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# What the CROWN Act means for Black women at work

The CROWN Act was meant to combat hair discrimination in the workplace. But some are skeptical about how fast real change will come.



[Photo: [Clarke Sanders/Unsplash](#)]



**BY ALEX GRAY**

4 MINUTE READ

The job hunt can be difficult for anyone. But for Black women, even being perceived as professional can be its own feat. When Brianne Cash prepared for an interview with an insurance company early in her career, she was mostly concerned about how the interviewer would view her—specifically her natural hair.

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decision to go natural was a difficult one at a former place of employment. “I got feedback from other Black women that said ‘Be careful because going natural will impact your career and it won’t resonate with people,’” Reed says. “Meanwhile, I had [white] coworkers literally dye their hair in rainbow colors, and no one would say anything.”

Reed’s and Cash’s concerns are understandable. According to a 2019 [Dove research study](#), Black women are 1.5 times more likely to get sent home from work because of their hair.

But Black people don’t just experience hair-based discrimination in the workplace. It happens in school as well. There have been [multiple instances](#) in recent years of students being suspended or otherwise disciplined for their natural or protective styles. It was this fact that prompted a coalition of organizations and lawmakers to create the CROWN Act in 2019.

[This act](#), which is now law in seven states and two municipalities, stands for “Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair.” It prohibits race-based hair discrimination in the workplace or educational system. It was first signed into law in California on July 3 of last year and has recently passed in Virginia on the law’s one year anniversary.

Help DOVE End Hair Discrimination with The CROWN Act



“Dove and the CROWN Coalition have accomplished so much over the past year, and as we continue the work to ensure the protection of Black women children and men from hair discrimination a form of

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that the CROWN Act passed last year in New York, where she lives. “This is something that we’ve been dealing with for a long time and something that we should not have ever had to really deal with,” she says. “Our hair is our hair.”

The Joy Collective, a marketing and communications agency, was one of the driving forces of the CROWN Coalition. “We were seeing more and more stories of our beautiful children being sent home from school,” says Kelli Richardson Lawson, CEO and founder of the Washington, D.C.-based agency. “We didn’t realize that it was legal in this country to discriminate against Black people at the time, but once we realized that, we, on behalf of Unilever and the Dove brand, started working on trying to craft something that could really make a change.”

Although the law being passed is an important first step, there is still a long way to go. A recent study by Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, a senior associate dean at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business, shows that Black women who wear their natural hair are still heavily discriminated against during the interview process.

Researchers recruited 480 participants of various races to act as recruiters for job candidates. Each participant was given job profiles of Black and white women with varying hairstyles and asked to judge their professionalism. According to the study, Black women with natural hairstyles were seen as “the least professional, least competent, and least likely to be recommended for an interview across all comparison groups.” Rosette’s study also revealed that participants found one Black candidate more professional when she had straight hair rather than her natural hair.

Over the past few months, many brands have rushed to [make statements against racism](#) and describe how they will improve their own business practices, following protests against police brutality and racial discrimination.

Reed is based in Oregon, one of the 16 states where the bill was introduced but not passed. But she believes that the new calls against racism plus the CROWN Act are a start to creating change for Black women at work. “It feels different this time. It feels as though it’s more than just a press release. I’m actually having difficult conversations in my work environment,” she says. “Now I’m seeing white people genuinely being allies and getting out there and doing work and asking real questions and reading books.”

Cash wants to be optimistic that the CROWN Act will bring more positive changes at work, but she has her doubts. “I do believe that there are employers out there who probably are really dedicated to paying attention to the way that women of color are treated within the workforce,” she says. “I honestly feel like white people will always find some kind of way to invalidate the Black experience, or invalidate our work ethic or our value.”

The CROWN Coalition plans to continue introducing, reintroducing, and passing the bill in every state. Federal legislation was introduced in December 2019 but has not passed in the House or the Senate.

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