enforce appearance and grooming policies, which are integral to promoting discipline, fostering institutional spirit and teaching young students to value their self-image. Students are expected to comply with these policies. However, an equitable and inclusive student appearance and grooming policy should:

- Restrict only on objective reasons (for example, hairstyles must be neat, hygienic and prop-

erly maintained), not on personal or cultural preferences.

- Apply rules equally to all students without disproportionately affecting any protected group; and

- Make reasonable accommodations for religious and cultural expression.

Denying a child access to education or shaming them for something inherent to their biological, religious or cultural identity can cause irreparable harm and unjustly restrict their right to learn in a safe and supportive environment. Educational institutions have a duty not only to educate, but to protect students from all forms of discrimination.

Schools are not just places of learning; they are guardians of inclusion, equality and respect. They have a responsibility to create safe spaces where all students, regardless of how they look, can thrive because they feel valued, respected and free to express their authentic selves.

All educational institutions are encouraged to review and update their policies with inclusion in mind, ensuring they align with the Equal Opportunity Act and

reflect the rich diversity of our nation. We must move toward a future where school policies uplift rather than diminish identity, where diversity is not only accepted but embraced.

Inclusive policies are not just about rules; they are about values. When schools create spaces where every student is seen and respected, they do more than comply with the law, they shape a generation that understands the true meaning of equality.

Let us not allow something as beautiful and meaningful as natural hair to become a barrier to education, belonging or self-worth. In protecting the right to learn, we must also honour the right to be seen – by promoting equality and embracing diversity.

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