Natural evolutions
one hair story

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

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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black hair and beauty industry is more than simply big business; it’s multilayered, complex and touches every aspect in the lives of Black women & girls. It defines our cultural identity, contributes to our self-esteem (or lack thereof), allows for self-expression, tracks family history, provides an economic base, connects us to Black women across the globe and it has deep, deep historical roots. However, little is known about the connection between the beauty products we use and the health status of Black women, neither as consumers nor as beauty industry professionals.

Natural Evolutions: One Hair Story is a compilation of our work in an effort to provide insights into the culture, conversations and research surrounding Black women’s hair, the beauty industry, and the subsequent effect on Black women’s health.

Black hair care professionals often offer economic stability to our communities; their history is interwoven within the social justice movements and civil rights and integration efforts of African Americans in the United States as well as worldwide.
Although the beauty industry financed the civil rights movement in the South, many activists lost their jobs as a result of working on civil rights issues. Beauty professionals’ livelihoods were and continue to be supported by the Black community, creating independence and flexibility for many of them resulting in support of liberation (civil rights) causes.

Indeed, African American beauticians and beauty professionals have historically contributed to the economic health of African Americans. In 2014, Black women spent upwards of 5 billion dollars on beauty products and services, twice as much as any other ethnic group. Today, much of those financial expenditures are not staying in our communities. Many other ethnic and racial groups are cashing in on our beauty expenditures, given that most beauty supply stores are not Black owned and operated.

Sadly, as the beauty industry continues to boom, Black Women for Wellness finds that the products marketed to and used by Black women are unregulated, unlabeled and problematic. Many products in our homes and communities tend to be toxic and carcinogenic, causing hormone disorders, reproductive health challenges and contributing to the obesity rates found among Black women & girls. Black hair care professionals are overexposed, under protected, poorly informed and suffer the consequences of cumulative impacts.

From 2009 through 2014, Black Women for Wellness convened a number of focus groups, conducted interviews with key leadership including community-based organization leaders, grassroots activists, opinion makers and influencers in the African American community as well as collected surveys from consumers to begin research into the world of Black beauty. Presented in this report are the key findings as well as ideas and intentions to influence and actualize changes within the Black community as a whole. We also intend to impact the Black community’s relationship with the beauty care industry as it relates to the negative effects on the health of both the consumer and the professional.
**Major Areas of Concern:**

Irritations, ergonomic hazards, respiratory disorders, reproductive issues and cancers are major areas of concern impacting Black hair care professionals.

*Black Women for Wellness* finds that women of color, and in particular, Black women, often use cosmetic products that are more toxic (when tested) than the general population. Black women have higher mortality rates than other women, more aggressive forms of cancer and less access to treatments.

Our hair care professionals are subject to increased ergonomic risks most specifically musculoskeletal disorders (MSD). Black hair care professionals are subject to workplace exposures from hairstyles taking long periods of time to complete. For example, stylists can take upwards of eight hours to complete one customer’s hair service, with many standing and working the entire time. Many stylists use the same repetitive motions for years, whether with curling irons or braiding, with little to no consideration about the risks to their health and future.

Hair care professionals work with many chemicals that are known to cause adverse effects to the respiratory system. Respiratory problems such as asthma are a growing concern in the Black community, with an estimated 3 million African Americans currently living with asthma. Women & girls often spend hours in the beauty salon exposed to fumes and airborne chemicals with minimal ventilation, protection or safety measures. As a result, they are at greater risk for autoimmune illnesses, symptoms of asthma as well as irritation of pre-existing respiratory difficulties. A recent study by the American Journal of Epidemiology determined that the use of hair relaxers is linked to uterine fibroids in young Black women and girls, something that is estimated to affect 80% of Black women over their lifetime. Other studies have shown reproductive issues faced by hairdressers included increased risk of infertility and spontaneous abortion compared to other professions. This information becomes even more alarming when considering the fact that African American women have higher rates of miscarriages, low birth weights and infant death than any other group.
FOCUS GROUP HIGHLIGHT

Natural Evolutions: One Hair Story highlights key insights from our extensive research and shares thoughts, with the hope to bring light to the links between chemicals in Black hair care products and Black women and girl’s health.

KEY NARRATIVES:

- Consumers stated that cost, scent, advertisements and access determine purchasing decisions.

- Greener/chemical free/organic products are not easily accessible in South Los Angeles.

- Active shopping is necessary and time consuming and it is difficult to find alternative/safer products.

- Hair care professionals are both curious and concerned about the chemicals in the products they utilize regularly. Hair care professionals want to know more about the health impacts for both themselves and customers.

- “After 20 years in the beauty industry, my friends have no fingerprints, they literally can’t go to the DMV, and put their hands down and [get] fingerprints anymore.” Quote from a focus group participant on the long-term effects of being in the beauty industry.

Survey interviews were conducted with hair care professionals between 2011 and 2014. The survey examined health issues, health disparities, exposures, and the knowledge Black hair stylists hold in South Los Angeles as it relates to chemical exposure and workplace hazards.

KEY SURVEY RESULTS:

- Occupational workplace exposures include chemical, ergonomic and reproductive hazards plus respiratory irritants.

- Salon workers’ reproductive health challenges include uterine fibroids and miscarriages.

- Top health issues reported, as having been related to work, were irritation (skin, nose, and eye), fatigue/tiredness, stress, and difficulty breathing.

- Top physical injuries experienced while at work include pain in wrists, pain in fingers, cuts, loss of wrist function, loss of finger function, back pain, and leg/foot problems.
• Though many hair stylists received their education from cosmetology school, more than 50% had not received any training on the health effects of chemical hair products.

• Stylists indicated interest in learning more about healthier workplaces and meeting with other workers or owners to talk about safer salons.

NEXT STEPS

Black Women for Wellness has identified several next steps from our work with Black beauty professional community including:

1. Provide information and increase awareness of hair care professionals about the intersection of environmental and reproductive justice issues, beginning with those that reported being open to learning more about these issues.

2. Provide information about chemicals and hazards in beauty and hair products to consumers and community members beginning with those that reported a desire and eagerness to learn more.

Education and Increased Awareness:

• Currently there is limited information about ingredients, chemical composition and the health impact of products that Black hair care professionals and consumers use. Proper labeling practices will help empower stylists and consumers to make healthy and informed decisions when shopping for products to use.

• Chemical composition, health impacts and safety protocol courses are critical additions to cosmetology schools. These courses should focus on mitigating chemical exposures, ventilation issues and other safety related best practices.

• Technology to determine chemical compositions and impacts is an eagerly awaited tool for both consumers and professionals.

Policy:

• Stronger regulations and enforcement of policies is crucial to not only mitigate toxic exposure to salon workers but also consumer exposure.
Legislation that funds and implements a system to regulate and/or remove chemicals that are proven health risks should be high priority. Beauty professionals should be included in the creation of policies that reduce exposures, increase safety protocols and regulate the chemical industry manufacturing products.

**Research:**

- Additional research is needed that is community participatory, focused on product use and workplace exposures to communities of color, and that seeks solutions to the increased health risks. Currently very few studies research the impact of chemical exposure on Black women.

- Inclusion of African American/Black researchers, adequate funding and links to policy makers and administrators is critical to reverse the adverse impacts of chemical exposures from personal care and beauty products.

Our research will continue as well as our sharing of, not only the story, but also the solutions, alternatives, and evolution of the Black beauty industry. Inside the full report our readers will find the words of consumers, women & men who work in the beauty industry, the fixes created to reduce exposures, the conversations in the salons/shops, and schools pointing to the natural trend we see currently in progress and importantly our history, from our perspective, on this multilayered, complicated, complex world of Black hair.
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