

ENVIRONMENTAL & REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

The Environmental Injustice of Beauty: Health Repercussions of Chemical Hair Products For Black Women

By Ami Zota and Trina Jackson

Over the last three decades, the environmental justice movement has been highlighting the impacts of structural racism on the health and environment of communities of color. The severe environmental degradation within our communities not only permeates where we live, work, and play, but it also affects women's bodies, the first environment for all of us. Chemical exposures encountered by the fetus in the womb can have long lasting effects on the reproductive health of our children and likely play a role in the disturbing and ever increasing health conditions within the Black community including low birth weight, obesity, early puberty, and breast cancer mortality especially among young Black women. In this article, we seek to raise awareness about an emerging reproductive justice issue – the environmental injustice of beauty – by discussing social constructions of beauty, resulting coping mechanisms including chemical hair products and their public health repercussions.

The dominant culture of the U.S. idealizes the physical characteristics of White women and measures women of color against this arbitrary standard. As a result, natural, kinky hair-which is most associated with blackness-has been tied to inferiority in the United States. Even, within the African American community, there exists a stratum between those with "good hair" and "bad hair." In these terms, "good hair" is associated with being straight, smooth, long, and easy to manage. "Bad hair" is associated with being kinky, short, rough and hard to manage.

These mainstream notions of beauty and attractiveness have not only been reinforced by the media but also by our families and community social norms causing a lot of stress and self loathing in Black women. As a result, Black women have turned to the widespread use of chemically-intensive hair straighteners as a form of self-medication, a hypothesis that suggests that Black women have used and often abused chemical hair products to cope with the constant assault of White beauty standards.

Chemically relaxed hair is currently the most popular style choice for Black women. In a recent study, 80 percent of the Black women surveyed responded that they believed relaxed hair is more easily maintained than natural hair. Black women spend approximately \$50 million per year on chemical straighteners alone. Walk into any pharmacy and you'll see a deluge of harsh chemical products that promise black women "unnappy hair".

However, little attention has been given to the safety of chemicals in hair creams and lotions. Many hair products marketed to the Black community contain placenta, hormones such as estrogen, and toxic chemicals that have the ability to mimic our bodies' natural hormones. Synthetic hormones, such as hormone replacement therapy, increase breast cancer risk. Animal studies show that estrogen-mimicking chemicals cause mammary gland tumors, and affect sexual and reproductive development so even small exposures to these chemicals during critical periods (like pregnancy and early childhood) can have a large public health impact. It is difficult to know if personal care products contain dangerous chemicals because manufacturers rarely list all the ingredients. Silent Spring Institute, a nonprofit researching women's health and the environment, is currently testing African American hair products for hormonally active ingredients to advance our understanding of how hair products may increase health risks in women of color.

In the meantime, we need to educate ourselves and our communities and push for healthier, less toxic hair products. More importantly, we must avoid blame, and recognize that similar to other forms of substance abuse, the widespread use of hair straighteners is a coping mechanism to internalized racism and systemic oppression. Change must occur both on the personal and community level.

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