



Workplace Hair Acceptance Report

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Executive Summary

This report will examine the issue of Afro hair discrimination in the workplace and the understanding of this problem, particularly focused on the Employer. There has been extensive research and evidence quantifying Afro hair discrimination from the victim perspective. This report will consider ways in which employers can eliminate Afro hair discrimination and what legal intervention might be needed.

The report draws on the seven-year global awareness raised by World Afro Day, other organisations and legal changes in the USA addressing Afro hair discrimination as well as other academics, professionals, lawyers and case studies. A survey was commissioned through Shift Insight, respondents were 1000 UK and USA decision-makers at various levels from CEOs, Line Managers, HR Officers and DEI Specialists.

The major findings were bias against Afro hair in the workplace is likely to cost jobs. Respondents were given a case study of a woman with Afro hair performing well in her role, while on probation at the company. She was the only Black professional in the 300 staff company and wore her natural long hair out, but she did not get the job role. However, before leaving the company she happened to blow dry her hair straight and was told by the Director that she may have been able to keep the job if she had worn her hair straight before. 37% of respondents, more than a third felt that this could possibly happen in their own companies, one fifth of respondents said this could definitely happen. This is clear Afro hair discrimination, and this person went on to become a successful business woman so this company potentially acted unlawfully and missed out on an excellent employee.

The Employer Hair Attitudes Survey shows a hierarchy of hairstyles considered appropriate from more Eurocentric decreasing to Afrocentric styles. These are historic attitudes towards Afro hair, which represent conformity to a European standard. 84% respondents considered straight hair on a woman appropriate in all circumstances versus 64% who felt an Afrocentric hairstyle (braids with buns) was appropriate. 82% approved of the very low fade for the black male, showing minimal visibility of Afro hair. 1 in 10 respondents (12%) considered several Afrocentric hairstyles completely inappropriate for the workplace.

Even companies with a strong DEI commitment, show definite bias for Eurocentric hair appearance over Afrocentric hair appearance. 85% of those who felt DEI was important to their company felt 'straight hair' was considered appropriate for all employees and only 65% also felt the 'braids with buns' and Afros were considered appropriate for all employees. There is potentially a disconnect between some of the common DEI themes around authenticity and bringing your whole self to work, which may be a blind spot not applied to Afro hair. The survey indicates that a Black woman who straightens her hair, could increase the chances of her hair being seen as 'appropriate' for the workplace by 20 percentage points.

Currently employees with Afro hair (like children in schools), are left with the burden of challenging workplace cultures that discriminate against Afro hair. However, most employees are hired by complying with a company's culture towards Afro hair. This can perpetuate a climate that reinforces Afro hair discrimination in the workplace. However, once positioned in employment, some employees with Afro hair will challenge workplace appearance codes from the inside. They may radically change their hair appearance, which can result in some unpleasant exchanges with their co-workers and management. (See Hair Discrimination Comments).

Changes Required

The World Afro Day organisation is calling for MPs and authorities from all political sides to agree to end the 'tolerance' of Afro hair discrimination by updating the 2010 Equality Act. We would like the update to be law by 2025 to coincide with 60 years since the first race relations Act 1965. Clear evidence is now available to improve equality legislation, which was not available to the original lawmakers so ignorance is no longer an excuse. Employers need specific training to eradicate Afro hair discrimination and they need to recognise that current DEI practice, policies and training may not necessarily provide them with the knowledge, skills and personnel to end Afro hair discrimination. Employers need to reflect on whether hair is at all important to determine the potential of an employee. Employers can use their power to foster environments of diversity and inclusion because 'what's hair got to do with it?' Employers can stop reinforcing a European and Western hierarchy of hair because this is discriminatory and has nothing to do with job performance. We call on the many companies, which already employ people with Afro hair and Afrocentric hairstyles, especially in senior roles to be vocal and visible in support of Afro hair. Good employers can make clear statements and introduce processes affirming Afro hair acceptance and help drive change across all industries.

Introduction

1. The Employer Hair Attitudes Survey conducted by Shift Insight in collaboration with World Afro Day CIC. This document seeks provide evidence about employers' attitudes towards Afro hair, including recruitment and knowledge of equality law. The principles and recommendations of this report applies to employers in the UK and USA but could be applied to other countries across the African diaspora.
2. World Afro Day (WAD) is endorsed by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. World Afro Day is a global day of celebration and liberation of Afro hair and identity. They have been raising awareness globally, about hair discrimination since September 2017. The message reach has grown from an estimated 2.5 million to 1.5 billion globally. (See Appendix 2)

Opening Statement

Michelle De Leon, Founder and CEO of World Afro Day CIC

Afro Hair discrimination has been overlooked, underestimated and ignored by UK legislators, global authorities and major nations for over 150 years. Since the 1960s, racial equality law has failed to tackle this issue, even though skin and hair discrimination originated at the same time. Hair discrimination continues to impact people of African descent, their opportunity to work and both their physical and mental health. Only in recent years have various US States led the way with the CROWN Act protecting specifically against Afro hair discrimination at work. Although hair discrimination is an economic and employment issue, as it stands, no Western nation or G7 Power has outlawed hair discrimination on a national level.

The influence of governments and business on Afro hair discrimination is critical because the opportunity to work is held as a fundamental right in international legislation.

Laws addressing Afro hair discrimination have lagged 50+ years behind laws addressing skin discrimination so this report will highlight how this lack of intervention may have impacted the propagation of this form of discrimination. Since 2017, I am able to compare and contrast tackling hair discrimination in schools with this new initiative in tackling it in employment. Businesses do not recognise hair discrimination as an employment and legal issue, which also fails to address the needs of their African heritage employees. UK and US Schools have appearance codes and uniforms that overtly regulate hair appearance. These policies can regularly bring them into conflict with students and their families. Companies more often covertly, rather than overtly regulate the hair appearance of employees but because of the power dynamic of the employer employee relationship; an employee is less likely to risk their job over their hair appearance. Black employees often cooperate with the company culture and look.

‘How bad can hair discrimination be?’

I definitely underestimated the severity of Afro hair discrimination towards adults so maybe authorities have done so too. I knew that incidences would be prevalent, albeit under the radar. Adult cases were not in the headlines as much as children but then in April 2023, The Ritz London case happened. A man going through the recruitment process at Ritz London was sent a grooming policy, banning Afro hairstyles. I wasn't that surprised that the attitude existed, only that they had put such an illegal statement into their official grooming policy, dated June 2021. Several TV appearances and press articles later and the Ritz London have made poor attempts to rectify their PR diversity disaster. Where was the review and new initiative to show their growth as a brand and acceptance of employees with Afro hair? The Ritz London and other major hotel chains were approached to see if they could be more positive about Afro hair acceptance but they declined the offer to show leadership in this area of equality. My experience so far approaching companies is that the people at the top are sometimes more resistant to change, than their more junior staff, who seem more willing.

Just over a week after the Ritz London case, details emerged in the media about a shocking hair discrimination case involving a private children's care business:

“Black female children placed at the Doncaster homes routinely had their hair shaved short when they arrived, at times against the wishes of their parents, the panel report said, describing it as an “unacceptable practice that was both depersonalising and degrading for the children.” (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel).

These cases of abuse towards children with Afro hair at Doncaster Children's homes; were the worse cases that I have come across, anywhere in the world in the last seven years of campaigning. Although, the behaviour at the homes were extreme and abhorrent their attitudes towards Afro hair are not uncommon, as evidenced by our previous research (see hair discrimination comments below). Doncaster Children's homes were run as a private business so 2023 emerged as an ideal time to further investigate the attitudes of UK and USA companies towards Afro hair.

Aim of the study

The Workplace Hair Acceptance Report aims to provide evidence as to the severity and consequences of workplace hair discrimination. The research seeks to reveal the understanding and perceptions of Afro hair discrimination from the employers' perspective, namely through decision-makers in the organisation. The aim is to provide robust evidence on an historical and hidden issue, which needs more exposure so that authorities and business leaders take decisive action. The report will make recommendations and call for changes to address this discrimination.

The Rationale

The report is needed to make companies aware that Afro hair discrimination is an employment issue, which affects their hiring practices and the potential and experience of their employees. Both employer and employees miss out because of this normalised and accepted form of discrimination. Eradicating hair discrimination means employers could choose from the widest possible pool of talent and employees could bring their whole selves and full potential to their company: it's a win, win. Afro hair discrimination in theory is illegal in the UK and 23 CROWN States in the USA but the Employer Hair Attitudes Survey clearly shows that hiring professionals may not understand that their bias against Afro hair is wrong. Historically, all employment discrimination has needed legal intervention and training to stop discrimination at work. This report will provide clear evidence that Afro hair discrimination is not being adequately addressed by current legislation and employment training.

What is hair discrimination?

Hair discrimination in the context of this report is a form of race-based discrimination against people of African descent based on their hair textures and styles. This means treating someone less favourably and causing them harm because of their natural Afro hair texture and or hairstyles associated with their African heritage (race). This is predominantly aimed at Black women and girls. In the UK, known hair discrimination cases can start in nursery as young as four years old, then continue throughout childhood educational experiences and into adult life.

Hair Discrimination at work

It is important to highlight the many hidden cases of hair discrimination, that form particular patterns. Harassment tends to fall into the below categories:

- **Hair experiments** – people without Afro hair conduct experiments on people with Afro hair. They may explore their curiosity through unwanted hair touching and in one case a boss pouring water on a person's head to see the effect.
- **Hair ignorance** – unwanted probing like: what do you do with it? How do you wash it? It's unclean, it's too big.
- **Hair superiority** – An overall attitude that straight hair is normal, straight hair is professional. Versus Afro hair is abnormal and Afro hair is unprofessional.
- **Hair animal comparisons** – indignity and harassment are experienced through Afro hair being called woolly, wild, like a monkey and other animals.

Hair Discrimination Comments (Hair Equality Report 2019)
1. "Questions at work regarding my hairstyle: It looks like wool. How do you wash it? Is it clean? It feels hard. It looks like a sponge."
2. Some comments comparing it to pubic hair or that "it looks dirty"
3. Had my boss tip water on my hair for "fun", to see what will happen. Been called a golliwog, had my hair pulled. Had my hair played with because it's so "fascinating"
4. My ex-husband is white when our child was born he said "I'm so glad she's got "normal" hair. Your hair's so restrictive" hence the ex status
5. When I had done the big chop a manager asked me if I "was okay up there". Possibly suggest the only reason my hair would be like that would be because I had an illness. It was ignorance above anything else.
6. Told unprofessional, or wild etc.
7. A very unkind person said I have n*gger hair
8. When I have had my natural hair in twists in a professional context, strangers have tried to touch and play with my hair. This includes in a toilet after a lady came out of the stall and hadn't yet washed her hands.
9. I only received compliments about my hair when it was straightened. I had my afro out on occasions and told I look like a lion, or my hair was like sheep wool.
10. I don't feel negative towards it but I have had people treat me like I am not human or ugly because of it.

World Afro Day has created 'The Hair Discrimination Files' which contains an extensive list of people's experiences of Afro hair discrimination. This is so the evidence is readily available to politicians, the media, academics, businesses, mental health professionals and community groups. Unearthing this serious form of discrimination; hopefully means that it will no longer be ignored.

Expert Commentary:

Patricia O'Brien-Richardson, PhD, MS. Ed

Associate Professor of Teaching

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey

"These comments can be summed up by not only are these experiences traumatic, but they may also lead to hopelessness and depression. Because the touching of hair occurs on the body, this might also trigger prior, deep-rooted traumas, as well as post-traumatic stress disorders. Feelings of fear, anxiety, and being unsafe may be exacerbated with each encounter, which could have a drastic effect on their mental health in the future."

Owen O'Kane BSc, MSc, BABCP

Psychotherapist, Former NHS Clinical Lead

"We live in a world of discrimination that more than often causes damage, hurt and pain. I need to start from a place of full disclosure as a mental health professional by ashamedly acknowledging that hair discrimination is not something that was high on my awareness. That changed when I was introduced to World Afro day and became aware of the appalling discrimination that people with Afro hair experience. This is particularly evident in the workplace.

As an outsider, I am not qualified to offer opinions that claim to know how this might feel. But as a psychotherapist I can hypothesise confidently the damage this is causing. It has mental health implications. It raises serious ethical questions. It evokes legal debate. And it calls for change and greater awareness.

I recently read hundreds of experiences from people with Afro hair that detail rejections, judgments, humiliations, assumptions, bias, and inappropriate touch. The list is endless. Can you imagine if this happened to someone because they have blonde hair or any hairstyle? It sounds unthinkable, doesn't it? There are several issues here in relation to discrimination, unconscious bias, bias, racism, intolerance and frankly ignorance.

I am commenting from a place of discomfort with my new insights. But it has motivated me to speak out and encourage my professional colleagues to become more aware of the importance of challenging this discrimination. Silence isn't an option when we witness fellow human being suffer unnecessarily."

Physical Health and Afro hair discrimination.

Physical as well as mental health has been impacted by Afro hair discrimination. There is a pressure to straighten hair and employers may be unaware that the use of chemical hair straighteners (relaxers) in the Black community has been linked in various studies to greater incidences of disease and higher rates of cancers. Hair relaxer products are known to contain very high levels of endocrine-disrupting chemicals ("EDCs"). Chemicals contained in hair products have been linked to more negative health outcomes for Black women and girls, including early puberty, preterm birth, obesity and diabetes. Most recently relaxers have been linked to uterine cancer and there are multiple lawsuits currently in the United States against the manufacturers. (Reports on Chemical hair straighteners See appendix 3)

Why Employer Hair Research?

There has been a lack of research into employer attitudes towards Afro hair and African heritage hairstyles. We sought to close the knowledge gap on current recruitment views and we also wanted to find out if there were any substantial differences between UK and USA attitudes. The legal positions of Afro hair discrimination are very different in both countries so what impact would this have on respondent views? The Employer Hair Attitudes Survey had instant impact and was welcomed by many respondents. The survey helped to raise awareness of the issue.

Employer Hair Attitudes Survey 2023
1.Excellent survey and right to focus on an area of inclusion that is not talked about enough to create education and awareness.
2. Good to know this information and I will share with employees
3.It was very eye opening and I will be looking more into the Crown Act
4. It's nice to see this being targeted as it can be an issue in the professional field
5. It's a very interesting topic and I'll like to know more about hair discrimination in the workplace
6. Just to say thank you for bringing awareness to a topic I will get more informed on
7. Thanks for bringing an important issue to my attention.
8. This is an interesting topic. I am part of a few E&B groups in my company, and I will take this back and ask some more questions.

9. This is such an important topic, and I'm glad that you're addressing it through research. I may be white, but my husband is afro-hispanic, so our children face this type of discrimination too.

10. I have a hairstyle that is naturally curly and I had prior managers that told me, " Can you brush your hair and neaten it up?" I have experienced the type of discrimination mentioned in this survey.

Employer Hair Attitudes Survey

Background and methodology

This section summarises key findings from a survey developed in collaboration between Shift Insight and World Afro Day, seeking to uncover employer attitudes towards Afro-textured and Afrocentric hairstyles in the workplace. The survey received 1000 responses, 500 from the UK and 500 from the US; respondents were HR decision-makers and other key decision-makers in the workplace, including those who might have hiring and line management responsibilities. Respondents were taken from a range of regions and states and weighted to reflect population distribution in the UK and US. Respondents were given full confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses. The survey was live in July - August 2023.

Findings

Few companies explicitly ban Afro-textured hair in their policies

To begin the survey, we asked employees whether their company had a hair appearance policy. Combining US and UK responses, 6% reported to have very strict hair appearance policies, either with specific styles ruled in or out or policies specifically relating to Anti-Afro hair texture or Afrocentric hairstyles (table 1).

Table 1: Prevalence of different hair appearance policies

	UK	US	Combined Proportion
Neat & tidy	35%	30%	33%
Professional	35%	29%	32%
No hair appearance policy	28%	33%	31%
Casual	20%	24%	22%
Very strict e.g., specified styles ruled in/out	4%	8%	6%
Anti-Afro hair texture or Afrocentric hairstyles	<1%	<1%	<1%

Base n = 1000, Q: *Does your company have a hair appearance policy? (Please select as many as apply)*

Many feel that they understand Afro-textured hair discrimination in the workplace

66% of our respondents indicated that they were familiar with the idea of Afro-textured hair discrimination in the workplace (67% UK, 65% US), and 66% of UK and 66% of US respondents felt confident in their understanding of how equality legislation applies to Afro-textured hair in their state or country.

In practice though, Afrocentric hairstyles are less welcome in the workplace than those which are more Eurocentric



Meaning: Afrocentric hairstyles e.g. Afros, Bantus, braids, locs, twists, head coverings etc. Hairstyles rooted in a more African appearance and heritage as opposed to Western or European.


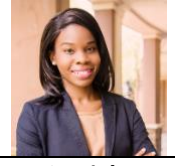
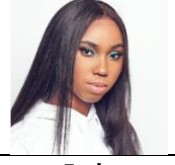

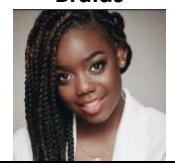
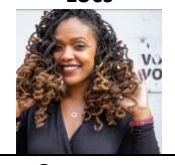
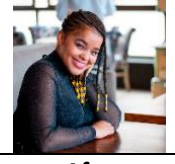
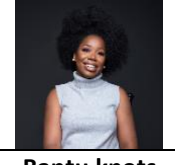
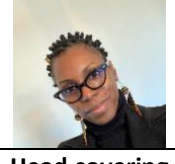
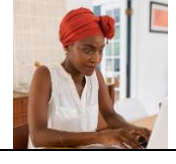
To test the extent to which Afrocentric hairstyles were deemed acceptable in the workplace based on appearance, we showed various hairstyles to respondents and asked them to select the extent to which this was considered appropriate in the workplace. The styles considered the most appropriate are traditionally Eurocentric rather than Afrocentric and are consistent across the UK and US: straight hair (UK 83%, US 86%), male fades (UK 80%, US 83%), ponytail braids (UK 79%, US 80%) and weaves/wigs (UK 76%, US 81%). Notably, these are the styles in which Afro-textured hair is the least visible.

Hairstyles with a lower acceptance rate are those where Afro-hair is more visible and styled, including the male Afro (UK 65%, US 65%), female braids (UK 62%, US 66%), locs (UK 65%, US 66%) and cornrows (UK 64%, US 67%). This simultaneously validates that a hierarchy of acceptability of hairstyles exists, and at the same time that there is a bias towards Eurocentric hairstyles. It appears there are certain standards of appearance, despite only 6% of UK and US respondents reporting that they have strict hair policies in the workplace.

This hierarchy was present both in companies that said DEI was ‘Important’ and those that didn’t; for example, straight hair was acceptable for all for 85% and male fades for 82%, however the male Afro was acceptable for 65% and braids for 65%. 12% of DEI strong companies felt male Cornrows that they were shown were completely inappropriate for the workplace.

Table 2: *The degree to which different hairstyles are considered appropriate in the workplace*

Response option by location	Considered appropriate for all employees		Considered appropriate in some circumstances e.g., for some employees only, those in particular roles...		Not considered appropriate for any employees		Don't know	
	UK	US	UK	US	UK	US	UK	US
Straight hair 	83%	86%	11%	8%	3%	4%	4%	3%
Fade (male) 	80%	83%	13%	10%	4%	6%	2%	1%

Ponytail braids 	79%	81%	12%	12%	6%	4%	3%	3%
Straight weaves/ wigs 	76%	81%	16%	12%	6%	4%	3%	3%
Straight weaves/ wigs 	76%	81%	16%	12%	5%	6%	3%	1%
Fade 	76%	80%	16%	11%	4%	5%	4%	4%
Braids 	70%	72%	20%	17%	7%	7%	3%	3%
Locs 	68%	74%	21%	16%	8%	8%	3%	3%
Cornrows 	65%	74%	20%	15%	11%	8%	3%	4%
Afro 	69%	69%	20%	20%	8%	9%	2%	2%
Bantu knots 	65%	71%	20%	16%	10%	8%	4%	4%
Head covering 	68%	64%	21%	21%	5%	11%	5%	5%

Cornrows 	64%	67%	17%	19%	14%	10%	4%	4%
Locs 	65%	66%	22%	20%	10%	10%	3%	3%
Afro 	65%	65%	23%	20%	8%	11%	4%	4%
Braid 	62%	66%	21%	19%	13%	10%	3%	5%

Base n = 1000, Q: *In your opinion, to what extent would the following hairstyles be considered appropriate in your workplace?*

A case study example highlighted a lack of understanding of the legal implications of Afro-hair discrimination in the workplace.

Later in the survey, we presented respondents with a real-life case study, where a woman was denied the opportunity to pass her probation, despite performing well in her role due to the way she wore her Afro hair.

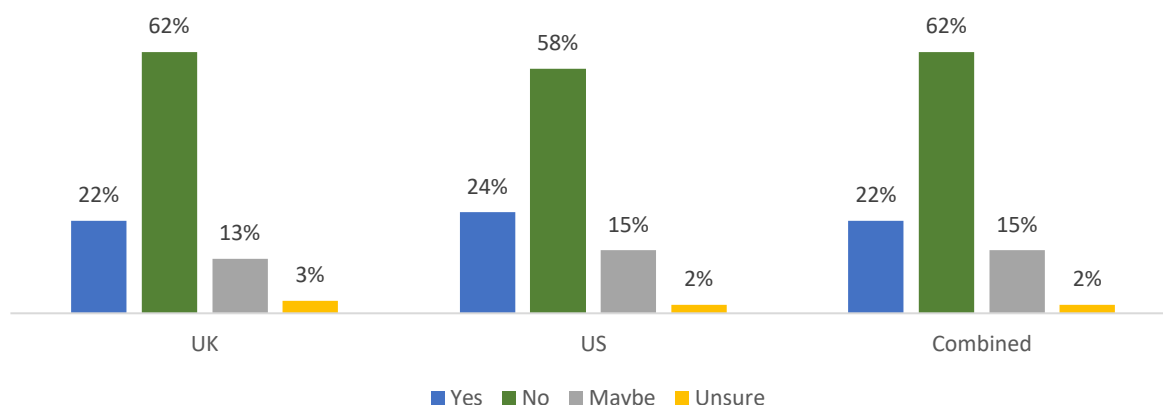
Case study, question 1: A Black professional woman was working, where she was the only black woman in a company of approximately 300 staff. She wore her hair Afro textured hair out, roughly shoulder length and it was voluminous. She was performing well in her role and her colleagues expected her to pass her probation period. However, she did not pass and no one understood this decision. During her final days, she wore a blow-dried straight hairstyle and her supervisor remarked: 'It's a shame that you didn't wear your hair like this earlier, you probably could have stayed here.' In your view, does it seem that her employer was acting in a way which was...?

Table 3: Response rates to case study (Figure 1)

Response option	UK Proportion	US Proportion	Combined Proportion
Case study Q1			
Discriminatory and against the law	64%	62%	63%
Discriminatory but not against the law	18%	20%	19%
Poor practice but not discriminatory	11%	7%	9%
Reasonable but clumsy	5%	8%	6%
Other, please specify	<1%	<1%	0%
Don't know/ unsure	2%	3%	2%

Over a third of respondents felt that this real-life instance of discrimination definitely or possibly could occur in their workplace; a fifth felt it definitely could.

The case study previously was based on a real incident. Do you feel something like this could happen in your workplace?



Base n = 1000, Q: *The case study previously was based on a real incident. Do you feel something like this could happen in your workplace?*

Legal opinions on the case study demonstrate that it could be construed as unlawful.

Laith Dilaimi, Barrister at Old Square Chambers

Leading barrister in employment law and education law

Contributing editor to *Discrimination Law* (Bloomsbury Professional)

In Great Britain, the employee might wish to consider going to an employment tribunal and bringing claims of harassment and indirect discrimination against her employer under the Equality Act 2010.

Harassment: Assuming that the employee genuinely felt that the supervisor’s comment created an environment which was intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive for her, an employment tribunal in Great Britain would be likely, in my view, to conclude that the supervisor’s comment was harassment related to race and was, therefore, unlawful.

Indirect discrimination: This claim would be harder for the employee to win. However, if the employment tribunal concluded from the evidence before it that the employer essentially had a policy or practice of requiring employees to have straight hair in order to pass their probation period, the employment tribunal would, in my view, be likely to conclude that not allowing the employee to pass her probation period was indirect race discrimination and was, therefore, unlawful.

Professor D. Wendy Greene J.D. LL.M.

Director, Centre for Law, Policy, & Social Action

Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law

In U.S. jurisdictions where the CROWN Act or parallel civil rights legislation has been enacted, an employer’s decision to terminate a Black female employee on the basis of her Afro should be deemed unlawful race discrimination. Similarly, the employer’s decision should be deemed unlawful racial discrimination in violation of federal civil rights statutes like Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Section 1981 of the 1866 Civil Rights Act, which prohibit racial discrimination in workplaces.

Pursuant to current federal jurisprudence, discrimination against a Black female worker on the basis of her Afro constitutes racial discrimination in violation of Title VII and Section 1981; however, if the same employee were terminated because she wore her Afro hair in other Afro/natural/protective hairstyles like locs, braids, twists, etc., without additional evidence, the employer likely would not violate these federal civil rights protections against race discrimination. For over 40 years, federal courts have maintained what I call a “hair splitting legal distinction” whereby discrimination against African descended workers on the basis of their Afros constitutes unlawful race discrimination yet discrimination against such workers on the basis of natural hairstyles flowing from an Afro hair texture, like locs, braids, and twists, is not.

Current legislation alone may not be enough to address hair discrimination

The CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair’) Act was first passed into legislation in California in 2019. Its broad aims are *“to ensure protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools.”*¹. The CROWN act currently applies in 23 states.

We looked at the difference between the answers of those in US states who had passed the CROWN act and those who had not in order to see if there were differences in other questions between these two groups. We found there to be no statistically significant differences present. This was perhaps most surprising when looking at the case study question explored above; in CROWN Act states, 26% felt that this case study could occur in their workplace, whereas in non-CROWN Act states, 18% felt it could occur (although this is not statistically significant). Those based in California - the first state to introduce the CROWN Act - were significantly more likely to say the case study could happen in the workplace (39%), than those in other states (19%). Thus, professionals in California indicate a higher likelihood that acts of discrimination on the basis of hair might occur in their workplaces.

One explanation for this could be that knowing more about hair discrimination through having the CROWN Act in law may raise sensitivity to these issues; therefore, respondents have higher levels of awareness of hair discrimination and are more likely to be aware that it may happen in their state. An alternate explanation could also be that CROWN Act is relatively new in some states, having only first been instated in 2019, and much more recently so for other states. This might mean there has not been adequate time for companies to become acquainted with the way in which it operates, so employees still feel the case study is possible in their state.

Nevertheless, it seems awareness of discrimination and legislation in states may *not* mean that people have confidence that incidences of discrimination would not occur at their workplace; Therefore, the CROWN Act might not be an effective measure alone for workplaces to use to eradicate Afro hair discrimination. It is important that individual companies enforce the Act providing specific hair-related discrimination training and/or resources to ensure that this discrimination does not occur.

¹ The Crown Act (2023). Available at URL: <https://www.thecrownact.com/> [Accessed August 2023]

Dr Patti O'Brien-Richardson PhD, MS ED

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy

An analysis from on the implications of this research.

DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) roles should exist in prominent levels of leadership, hair policies should be specifically outlined and embedded in the company's policies.

When analyzing gender, Afros were considered more inappropriate than females as a hairstyle for the workplace. Similarly, wearing braids among men was considered less appropriate among men than women. Although braids are considered neat, and professional and are among protective hairstyles, we are still living in a world where who is wearing the hairstyle matters more.

In the United States, besides the CROWN Act, employees have a right to not be harassed or discriminated against because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability or age or genetic information which is based on the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, stemming from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits such discrimination. Head coverings are protected under this law. One of the greatest needs this study revealed is the need for training among hiring staff, HR managers, supervisors and CEOs on hair discrimination and racial discrimination.

In America, the CROWN Act is not a federal policy. Half the states have such a policy. Much work needs to be done to continue for federal policy as failed to pass bipartisan agreement on the way to federal status earlier this year. There is a tremendous need for education, awareness, and understanding for workplace equity and for workplace discrimination to be prevented by legislation. It is not simply a promising idea, but a significantly essential element of the status of inclusion and belonging in the corporate environment. Such training should be ongoing, continuous, and supported at all levels of an organization. Based on the data the likelihood of this happening is exceptionally low. Of the four United States with the highest responses, three were from states who had passed the CROWN Act. One state failed to pass it earlier this year.

Lastly, many respondents were from the technology fields, followed by construction and financial/insurance services and human health and social work services. Considering these industry related concentrations are in demand and are likely to attract a continued diverse workforce, more work needs to be done to educate and train employers and supervisors in these fields regarding hair discrimination. We should live in a world where the way an individual wears their hair, has no bearing on what they can contribute to an organization in terms of skills, talents, abilities, and strengths.

Conclusion

The research reveals the existence of clear biases towards Eurocentric hairstyles and even more worryingly, the likelihood of specific cases of Afro hair discrimination occurring within the workplace even in organisations for whom DEI is a priority. This presents an unambiguous, clear message: there is a blind spot regarding the discrimination of Afro-textured/ Afrocentric hairstyles in the workplace. Although legislation is a positive tool, the research reveals that it may not be enough by itself to ensure avoid acts of Afro hair

discrimination, needing perhaps to be supplemented by specific training relating to Afro-textured hair discrimination and backed up by strong company policies and leadership.

Further details

For the full results of this survey in more detail, please follow this link to Shift's [website](#).

About the research

This research was developed in collaboration between World Afro Day® and Shift Insight. This report was authored by Jessica Taylor and Jane Powell at Shift Insight, with collaboration from Michelle De Leon, CEO of World Afro Day® and Dr Patti O'Brien-Richardson.

Shift Insight is a research consultancy with its foundation in education but expanding over the years into the complementary areas of Sustainability and Membership.

Top 100 UK FTSE and SME Companies

The UK top 100 FTSE and SME companies were approached between June – July 2023. They were offered new training to end Afro hair discrimination. If they did not need training, then they were invited to take part in a survey to find out what plans they currently have in place to identify and or end Afro hair discrimination? We cannot guarantee that all emails got through and that they were all read but all 100 UK FTSE and 100 SME companies were emailed twice and below was the outcome. There is not an official SME listing so we used Elite Business Magazine top 100.

Out of 200 companies contacted, seven responded. Five out of seven wanted to engage with the Belonging in Business survey, one sent their existing DEI policies. Some companies expressed interest in Afro hair inclusion training, but no companies signed up for training during that time. However, three companies contributed with positive comments:

“We have worked with an intern with a beautiful ethnic hairstyle and we made her feel welcome and included in the conversation. We are still in touch with her and support her in her career.”

“Really inspired by the work you do!”

“Thank you to World Afro Day for bringing the topic of Afro hair into the spotlight for businesses in the UK. We wish your campaign continued success.”

The Employer Hair Attitudes Survey showed that a high proportion of respondents would be likely to introduce measures to end hair discrimination. However, in direct contrast to that result, when the UK top 100 FTSE and SME companies were offered training, there was a low priority and low engagement with the subject. If the government and the legal system have also not prioritised ending hair discrimination, then how can we expect companies to do so?

Case Study: Headland Communications Consultancy

Headland is a London-based consultancy specialising in financial and corporate communications, public affairs, and brand campaigning. The nature of their business means that they keep abreast of different types of news and societal trends.

The founder of World Afro Day, Michelle De Leon was invited to give a presentation as part of the company's regular discussion sessions called 'Headspace.' Her contact Lisa Mai had worked with Michelle at her previous job and thought that Headland would benefit from being exposed to the work of World Afro Day®.

The session was entitled "Talking My Language" to inspire better communication around subjects of racial difference and particularly the experience of having Afro hair in the workplace. Headlands were given some history and an explanation of Afro hair discrimination from childhood to adulthood. The participants watched a few short film clips and took part in exercises and discussions to explore their awareness and understanding of Afro hair discrimination in the UK. The presentation was interactive with many opportunities to ask questions. Headland workers were engaged and reflective about the content and towards the end of the session, they were asked to say in their own words, what the three key themes of World Afro Day meant: celebration, liberation and identity? Three different participants answered confidently from their own perspective, which contrasted from earlier on in the session, when they felt less sure of the subject matter. After the presentation many Headland colleagues asked the speaker many further questions and for some further reading suggestions. Some young Black interns were also keen to find out more about the work of World Afro Day.

Overall, the presentation was a success and the following feedback was recorded:

- 100% agreed "Education and training is important to change attitudes to Afro hair and Afrocentric styles at work.
- The majority agreed and none disagreed that "Updating the Equality Law to include hair discrimination would create positive change in workplaces."
- A small number had come across training on Afro hair discrimination before.
- "I thought this was a great Headspace - she told us things we didn't know before. The business side is also something we can advise our clients on."
- "Thank you - my eyes have been really opened as to the often-hidden influence/ role hair plays in inequality/discrimination practices"

Comments about motivation were also encouraging:

- "Talk to others about what I've learnt today - educating people who may be as unaware of the extent of the issue as I was."
- "Unpack latent perceptions I have about what 'presentable' hair is."
- "Celebrate having Afro hair and discussing this with other people with Afro hair."

The Headland presentation was a positive start to raising awareness in workplaces and the potential of training companies to end hair discrimination.

New Growth

Over the last, 15 plus years the natural hair movement, World Afro Day®, The CROWN Act campaign and many others; have helped Black people feel more emboldened to ‘wear their hair, their way.’ This has also impacted the workplace, with some staff becoming Afro hair advocates by hosting learning events and inviting external guests for Black History Month Talks at their companies. Beauty companies have also responded to the trend of Black female consumers reducing the use of chemical straighteners and preferring a more natural textured look. Major global brands like Dove, Pantene and Shea Moisture, plus many Black owned brands and various other hair companies have been supporting the message of Afro hair acceptance, through campaigns and products. Beauty brands have definitely helped to raise awareness about hair discrimination, but the downside is that the focus has remained in the hair and beauty industry and not across all employment sectors. The overall picture is mixed, with several media reports reflecting that some Black women may be returning to chemical straighteners, which could be a risk to their health.

Some UK companies have signed up to the Halo Code, which encourages employers to take a stand against Afro hair discrimination. This is a good start for companies to acknowledge the issue publicly but the research indicates that changing attitudes will need more in-depth intervention with a combination of laws, training, policies and accountability.

Leadership

World Afro Day, CEO Michelle De Leon:

“Hair discrimination continues, when good companies do nothing.”

It is hard to quantify the number, but there are potentially hundreds of thousands of companies in the UK and millions of companies in the USA, employing people with Afro textured hair and African heritage hairstyles. These companies could become great beacons of business, counteracting the hierarchy that straight hair is ‘the only professional standard’ and Afro hair is not. If they better understood the issue of hair discrimination, these companies would be able to use their influence as industry leaders and help shift the historical bias against Afro hair. Ultimately, some businesses do recognise that an employee’s hairstyle does not correlate with their talent abilities and skills.

“I don't discriminate by any means when it comes to the staff I look to hire and recruit. I base a lot of it on personality, work ethic and common ground. I don't believe that hair effects a person’s ability to do the job or a job.”

World Afro Day, CEO Michelle De Leon:

“Hair discrimination continues, when politicians delay the lessons of the past.”

Political Leadership is a critical factor in determining the end of Afro hair discrimination. Hair and skin discrimination originated at the same time so it is not a new form of discrimination. Previously, Afro hair has been discounted from needing specific legal protection in most countries. However, a few governments have made statements condemning Afro hair discrimination two Caribbean nations, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda and also the UK government. The US continues to lead with the CROWN Act in 23 States providing legal

protection specifically for Afro hair and protective hairstyles. Plus, the latest developments are a French MP proposing to introduce Afro hair protective legislation in France for October 2023.

This report clearly shows that current UK legislation does not prevent, or even acknowledge the existence of hair discrimination. However, the absence of specific laws could actually be fuelling ignorance and exacerbating hair discrimination in comparison to skin discrimination. Historically some Black people in the UK have experienced people touching their skin to see if the brown colour would rub off. This kind of ignorance would almost certainly be unheard of in modern Britain today. Yet similar human experiments are conducted regularly on Black people, through unwanted hair touching. Why would skin touching have disappeared completely and the other type, hair touching still be a common issue for many Black people from childhood to adulthood? One theory is that the absence of law has played a key part in propagating ignorance towards Afro hair.

Human beings need guidelines of what is morally and legally acceptable in any given society. There was a mention of Afro hair discrimination in the UK government, Inclusive Britain Report and the new EHRC school guidelines are the most explicit in suggesting some school practices are 'likely to be unlawful.' However, the probation case featured in the Employer Hair Attitudes Survey; shows that stringent laws, education and training is needed to counteract ingrained prejudice. The most effective power that any politician has in order to end any kind of discrimination is to make it emphatically illegal.

Historic Case Study: Una Marson

This report aims to bring fresh insight to the contemporary issue of Afro hair discrimination. However, there are some important lessons to learn from history.

Una Marson was a professional West Indian woman, working in Britain 1932-1936 and 1938-1945. She was a poet, playwright and campaigner and carved her place in history as Britain's first Black female Producer at the BBC. She experienced hair discrimination, while working in Britain not too dissimilar to the women of today. This illustrates a clear timeline that hair discrimination has been part of the working life of Black people in Britain for most of the 20th and 21st centuries. No doubt that this issue actually goes further back but because of Marson's writing we can evidence it as a form of discrimination passed over by UK legislators from her arrival in 1932, until now so at least for 91 years. Below is confirmation from her biographer:

Delia Jarrett-Macauley
Author, *The Life of Una Marson 1905-1965*.

Where Una sits on hair...

I think of Una Marson's brave poem, "Kinky Hair Blues" every time I'm asked about her sense of self as a black woman living in interwar Britain.

*'Gwine find a beauty shop
Cause I ain't a lovely belle
The boys pass me by,
They say I's not so swell.*

I hate dat ironed hair

*And dat bleaching skin.
Hate dat ironed hair
And dat bleaching skin.
But I'll be all alone
If I don't fall in.'*

These are the words of a black Caribbean woman expressing cultural solidarity with other black people, globally, and rejecting the assimilation to white aesthetics.

What prompted this new self-awareness?

Life in Britain. Una faced discrimination in terms of employment and observed what happened to other black women in the job market; and in her poetry, she was encouraging the reader to unpick the ways in which they usually gazed at the black female body. She was a pioneer, no doubt about it.

Before she knew that her hair could be *wrong*, I suspect she experienced what we now term *microaggressions*, strangers touching her hair and passing the sort of comments which transformed beauty into a burden.

The Past and Present

Most companies will probably be unaware that businesses are the source, the driver and the sustainers of Afro hair discrimination for hundreds of years. This is because they may be unaware of the history and the role that commerce originally played. There is often resistance to connecting present day behaviours with the colonial and slavery eras but the ignorance shown towards Afro hair is rooted in the past. Western governments in collaboration with companies, were involved in shaving off the hair of newly captured slaves. This stripped them of their identity, status, distinguishing tribal connections and ultimately their humanity. Incredibly, shaving heads resurfaced between 2018-2021 in Doncaster Children's homes UK. Vulnerable Black girls routinely had their heads shaved without parental permission. Negative actions comes from negative thoughts, which are not isolated but come from ingrained and widespread bias against Afro hair. Contemporary victims of hair discrimination also experience abhorrent behaviour: 'people treat me like I am not human.'

After slavery and during colonialism there was a clear preference by employers for African people/descendants to appear more European to secure jobs. The link between hair discrimination and jobs has not been broken to this day but the skin discrimination link is better understood. African descendants adapted to the harsh reality that their natural hair could cost them jobs so they conformed and changed it to fit into the workplace. This practice continues even now. Along the way, millions of Black women have adapted to the straighter hair preferences of employers, rather than hairstyles from their African heritage. From generation-to-generation, Black families have passed on: 'you won't get a job if you wear your hair like that.' 'Like that' are essentially the types of hairstyles rated at the bottom of the 2023 Employer Hair Attitudes Survey. Hair discrimination, within the same group is commonly referred to as texturism. Looser curls, mixed hair and straighter can be considered superior because of its proximity to European hair appearance.

Conclusion

Most employers are at ground zero in recognising and tackling Afro hair discrimination. They do not yet acknowledge it as an employment issue, possibly because of the lack of legal clarity about hair discrimination. Also, previous research was focused on the experiences and perspectives of employees with Afro hair and not the employer. Now this report can frame the conversation with statistics and evidence from the employer's perspective. The research shows a biased mindset of many of the respondents towards Afro hair. There is a workplace hierarchy, which is based on looking European, even when the employee is actually an African descendant. This is unjust. The research shows that an employer could withhold a job from a person, who is performing well in a role, simply because they have Afro hair. This is unjust. If companies reflect on this research, which is about their attitudes and behaviours towards Afro hair, then hopefully they will make the needed changes. This is an opportunity for businesses to create a momentous shift towards ending hair discrimination, for this current generation and future generations. In contrast, employees who face Afro hair discrimination are the fifth or sixth generation to do so, which demonstrates a huge power imbalance.

The incentive for employers to change is that they will have the widest talent pool and the greatest potential to draw from if they allow people to be themselves in the workplace. ¹Studies show that some of the key benefits listed for work is self-esteem and identity.

Founder and CEO World Afro Day Michelle De Leon says "When workplaces undermine an employee's right to show up as their true self, they create psychological conflict zones and can actually diminish self-esteem, identity and belonging. Work is supposed to be good for you, not suppress you."

Silence has been the enemy of progress because there are so many companies who do have employees of African heritage with Afrocentric hairstyles. These businesses could be celebrating themselves and their employees, who are flourishing there. However, some employers may be unaware if any of their employees are experiencing everyday harassment, directed towards their Afro hair. The Hair Discrimination Files will be useful as a quick reading exercise to know what many employees with Afro hair face. A future area of research could be identifying the companies, who have positive environments for employees with Afrocentric hairstyles. How do these workplaces differ to others? There is currently no clear and universal way to identify employers who have become educated, trained and 'worked' on this issue. This would clearly help job seekers to be able to find companies, where they will feel welcomed and that they can truly belong.

Politicians and authorities now have the evidence to make equality legislation clear and meaningful to protect against Afro hair discrimination. The research shows a strong likelihood of job loss and employment discrimination based on Afro hair. There is also evidence of unacceptable levels of harassment in the workplace, which is unlawful.

Yet maybe times are changing because employees with Afro hair are not passively waiting around to be rescued. Many thousands of people, maybe even millions successfully defy the status quo against Afro hair and this can be seen on the daily commute, professional headshots, Hollywood red carpet events and social media images embracing natural hairstyles. More research is being commissioned, more training is being offered and more

workplaces are hosting events about Afro hair. Could this be the beginning of a burgeoning Workplace Hair Movement?

In conclusion, Europeans can go to work looking like Europeans; Asians can go to work looking like Asians; Africans should be able to go to work looking like Africans. History cannot be changed, but the future certainly can be. There is a great opportunity for Britain to be the first Western nation to outlaw Afro hair discrimination nationally. However, businesses don't have to wait for new legislation because they can act now.

Key Recommendations

This report recommends the following for Workplaces:

- Companies to take part in guided training to eradicate hair discrimination.
- Companies to review all hair policies and practices, that directly or indirectly discriminate against employees of African descent.
- Companies to create positive statements imbedded and visible in their HR and DEI commitments.
- Companies to become business beacons sharing good practice and influencing their sectors.
- Staff consultations to explore their Afro hair experiences at work.
- Celebrate Afro hair acceptance and African heritage at work through activities, events and external speakers.

This report recommends the following for the UK Government:

- Amendment to the 2010 Equality Act to specifically include Afro hair discrimination and robust protection for Afro- textured hair and Afro hairstyles.
- New Equality Act in place by 2025 sixty years after the first Race Relations act 1965.
- Consultation with experts to support and advise government implementation.
- Secure cross-party support for greater legal protection for Afro hair and African heritage hairstyles.
- This report to be widely circulated in the government and civil service.
- Access The Hair Discrimination Files via www.worldafroday.com to become more informed about UK hair discrimination issues.

This report recommends the following to politicians, unions, mental health groups, race equality charities, local authorities:

- This report to be widely circulated and discussed.
- Plan how this report can inform policies, actions and systems.
- Take part in guided training to eradicate hair discrimination.
- Access The Hair Discrimination Files via www.worldafroday.com to become more informed about UK hair discrimination issues.
- Support and use your lobbying influence for the amendment to the 2010 Equality Act to specifically include Afro hair discrimination.
- Support workplace reform to accept Afro hair and African heritage.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Statements from Academics

Statement	Contributor
<p>Afro hair is often stigmatized as “unprofessional” and therefore “unsuitable” for the workplace, resulting in: harassing and humiliating treatment aimed at African descended workers; the deprivation of employment for which they are qualified and competently performing; the denial of professional advancement opportunities they have earned; as well as infringements upon their economic security, identity expression, and well-being. Though Afro hair discrimination is a systemic form of race-based discrimination occurring in contemporary workplaces around the world, it is often not recognized as such by workplace decision and policy-makers while also not effectively protected as such under civil and human rights laws.</p>	<p>Professor D. Wendy Greene J.D. LL.M. Director, Centre for Law, Policy, & Social Action Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law</p>
<p>Hair discrimination, whether intentional or unintentional, direct or indirect, should not be tolerated. The report outlines clearly why this is an area of concern and matters that need to be addressed. It also highlights how particular members of society are disproportionately affected and targeted, who tend to be melanated and female. As these two additional factors are also reported as putting people at risk for suffering discrimination and underrepresentation, then there is a real risk of some individuals being disadvantaged and targeted on multiple levels simultaneously. This suffering, in effect could be viewed as a double or triple penalty tax, in terms of poorer educational or career prospects, economic earnings, and social status - simply because of people being their natural selves. Add to this the psychological harm and damage caused by attacks on someone’s natural identity, or them feeling the social pressure to change in order to fit in, along biased lines that they will struggle to conform to.</p> <p>Furthermore, there are potentially increased medical risks for those who chemically change their natural hair types. Finally, it should be noted especially that younger members of society, with these increased</p>	<p>Prof Jonathan A.J. Wilson PhD DLitt Professor of Brand Strategy & Culture Director of International Business, Regent’s University London</p>

<p>hurdles and barriers, may not get the start in life that they deserve. The natural conclusion of this report is that too much is affecting too many people, with adverse effects to everyone. Regardless of our own positions and identities, we can all do so much more.</p>	
<p>Hair discrimination denies people of African descent from being their true, authentic self. Research shows when individuals can be their authentic selves in the workplace, it increases mental health, produces engaged employees, and results in professionals who feel appreciated and valued.</p> <p>Black professionals may experience hair discrimination and hair harassment through comments from coworkers, and not being hired or promoted. The pain is often unseen, and beneath the surface, as these experiences leave traumatic scars, both mentally and emotionally. If they are penalized because of their hair, they may also experience social rejection and trauma from being removed from their colleagues and the workplace environment.</p> <p>Black professionals need to know there are safe spaces to vent their frustrations about hair discrimination. Recommendations include trained therapists equipped to handle the trauma of hair discrimination and harassment, engaged HR representatives, and employee affinity programs promoting cultural encouragement and advocacy.</p>	<p>Dr Patti O'Brien-Richardson PhD, MS ED Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy</p>

Appendix 2: Overview World Afro Day®

<p>World Afro Day is a global day of celebration and liberation for Afro hair and identity with an estimated reach of 1.5 billion. Since 2017, their work has influenced the UN, UK government, Anguilla government, global brands, international media and major celebrities. They carry out research, create events and produce training and resources to empower people with Afro hair and raise awareness in wider society.</p> <p>Their work in education produced The Little and Big Hair Assembly events engaging over 190,000 children and youth, hundreds of schools and teaching staff. They are supported by five UK education unions to end hair discrimination in schools.</p>	<p>World Afro Day CIC</p>
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World Afro Day is held annually on September 15th. The date was chosen in response to the US Alabama court ruling on the same date in 2016, that discrimination against dreadlocks in employment was lawful.

This report is the fourth contribution to research on Afro hair discrimination, which is essential to overcome longstanding bias against Afrocentric hair in the workplace.

For more information www.worldafroday.com.

Appendix 3: Hair and chemical straightening reports

<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hair-straightening-chemicals-associated-higher-uterine-cancer-risk>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8812815/>

- [The Sister Study](#) found that use of chemical hair straightening products is associated with increased incidence of endometrial cancer risk in African American.
- The [Ghana Breast Health Study](#) found an association between use of hair relaxers and breast cancer in women of African descent. ([11](#))
- The [Women’s Circle of Health Study](#)[Exit Disclaimer](#) described an association between use of hair relaxers and hair dye, specifically dark hair dye, and aggressive breast cancer risk in African American women. ([8](#), [9](#))
- The [Black Women’s Health Study](#)[Exit Disclaimer](#) observed an association between use of hair relaxers containing Lye and aggressive breast cancer risk in African American women. ([10](#))

¹<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08902070211027142>

Appendix 4: Acknowledgements

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