

# What's Hair Got To Do With It?

Haircare is a multi-billion-dollar industry with individuals spending thousands of dollars per year on their hair for the sake of appearances. In addition to haircuts, hair color, products, and treatments, we also invest a lot of time to wash and style our hair. Nearly everyone combs their hair into place before presenting themselves to the world at the start of each new day. Think about how many times you run your fingers through your hair each day. How often do you glance in the mirror to check your hair throughout the course of your day? As a licensed cosmetologist in Pennsylvania for nearly a decade, I have learned that hair is a crucial part of one's identity. Hair and self-esteem are tightly interwoven, sharing a deeply personal relationship as one's hairstyle choice is a vital reflection of oneself. Hair enhances your beauty and complements your features. Hair gives you confidence in your appearance and your abilities. Most would agree that personal appearance matters with hair being a determining factor of one's self-confidence, demonstrated by the popular slogan, "If you look good, you feel good." You wear your hair every single day of your life, altering your hairstyle to fit your personality while demonstrating your individuality. Unfortunately, it has become quite common in society to judge one's character based upon their hairstyle choice. Simply leaving the house without brushing your hair can lead others to view you as sloppy, lazy, or a combination of both.

Unfair judgements, labels, and biases about hair target Black people—specifically Black women—for wearing natural or Afrocentric hairstyles including afros, braids, twists, dreadlocks, and other styles that embrace the natural texture of Black hair. Discrimination based on hair texture disproportionately affects Black people while heavily influencing their daily hairstyle choices. "Afrocentric hairstyles are often labeled unprofessional, unkempt, messy, or unacceptable. These labels create an appearance stigma and determine how Afrocentric hairstyles are viewed by society in general" (Dawson 390). Eurocentric standards of beauty have historically reigned supreme, forcing people of color to alter their hairstyles to fit what society has deemed appropriate. Silky, smooth, and straight hair is often considered to be "good" hair while kinky, curly hair is negatively viewed as wild, unruly, and undesirable. "The presence or absence of kinky hair texture can make the difference between being attractive and unattractive, accepted or unaccepted," says Brenda A. Randle, Assistant Professor in the College of Media and Communication at Arkansas State University (Randle 115). Black individuals have long suffered from the internalization of Eurocentric standards of beauty as conformity became essential to one's survival and upward mobility in American society.

## A Brief History of Black Hair

Hair discrimination has existed for centuries in the United States dating back to times of slavery. In Africa, wearing one's hair in certain styles symbolized rank and status in culture (Ellis-Hervey 870). However, African Americans' bond with their hair was forever altered once the slave trade began in America with slave ships arriving in the 1600's. Slaves were forced to work in the fields from sunup to sundown with no time to care about their hair or personal appearance. In the 1700's, "slaves were required to wear rags on their heads to hide their "undone" hair or iron their hair in order to appear more acceptable by White standards and to avoid offending White people" (Ellis-Hervey 871). African Americans who worked in the fields mostly covered their hair with rags while African American women working indoors were permitted to style their hair, which often resulted in braids (Randle 117). Slaves were expected to maintain their hair without the combs and herbal treatments used in Africa, forcing many to rely on bacon grease, butter, and kerosene to cleanse and condition their hair (Ellis-Hervey 871).

Chante Griffin, a writer and natural hair advocate, explains, “The social pressure to emulate Eurocentric hair permeated American society, impacting black women’s hair grooming decisions and assimilation became dominant” (Griffin).

By the 18th century, enslaved Africans who worked in the “big house,” began to imitate the “hairstyles of their enslavers, either by wearing wigs that had become popular during that era or shaping their kinky hair to emulate them” (Griffin). Madam C.J. Walker became the first African American millionaire in the early 1900’s by selling her hair softener, which was accompanied by a hair-straightening comb. Walker may have perpetuated beliefs in Eurocentric beauty standards of straight and smooth hair leading to social and economic advancement, but she offered Black women the possibility of social acceptance at a time when African American hair texture was “compared to wool and often described as nappy” (Griffin). Chemical straightening processes rose in popularity as straight hair continued to be linked to social and economic status after slavery was abolished. “With the migration of Blacks from southern rural areas to northern urban areas, straight hairstyles replaced braids, plaits, and cornrows as Blacks fought for social acceptance and tried to look less like uneducated people from the country” (Dawson 391). Afrocentric hairstyles were deemed unattractive and inferior by Europeans in an effort to further distance Blacks from their cultural roots while discouraging any attempts to hang on to African hair traditions (Randle 118).

The idea that “Black is beautiful” became popular during the 1960’s Civil Rights Era, resulting in the first wave of the natural hair movement. Many felt liberated and empowered in choosing to wear more natural styles such as afros and braids, while resisting conformity to Eurocentric standards of beauty (Dawson 391). Prominent political activist, Angela Davis, wore an afro as a symbol of Black power, self-love, and rebellion against Eurocentric beauty standards (Griffin). During the 1980’s and 1990’s, natural hairstyles faded in popularity along with the Black Power movement and their revival is still often viewed as radical or political (Dawson 391). A second wave of the natural hair movement began in the 2000’s with films and social media encouraging many Black women to embrace their natural hair texture and abandon chemical straightening processes and pressing combs. Chris Rock released his *Good Hair* documentary in 2003, exploring the economics of Black women’s hair care routines in which comedian Paul Mooney states, “If your hair is relaxed, they are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they are not happy.” Perhaps Mooney’s observation is so comical because it accurately described White society’s reaction to Black hair at the time. Sadly, hair discrimination remains prevalent in American society today—particularly in workplaces and schools.

## The Damaging Effects of Assimilation and Conformity

In America, the standard of beauty is heavily influenced by Eurocentric standards that have regarded Black hair as undesirable. The relentless pressure to fit into societal beauty standards has left many altering their hair to be perceived as beautiful by others. Hair influences the way that people think and feel about themselves as individuals. “There is a sense of inauthenticity associated with conformity that takes an emotional toll on individuals, resulting in frustration and resentment” (Dawson 392). Eurocentric standards of beauty have forced Black individuals to view their hair as inadequate, which in turn makes them feel inadequate as a person. Hairstyles differing from the Eurocentric norm of ‘smooth and straight’ are stigmatized as less attractive and unprofessional. Afrocentric hairstyles are often associated with being mean, angry, or having a militant disposition. These negative views and opinions about Black hair have been internalized by Black individuals for generations. Griffin explains, “Many African Americans are forced to choose between embracing their identities and economic advancement”

(Griffin). In other words, it's easier for Black individuals to find employment and move up in a company if they give up a unique and significant part of their identity by altering their hairstyle to comply with White standards.

Media representations of Black hair have also negatively influenced people's opinions of Black hairstyles. "Perhaps fueled by hip-hop culture and its images of pimps, thugs, and gangsters who wear cornrows and braided hairstyles, a review of the discourse on Black hair shows very little acceptance of natural Black hair" (Randle 119). Pop culture representations of beautiful Black women are portrayed with long, silky, straight hair while natural Black hair is often adversely marked for its difference (Randle 116). Black women are often shown with big, bouncy curls. However, in order to achieve this look, the hair must first be straightened to eliminate any natural kinky curls. "For many African Americans, "fitting into the European standard of beauty can be difficult, expensive, and even unattainable," says Dr Nina Ellis-Hervey, a licensed psychologist and life coach (Ellis-Hervey 873). Straightening Black hair can take hours whether it be through chemical processes or using heat to blow the hair dry before pressing it with a flat iron or curling iron. Processes to straighten hair do not last long and many cannot afford to visit a salon every week or month to straighten their hair. Relaxers or perms contain powerful chemicals that cause severe burns and even hair loss if left unattended for too long. These chemical alterations of natural hair cause extensive damage over time and breakage of the hair is quite common.

Many Black Americans are aware of the consequences of long-term hair straightening but continue to do so in order to achieve hairstyles that comply with Eurocentric standards of beauty. Dr. Ellis-Hervey states, "Hair alteration is not necessarily a result of self-hatred, nor a desire to be White, but about working within internalized beauty paradigms to attain one small piece of what society defines as beautiful" (Ellis-Hervey 874). American society continues to cling to the belief that Black hair is unattractive and substandard, forcing many Black Americans to succumb to the intense pressure of conformity. "The problem remains that while we may style our hair to reflect our own individual choices, our hair is still being interpreted by a White mainstream gaze and that interpretation is often wrong as well as racist," says journalist Lori Tharps, who co-wrote the book *Hair Story* about the history of Black hair (Jahangir). "Too many people still make assumptions that an afro implies some sort of militancy or that wearing dreadlocks means a predilection for smoking pot." These erroneous assumptions have led many employers and schools to prohibit natural hairstyles. "In such circumstances, the decision to alter or not alter one's hair becomes involuntary," says Dr. Ellis-Hervey (Ellis-Hervey 874). Legal cases have emerged in courtrooms across the nation as valiant efforts are being made to confront and eradicate hair discrimination.

## Eliciting Change with the CROWN Act

Andrew Johnson, a Black teenager from New Jersey, was a member of his school's wrestling team in December 2018 when a White referee demanded that Johnson either cut his dreadlocks before participating or forfeit the wrestling match (Arefin). Johnson stood calm, yet tearfully, as a White female trainer chopped off his dreadlocks under the watchful gaze of a crowded gymnasium. Video of the shocking incident quickly went viral, permitting millions to witness this blatant display of hair discrimination. This is merely one example that gained national public attention. Unfortunately, Black Americans are forced to deal with similar situations every day in schools and workplaces across the United States with the added expectations of maintaining a calm demeanor and accepting attitude of such race-based prejudices.

Hair discrimination restricts jobs and educational opportunities. It forces people to spend tons of money to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards while bolstering negative stereotypes around Black hair. According to a recent Dove CROWN research study “of 1,000 black and 1,000 white women, black women’s hair is 3.4 times as likely to be perceived as “unprofessional” versus white women’s hair” (Summary). The study found that “80 percent of African American women felt they needed to switch their hairstyle to align with more conservative standards in order to fit in at work” (CROWN). Black women were also 1.5 times more likely than white women to have been sent home from the workplace because of their hair (CROWN). Eurocentric standards of beauty continue to place Black people, especially Black women, at a disadvantage as wearers of natural hairstyles in the workplace and schools are repeatedly ostracized and penalized. A recent study examining natural hair bias in the workplace revealed the following comments from Black women’s experiences with hair discrimination:

“I just don’t understand why certain parts, at least, of our culture can’t be displayed and expressed at work. I dare not even wear my hair in cornrows at work because I think they may all think I have a gun under my shirt. I just don’t get it. They tell me at work to be myself and stop being so serious but that is the only emotion that I feel would be “professional” to them because when I laugh they think I’m crazy, when I smile they think I have an ulterior motive, and when I do express my opinions I’m getting agitated and it makes them uncomfortable” (Dawson 395).

“Today I walked into the office wearing office attire and my natural hair up in a professional bun. I was quickly told by operations that I too would have to adhere to the dress code. I looked at her and stated that I was dressed professional today. I then asked by professional do you mean that my hair needs to be relaxed. She stated yes that is exactly what I mean. So apparently if I do not have my hair relaxed by July 1, I’m not allowed to go to work” (Dawson 394).

“The standard of professionalism is straight hair. As black people, our hair is naturally the farthest from straight...White people still think that an afro is a “hairstyle” or a form of “self-expression”...It’s not a style or expression, it’s what our hair looks like...So why are we being penalized because our hair cannot be straight without harmful chemicals? As long as the appearance is neat, and you can perform the job then nothing else should matter” (Dawson 396).

The CROWN Act, which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair, is gaining momentum in the movement to end hair discrimination (CROWN). The CROWN Act is a law that prohibits discrimination based on hair style and hair texture. Implementation and enforcement of the CROWN Act requires employers and schools to examine their facially neutral grooming and appearance policies and their disparate impact on African Americans and other minorities. Currently, seven states have passed and signed the CROWN Act into law with forty-three more states to go (CROWN). California became the first state to ban hair discrimination in June 2019 followed by New York as the second state in July 2019 (Summary). “The California version of the CROWN Act passed both the state Assembly and Senate unanimously, but the New York vote had a bit more opposition, passing the state Senate forty-six to sixteen” (Summary). New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Colorado, and Washington followed, making hair discrimination illegal by passing the CROWN Act as law while Pennsylvania appears to be the next state in line.

The CROWN Act is currently “making its way through legislation in Pennsylvania” with “twin bills being introduced in both chambers of Pennsylvania’s general assembly” (Sylvester). According to

KDKA news, Mayor Bill Peduto introduced the CROWN Act following a 2019 report by Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission that "suggested the city is the most inequitable for Black women when it comes to personal, professional, housing and educational outcomes" (KDKA). In early October 2020, Pittsburgh City Council unanimously passed the CROWN Act to protect people from hair discrimination and the bill will now return to Mayor Peduto's desk for his signature (KDKA). Allegheny City Council passed the CROWN Act soon after on October 20, 2020 (KDKA).

The CROWN Act was first introduced to Congress as a federal bill on December 5, 2019 by Representative Cedric Richmond, a Democrat from Louisiana (Summary). Rep. Richmond stated in a press release, "For far too long, Black Americans have faced senseless forms of discrimination merely because of how they choose to wear their hair. As states begin to tackle this issue, it is long overdue for Congress to act. From Louisiana to New Jersey, textured hair should never serve as a professional or educational impediment nor should it ever lead to a reprimand of consequence" (Rep.). Rep. Richmond's House version of the CROWN Act has currently attracted sixty-three cosponsors with twenty-nine of those being original cosponsors, including the late Representative John Lewis, (D-Ga.) (Summary).

In addition to the House bill, Democratic Senator of New Jersey, Cory Booker, introduced a version of the bill to the U.S. Senate on January 8, 2020 (Kelley). Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Oh.), was the original cosponsor of the Senate version of the CROWN Act (Summary). The Senate version has attracted only twenty cosponsors, although the list includes some influential names, such as Vice President Kamala Harris (former Rep. D-Ca.), Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), and Elizabeth Warren (D-Ma.) (Summary). The Senate referred the bill to the Senate Judiciary Committee where no action has been taken (Summary). On September 21, 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the CROWN Act, and the federal bill will now proceed to the U.S. Senate for consideration (Kelley). GovTrack, a highly regarded source for tracking the activities of the United States Congress, predicts that "the odds of passage are low in the Republican-controlled chamber" (Summary). Essentially, the prediction implies that conservative Republicans are either still struggling to understand the issue of hair discrimination or adamantly refusing to address it as on-going problem.

## Wear Your Hair

Much like other preceding Civil and Equal Rights laws, the CROWN Act is gradually advancing at a seemingly glacial pace. Ignorance or denial of hair discrimination remains to be a massive impediment for progress. Delinking Black hair and Eurocentric beauty standards allows for a rejection of the oppression and subjugation of Black hairstyles. Severing the connection between Black hair and White standards for hair is not an easy task as hair assimilation has been the expectation for generations. We must eliminate the idea that Eurocentric beauty standards are superior, and refrain from encouraging others to conform to such obsolete standards. An overhaul of societal beliefs in Eurocentric standards of beauty is long overdue. One's hairstyle expresses their personality and individuality. It represents the diversity of different cultures and pride in one's heritage. The world would be quite mundane if everyone had the same hairstyle that complied with Eurocentric standards of long, straight hair.

Understanding the deep cultural and historical roots of Afrocentric hairstyles is imperative to garnering respect for Black hair in both Black and White communities. "The key is for society, particularly African American women to take pride in their hair and accept that the Western standard of beauty is not the only standard," says Dr. Nina Ellis-Hervey (Ellis-Hervey 875). "An increased understanding of the struggles African American women encounter may further raise awareness and begin the path of reducing the influence of general beauty standards to change and reflect a greater

amount of diversity” (Ellis-Hervey 880). Collective efforts to ban hair discrimination are moving forward and it is time that we as a society move beyond the conviction that there is only one “correct” standard for determining what is considered acceptable, appropriate, and beautiful. Many have come to recognize that Black hair is beautiful and worthy of adoration and respect. Awareness of hair discrimination is spreading along with support for the CROWN Act. The United States of America prides itself on the many freedoms our country offers, yet we continue to limit certain rights to Black Americans—such as the simple freedom to choose one’s hairstyle. One’s choice to sport an Afrocentric hairstyle should no longer determine whether or not they are hired for a job or receive the education they deserve. Afrocentric hairstyles in the workplace and schools should not result in punishment, suspension, nor termination—although oftentimes they do. Removing labels that have come to define Black hairstyles allows for acknowledgment of the fact that *forcing Black Americans to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards is undesirable*, not Black hair.

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