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Spotlighting the CROWN ACT: Examining Hair Discrimination Among Black Women Professionals in Massachusetts

By Dr. Oyenike Balogun

Representing just under 7% of the US population, Black women have the highest rates of labor participation and earn degrees at higher rates than Black men (Department of Labor, 2021; National Center of Educational Statistics, 2018). This is particularly true in Massachusetts, where Black labor force participation is 2% higher than the state average and 4% higher than the national average (Massachusetts Labor and Workforce Development, 2024). Although clearly an upwardly mobile demographic, Black women remain vulnerable to numerous challenges in the workplace, including high levels of scrutiny, stereotyping, and appearance-related discrimination (Harris & Davis, 2023; Wilkins-Yel & Farra, 2023). Notably, Black women encounter significant prejudice in recruitment and career advancement processes. The promotion rates for Black women to initial managerial positions is much lower than for their White counterparts and they, along with other Women of Color, face the steepest drop offs in representation between entry level and C-Suite positions (Lean In, 2023). Over 25% of Black women believe racial discrimination has cost them career growth opportunities (McKinsey and Co., 2021). They are three to four times more likely than White women to encounter disrespectful behavior and comments that make them feel like outsiders. Additionally, Black women are less likely to enjoy tangible supports

from their supervisors around their well-being, workloads, and deadlines.

As a burgeoning sector of the US workforce, the success of Black women at work requires that employers are attentive to these systemic challenges and deploy targeted initiatives. In this article, I examine the experiences of Black women professionals in Massachusetts, their appearance-related experiences, and the degree to which their employers have explicitly engaged with policies, such as the CROWN Act, in service of their well-being.

The Relevance of Disparities Research in the Workplace

In Massachusetts, Black workers tend to be overrepresented in lower-paying occupations such as food preparation, service, moving and transportation, and health support roles (Massachusetts Office of Labor and Workforce Development, 2024). Conversely, they are underrepresented in tech and legal occupations, which offer some of the highest-paying jobs in the state. Such disparities highlight concerns about occupational equity, whereby Black individuals are disproportionately disadvantaged, especially in the most financially rewarding career categories. Can



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targeted policies address some of these issues of inequity?

In my clinical practice and research, I focus on racial disparities in mental health. An important area of attention has been the intersectional experiences of highly educated Black women. Building on our 2017 study of Microaggressions among Black women in higher education and a more recent study exploring body image among Black African women (Robinson-Wood et al., 2017; Balogun-Mwangi, 2023), I am in the final stages of a study on the appearance-related experiences of Black women professionals in the workplace. The passing of the CROWN ACT in 27 US states to date, has offered a unique opportunity to examine the impact of policy on the workplace experiences of Black women professionals.

The CROWN ACT

"CROWN" in the CROWN Act is an acronym for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN Act, 2021)." This legislation aims to prevent discrimination based on hair, specifically targeting unfair treatment in workplaces and educational settings. It protects individuals from being denied opportunities due to their natural hair texture or culturally significant hairstyles, such as braids, locs, twists, or Bantu knots. The CROWN Act's official campaign is spearheaded by the CROWN Coalition, an alliance established by Dove, National Urban League, Color of Change, and Western Center on Law & Poverty. California became the first state to enact the CROWN Act, with the bill receiving unanimous approval from state lawmakers

and being signed into law on July 3, 2019. In 2022, the CROWN ACT was signed into law in Massachusetts by Governor Charlie

Baker. At the national level, the CROWN Act was successfully passed in the House of Representatives twice, in 2019 and 2022, but failed to clear the Senate. In May 2024, Democratic politicians made another attempt by reintroducing the legislation in the U.S. House.

You may wonder why such a policy is necessary, given the employment protections of the Civil Rights Act (Title VII). In the past, court rulings favored employers who had terminated Women of Color for wearing braids and cornrows. Notable examples include the 1981 Rogers v. American Airlines case and the 1994 Tatum v. Hyatt Corp. case. The legal reasoning behind these decisions was that hairstyles, like braids, were not immutable racial features (unlike skin color), and therefore were not safeguarded by the Civil Rights Act. This legal precedent has only begun to shift in recent years.

According to the 2023 Crown Research Study, approximately two-thirds of Black women modify their hairstyles when preparing for job interviews, typically opting for straighter styles that align with Eurocentric beauty standards. The study findings also revealed that over 20% of Black women between the ages of 25 and 34 have been sent home from their workplaces due to their choice of hairstyle. Furthermore, a quarter of Black women believe they've been denied employment opportunities because of their hair. This perception is even more prevalent among Black women in the 25-34 age group, where the percentage is



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higher than the overall average. To many, a policy providing protections above and beyond what was offered by law was clearly indicated.

Preliminary Findings from the CROWN Act at Work Study

My 2024 study of 109 Black women professionals in Massachusetts (aged 20-69; $M = 37.76$, $SD = 10.26$), provides some potentially noteworthy early findings. Over 86% of the sample ($n = 81$) reported that in their current place of employment, they were comfortable wearing hairstyles of their choosing, including locs, braids, and twists, without fear of discrimination. About 11%, however, did not report this level of comfort ($n = 11$). Importantly, 13.8% reported that they had experienced hair discrimination at their most recent place of employment ($n = 13$), which meant that the vast majority of Black women professionals in our study had not faced hair discrimination at their current place of employment (74.4%; $n = 70$). Most of our sample (74.7%), first learned about the CROWN Act via social media. Only 3% found out about the protections of the CROWN Act via their employers.

Strikingly, 18.1% ($n = 17$) reported that they had received any explicit written communications/policies from their employer about the protections against hair discrimination provided by the CROWN Act. However, more than half (59.6%; $n = 56$) reported that they had not received any such communication from their employers.

Evaluating the Hair Discrimination Landscape in Massachusetts

Here, I report some early reflections on the CROWN Act in Massachusetts two years after being signed into law. Encouragingly, our study may suggest that Black women professionals in Massachusetts experience high levels of personal comfort in wearing their hair in a variation of hairstyles without fear of discrimination. Notably, very few of these respondents had received explicit communication from employers about these protections against hair discrimination. This is likely an area in which Massachusetts employers can target their employee-facing initiatives. This is particularly important for industries that hire disproportionately higher numbers of the Black working population. One limitation of this study is that these findings may not generalize to Black women workers in Massachusetts who are non-salaried, part-time, and not college-educated (the majority of our sample were salaried, full-time, and highly educated; 96% had at least a bachelor's degree).

The next phase of my study is inviting a sub-set of this sample to in-person focus groups on the Bentley Campus; offering an opportunity to delve deeper into these topics of hair discrimination. The second wave of our analysis will examine the degree to which work-related quality of life is affected by experiences of hair discrimination and perceptions of employer adherence/commitment to hair discrimination. I look forward to sharing these results in the coming months.



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About the Author



Dr. Oyenike Balogun is a licensed psychologist and mixed-methods researcher. Her scholarship and clinical interests focus on racial and cross-cultural disparities in mental health and body image among Black African women. Most recently, she examined body image among Black African women in Nigeria and Kenya and examined the appearance-related work experiences of Black women professionals.



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