

November 22, 2021

The Honorable Michael S. Day  
House Chair, Joint Committee on the Judiciary  
State House, Room 136  
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable James B. Eldridge  
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on the Judiciary  
State House, Room 511-C  
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairs Day and Eldridge, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Meera Ruparelia, and I am a resident of Boston, as well as a graduate student at the Boston University School of Public Health. I write to you today to urge you to report favorably on S.1049 and H.1907, An Act prohibiting discrimination based on natural hairstyles, and to provide research on the need for these bills.

As you all are aware, Black Americans and other marginalized peoples have faced widespread discrimination in our country for centuries. While both federal and state legislation has been passed to combat this discrimination over the years, the letter of these laws currently falls short in providing the clarity needed to fully support and enforce their spirit. This is particularly true of discrimination based on hair texture and style. As a result, many people are still targeted and deprived of opportunities to engage in their education, in their work, and in our economy simply because of their natural hair.

While people of all backgrounds can experience hair discrimination, empirical evidence shows that Black women have borne the brunt of its impact, with many having been forced to alter their hairstyles to be accepted in majority-white schools, workplaces, and stores and other places of business. In a study conducted by Dove, a founding member of The Crown Act Coalition, researchers found that Black women were 83% more likely to be judged harshly on their looks than other women<sup>1</sup>. They were also 30% more likely than other women to be made aware of workplace appearance policies in general. Additionally, in a 2014 study conducted by researchers at the City University of New York, about a third of Black women surveyed reported that they've faced discrimination when wearing their hair naturally<sup>2</sup>.

These statistics are reflected in the experiences of many in Massachusetts. In 2017, 15-year-old twin sisters Deanna and Mya Cook were called to the office at The Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Malden, MA, for a "uniform infraction."<sup>5</sup> The infraction, administrators told them, was the wearing of their hair in long, professionally done box braids, a hairstyle long associated with Black culture.<sup>5</sup> The sisters were told that their new braids violated a school policy prohibiting hair extensions as they were "distracting." Both students were instructed to remove their braids, but refused, noting the discriminatory nature of the policy.<sup>5</sup>

Both sisters were subsequently kicked off school sports teams, banned from attending prom, and received hours of detention—all because they refused to change their hairstyle.<sup>5</sup> The school eventually came under fire after their parents spoke to local media, which led to the American Civil Liberties Union filing a discrimination complaint with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and with the Office of the Attorney General.<sup>5</sup> After entering into a memorandum of understanding with the

Attorney General, the school board eventually voted to end the girls' punishments and suspend the policy on which they were based, but this reversal only came after the two students had endured months of ongoing detention and exclusion from extra-curricular activities.

Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley has also spoken about her own experiences with her natural hair. When Rep. Pressley was a Boston city councilor and then later a congresswoman, she wore her hair in Senegalese twists.<sup>9</sup> When Rep. Pressley lost all of her hair due to alopecia in 2019, it reinforced for her the necessity to ensure that "no one be criminalized or penalized for something out of their control like how their hair grows."<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Rep. Pressley strongly believes that hair discrimination is a major contributing factor to criminalization of colored people, especially for young girls and women.<sup>9</sup>

For many who don't have the resources to resist hair discrimination where they encounter it, the absence of these protections forces the use of hair styling tools or chemicals that alter and can cause irreparable damage and breakage to naturally curly hair. Furthermore, in a study done by researchers from the National Institutes of Health and Harvard University's School of Public Health, it was found that chemical straightening products have been linked to other issues such as hair loss, burns, cancer, miscarriages, and infant underdevelopment.<sup>8</sup>

Bearing in mind the negative impacts that hair discrimination continues to have on the residents of our Commonwealth—from limiting access to education and jobs to its negative psychological and physical impacts— I believe that the time for action is now. As of today, 12 states have passed similar legislation banning hair discrimination into law, including California, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Colorado, Washington, Maryland, Connecticut, New Mexico, Delaware, Nebraska, and Nevada.<sup>3</sup> It is time Massachusetts joins these states to stand up again this insidious form of discrimination.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I once again urge members of the Committee to issue a favorable report on bills S.1049 and H.1907.

Sincerely,  
Meera Ruparelia

## References

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