

'Black Hair' is Never 'Just Hair': A Closer Look at Afro Discrimination in the Workplace

'The curiosity to touch Afro hair starts in school and continues into adulthood, transferring to the workplace', says this lawyer, in a piece for U.K. Black History Month.

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By Rebekah Gougeon, Trowers & Hamlins

Rebekah Gougeon's natural hair is a tightly coiled combination of 4B/4C type hair. 4B curls are very tightly coiled like the spring in a pen and bends in angles like the letter z, while 4C curls are z-shaped like 4B curls but are tighter and denser.

Several law firms have signed up to the Halo code, a campaign seeking to champion and protect the rights of individuals to embrace Afro-hairstyles in the workplace. For U.K. Black History Month, Gougeon, a diversity & inclusion manager at Trowers & Hamlins, discusses her firsthand experience of hair discrimination and why it needs to be looked at.



Rebekah Gougeon

When it comes to afro-textured hair, or 'Black hair', it is never 'just hair' and is always more than just a hairstyle. It is the most heavily policed type of hair and continues to be one of the ways in which Black people, particularly women, still suffer prejudice today with serious consequences. Hair discrimination is a form of racial discrimination and a major human rights issue but this topic is often overlooked.

Although the Equality Act 2010 protects against racial discrimination in the U.K., when it comes to discrimination against hair textures and styles which are inherent to an individual's race i.e., afros, dreadlocks and braids, there is no legal protection and therefore almost impossible to enforce.

It is evident from numerous high-profile cases making the headlines in the U.K. that we do not have hair equality and that hair discrimination is far too common. There are school and workplace policies and practices in place pushing those with afro-textured hair to conform to Western hairstyles, that are not only damaging to their natural hair but also their confidence, self-esteem and mental health.

Research by Dove reinforces how important it is to raise awareness as 63% of Black adults have faced hair discrimination, 25% of Black adults have been sent home from work or faced disciplinary action as a result of wearing their hair in a natural or protected style, and 58% of Black adults say that hair discrimination has impacted their ability to advance at work. In 2019, a study by World Afro Day revealed that 41% of children with afro hair want to change their hair from curly to straight and over 80% of pupils with afro-textured hair experience hair touching without permission (the most common micro aggression).

The curiosity to touch Afro hair starts in school and continues into adulthood, transferring to the workplace. The statistics point to a pressing issue that recurs from generation to generation, with Black people under constant pressure to fit into school and society.

Over in the U.S. in 2019, the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) became law in 11 states, making it illegal to discriminate based on hair texture and style. In the U.K., whilst we do not have established legislation which protects against hair discrimination, activists like Emma Dabiri and Zina Alfa are fighting for change by way of petitions and several huge corporations have also joined this fight. Last year, we saw the introduction of the Halo code, the UK's first Black hair code, fighting for the protection and celebration of Black hair and

hairstyles. More recently; Members of Parliament and several renowned organisations and names have co-signed a letter to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, asking to make afro hair discrimination officially classed as a form of racism.

Afro hair discrimination has been around for centuries and stems back to colonialism which changed the way Black people perceived and wore their hair when Europeans brought with them their ideas of what hair and beauty was supposed to be. A stark contrast to pre-colonial Africa, when hair was a symbol of wealth, identity, family, heritage, tribe, religion, and a form of art. These derogatory attitudes and the policing of Black hair continued even after slavery was abolished and we still see it played out today.

This is the backdrop against which much of today's internalised (and societal) negative perceptions have been formed and is known as 'texturism' – the idea that looser, natural curls and hair patterns are more beautiful, professional and less intimidating than kinkier, tightly coiled hair.

Biased, euro-centric beauty standards have driven many Black women to spend eye-watering amounts of money on chemical relaxers, extensions, gels, styling creams, wigs, weaves, extensions – all in addition to standard hair products like shampoo and conditioner. The Black haircare industry is worth an estimated £88 million, with black women spending six times more on hair care than their white counterparts. Assimilating to this unrealistic standard is expensive but studies have shown, harmful too.

As a Black woman of Caribbean heritage, whose natural hair is a tightly coiled combination of 4B/4C type hair, I have had firsthand experience of hair discrimination and microaggressions, at school and within the workplace.

For readers who may not be aware, 4B curls are very tightly coiled like the spring in a pen and bends in angles like the letter z, while 4C curls are z-shaped like 4B curls but are tighter and denser.

My obsession with straight hair and awareness that afro hair textures were not desirable, started in primary school. I recall mimicking having European hair in my role playing, donning a variety of head coverings ranging from towels, t-shirts, tights and leggings. Black friends and family report similar lived experiences. Being the only Black pupil at secondary school continued to shape the way I viewed my hair and had a huge impact on my confidence, self-esteem and identity.

Fascination and curiosity triggered uninvited questions, comments and general feedback, microaggressions and touching, which was only heightened when I arrived at school with a new hairstyle (no surprise really that during my secondary school years I started to chemically straighten my hair and continued doing so every 6-8 weeks for the next 15 years). My school experience has direct parallels to my experience as an adult and in the workplace. Stories like mine are not isolated as this seems to be a shared lived experience for most Black women.

Hair discrimination won't end overnight but I look forward to a time where Black hair is normalised as just another hair type, equally as beautiful and worthy of praise when worn in its natural state. No one should be penalised for the way their hair grows out of their scalp or made to feel less than or othered. It is about freedom to wear your hair however you choose, whenever and wherever you want. Black hair is versatile, multi-faceted and deserves to be celebrated, in all its glory.

Rebekah Gougeon is diversity & inclusion manager at Trowers & Hamlins.

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