

**House Bill 178**  
**Enact Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act**  
**Proponent Testimony**

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Chairman Hillyer, Ranking Member Galonski and Representatives of the Civil Justice Committee.

I am Tracy Maxwell Heard, former Minority Leader in this body, current Executive Director of Multiethnic Advocates for Cultural Competence, Inc. (MACC) and Public Policy Committee Chair of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women Central Ohio Chapter. I stand before you today wearing all those hats and my natural hair.

I am here to offer proponent testimony on behalf of **House Bill 178 – Enact Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act** – or as it is more commonly known across the state and 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 the 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.

There has continued to be discriminatory action against black women and our hair over the centuries. 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, femininity, heritage.

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.

For many years, many attempted to conform in order to be accepted and have access to opportunities, However, in recent years we have started to again reclaim 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, mood and perception of beauty. Further, many are now teasing and texturizing, curling braiding and locking their hair in what some would call *cultural appropriation* yet 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. All while black women were being punished or ostracized for the same.

This 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 support 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, jheri curls and braids over the course of my professional life and would have been offended and taken issue with being questioned – especially in the face of demonstrated talent, skills, acumen, experience and leadership.

Our hair has always been just one more obstacle to surmount in seeking equity in the workspace. Equity to economic freedom.

Our expression of culture and heritage, our choice to present as how we are naturally born should not result in punishment. That kind of treatment is oppressive and reflective of days of enslavement to a culture that is not our own or of our choosing.

As of June of 2023, 22 states in this nation have adopted the Crown Act. More than 30 cities around the 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 Representative Jamie

Callender for his recognition of the importance of this legislation and his courage to cross the aisle and stand in support of its passage.

I trust 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. Finally, 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.

Yours in service,

Tracy Maxwell Heard  
Executive Director  
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