

# HISTORIC INAUGURAL CROWN CONFERENCE HELD IN NEW JERSEY – CAN PUBLIC POLICY END HAIR DISCRIMINATION?

For Immediate Release



Image: Inaugural CROWN Conference in New Jersey with distinguished panelists. Pictured from left to right: Hon. Sandra Cunningham, Senator and NJ CROWN Bill sponsor, Angela McKnight, Assemblywoman and NJ CROWN bill sponsor, Dr. Bernice B. Rumala, CROWN Campaign Co-founder, Shemekka Ebony Coleman, CROWN Campaign Co-founder, and Karen Thompson, ACLU-NJ, Senior Attorney

## 2020 CROWN CONFERENCE - RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Report by CROWN Campaign

The inaugural CROWN conference, a first of its kind, was held in New Jersey and hosted by Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. Participants came from as far as Washington DC to engage on the important topic of policy and discrimination. The CROWN conference was envisioned and moderated by Dr. Patricia O'Brien Richardson, Associate Professor at Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, researcher, and founder for Curls on the Move (an initiative to address self-esteem in young girls, including hair discrimination). The session opening included welcome remarks from Senator Cory Booker. The team of distinguished panelists included: Hon. Sandra Cunningham, Senator and NJ CROWN Bill sponsor, Angela McKnight, Assemblywoman and NJ CROWN bill sponsor, Dr. Bernice B. Rumala, CROWN Campaign Co-founder, Shemekka Ebony Coleman, CROWN Campaign Co-founder, and Karen Thompson, ACLU-NJ, Senior Attorney.

Attendees shared their experiences with hair discrimination within schools, the workplace and other settings, and, received tools (<http://www.crowncampaign.com/resources.html>) for action and advocacy. Many expressed that this is the first time they have participated in a conference like this and they left feeling empowered by a topic that has impacted them personally as well as the social fabric of many communities. The audience included policy students, medical students, faculty, community members, administration, policy makers and much more.

# CROWN CONFERENCE CONTINUED

One of the experiences shared by attendees included a mother (Oluwatoyin Pyne) and daughter who came all the way from Washington DC to the conference for support because her child had been stopped from going to school due to her hair. She highlighted the stressors and impact that this has had on her and her child's health and well-being. She is now currently homeschooling her child and in search of options for her daughter who has now been isolated from an education and social network of friends. This case is not unique as there are rising cases across the nation and globe of racism, hair discrimination based on race, that are impacting educational attainment, ability to obtain employment, upward mobility in the workplace and opportunities. Discrimination has severe impacts on health and well-being of individuals and communities.

Dr. Bernice B. Rumala and Shemekka Ebony Coleman, co-founders of the CROWN Campaign ([www.crowncampaign.com](http://www.crowncampaign.com)) emphasized the importance of grassroots advocacy on every level to change systems locally, nationally and globally. They further emphasized the important voice that people with lived experience of inequities have towards policy change, advocacy, and systems transformation. The CROWN Campaign, a partner of WE in the World (Well Being and Equity in the World) consists of a growing national and global interdisciplinary team of experts in research, health equity, policy, social justice, community engagement, academia, legal and the creative arts who have had lived experiences of these injustices to address discrimination towards building a culture of health, well-being, and equity. One of the CROWN Campaign research experts and Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Research Scholar, Dr. Manka Nkimbeng, previously mentions as part of community educational efforts that "discrimination of all forms such as hair discrimination has impacts on health". Similarly, Ms. Crystal Monique Richardson, Esq, legal expert on the CROWN campaign team continues to advocate for the need for further legal protections based on the rising cases. Mr. JB Afon Manin, Esq. provides a legal lens on men and hair discrimination as part of the CROWN Campaign team and highlights the many injustices that have occurred toward men in his legal work.

"What happens with legislation is - if you don't talk about it or do something about it, it dies".-  
Representative Sandra Cunningham

Mother and Daughter share their experiences with hair discrimination when her daughter was expelled from school due to her loc extensions.  
(left) Oluwatoyin Pyne



Photo Credit: Michael Stewart-Isaacs, MOSAYK LLC

Dr. Bernice B. Rumala, Co-Founder of the Crown Campaign mentioned to participants of the CROWN conference, "We need to have the boldness to challenge existing policy, in schools and the workplace. If policy is phrased in a discriminatory way, why normalize it? We need to find ways to invite ourselves to the table if the seats are not there".

Shemekka Ebony Coleman further explained that "it's important that we all have that moment when we say, I love myself no matter what. People treat you how you give them permission. We have to stop giving others permission to tell us how they like our hair".

New Jersey Representative Sandra Cunningham when asked about getting the CROWN act to the federal level says that "What happens with legislation is - if you don't talk about it or do something about it, it dies". Therefore, advocacy is important.

Assemblywoman Angela McKnight also emphasized the importance of advocacy noting that it takes policy, advocacy and people to move this forward and make a change. She emphasized that people need to use their voices to educate their peers, colleagues, and communities to end discrimination.

ACLU senior attorney Karen Thompson highlighted "that policy is not enough, it takes advocates, activists and everyday people to educate others including employers and their communities".

Dr. Bernice B. Rumala, Co-Founder of the CROWN Campaign, has traveled to more than thirty countries globally and said to the attendees "know that everything you are doing here, today in this room, and in New Jersey is making an impact nationally and globally. The whole world is taking cues based on what is going on here"

Dr. Patricia O'Brien Richardson who has published a number of studies on hair discrimination including research on hair harassment and impacts on physical activity emphasized at the convening of the conference that "it is difficult to imagine that the texture of hair could bar someone from school, employment, or a promotion, yet every week there are cases of this common practice on the news". This historic inaugural CROWN Conference unpacked hair discrimination through policy, education, health, and advocacy.

The CROWN conference advocates and supports for the passing of the CROWN act nationally. The CROWN act was recently passed in New Jersey on December 19th, 2019. The conference was used as a forum to provide interdisciplinary perspectives on policy, health, education, advocacy, and the law. One attendee when asked what she is walking away with, said "I am walking away with the fact that my voice matters, I will no longer stay silent on discriminatory policies". Public policy must be coupled with advocacy and changes in practice-based implementation to advance systems transformation and build a culture of health and equity from theory to practice.

CROWN Campaign is a self-funded initiative. Sponsorships and seed funding are needed to advance the important work. You may assist CROWN campaign in this labor of love here:  
<http://www.crowncampaign.com/donate.html>