

The Crown Act

Chairman Hillyer, Ranking Member Isaacsohn and Members of the House Civil Justice Committee.

I am Tracy Maxwell Heard, former Minority Leader in this body, current Chair of the Public Policy Committee for the National Coalition of 100 Black Women – Central Ohio Chapter, and business owner. I stand before you today wearing all those hats as well as my natural hair.

The National Coalition of 100 Black Women – Central Ohio Chapter is a part of the NC100BW, Inc. which is a nationally recognized movement of over 14 million black women and girls in 28 states. Our mission is to advocate on behalf of black women and girls through national and local actions and strategic alliances to promote leadership development and gender equity in the areas of health, education, and economic empowerment.

I am here to offer proponent testimony on behalf of our organization and in support of House Bill 178 – “Enact Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act – or as it is more commonly known across the country – “The Crown Act.”

It is often surprising what bills are assigned to what committees. This bill could have landed in Commerce and Labor as the negative impact of perception and judgement of black women’s natural hair and styles has cost us jobs, economic advancement and opportunity.

It could have been assigned to State and Local Government as it is an issue that obviously requires the address and hopefully protection of law.

However, it is appropriate that it is this Civil Justice committee where the bill is being heard as this is an issue of civil justice.

This bill is appropriately and more familiarly recognized as The Crown Act as that is how black women have historically referenced our hair – as our crown.

CROWN is used as an acronym in this case – Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural hair – but the acronym perfectly represents the cultural perspective black women carry in relation to our hair.

From the beginning of our existence in Africa, our hair has had cultural, social and historical relevance for us. Our hair was not just a representation of fashion or mood, it spoke to place of origin, occasion and heritage. It spoke to tribal affiliation and even our religion.

During slave trading times, our women would often braid or weave precious cargo like seeds into our hair for discreet transport from the Motherland. How our hair was braided could function as language conveying messages. Our hair could identify us as royal or even identify us by faith.

There has been discriminatory action against women of African descent over the centuries regarding our hair. We were often required to keep our hair covered. Sometimes our heads were shaved in effort to dehumanize or defeminize us. Attitudes and cultural biases have persisted to this day and continue to marginalize and devalue our culture's reflection of beauty and femininity – and even class. But it has not just been a backlash toward black women – black men and boys have suffered the same discrimination. There have been several instances across the country where black children have been denied the opportunity to walk the graduation stage if their hair was styled in a natural or culturally representative style. Children have been required to cut off their heritage – braids and locks that took years to grow - or be denied their diploma. We have been described as unprofessional or even unkempt when wearing natural or traditional styles. We have been shamed about our hair.

The same standard has not been applied to white women, men or children.

For many years, many of us attempted to conform in order to be accepted and have access to opportunities, However, in recent years we have started to again view our hair as a symbol of empowerment, an affirmation of heritage and cultural identity.

White women have permed their hair to straighten it, make it curly, colored it and created hairstyles across the years that reflect their style and mood.

Further, many are now teasing and texturizing, braiding and locking their hair in what some would call cultural appropriation. We were to have been flattered when in the 1979 movie “10” with Bo Derek, she was regarded as the height of beauty all while sporting and popularizing cornrows for white women.

Forced assimilation is particularly egregious in a time when there is a national class action lawsuit against the makers of lye based hair relaxers that have been proven to cause multiple types of cancers in the women that use them. Why should black women be forced into conforming to Eurocentric hairstyles and hair management, jeopardizing our health to meet the understanding, comfort and presentation of the currently dominant culture.

My hair is currently chemical free yet today I am wearing a style that is considered “acceptable”. However, I have worn afros, gheri curls and braids over the course of my professional life and would have been offended and taken issue with being questioned.

Our hair has become just one more obstacle to surmount in seeking equity in the work-space.

As of 2024, 25 states in this nation have adopted the Crown Act along with the U.S. Virgin Islands.

More than 30 cities and counties around this state have adopted protections against these discriminatory practices including Akron, Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland Heights.

I applaud Representative Juanita Brent for her persistence in continuing to reintroduce this legislation for consideration.

I congratulate all who have signed their names in support and recognition of the importance of this legislation.

I have come today to offer proponent testimony for this bill, I have testified before and will continue to do so until its passage. I sincerely hope this will be the final time this bill need be submitted as this body will ensure sufficient votes for its passage and call foul the racial, cultural, and economic harm inflicted upon black women, and levy punitive consequences upon the perpetrators of such

discrimination thus protecting black women from suffering the consequence of simply being black, beautiful and proud in the workplace.

I thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony and this legislation.

Mr. Chairman, I stand for questions.

Black women's hair has a rich and diverse history in Africa, deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and historical contexts. Here are some key aspects to consider:

1. **Cultural Significance:** Hair has held great cultural and symbolic importance in many African societies. Different hairstyles, hair textures, and adornments often reflected tribal affiliations, social status, age, marital status, rituals, and even spiritual beliefs.
2. **Traditional Styling Techniques:** African women developed intricate and diverse hairstyling techniques that varied across regions and tribes. These techniques included braiding, twisting, cornrowing, threading, and more. These styles were not only aesthetically appealing but also served practical purposes, such as protecting the hair from environmental elements and facilitating ease of maintenance.
3. **Cultural Expressions:** Hairstyles in Africa served as a means of cultural expression and identity. They conveyed messages about a person's age, social standing, marital status, and ethnic background. Certain hairstyles were specific to certain tribes or regions, acting as a visual marker of cultural affiliation.
4. **Symbolism and Rituals:** Hair was often linked to spiritual and ritual practices in African cultures. Some hairstyles were reserved for specific occasions, ceremonies, or rites of passage, symbolizing transitions, blessings, or ancestral connections.
5. **Adornments and Accessories:** African women embellished their hairstyles with various accessories, such as beads, cowrie shells, feathers, and elaborate headpieces. These adornments not only enhanced the beauty of the hair but also held symbolic and cultural meanings.
6. **Knowledge Passed Down:** The art of hairstyling was traditionally passed down through generations, with mothers teaching their daughters and community members sharing their expertise. This allowed for the preservation and continuation of hairstyling traditions and techniques.

Understanding the historical significance of black women's hair in Africa helps to challenge negative narratives and appreciate the cultural richness and diversity of natural black hair. It highlights the legacy of self-expression, resilience, and pride that continues to influence black women's perceptions of their hair today.

Black women often refer to their hair as their crown because it symbolizes their beauty, strength, and heritage. Here are a few reasons why this association exists:

1. **Cultural Significance:** For many black women, their natural hair is deeply connected to their cultural identity. It represents a connection to their African roots, traditions, and history. Embracing and celebrating their natural hair is a way to honor their heritage and express pride in their cultural background.
2. **Unique and Versatile:** Black hair is incredibly diverse and versatile in terms of texture, curl pattern, and styling options. It can be worn in a variety of beautiful and intricate styles, such as braids, twists, locs, afros, and more. This versatility allows black women to express their individuality and creativity, making their hair truly their own unique crown.
3. **Empowerment and Self-Expression:** The journey of embracing one's natural hair can be transformative and empowering. For many black women, it represents a shift towards self-acceptance, self-love, and embracing their authentic selves. Referring to their hair as their crown signifies a reclaiming of their beauty standards and a celebration of their natural features.
4. **Symbol of Resilience:** Black hair has a complex history tied to racial discrimination and societal biases. For generations, black women have faced societal pressures to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards that often devalue their natural hair. Referring to their hair as their crown is a way to reclaim power, challenge those biases, and celebrate their resilience in the face of adversity.

Overall, referring to their hair as their crown is a powerful statement for black women. It encapsulates their pride in their heritage, their individuality, and their journey towards self-acceptance and empowerment. It serves as a reminder that their hair is not a flaw or something to be ashamed of, but a beautiful and significant part of their identity.

Throughout history, there have been various attitudes, perceptions, and comments about black women's hair. These views have been shaped by societal norms, cultural biases, and historical factors. It is important to note that while progress has been made in recent years, negative and discriminatory attitudes towards black women's hair still persist in certain contexts. Here are some notable observations about the discourse surrounding black women's hair over time:

1. **Eurocentric Beauty Standards:** Eurocentric beauty standards have often regarded straight hair as the ideal, leaving natural black hair textures and styles marginalized and devalued. This has resulted in the promotion of chemical relaxers and hair straightening methods to conform to these standards.
2. **Negative Stereotypes:** Negative stereotypes have perpetuated biases against black women's natural hair, associating it with notions of unprofessionalism, unkemptness, or unattractiveness. These stereotypes have affected perceptions in workplaces, schools, and other societal settings.

3. Cultural Appropriation: Black hairstyles and braiding techniques have been historically appropriated and commodified without proper acknowledgement or respect for their cultural significance. This has resulted in non-black individuals wearing these styles as trends while black individuals often face discrimination for the same hairstyles.
4. Embracing Natural Hair: In recent years, there has been a resurgence in embracing natural black hair, with a growing movement of black women proudly wearing their hair in its natural state. This movement celebrates the diversity, versatility, and beauty of black hair textures and styles.
5. Empowerment and Identity: Black women's hair has become a symbol of empowerment, self-expression, and cultural identity. Many black women view their natural hair as an affirmation of their heritage, challenging societal norms, and embracing their unique beauty.
6. Legislation Against Hair Discrimination: The passage of The CROWN Act and similar legislation in various states acknowledges the need to protect individuals from hair discrimination. These measures aim to address biases and promote inclusivity in schools, workplaces, and public accommodations.

While the perception of black women's hair has evolved over time, it is essential to continue challenging discriminatory beliefs and embracing the beauty and diversity of all hair types and textures.

As of my knowledge cutoff in September 2021, several states in the United States have passed the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair). However, please note that the status of legislation can change over time, and there may be additional states that have passed the CROWN Act since then. Here are the states that had passed the CROWN Act up to September 2021:

1. California: The CROWN Act was first passed in California in 2019, making it the first state to enact such legislation. It prohibits discrimination based on natural hairstyles or textures, such as afros, braids, twists, and locks, in schools and workplaces.
2. New York: In July 2019, New York became the second state to pass the CROWN Act, extending protection against hair discrimination.
3. New Jersey: The CROWN Act was signed into law in December 2019 in New Jersey, making it the third state to pass such legislation.
4. Virginia: Virginia passed the CROWN Act in February 2020, becoming the fourth state to prohibit hair discrimination.
5. Colorado: The CROWN Act was signed into law in Colorado in March 2020, making it the fifth state to pass this legislation.
6. Washington: In March 2020, Washington also passed the CROWN Act, extending protection against hair discrimination in the state.

7. Maryland: Maryland passed the CROWN Act in February 2020, becoming the seventh state to prohibit hair discrimination.
8. Connecticut: The CROWN Act was signed into law in Connecticut in March 2021, making it the eighth state to pass such legislation.
9. Delaware: In April 2021, Delaware became the ninth state to pass the CROWN Act, protecting individuals from hair discrimination.
10. Nevada: Nevada passed the CROWN Act in May 2021, becoming the tenth state to enact such legislation.
11. Oregon: The CROWN Act was signed into law in Oregon in June 2021, making it the eleventh state to pass this legislation.

It's important to note that the list above reflects the status of the CROWN Act up until September 2021, and there may have been additional states that have passed the act since then. For the most up-to-date information, I recommend checking with reliable sources or conducting a search for recent updates.