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SHIFT INSIGHT

Afro-hair discrimination: A blind spot for US and UK companies

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SHIFT SUSTAINABILITY

Executive summary

Background to the research

In 2023, during the final round of interviews for a dining reservations supervisor at the prestigious London establishment, The Ritz, a Black applicant was sent the company's employee grooming policy, which stated that 'unusual hairstyles' such as 'spiky hair, Afro style' were not allowed. The resulting publicity put Afro-hair discrimination in the spotlight as never before in the UK.

The issue has had more prominence in the US over recent years, with some states having implemented the CROWN Act, a state law that prohibits discrimination based on hair style and hair texture.

This survey was developed as a collaboration between Shift Insight and World Afro Day, seeking to uncover and quantify employer attitudes towards Afro-textured and Afrocentric hairstyles in the workplace both in the UK and US.

Methodology

Working collaboratively with World Afro Day and Dr Patti O'Brien-Richardson of Rutgers University, we developed a survey with approximately 25 questions that was distributed online. The survey received 1,000 responses, with 500 from the UK and 500 from the US.

Respondents were HR decision-makers and other key decision-makers in the workplace, focusing on those who have hiring and line management responsibilities or responsibility for HR policies. Respondents were taken from a range of regions and states and weighted to reflect population distribution in the UK and US. Respondents were given full confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses.

The survey was live in July to August 2023.

Findings

We found that, while few companies have explicit policies banning Afrocentric hairstyles, hair discrimination is still evident in the workplace in 2023. While two-thirds of respondents indicated they were familiar with the idea of Afro-textured hair discrimination in the workplace (67% UK, 65% US), we found evidence that certain Afrocentric hairstyles were considered less acceptable than more Eurocentric styles. We conclude that a generic diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policy is insufficient to prevent Afro-hair discrimination at work. Measures may need to be specific and backed by training at all levels.

Afrocentric: Afrocentric hairstyles, e.g. Afros, Bantus, braids, locs, twists, head coverings. Hairstyles rooted in a more African appearance and heritage as opposed to Western or European 'Eurocentric'.

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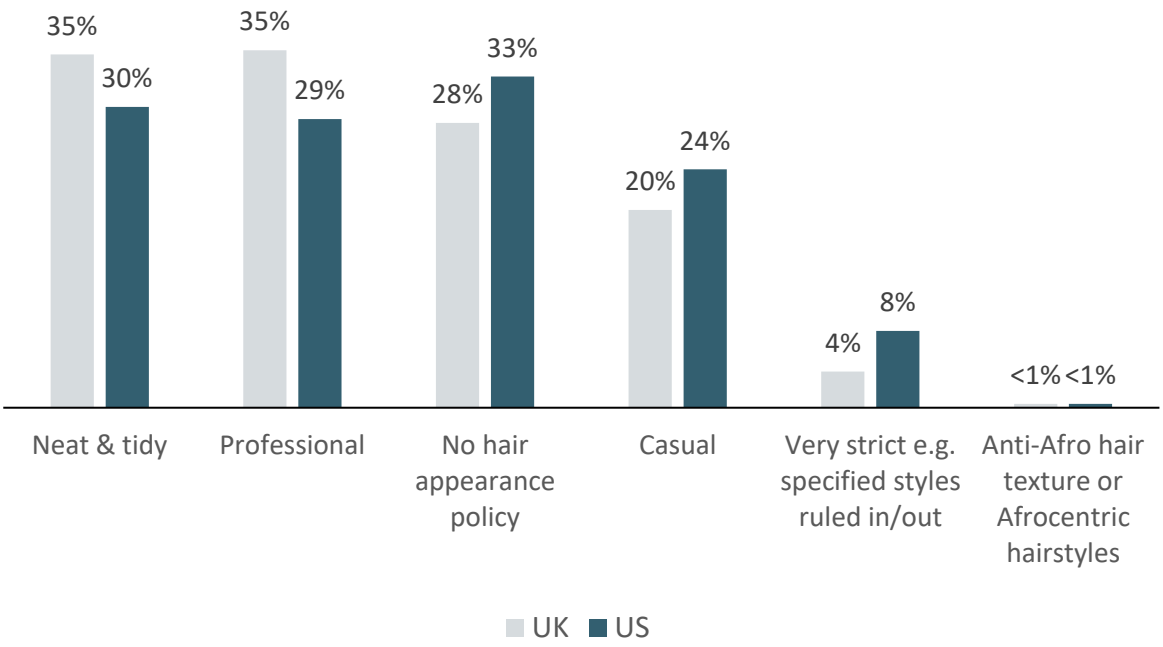
Afro-textured hairstyles in the workplace

Hair appearance policies in the workplace were not common

Only 6% of respondents indicated their workplace having a strict hair appearance policy

We asked respondents whether their company had a hair appearance policy, to which 6% (combining US and UK), indicated 'very strict hair appearance policies', either with 'specific styles ruled in or out' or policies specifically relating to 'Anti-Afro hair texture or Afrocentric hairstyles'. A third (33%) reported having no hair appearance policy at all.

Q: Does your company have a hair appearance policy?
Base n = 1,000



Smaller companies were more likely not to have any policies in this area

Companies with 'No hair appearance policy' were significantly more likely to be smaller, with 0-9 employees (42%), and those reported as 'Very strict' were significantly more likely to be larger, with 50-249 employees (7%). Those working in 'Financial and insurance activities' were significantly more likely to indicate their company had a policy that was 'Professional' (65%) or 'Very strict e.g. specified styles ruled in/out' (35%).

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‘Eurocentric’ hairstyles were more likely to be considered acceptable in the workplace

To test the extent to which Afrocentric hairstyles were deemed acceptable in the workplace, we showed photos of various hairstyles to respondents and asked them: *“In your opinion, to what extent would the following hairstyles be considered appropriate in your workplace?”.* The options enabled them to say whether they felt the hairstyles would be considered appropriate for all employees or just for those in some specific roles.

The table on the following page shows the proportion of respondents in each country who felt each hairstyle would be considered acceptable for all employees in their workplace.

Eurocentric styles had higher rates of acceptance for all

Looking at the styles considered ‘appropriate for all employees’, the traditionally Eurocentric rather than Afrocentric were more likely to be seen as ‘acceptable’ across the UK and US. Notably, these are the styles in which Afro-textured hair was the least visible and styled. Hairstyles with a lower acceptance rate for all respondents were those in which Afro hair was more visible and styled.

Styles with higher acceptance rates:	Styles with lower acceptance rates:
Straight hair (UK 83%, US 86%)	Male Afro (UK 65%, US 65%)
Male fades (UK 80%, US 83%)	Female braids (UK 62%, US 66%)
Ponytail braids (UK 79%, US 81%)	Male locs (UK 65%, US 66%)
Weaves/wigs (UK 76%, US 81%)	Cornrows (UK 64%, US 67%).

It appears that, while in many companies there may not be set standards in terms of a formal policy, potentially discriminatory judgements of the acceptability of Afrocentric hair styles are fairly common in both UK and US organisations.

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Proportion of US and UK respondents who felt each hairstyle would be considered acceptable for all employees

Straight hair (short)

UK: 83%
US: 86%

Fade (male)

UK: 80%
US: 83%

Braids (ponytail style)

UK: 79%
US: 81%

Straight weaves/wigs (short)

UK: 76%
US: 81%

Straight weaves/wigs (long)

UK: 76%
US: 81%

Fade (female)

UK:76%
US: 80%

Braids (other)

UK: 70%
US: 72%

Locs (female)

UK: 68%
US: 74%

Cornrows (female)

UK: 65%
US: 74%

Afro (female)

UK: 69%
US: 69%

Bantu Knots

UK: 65%
US: 71%

Head coverings

UK: 68%
US: 64%

Cornrows (male)

UK: 64%
US: 67%

Locs (male)

UK: 65%
US: 66%

Afro (male)

UK: 65%
US: 65%

Braids (buns)

UK: 62%
US: 66%

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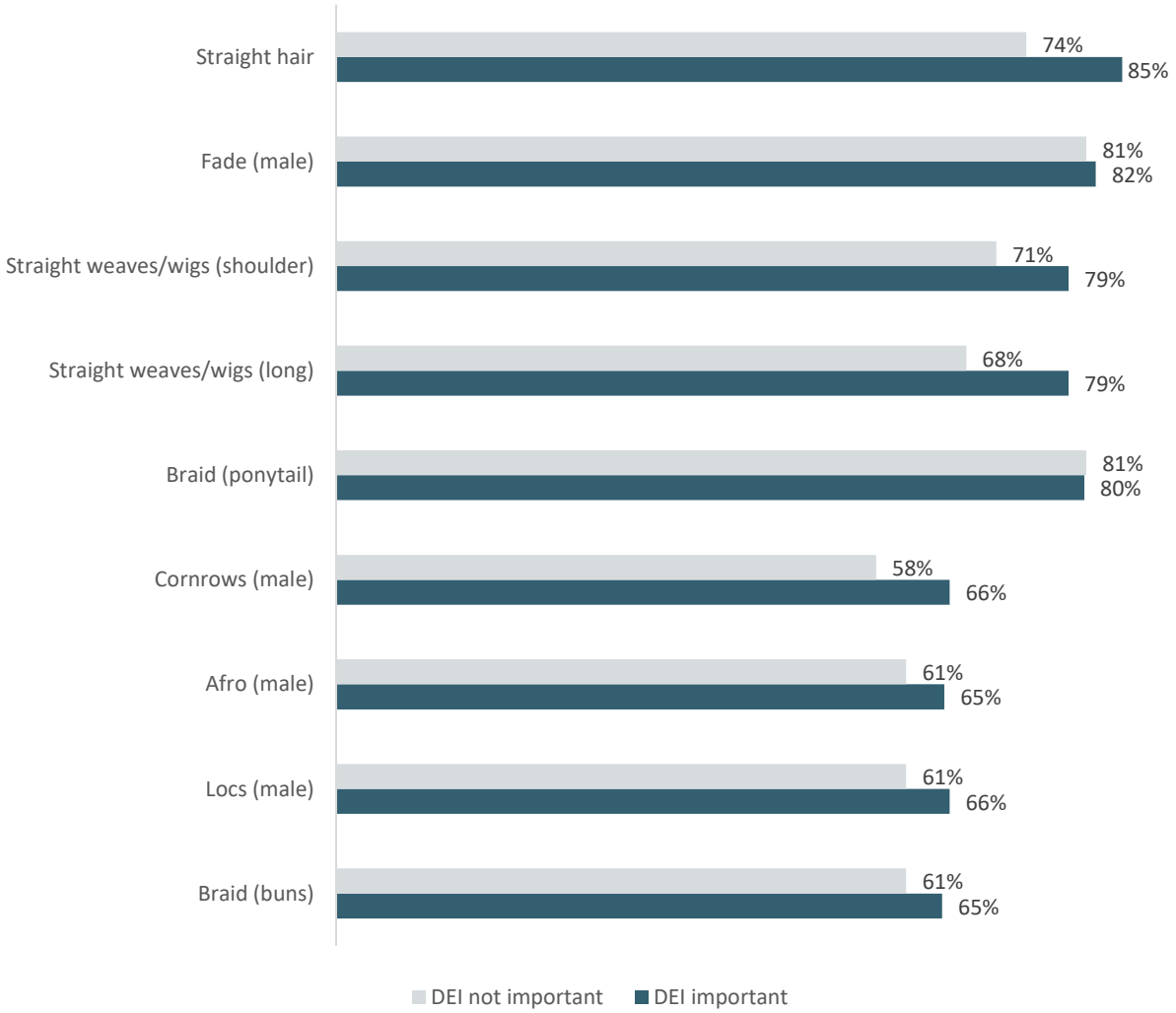
Question wording: Q4*: In your opinion, to what extent would the following hairstyles be considered appropriate in your workplace?* Base n = 1000

This was the case even for companies with a declared commitment to DEI

While there were some small differences, even those who reported that DEI was important to their company revealed similar biases in terms of the acceptability of Afrocentric versus Eurocentric styles.

Hairstyles 'considered appropriate for all employees' by importance of DEI to company (first 9 styles by acceptance rate)
Base n = 1,000



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Understanding Afro-hair discrimination

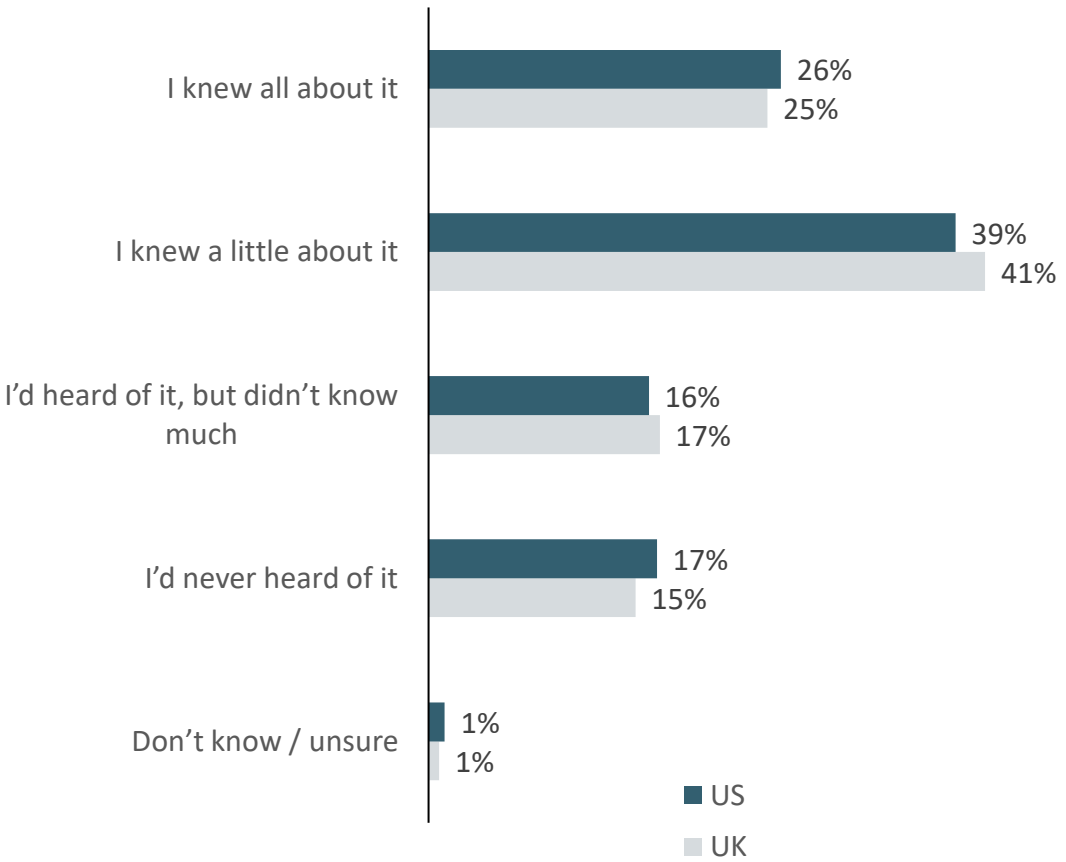
Most reported some prior familiarity with issues of Afro-hair discrimination

Around a quarter of the sample in both the US (25%) and UK (26%) claimed to be well informed on the idea of Afro-textured hair discrimination in the workplace

There were some key differences by role and type of organisation, specifically:

- Owners / Chief Executives / Managing Directors were more often confident in their knowledge of Afro-textured hair discrimination and equality legislation than those who described themselves as managers or supervisors.
- Those from larger organisations were more likely to say they knew all about Afro-textured hair discrimination than those in smaller companies.

Q: Before taking this survey, how familiar would you say you were with the idea of Afro-textured hair discrimination in the workplace?
Base n = 1,000



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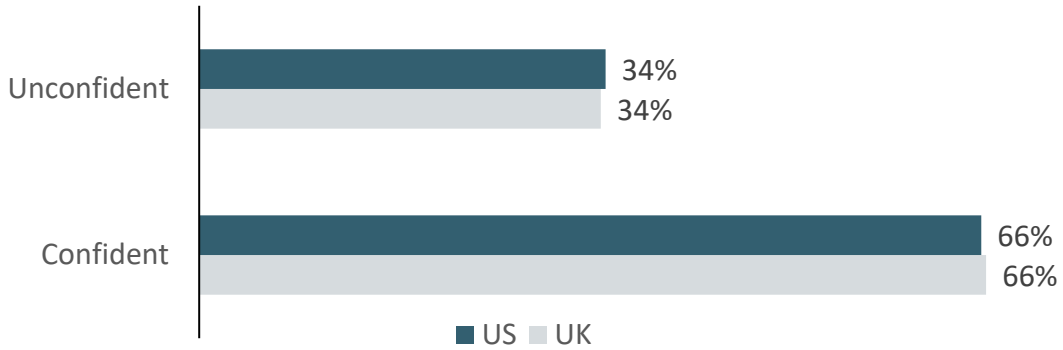
Confidence in understanding of the issue was quite high

Two-thirds of respondents declared themselves 'confident' in their understanding of equality legislation relating to Afro-textured hair

Q: How confident are you in your understanding of how equality legislation (including the CROWN Act) applies to Afro-textured hair and Afrocentric hairstyles in your state/country? Base n = 1,000



Those in more senior roles were more confident

Those whose role included 'Senior management team' were significantly more likely to be confident in understanding equality legislation (73%) compared to those who indicated that they were managers and supervisors.

Those based in California and London were more confident

Respondents based in California were more likely to be confident in their understanding of quality legislation (84%) than those in other states, perhaps due to it being the first to pass the CROWN Act. In the UK, those based in London were significantly more likely to be 'Confident' (82%) than those based in other regions.

Company size was also a factor

Those in smaller companies of 0-49 employees were more likely to be unconfident (49%), whereas those in larger companies (50-250+ employees) were more likely to be confident (72%).

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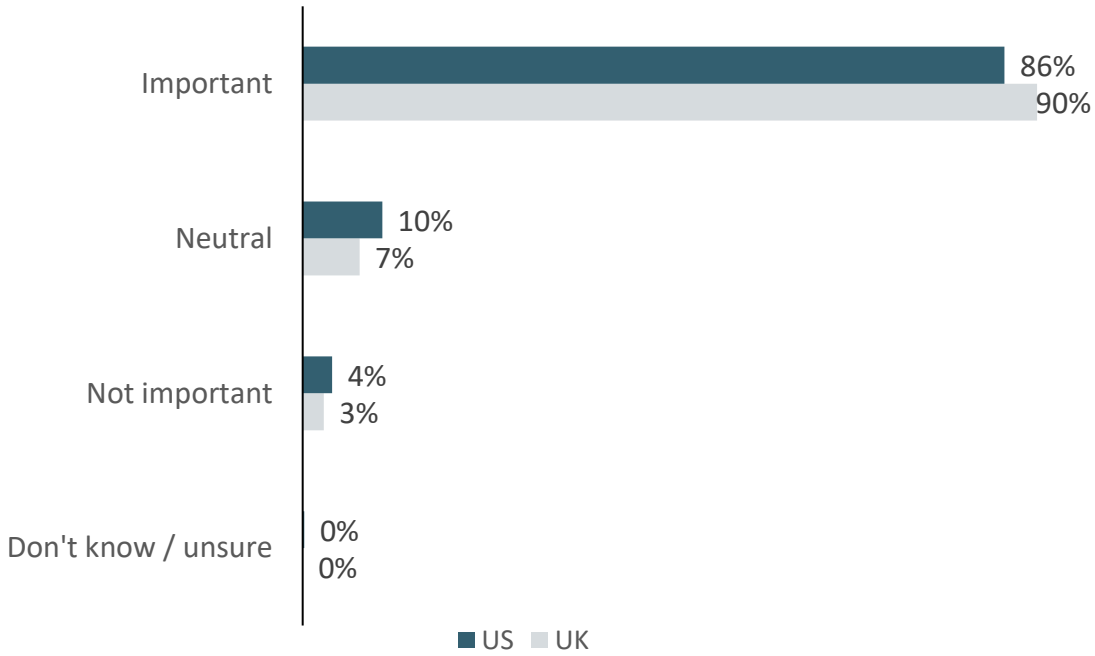
Many also indicated that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) was important to their workplace

The vast majority indicated that DEI was important

Only 4% of US respondents and 3% of UK respondents indicated that DEI was not important in their workplace.

Q: How important is diversity, equity and inclusion in your company or workplace?
Base n = 1,000



The extent to which DEI was seen as important to companies varied by role

Respondents in the most senior positions surveyed ('Owner / Chief Executive / Managing Director') were significantly less likely than other roles to indicate that DEI was important to their company (combined US & UK: Managing Directors 83%; Senior Management team 92%; Human Resources specialist 90%).

Smaller companies appear less likely to see DEI as important than larger companies

Respondents from companies with 0-49 employees were significantly more likely to think that DEI was seen as 'Not important' (7%) or 'Neutral' (12%), whereas those from companies with 50-250+ employees were more likely to think DEI was seen as 'Important' (91%).

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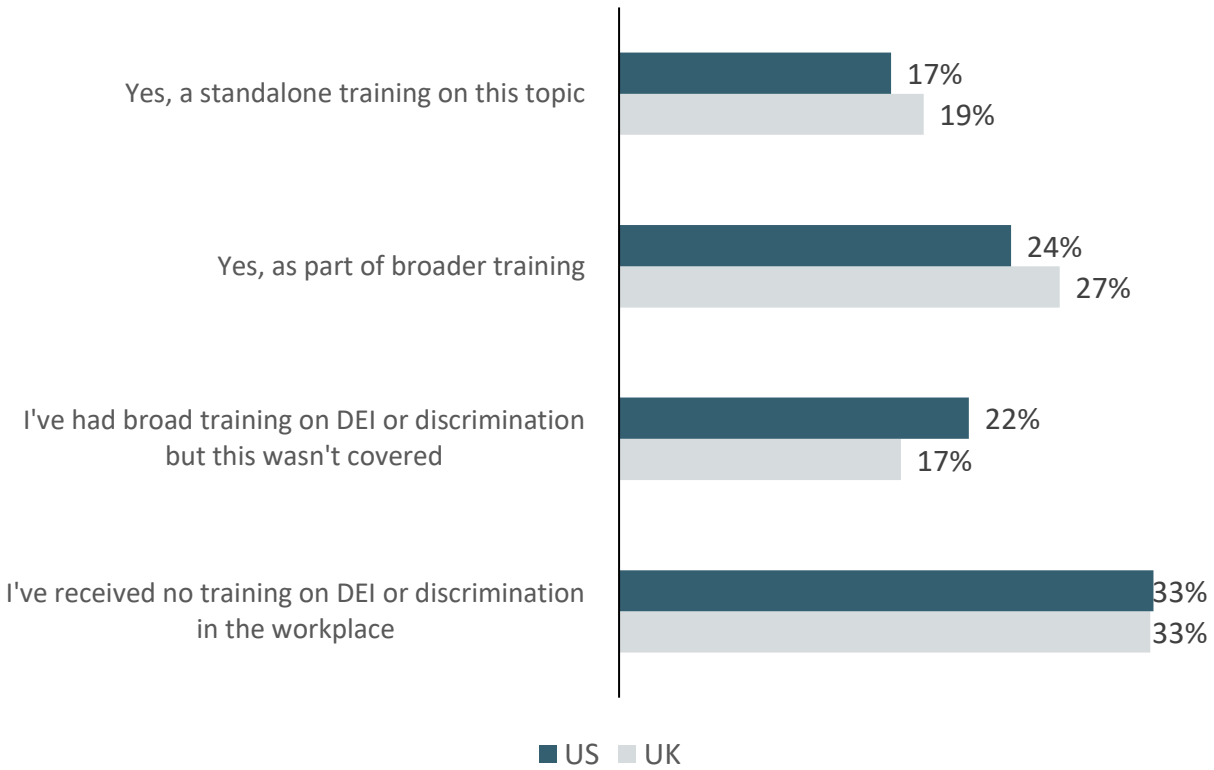
However, standalone training on this topic was not common

Around half of respondents had either not received any DEI training or had received DEI training without reference to Afro-textured hair discrimination

Under a fifth had accessed a specific training as shown below, with more indicating that their more general DEI training had included content on this topic. Respondents working within companies of 0-49 employees were significantly more likely to indicate that they had received 'No training on DEI or discrimination in the workplace' (UK 59%, US 54%).

Q: Have you had any training on how the law relates to Afro-textured hair discrimination? Base n = 1,000



Often even those in DEI roles were not specifically trained

In the UK and US, around half of those in DEI-specialist roles selected 'I've had broad training on DEI or discrimination but this wasn't covered' (UK 50%, US 55%), indicating a training gap for those in these very important roles.

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Using a real-life example revealed gaps in understanding

We presented respondents with a case study, based on a real-life situation, in which a woman was denied the opportunity to pass her probation despite performing well in her role due to the way she wore her hair.

Case study, question 1: *A Black professional woman was working, where she was the only black woman in a company of approximately 300 staff. She wore her hair Afro-textured hair out, roughly shoulder length and it was voluminous. She was performing well in her role and her colleagues expected her to pass her probation period. However, she did not pass and no one understood this decision. During her final days, she wore a blow-dried straight hairstyle and her supervisor remarked: 'It's a shame that you didn't wear your hair like this earlier, you probably could have stayed here.' In your view, does it seem that her employer was acting in a way which was...?*

Case study, question 2: *The case study previously was based on a real incident. Do you feel something like this could happen in your workplace?*

There is confusion around where Afro-hair discrimination sits legally

Around a third of those surveyed did not see this example of Afro-hair discrimination as a legal matter, indicating the need for educating decision-makers in this topic to maintain the rights of those affected.

Responses Base n = 1,000	UK	US	Combined
Discriminatory and against the law	64%	62%	63%
Discriminatory but not against the law	18%	20%	19%
Poor practice but not discriminatory	11%	7%	9%
Reasonable but clumsy	5%	8%	6%
Don’t know / unsure	2%	3%	2%
Other	<1%	<1%	<1%

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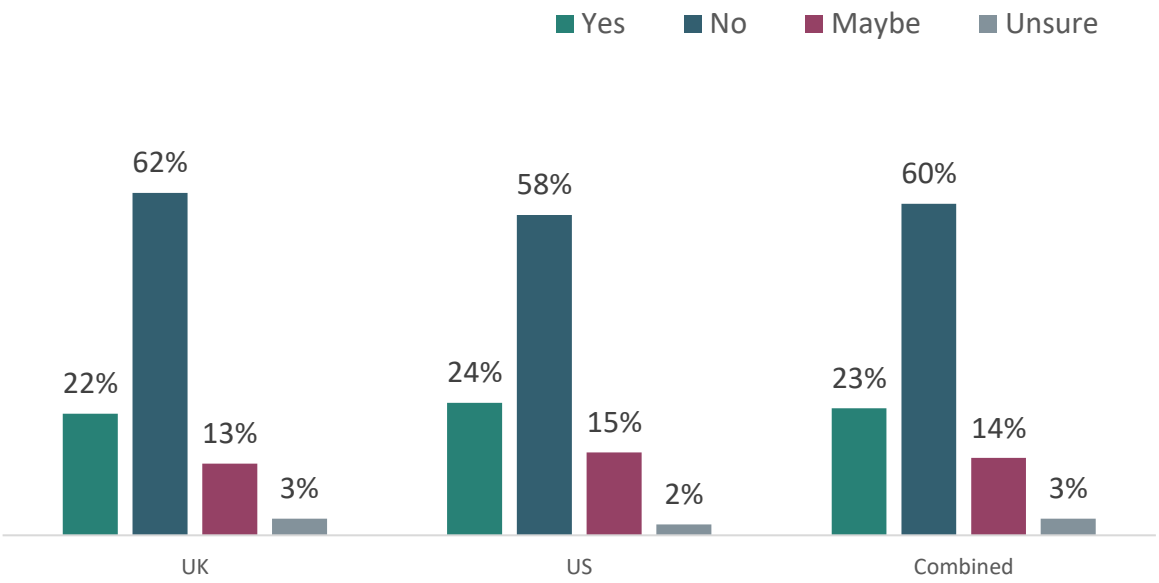
Many respondents could see this situation happening at their work

Only 60% of respondents felt that this example of discrimination could not occur in their workplace

More than one in five respondents felt that this real-life instance of discrimination could happen where they work.

Q: The case study previously was based on a real incident. Do you feel something like this could happen in your workplace?
Base n = 1,000



This was also the case in CROWN Act states

No statistically significant differences were found between respondents based in US states that had passed the CROWN Act and those that hadn't. It may be that this is because the CROWN Act is still relatively new, meaning there has not been adequate time for companies to become acquainted with the way in which it operates, so employees still feel the case study is possible in their state.

In fact, those based in California – the first state to introduce the CROWN Act – were significantly more likely to say the case study could happen in their workplace (39%), than those in other states (19%). One explanation could be that knowing more about hair discrimination through having the CROWN Act in law may raise sensitivity to these issues.

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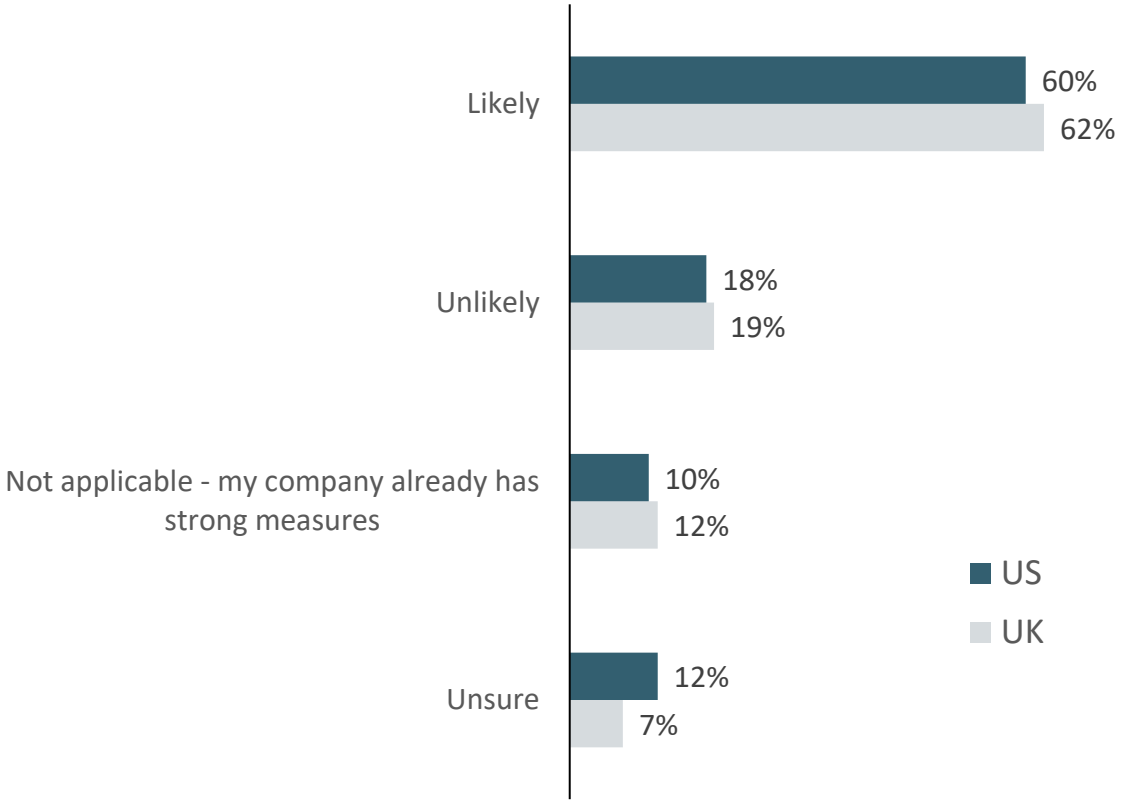
Around two-thirds of respondents thought that their companies would respond with measures to stop Afro-hair discrimination

US and UK companies appear to have similar expectations on the likelihood of their company to introduce measures to end Afro-hair discrimination

60% of US and 62% of UK respondents felt that the introduction of such measures was likely, as shown below. This was more likely in larger companies than smaller ones.

Q: How likely is your company to introduce measures to end Afro-hair discrimination?
Base n = 1000



Managing Directors were more likely to feel that change was not required

UK and US Managing Directors were significantly more likely than others to indicate that no action was required as their company already had strong measures in place (UK 19%, US 22%). Meanwhile, Managing Directors were also significantly more likely to indicate 'I've received no training on DEI or discrimination in the workplace' (combined 40%: UK 36%, US 45%) than other roles. Taken together, these results may indicate that, while they are confident in their teams' measures, senior leaders may not have had adequate training themselves to evaluate their adequacy.

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The research presented here shows that, although many organisations do not have official policies, Afro-hair discrimination is still likely to be present within UK and US companies. This looks to be true even of those organisations who make DEI a priority and those who work in the CROWN Act states in the US.

In particular, we see a picture of organisations finding Afrocentric hairstyles inappropriate for some positions, effectively creating a hierarchy of styles, with those that are most Eurocentric felt to be most acceptable.

Our study also indicates that, while individuals may have quite a high level of confidence in their understanding of the implications of Afro-hair discrimination, there are gaps in their understanding of it as an issue. The findings presented here may have powerful real-life implications for the individuals concerned, as this lack of understanding may result in situations in which people are unable to fulfil their potential in the workplace or, worse still, may lose their jobs.

Just over half (52%) of respondents indicated having no training on how the law relates to Afro-textured hair discrimination. Our work here puts a clear case for this to change.

Though legislation is a positive tool, the survey findings indicate it may not be enough by itself to avoid acts of Afro-hair discrimination – nor is it enough to have a general DEI policy or generic DEI training. Our findings suggest that to adequately address Afro-textured hair discrimination, both need to be specific and backed up with training at all company levels.

Specific training relating to Afro-textured hair discrimination, backed up by strong company policies, may be a better route for companies to eradicate discrimination on the basis of Afro-hair style and texture.

About the research:

This research was developed as a collaboration between World Afro Day and Shift Insight. This report was authored by Jessica Taylor and Jane Powell at Shift Insight, with collaboration from Michelle De Leon, CEO of World Afro Day, and Dr Patti O'Brien-Richardson of Rutgers University..

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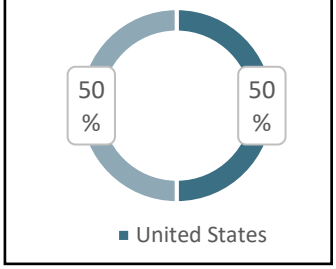
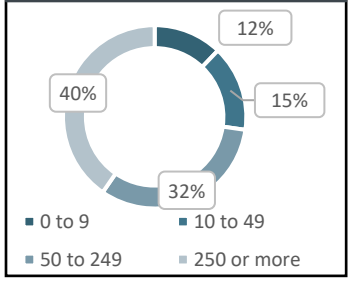
Country of residence

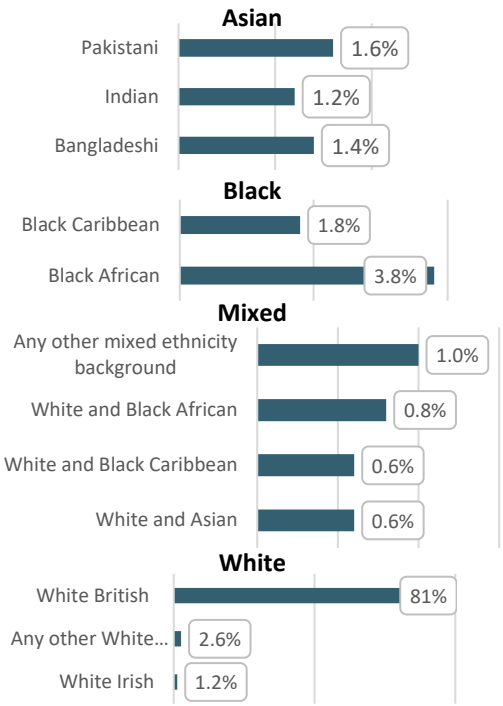


Organisation size by employee numbers



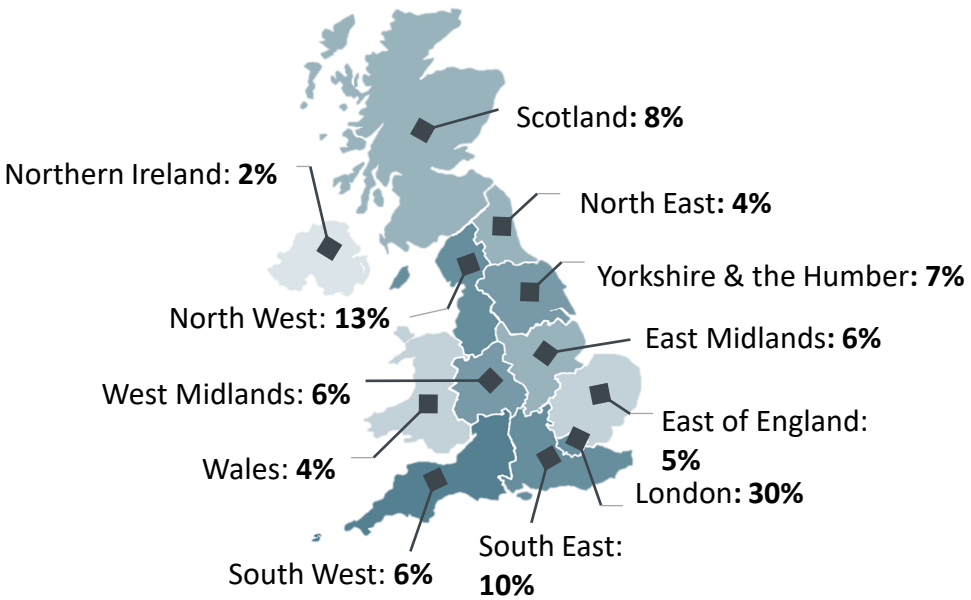
Job role

Ethnicity (UK)



Excludes ethnic groups that make up **<0.5%** of the sample.

Region (UK)



Base n: 1000

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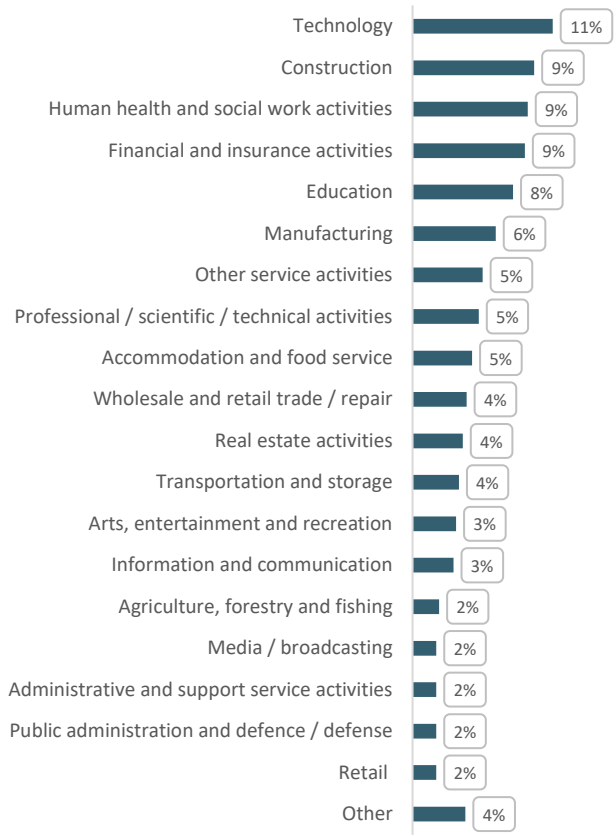
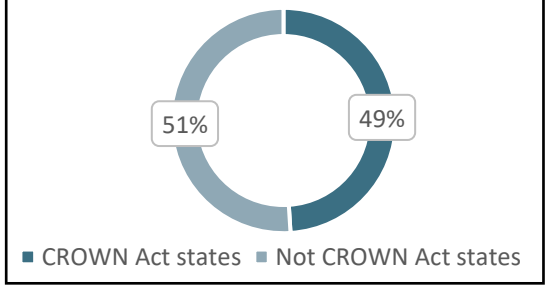
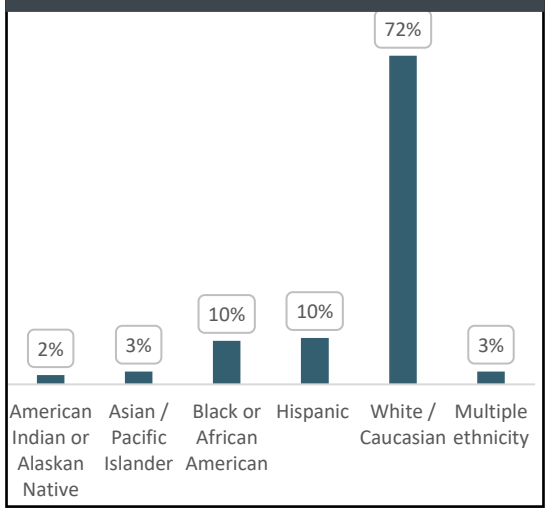
Main activity of organisation (US and UK)



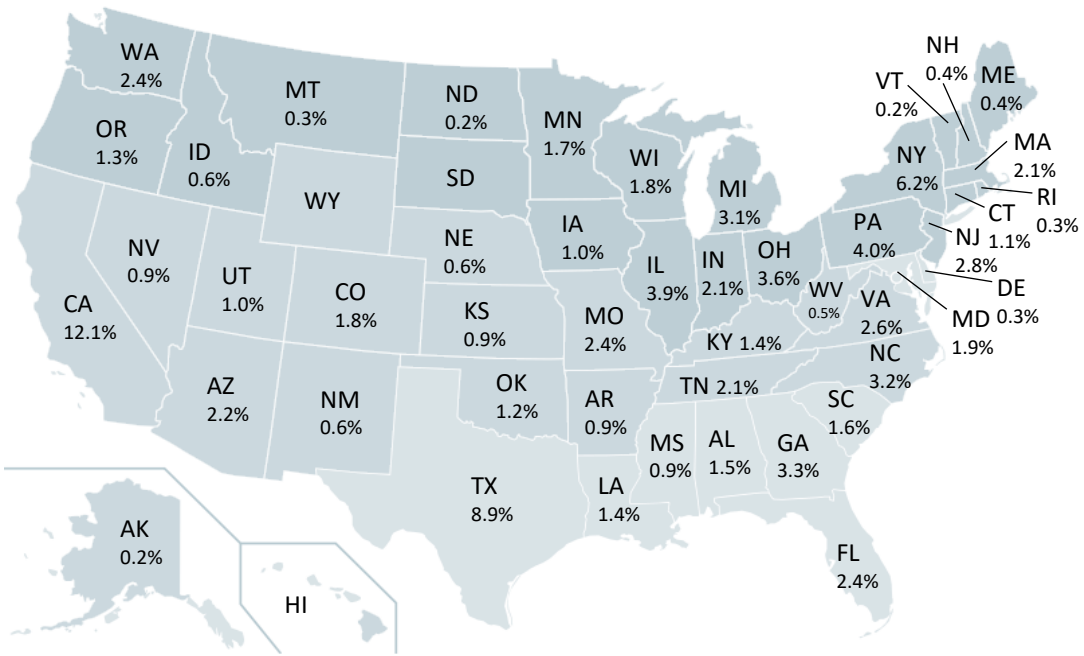
US state of residence based on the CROWN Act



Ethnicity (US)



State of residence (US)



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Base n: 1,000. Activities that made up less than 2% of respondents were excluded from 'Main activity of organisation' chart. 'Ethnicity (US)' excludes respondents who responded 'Other: please specify'. States with no listed percentage did not have any respondents.