Crown Act could make natural hair discrimination illegal in American public schools and workplaces

Posted At: November 18, 2020 4:37 PM | Posted By: SHSJC
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(AJC 210 class assignment using martini-glass organization formula. Family interviews approved by professor)

Afrikka Ennis has worked many jobs in her 45 years of living, from the drive-through of McDonald's to the offices of the Department of Defense. For much of her life, she kept her hair relaxed and straight.

"That's what my mom did to me when I was a child, and so I just kept doing it. I didn't have any knowledge of how to do my hair any other way," Ennis said.

In 2014, Ennis contracted breast cancer, and chemotherapy robbed her of all her hair. When it grew back, it was as soft as a baby's and relaxer-free. She had her natural curls back, and just in time for the natural hair movement to start gaining steam again. Since regrowing her hair, she's preferred protective styles like twists and Bantu knots for the workplace.

Because Ennis works for the federal government, she has yet to encounter any discrimination against her for her natural hair. However, not every African American is lucky enough to be in environments with the same standards of acceptance.

That's why the Crown Act, which successfully passed in the House on September 21 and now rests in the Senate, is so important. The bill, if passed into law, could make natural hair discrimination illegal in American public schools and workplaces.

Black people across the nation recall the stories of Andrew Johnson, DeAndre Arnold, and Kaden Bradford. Johnson was a high school wrestler who, in April 2019, was told either to get rid of his dreadlocks or forfeit a match; the video of a white athletic trainer cutting off his locs quickly went viral. DeAndre Arnold and his cousin, Kaden Bradford, were seniors at a Texas high school and on track for graduation. Both were suspended and barred from walking because they refused to cut their locks.

In addition, a study conducted by Dove on Black hair discrimination revealed that 80 percent of Black women reported having to change their hair for the workplace. They also found that Black women were 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from work because of their hair.

In 2019, four organizations came together to found the CROWN Coalition: the National Urban League, Color of Change, the Western Center on Law and Poverty, and Dove. CROWN is an acronym for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair". Their mission is to "create a world where Black lives are valued, respected and free of oppressive systems."

The CROWN Coalition created the Crown Act in the same year, a piece of
legislation which aims to outlaw school and workplace discrimination based on hair texture or style. These laws would protect black people (especially women) from having to compromise their health, culture, and individuality to keep a job or get an education.

Initially, the Crown Act was passed by only seven states: California, Colorado, Maryland, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Washington. Virginia was the fourth state to do so, back in March.

However, the act is now on the national table, and the House's approval is a huge step towards creating more Black-inclusive spaces. On the day of the bill's passing, Rep. Ilhan Omar tweeted a message of success.

"For far too long, Black women have been penalized for simply existing as themselves--that ends today."

The Crown Act could also mean a shift in the way we evaluate all discrimination under the law.

Currently, discrimination lawsuits must show proof of bias over traits people can't change. The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals co-signed this interpretation in 2010, during the EEOC v. Catastrophe Management Solutions case.

In that case, Alabama woman Chastity Jones attended a job interview with her hair in short locs. Her interviewer told her that her hair violated the company's grooming policy, and rescinded their job offer after she refused to cut it. The court sided with the company, stating that because hair can be changed, it can't be discriminated against.

However, the Crown Act supports the CROWN Coalition's interpretation of race as a social construct, one that is also defined by cultural practices like protective hairstyles. This could open avenues for different races to pursue discrimination lawsuits for their cultural practices (for example, traditional tattooing for various Native American cultures).

The enactment of the Crown Act would allow African Americans to have the same rights as white people do: to wear their hair naturally at work and school and not be penalized for it.

Afrikka Ennis may never have dealt with hair discrimination problems herself, but she fully supports the Crown Act for a very simple reason.

"Hair has nothing to do with how good of an employee you are. I don't think that people should be discriminated against at their jobs for anything other than pure work performance."