
BILL NO: Senate Bill 531
TITLE: Discrimination – Definition of Race – Hair Texture and Hairstyles
COMMITTEE: Judicial Proceedings
HEARING DATE: February 18, 2020
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

Senate Bill 531 seeks to address employment discrimination based on racist attitudes towards hairstyles and hair textures traditionally worn within the Black community. Because the Women's Law Center of Maryland fully supports bodily autonomy, including the ability to wear hairstyles with cultural or historical significance, and recognizing the continued existence of discriminatory practices, specifically against Black women who choose to wear these hairstyles, the WLC believes this legislation is necessary.

While our current law already prohibits employers from discriminating or engaging in adverse employment practices based on an employee's race, the fact remains that hair discrimination exists and has a detrimental effect on employees' abilities to advance, grow, and connect, in the workplace¹. Policies and practices that have a negative impact are not based on any legitimate business or safety rationale, but are rooted in bias and negative stereotypes. Hair discrimination has a measurable impact on Black women – both in terms of societal acceptance and also in terms of their economic security.

By changing the definition of race within Title 20 of the State Government article to include “traits historically associated with race, including hair texture, afro hairstyles, and protective hairstyles” workers across the state will gain increased protection from racist and biased policies and practices within the scope of their employment. New York, New Jersey, and California have already passed similar legislation and the WLC believes Maryland should join the growing list of states prohibiting these practices.

Therefore, the Women's Law Center of Maryland, Inc. urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 531.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, membership organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change. The Women's Law Center operates two hotlines, Protection Order Advocacy and Representation Projects in Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Carroll County and the Multi-Ethnic Domestic Violence Project.

¹ The Crown Research Study, 2019, <https://www.thecrownact.com/research>, last visited 2/15/2020