

Natural Evolutions

One Hair Story

A compilation of results, cultural insights, health, and research around Black women's hair and health.



Black Women for Wellness

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Natural Evolutions One Hair Story
Updated August 2023

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A large of this work can be attributed to the previous authors and contributors Black Women for Wellness would like to acknowledge all the hard work, input, guidance, support and direction from various people and organizations who helped with this project including:

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Pauline Brooks & Ruth Forman Funds supporting the work and development of this report are appreciated especially from: Center for Environmental Health –Michael Green & Ansje Miller Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation – Wilma Montanez The California Wellness Foundation – Earl Lui The Grove Foundation – Karen Grove The Regeneration Fund – Zak Sinclair Graphic Design: Pam Ward

A special thanks to Earl Lui and the California Wellness Foundation for making this report possible

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Our Mission

Black Women for Wellness (BWW) is committed to healing, educating, and supporting Black women and girls. In 1997, BWW started as “Sisterfriends,” with the Birthing Project in Los Angeles. We began as a group of six women concerned about the health and well-being of our babies. As grandmothers, mothers, aunts, daughters, and sisterfriends, we found we had no choice but to take on the plethora of health issues Black women encounter. Black Women for Wellness is a grassroots non-profit committed to the empowerment, health and well-being of Black women and girls.

Black Women for Wellness utilizes a reproductive justice framework to engage in policy, advocacy, outreach, research, civic engagement and education toward increasing the health and well-being of Black women and girls locally in Los Angeles and throughout California.

Organized by 6 women in 1997, Black Women for Wellness has worked for more than twenty-six years to:

- (1) expand access to reproductive and sexual health through supporting state and county policy implementation and regulations,
- (2) provide sex education and outreach to youth, and
- (3) share information with consumers on reproductive and neurological toxins.


In addition, BWW has worked on implementing healthy eating and exercise programs to prevent obesity and infertility, conducting research with African American beauty professionals to determine chemical exposure and correlating health status, collaborating on the Taking Stock study to better understand the increased toxic chemical exposure on Black women from cosmetic products, and employing advocacy and outreach to ensure the Affordable Care Act is inclusive of reproductive health services.

BWW also works on organizing and mobilizing around local and statewide elections, as well as publishing culturally relevant voter education and information materials for the Black community. Additionally, we work to protect the environmental integrity of Black communities by eliminating oil drilling and promoting water integrity.

For more information, to volunteer, share information, ask questions, comment or otherwise communicate with Black Women for Wellness use the information below

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Introduction

In 2022, Black individuals spent about 7.4 billion dollars on beauty products alone. In the coming years, this number is expected to rise with the increased demand for products that fit the specific needs of textured hair, and the willingness of Black consumers to invest in effective products, especially if the company is Black owned (Dinarichter, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 Pandemic caused an overall reduction in out-of-home activities, which in turn hurt the Black hair care market in the United States, a market that is predicted to remain flat through 2027. While there have been minor gains since 2020 because of inflationary pricing, natural hair care products will be essential to retaining the relevance of the industry.

Nevertheless, many of the products marketed to and used by Black women are rarely researched for toxic health consequences; in the rare cases that they are, Black hair products are found to be some of the most toxic beauty products on the market ("Harvard School of Public Health", 2020).

Black hair care professionals offer stability to our communities. Their history is interwoven with social justice movements, civil rights, and integration efforts of our experience in the United States as well as worldwide (Gaines, 2020, "Smithsonian", 2022).

The first Black female millionaires, Madame CJ Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, made their fortune as pioneers in the beauty industry. Walker and Malone are just two examples of how African American beauticians and beauty professionals have contributed to the economic health of African Americans.

The Black hair and beauty industry is more than simply big business, it is multi-layered, complex and touches the lives of Black women and girls. It allows for self-expression, it is an economic base, it connects us to Black women across the globe, and has deep historical roots. However, little is known about the connection between the beauty products we use and the health of Black women, both as consumers and workers.

As the beauty industry booms, products marketed to and used by Black women are found to be toxic, containing chemicals that are carcinogenic, linked to hormone disorders, reproductive health challenges, and contributing to obesity rates. Black hair care professionals and consumers are experiencing the consequences of cumulative impacts of toxic chemical use from exposures in hair salons and unregulated, untested products.

Starting in 2009, Black Women for Wellness began collecting data, conducted literature reviews, hosted focus groups, interviewed key leaders, and researched the world of Black beauty. *Natural Evolutions - One Hair Story* is a compilation of the collected results and insights into the culture, health, and research around Black women's hair and health.

For the purposes of this report natural hair is defined as hair not chemically treated with relaxers, texturizers, or a “perm.” Hair that is colored, but is styled in a natural way, is included under natural hairstyles. Examples of natural hairstyles include: braids, twists, sister locs, etc.

Black, for the purposes of this report, is defined as all people who self-identify within the African Diaspora, including but not limited to: Africans, African Americans, Black Americans, Black Caribbeans and Afro Latinos.

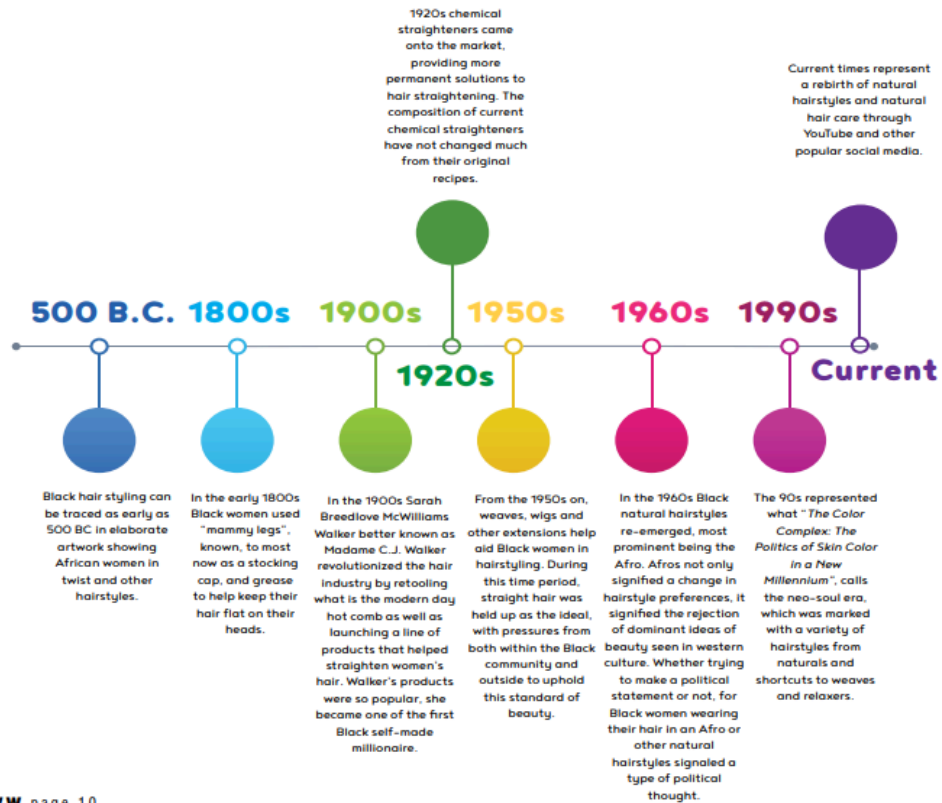
Although African American and Black do not have interchangeable meanings, in this report we will use both terms since research that involves Black people in America rarely disaggregates information by ethnicity or nationality.

Short History On Black Hair

The current culture around Black hair is multi-faceted and still infused with race, class and political influence. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies, a Nigerian author illustrates this notion in her quote, “I am a bit of a fundamentalist when it comes to black women’s hair. Hair is hair - yet also about larger questions: self-acceptance, insecurity and what the world tells you is beautiful.

For many black women, the idea of wearing their hair naturally is unbearable” The history of Black hairstyling is important in understanding the significant cultural implications of Black women’s hair. Black hair culture is interconnected with the conversation around class, gender, race, colorism and colonialism.

The research that BWW conducted around Black hair and health intersects with the deep history, and current attitudes of what Black hairstyles represent and cannot be looked at in a vacuum.



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Health Status

Black women and girls have an overwhelming burden as a result of health disparities. Issues such as skin irritations to reproductive disorders experienced by Black women have direct links to the toxic chemicals we frequently come into contact with through beauty products. In this report we highlight major health areas of concern for both Black hair care professionals and consumers.

AREAS OF CONCERN INCLUDE:

Skin and Eye Irritations Respiratory Disorders Ergonomics
Obesogens Cancer Reproductive Issues

SKIN & EYE IRRITATION

Occupational contact dermatitis* is a significant and growing health problem for hairdressers. The most frequent contributing factors to skin damage include shampoos, detergents, conditioners, hair dyes, bleaches, permanent wave solutions, and components of gloves. Prolonged exposure to irritants, exposure to potential allergens such as hair dyes, coupled with pre-existing sensitive skin can greatly increase skin irritation. In the UK it is estimated that 14-20% of cosmetology students drop out during their first two years due to contact dermatitis. Studies estimated that around 7 out of 10 hair stylists will likely suffer from a form of work related dermatitis in his or her career. In addition to contact and allergic dermatitis, stylists are also exposed to other skin disorders including chemical burns and bacterial infections.

Another area of concern and a significant health problem for hairdressers is eye irritation. Products such as nail polish, hair dye, glues, flat iron sprays and disinfectants can cause significant eye irritation. A study conducted of 50 Portuguese hairdressers found that 50% of the workers had hand dermatitis and 43% had eye irritation. The study found, as did similar studies, that there was improper use of personal protective equipment and a lack of effective prevention measures. Black Women for Wellness had similar findings in our research.*Contact dermatitis is a condition in which the skin becomes red, sore, or inflamed after direct contact with a substance.

RESPIRATORY DISORDERS

Breathing and respiratory disorders are among the most prevalent health issues faced by hairstylists. Hair care professionals work with various chemicals that are known to adversely affect the respiratory system. Chemicals such as formaldehyde, ammonia, and bleaching agents have been known to lead to breathing difficulties such as coughing and wheezing, heightened sensitivity, and in some cases occupational asthma(Hiller et al., 2022). Studies have also shown that stylists assume a greater risk than the general public in developing respiratory problems and allergies, due to their frequent contact with chemicals that trigger such conditions .

A study conducted in 2007 with 344 women in Nigeria found that respiratory symptoms were more common among hairdressers as compared to the community at large. Frequent sneezing, coughing, and chest tightness were found in the hair stylists. In addition, the mean pulmonary function test (FEV1, FVC, and FEV1/FVC) was lower in hairdressers, with no relation to duration of employment in the industry. In short, a beauty professional's ability to breathe deeply is compromised once entering the profession.

Respiratory problems such as asthma are a growing problem in the Black community. Nearly 4 million African Americans are currently living with asthma, making us the largest racial group with this condition("NIH" 2023). It is estimated that African Americans are almost three times more likely to die from asthma related causes than White Americans. Increased risks from traditional asthma factors such as air pollution and occupational exposures leave Black hair dressers at a greater risk of harm.

ERGONOMICS

Hair care professionals are exposed to ergonomic risks, most specifically, work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSD). Problems such as poor posture, prolonged standing, extended hours, and working through breaks, which are common habits of hair care professionals, lead to increased MSD risks. Specific MSDs include lower back problems from standing for long periods, shoulder problems from holding arms above shoulder level for extended periods of time, neck problems from constant head turning, and wrist problems from forceful repetitive movements.

Black stylists may spend more than eight hours on a single customer, especially if styling individual braids, twists, or locs. The majority of this time is spent standing or working nonstop. Describing her reality, a stylist in our network revealed, “Over the past four years, I've been doing more braiding. My hands go numb every night like clockwork. With the numbness, it feels like a baseball mitt, and it wakes me out of my sleep. Ergonomic challenges such as those mentioned prior significantly impact the health of hairdressers and the ability of stylists to work over time. MSDs are a substantial illness burden in the United States contributing to unnecessary pain and suffering, stress, and, ultimately, loss of income.

*Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are injuries or disorders of the muscles, nerves, tendons, joints, cartilage, and supporting structures of the upper and lower limbs, neck, and lower back that are caused, precipitated or exacerbated by sudden exertion or prolonged exposure to physical factors such as repetition, force, vibration, or awkward posture (“CDC Musculoskeletal”, 2022). This definition specifically excludes those conditions such as fractures, contusions, abrasions, and lacerations resulting from sudden physical contact of the body with external objects.

OBESOGENS

Obesogens, discovered in 2006, are a class of chemicals that disrupt the normal flow of the metabolism. A study published in The National Center for Biotechnology Information Journal found that these chemicals “altered the human metabolism, predispose some people to weight gain and, in some instances, fetal and early-life exposures alter individuals’ metabolism and fat-cell makeup for life.” Obesogens are found in everything from “high tech foods” to many of the chemicals utilized in shampoos, conditioners, and fragrances.

A recent review of the role of environmental chemicals, such as phthalates which are obesogens, that “chemical exposures may increase the risk of obesity by altering the differentiation of adipocytes or the development of neural circuits that regulate feeding behavior,” and “the review of the existing literature identified linkages between several of the environmental exposures and type 2 diabetes.” As a whole, African Americans are twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as non-Hispanic whites. Between 2017 and 2020, the CDC National Diabetes Statistics Report found that after adjusting for age, the prevalence of diagnosed diabetes in

Black women aged 18 and over was 12.1 percent, while the prevalence for white women was 6.9 percent (“Office of Minority health”).

Phthalates are found in many different hair and beauty products including hair conditioners, shampoos, detanglers and hair lotions.

CANCER

According to an Environmental Working Group survey, 1 out of every 100 products on the market contains ingredients certified by governmental authorities as known human carcinogens. This includes items such as shampoos, lotions, deodorants, lipsticks, lip balms and make-up foundations. Continually, the survey found that women, who on average use more products than men, have higher exposure to chemicals of concern.

Cancer causing chemicals in hair and beauty products are of special concern within the Black community. Chemicals found in hair relaxers, hair dyes, and straightening products, such as Brazilian blowouts, have links to carcinogenic materials. Black Women for Wellness found that women of color, particularly Black women, often use cosmetic products that are found to be more toxic, when tested, than the general population. A study conducted by the NIH in 2022 found that “women who reported frequent use of hair straightening products, defined as more than four times in the previous year, were more than twice as likely to go on to develop uterine cancer compared to those who did not use the products” (“NIH”, 2022). The results of this study are especially concerning, considering the prevalence of hair straightening products among Black women and girls .

The Journal of the National Cancer Institute, in 1994, reported that deep-colored dyes, when used over a prolonged period of time, seemed to increase the risk of both non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma and multiple myeloma. Similarly, the International Journal of Cancer found that those who use permanent hair dyes are 2.1 times more likely to develop bladder cancer. Prolonged use by hairdressers using these types of chemicals on clients also increases risk. A 2008 report by the International Agency for Research on Cancer noted that the chemical exposure to hairdressers and barbers are probably carcinogenic (“IARC”, 2008).

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among Black women. In 2018, breast cancer was the first leading cause of death for Black women aged 45-84, and when averaged for all ages, the second leading cause of death (“CDC”, 2022).. According to the CDC, in 2020, the breast cancer diagnosis for Black women was 119.6 per 100,000 per year, which is less than white women’s incident rate of 125.3 per 100,000 per year.

However, even though Black women have a lower incident rate of breast cancer than White women, Black women are far more likely to die from breast cancer, often having more aggressive cancers or being diagnosed in later stages (“American Cancer Society”, 2022). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Vital Statistics

report, the breast cancer death rate for women aged 45-64 years of age was 60% higher for Black women than White women (56.8 and 35.6 deaths per 100,000, respectively).

REPRODUCTIVE ISSUES

There is a wide array of problems that impact the reproductive health of Black women such as socio-economic status, access to health services and other issues of concern. In this report we are centering on the impact of toxic chemicals, specifically endocrine disruptors, on the reproductive health of women and girls.

Infant development/mortality

There is still more testing needed when it comes to birth outcomes and the use of hair care products. However, a pilot study revealed that, "Prenatal exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) from personal care products may be associated with birth outcomes including preterm birth and low birth weight.(Chan et.al, 2021)".

Preterm birth in itself increases the odds of later adverse health effects such as neurodevelopmental delays, cardiometabolic disease, allergy, and asthma(Chan et.al, 2021). Relating to an earlier topic, maternal exposure to obesogens and other EDCs during the critical times of fetal development "may permanently affect adipogenesis, metabolism, and appetite across the lifespan", leading to the occurrence of type 2 diabetes (Romano et al., 2014). Black infants are also four times more likely to die as a result of low birth weight compared to non-Hispanic White infants.

Miscarriages

A North Carolina survey of cosmetologists revealed a greater number of spontaneous abortions (miscarriage) among cosmetologists when compared to non-cosmetologists(CM;, 1994). The survey also noted that those women who had been in cosmetology school during pregnancy had twice the risk of miscarriage.This risk increased in salons that used formaldehyde and alcohol based disinfectants.

A cross-sectional study done with 16,907 women in Norway found that female hairdressers in the sample were at an increased risk for infertility and spontaneous abortion compared with women in other professions (Baste et al., 2008). Other studies have shown hairdressers had higher rates of giving birth to infants that were small for their age, had major malformations and suffered from early infant death when compared with non-hair professionals.

Hairdressers that worked more than 30 hours a week during pregnancy were 1.8 times more likely to have a low birth weight infant when compared to hairdressers that worked less than 30 hours a week. This study is especially important given that Norway has a homogenous populations with national healthcare, giving them the ability to better identify beauty stylist exposure to chemicals and the health issues connected.

Given what we have found regarding the links between miscarriage, low birth weight, and chemicals found in products used by hairdressers, there is reason to be concerned that chemicals are one of many issues that impact infant mortality.

“ Hair relaxers are linked to uterine fibroids in Black women and girls”

Uterine Fibroids

An early study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology determined that the use of hair relaxers is linked to uterine fibroids in Black women and girls, something that is estimated to affect 80% of Black women over their lifetime(Wise et al., 2012). The study, which interviewed more than 23,000 premenopausal African American women from 1997 to 2009, found two to-three times higher rates of fibroids among Black women .

Chemical exposure through scalp lesions and burns caused by relaxers are linked with high fibroid tumor rates. The main ingredients found in relaxers, lye (sodium hydroxide) and no-lye (calcium hydroxide) formulae are linked to scalp lesions and burns. Women who use lye relaxers have a higher risk of scalp lesions or burns, which increases dermal absorption of chemicals directly into their bodies(Wise et al., 2012).

Reproductive Development

Girls who reported using chemical hair oils and hair perms were 1.4 times more likely to experience early puberty after adjusting for race, ethnicity, and year of birth(James-Todd et al., 2011). In addition, other studies have linked early puberty to hair detangler use by Black girls.

In one of the studies African American girls as young as two years old started showing signs of puberty after using products containing animal placenta found in many detanglers and conditioners. Placental extracts also contain estrogen, which has been associated with an increased risk of breast cancer(“Silent Spring Institute”).

This information along with the proliferation of chemicals in our hair and beauty products, and the possible impacts of untested, unregulated chemicals on Black women’s reproductive health, is alarming.

REGULATIONS

For far too long, there has been a severe lack of regulations placed on what chemical ingredients can be used in cosmetic products, and existing regulations are seldom enforced. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is able to inspect and issue citations to manufacturers who distribute products with high levels of chemicals of concern at the state and federal levels. However, there are very few pieces of actual legislation that protect salon workers and consumers from harmful products and chemical exposure.

Federal and State Agencies

In addition to consumers, Black hair stylists and barbers are made vulnerable at the hands of cosmetic companies who continue to use hazardous chemicals in their products. The researched and documented threats these products present to consumers is only compounded for salon workers, as working with them for several hours a day increases the risk of chemical exposure. Despite the research that shows health issues related to certain chemical ingredients in these products, there have only been some strides in regulatory efforts in the past few years.

Regarding state and federal regulatory agencies, OSHA enforces safe manufacturing practices by issuing citations to various corporations and workplaces that put workers in a vulnerable position for chemical exposure. For instance, a number of chemical hair straighteners contain formaldehyde or formaldehyde releasers in their ingredients, one of the most common being Brazilian Blowout. In 2010 in California, CAL-OSHA inspected GIB LLC, the distributor of Brazilian Blowout, and issued 11 citations, 4 of which were directly related to the product.

In 2011, the FDA considered Brazilian Blowout product to be both an adulterated and misbranded cosmetic. It was considered “adulterated” because it contained formaldehyde, a chemical that can harm or injure users when used as described on the label.

It was considered “misbranded” because despite the “formaldehyde-free” label, the product contains methylene glycol, the liquid form of formaldehyde. At the time, the only regulatory efforts conducted by the FDA was a warning letter sent to Mike Brady, the CEO of GIB, LLC, the producer and distributor of Brazilian Blowout product.

This wasn't the first time the company was warned of their health and safety violations. The FDA response came a year after CAL-OSHA inspected GIB LLC in 2010 and issued 11 citations, 4 of which were directly related to the product.

In fiscal years 2011 and 2012, Federal OSHA issued citations to 49 different workplaces that regularly used Brazilian Blowout with chemicals of concern, including manufacturers and distributors, beauty schools, and salons. Manufacturers and distributors were cited for failing to protect factory workers from potential formaldehyde exposure, as well as failing to communicate the chemical hazards to salons and stylists.

This came following a joint report published in 2011 by the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health that showed that even short-term air quality during the use of Brazilian Blowouts in salons exceeded NIOSH exposure limits, proving the product was not “formaldehyde-free”, as the company claimed.

Regulatory Legislation

In more recent years, an increasing amount of legislation has been drafted to better regulate the ingredients used in cosmetic products and protect consumers and salon workers.

The Safer Beauty Bill Package

Introduced to Congress in October 2021, the Safer Beauty Bill Package is a series of five bills currently being passed through our legislative branch to address cosmetic safety issues impacting consumers and salon workers who are primarily women of color. It includes the Modernization of Cosmetics Regulations Act, the Toxic-Free Beauty Act, the Cosmetic Safety for Communities of Color and Professional Salon Workers Act, the Cosmetic Fragrance and Flavor Ingredient Right to Know Act, and the Cosmetic Supply Chain Transparency Act.

The bill package has four main goals: to ban the 11 most toxic chemicals used in hair care products, defend the health of women of color and salon workers, require companies to disclose fragrance and flavor ingredients, and force supply chain transparency so that companies can manufacture safer products. As of May 2023, 2 government agencies, 56 businesses, and 98 NGOs endorse the Safer Beauty Bill Package.

MoCRA

The Modernization of Cosmetics Regulation Act of 2022, or MoCRA, is the first significant amendment to the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act since its enactment in 1938. The Act would greatly expand the FDA's authority to regulate cosmetic products and help enforce transparency with chemicals of concern used in these products.

New authorities granted to the FDA would include records access, including safety records, of certain products. Additionally, they would be allowed to carry out mandatory recalls. This means that if the agency determines a product is either adulterated or misbranded and causes serious adverse health consequences, they have the power to recall the product if the manufacturer refuses to do so voluntarily.

MoCRA also establishes new requirements for the cosmetics industry, one of the most significant being Product Listing. This requires companies to list each marketed cosmetic product with the FDA, including the product's ingredients, and provide any updates annually. The Act also requires manufacturers to comply with FDA-established regulations for fragrance allergen labeling as well as standardized testing for detecting asbestos in talc-containing cosmetic products.

Toxic-Free Beauty Act

The Toxic-Free Beauty Act of 2023 intends to ban eleven hazardous chemicals from personal care and beauty products currently sold in the U.S. that are already prohibited in the EU, California, and Maryland. The worst of these chemicals include formaldehyde/formaldehyde releasers, mercury, the two phthalates DBP and DEHP, the parabens isobutylparaben and isopropylparaben, and M- and O-Phenylenediamine.

Despite being linked to things like birth defects, endocrine disruption, breast cancer, respiratory and nervous system harm, and more, these chemicals are found in all sorts of cosmetics. This includes nail polish, sunscreens, makeup, soaps, and even baby shampoo. While many

multinational corporations like CVS and Target have added these chemicals to their “Do Not Use” lists, other companies continue to sell products with these chemicals, because there is currently no legislation prohibiting it.

H.R. 3620

The Cosmetic Safety for Communities of Color & Professional Salon Workers Act of 2023, or H.R. 3620, is a bill that aims to federally mandate access to translated safety data sheets, fund research to identify chemicals of concern in cosmetics and the resulting health impacts, fund the development of green chemistry for safer product alternatives, and fund the creation of two national resource centers for beauty justice and occupational health and safety protections for salon workers.

This bill would be a major step forward in terms of transparency of chemical ingredients used in cosmetics, especially to those workers who do not speak English as a first language. Additionally, it would support safer alternatives to products whose chemical ingredients unavoidably cause harm, even with safety instructions provided by the manufacturer.

Cosmetic Fragrance and Flavor Ingredient Right to Know Act

This 2023 Act aims to require manufacturers to publicly disclose a full list of fragrance and flavor ingredients in their products on both product labels and company websites. Currently, the terms “fragrance” and “flavor” are used as blanket terms that could include thousands of synthetic chemicals used in cosmetic products.

Many of these chemicals are linked to concerning health effects such as skin irritation, reproductive harm, and an increased risk of breast cancer. The fragrance label can be found on over 95% of personal care product labels, including sunscreens, shampoos, lotions, hair styling products, and more. Already, the push for public disclosure of these chemical ingredients is happening in states like California and New York. However, this bill would require this action at the federal level.

Cosmetic Supply Chain Transparency Act

The Cosmetic Supply Chain Transparency Act of 2023 would, as the name suggests, require suppliers to provide accurate ingredient disclosure, toxicity and safety data, and the certificate of analyses needed to make safer beauty and personal care products to brand owners. These suppliers include fragrance houses, formulating labs, and suppliers of ingredients, raw materials, and finished products.

Currently, there is no legislation at the federal level requiring transparency between supply chain members in the cosmetics industry. Because brand owners carry the ultimate responsibility for safety liability, this bill would not only help consumers, but would also help brands maintain a positive image and reputation.

COVID, Salons, and Evolutions in Black Hair Care

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black salons were various and widespread. Through our canvassing effort, we were able to learn directly about the financial, health, and industry concerns of these stylists as well as methods of adaptation.

Financial

Stories of the financial difficulties brought on by the pandemic were substantial. One stylist said, "People were too afraid to come into the shops." And as stylists, many depended on the foot traffic into salons to stay afloat. This client decrease directly led to cash flow challenges and tremendous income drops.

Likewise, it was noted that due to the general financial distress during the pandemic and changes in outlook, people "were not in the position to seek regular services," another direct economic impact.

Many stylists left their booths due to an inability to pay, leaving salon owners struggling to make ends meet for rent. Some stylists went through their savings or explored alternate careers during this "extended period of zero income" to deal with the sea of piling bills. It was devastating not only to see the effects of the pandemic but witnessing the reactions of the stylist recounting these stories while still not entirely free from the effects of COVID.

Hair at Home

With limited access to the salons, many people became self-beauticians. The stylist noted that many clients had done their hair during the pandemic, some returning to the salons with damaged hair due to their endeavors. Yet, the pandemic also saw the rise of unqualified stylists learning online. Stylists complained of individuals lacking proper qualifications, doing hair because of the ease of learning on the internet while inflicting lasting damage to a client's hair.

Adaptability

Despite the various challenges, some stylists adapted by performing house calls or operating out of their residences. Another stylist, seeking to stay as safe as possible, closed entirely.

Staying Safe

For those salons that opened up or stayed open during the pandemic, they utilized public health advice by masking, sanitizing, and social distancing within the salon space.

Current affairs

The view of stylists regarding the aftermath of the pandemic varies. Some could bounce back and are as lively as they were pre-pandemic. However, many salons are slowly regaining

clientele and returning to "normal." Stylists who service older clients are just seeing those customers returning. From our observations, things are not what they were. Many salons on our list from prior canvassing efforts were closed. Others had unreliable hours or stylists only in the shop by appointment. Only a few stylists stood in many shops, with signs outside noting available booths for rent.

Mini Grants

As is known, small businesses faced some of the most significant financial impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, and black salons were not spared. Despite government-funded COVID-19 relief programs being available, such as the Paycheck Protection Program or COVID-19 EIDL, not all black businesses qualified to receive that assistance, as is the case for certain stylists we had talked to.

Though all small businesses were affected, black-owned businesses were hit particularly hard. To relieve the pandemic's financial burdens, BWW gave mini-grants to over 50 Black businesses, many salons included.

Research and Data Collection

Research & Data Collected From 2022 BWW Listening Session

BWW sought to hear from stylists to learn more about their concerns regarding safe styling, reoccurring occupational hazards, and any necessary support or resources they would need to better perform their services.

Product Formation

Stylists mentioned staying away from products due to allergies, concerns of safety, or lack of effectiveness. To avoid harmful chemicals in products, some limited the number of products they would use. Likewise, stylists mentioned concerns over the coloring and bleaching processes and the chemicals involved especially when followed by heated styling.

Health and Safety

An overwhelming majority of the stylists mentioned health concerns related to the occupation. Many noted limiting the amount of braided styles due to the numbness and physical toll of doing multi hour styles on a continuous basis. One stylist sought therapeutic relief after performing such styles in the form of acupuncture and yoga. Other concerns included inhaling fumes or physical safety around difficult clients. Moreover, energy and mental health were major concerns. Dealing with clients unloading emotional burdens was noted to be taxing.

Industry and Natural Hair

Participants echoed how the natural hair industry is gaining more acceptability amid changing mindsets concerning wearing one's natural hair. However, despite the move to healthier hair, stylists mentioned concerns over the growing amount of stylists who don't wash hair.

This tendency is gaining prevalence throughout the industry, and becoming a trend despite the practice of cleaning a client's hair being a canon in cosmetology school. Thus, participants mentioned a desire for re-education, or refresher workshops for current stylists to learn the basics, and better protect clients' hair.

Hair Care Professionals

2014 Focus Group Data

Black Women for Wellness conducted a focus group with stylists who worked primarily in the South Los Angeles area.

Were the products the stylists used on the cosmetics hazard database website?

The stylists' group visited the cosmetics database to see if they could look up the products they utilized the most. The most commonly used relaxers did not have any information in the database. The cosmetics database rates products on a scale of 1 – 10, the lower the score the safer or less toxic the product.

A few of the stylists found chemical reports for the hair colors they used. Two of the hair colors had a high concern rating, which did not surprise the stylists. However, the group was interested in the lower score relaxers.

Although it had a lower score, the stylists said they stopped using the product because, "It doesn't work ... when [companies] switch a product it stops working the way they used to work." One participant stated, "They're taking [the chemical] out for a good reason, but then our clients are like, wait a minute, something's not right."

The stylists mentioned that it seemed like the website did not list the professional brands. The stylists wished there was a space to look up professional use products. One of the participants said that she would look at the website and request some of these products on her own.

What are the reasons stylists use particular products?

Effectiveness/Moisture was a common reason to use a product, both for their clients and themselves. It was reported that many clients have dry scalp; they are seeing psoriasis a lot more and clients come in with medicated shampoos. Stylists look for hair care and personal

products that don't irritate their skin or their natural hair. One stylist shared, "We are looking for something that keeps you healthy, for use with our clients and for ourselves."

Potential chemical harm?

When asked if they've ever wondered if there are chemicals in the products that they use that may potentially harm their general health or reproductive health, or the health of their clients, the stylist answered yes to all questions. One stylist said, "What's in all of these products that's bringing on these ailments such as scalp conditions?"

Priority concerns for stylists included respiratory issues, latex gloves, chemicals in hair color, relaxers, hair sprays/holding sprays, heat/smoke from curling irons combined with oil, and glue for weaves.

Client reactions to glue include headaches or scalp reactions such as a raised red lump on the scalp where glue was when removing hair, and bald spots. One stylist said for these reasons "she only uses glue to do a closure."* *more information in the quantitative section about this topic.

"A participant mentioned using gloves because she had sensitive hands"

Protecting their own health?

When asked if they do anything special to protect their own health or their client's health from environmental toxins at work, most answered that they use different types of ventilation. One stylist said, "[The] place can't be closed in and cluttered, though some shops are."

One of the participants used a website called "Killer Strands" (started by a chemist who is a hair stylist as well) which offers information on healthier hair care options. Another participant mentioned using gloves because she had sensitive hands.

Hair Care Professionals

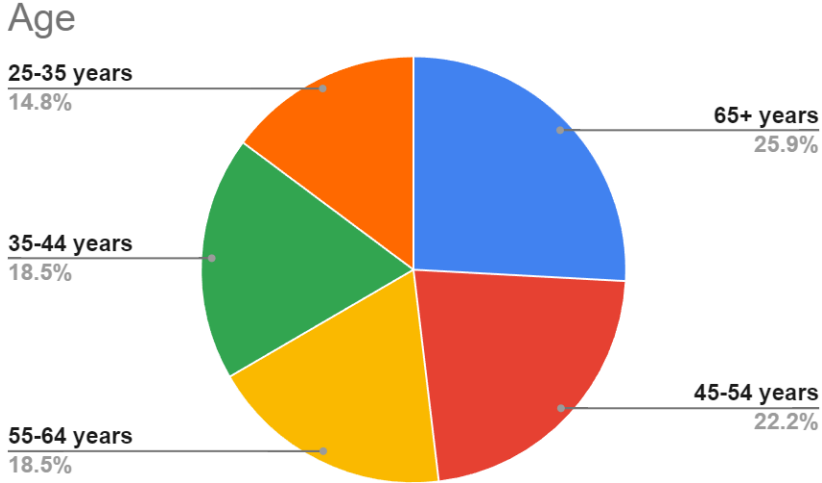
2023 Survey Data

Black Women for Wellness conducted a survey with stylists who worked primarily in the South Los Angeles area.

Demographic Questions:

Age

The age range of survey participants ran from 25 to 65+ years old. 30.8% of stylists chose not to report their age range, but of the remaining 69.2%, 10.3% were 25-34 years, 12.8% were 35-44 years, 12.8% were 45-54 years, 15.4% were 55-64 years, and 17.9% were 65+ years old.

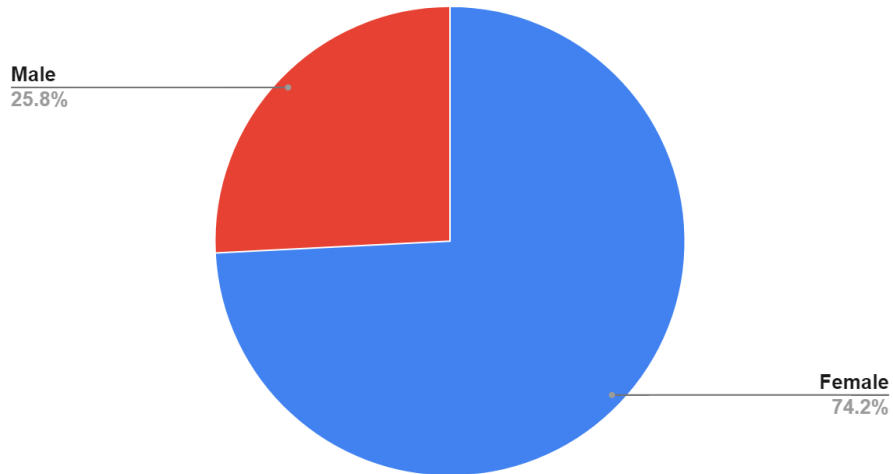


To which gender do you most identify?

Participants were given the option of man, woman, transgender man, transgender woman, gender-variant/non-conforming, or prefer not to say when it came to their gender identity. 74.2% of survey participants were women, while 25.8% were men.

Survey Questions:

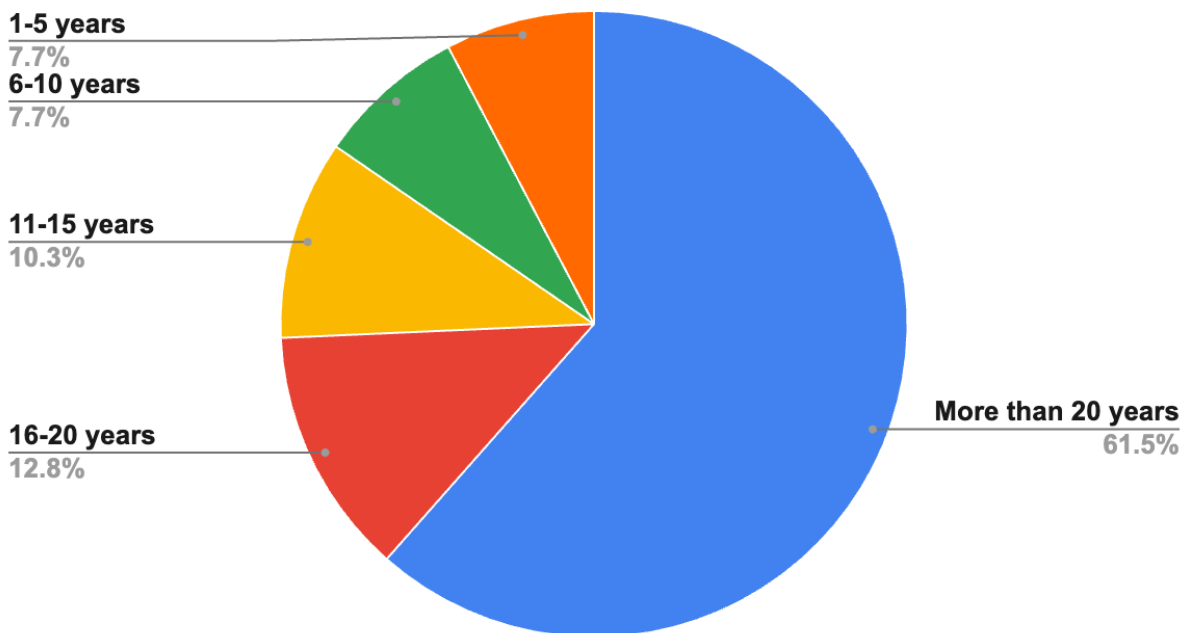
Gender



How long have you been a hair stylist?

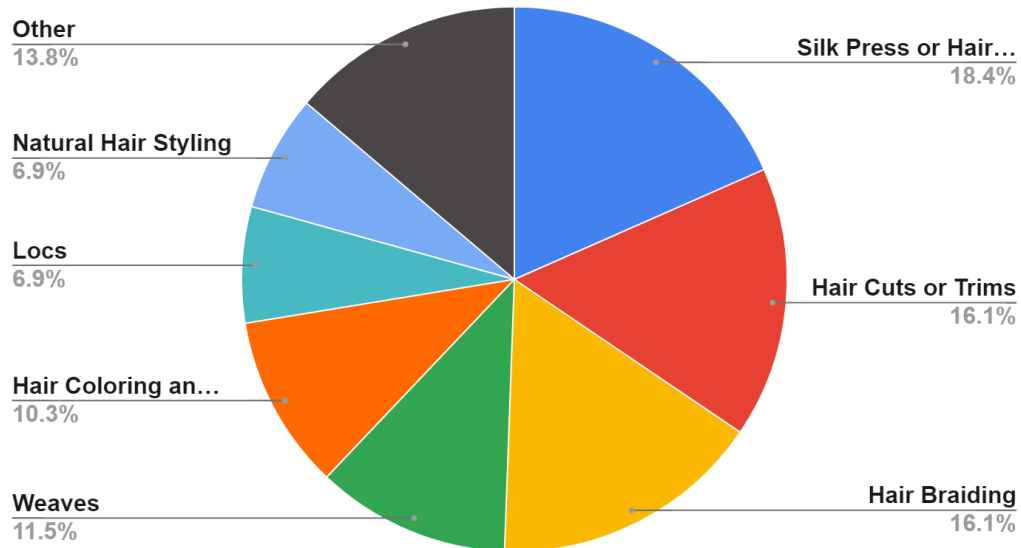
The range given to stylists for this question was between 1 and 20+ years working in the field. An overwhelming majority of stylists (61.5%) said they'd been working for more than 20 years. 12.8% said they'd been doing hair for 16-20 years, 10.3% said 11-15 years, 7.7% said 6-10 years, and 7.7% said 1-5 years.

Years in the field



What are your top 3 requested services offered?

This question had 11 response options, as well as an open-ended “other” response option. There were over 15 types of services reported, but the top five were: silk press/non-chemical hair straightening (18.4%), hair cuts or trims (16.1%), braiding (16.1%), weaves (11.5%), and hair coloring or bleaching (10.3%).



If at all, how has the pandemic affected your job?

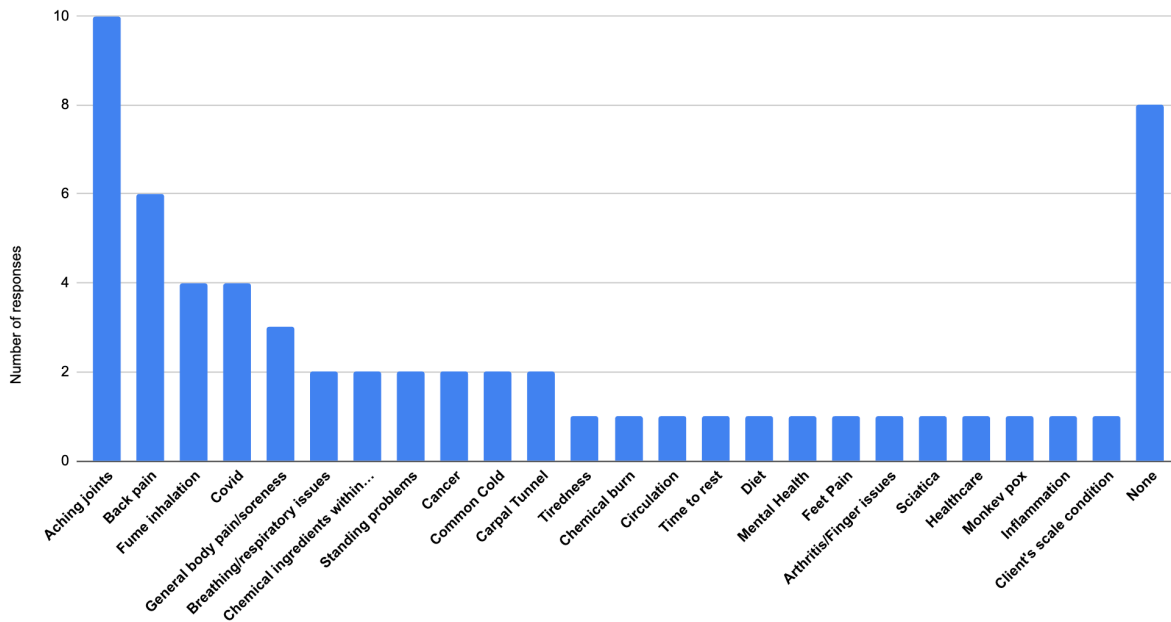
This was an open-ended question. Most survey participants discussed the economic strains of the industry, as they had to shut down their businesses, and many had to stop working all together. Few respondents reported that they continued house-calls during the pandemic, but most did not work until they were able to open up their shops again.

Workers also reported the difficulty with retaining their full clientele after the shut-down. Many clients learned to do their own hair while shut in the house, and therefore haven't needed a stylist to do it for them. Additionally, salon workers with older clientele reported that many of those clients are worried about going back into public spaces and catching COVID.

What are your main health concerns as a hairstylist working in the industry?

Similar to the question regarding top requested services, this prompt had a combination of response options as well as an open-ended option. The top five responses were aching joints, back pain, fume inhalation, COVID-19, and general body pain/soreness. As seen in the figure below, ergonomics was a major issue reported by participants, as aching joints was the highest reported health concern as a result of repetitive hand motions.

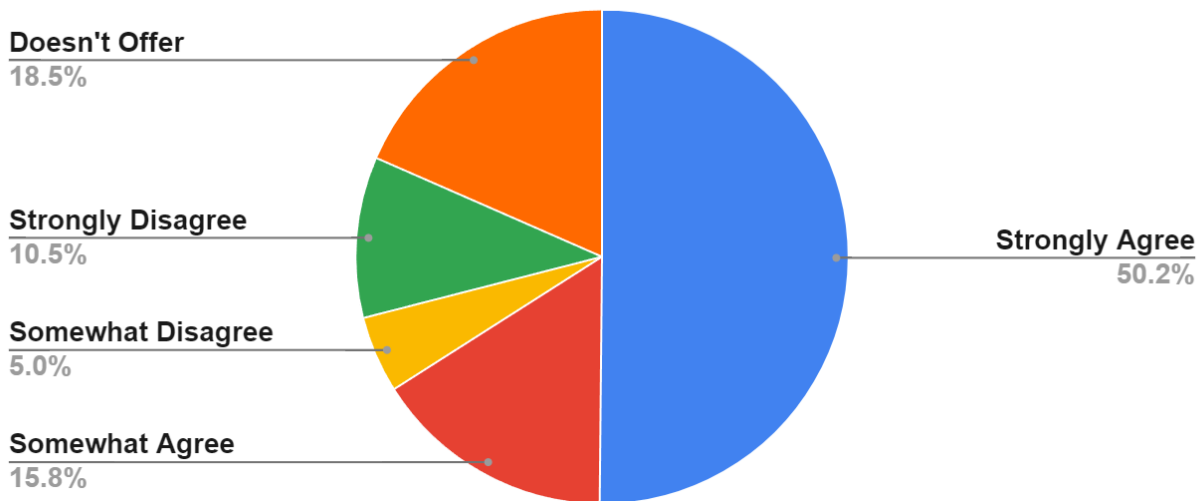
Number of responses vs. What are your main health concerns as a hairstylist working in the industry?



What are your main health concerns as a hairstylist working in the industry?

Please rate your agreement or disagreement to the following: I have seen a decrease in the amount of chemical hair straighteners and/or relaxers requested by clients.

We allowed stylists to rank their agreement in a range: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly agree, and doesn't offer chemical straightening. 50.2% of participants said they strongly agree with the statement and 18.5% said they didn't offer chemical straightening, indicating a shift towards more natural styles.

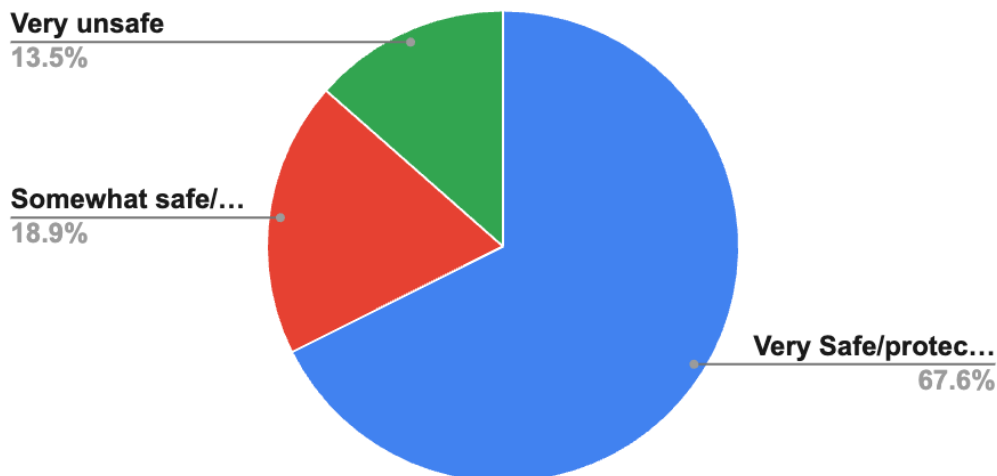


What trends are you seeing in the beauty industry and/or in requests from your clients regarding services?

Most stylists reported seeing more requests in natural styles. Many noticed an increase in requests for different types of braids as well as locs. Some mentioned that social media trends play a role in requests as well, as many clients are requesting wigs and weaves as they are trending on social media and in popular culture. Stylists with older clientele continued to see primarily requests for relaxers or silk presses.

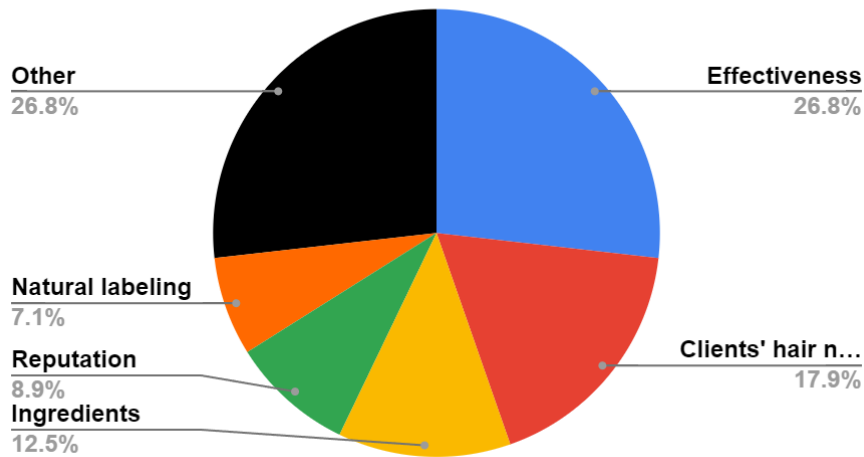
Do you feel safe around the chemical ingredients used in the products that you work with?

For this question, survey participants were given response options of: very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe. An overwhelming 67.6% of participants said they felt very safe around the chemical ingredients used in their products. Because the survey was conducted while many stylists were working on clients' hair, this statistic might be slightly skewed, as stylists could have been reluctant to say that they felt anything less than very safe around products they were actively using on clients in front of them.



What are the top reasons you choose certain products?

This question again had a list of response options as well as an open-ended "other" option. While over $\frac{2}{3}$ of the respondents said they felt very safe around the products they work with, the top reason stylists chose certain products was effectiveness. This is concerning, as the more effective a product is in the short-term, it tends to have more chemicals of concern in its ingredients which can cause harm in the long-term.



What changes do you want to see in the beauty industry to better protect salon workers like yourself?

This was an open-ended question, and there were four general themes to categorize participant responses: increased awareness of product safety, healthcare coverage, collective action, and improved regulation.

As awareness regarding chemicals of concern in cosmetics is increasing, respondents said they would like to have some sort of centralized resource or database where they could find out what products contain which chemicals, and the potential harm certain chemicals can cause. Stylists also mentioned the importance of unionizing to push for healthcare coverage, as many are independent contractors and have to pay for healthcare services out of pocket.

This is concerning considering the vulnerable position that the nature of their job places them in. Lastly, participants reported that they would like to see manufacturers being held accountable and having more regulations placed on what chemical ingredients can be used in their products.

Data Summary and Recommendations

Black Women for Wellness recommends the following actions to protect salon worker health and safety based on patterns in data collection as well as suggestions from hair stylists themselves.

Based on our survey data collected, recommendations to better protect salon workers can be divided into four general categories: legislation, education, collective action, and every day actions. Manufacturers need to be held accountable for continuing to put harmful chemical ingredients in products through legislation.

Historically, there has been a severe lack of regulation of what ingredients go into these products, and a lack of enforcement for the few regulations that exist. There needs to be federal laws in place that would hold companies accountable for toxic ingredients used in their products. In terms of education, improvements in awareness can take many forms. One is to implement a centralized database with information on chemicals of concern in Black hair products with clear and understandable language.

Additionally, many stylists expressed that there should be improved awareness and education on what is helpful and harmful for hair in beauty and cosmetology schools. One stylist also recommended some sort of government-sponsored program to teach future stylists on chemical hazards and health effects for those who cannot afford beauty school.

Collective action is another way to push for protections. Though hair salon workers are considered independent contractors, many workers we spoke with wanted some sort of union or collective bargaining unit to represent their interests. Because many do not have a traditional employment relationship with the salon owners, perhaps a worker center could help advocate on their behalf for things like health insurance, which was a change that quite a few workers mentioned to us during canvassing.

On a smaller scale, everyday actions can be taken by stylists to lower the risk of chemical exposure. General PPE such as masks, gloves, aprons, and capes for clients are recommended when performing chemical services.

Additionally, making sure there is proper ventilation in the salon can help limit fumes and smoke inhalation. A third change in this category would be to avoid booking multiple chemical treatments back-to-back or on the same day at all, if possible.

These recommendations would work to ensure the safety and wellbeing of Black salon workers affected by cosmetic chemicals of concern.

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