

“It’s 2024, and I still don’t feel safe in the hair salons with my curly hair”

Black hair salons are often portrayed as a natural hair haven, caring and protecting your curls and coils. But I learnt the harsh truth that it’s not as lovely as it seems.

My first salon visit in 7 years. I was so ready to receive all the luxury and relaxing treatments to have my hair looking its absolute best; everything a salon should provide! But unfortunately, it’ll be my last visit. It was the appointment that would give me my first ever silk press. You know, the glossy flat ironed hair that natural hair girls get? I thought I could have it too, but I was sorely mistaken.

Naturally, I put my full trust in these professionals, assuming they know what they’re doing. Considering it was a Black hair salon, I had no initial fears of them misunderstanding my coils. After all, as ‘standard’ down the road high-street hair salons do not cater to women with my hair texture, these were the only hairdressers trained to handle my hair.

The quick moisture treatment and blow-dry they did for me (an uncomfortable experience as I had heated clips digging into my neck), followed by the big daunting steaming hot titanium flat iron that went to press my curls away (keeping in mind my hair has never known a heat like this before), was all seen as part of the process. That was until the stylist began to assert micro aggressive comments about my hair texture, saying it was hard, coarse and rough, overemphasising how it’s completely different to my sisters’ fine, flouncy and soft hair. “I don’t know where she got her hair from!” she says to my Mum sitting down waiting (and now dreading) her turn. It was made clear that my hair was seen as unmanageable, even in a salon dedicated to afro hair.

As it was ‘silk press season’ (in other words due to the air being less humid in winter, straight hair is easier to maintain) the salon was quite busy, my hairdresser was flying across the room attending different customers (the fact she wasn’t even focused properly should have triggered some red flags) meaning my hair was straightened very quickly. This was evident at one look of my hair: hardly styled, limp and dull. As if this wasn’t bad enough, it was weeks later when I discovered the full extent of the damage. The biggest nightmare for most women with natural hair, had become a reality, I had serious heat damage. Large lifeless curls at the bottom of my hair refusing to spring back into their original form. I’d spray, drench and scrunch it, but it was no use. After years of being cautious and careful with heat, the pain was immense. I sat there and thought to myself, “I just paid £70 to damage my hair”.

From a young age I was always told that relaxing my hair made it easier to manage. I was conditioned to believe the moment I saw natural fresh coils at the roots of my hair, it meant that it was ‘due’ for a relaxer. That is, to do an irreversible procedure that chemically straightens strands, making it weaker and more prone to breakage. I was more disappointed rather than shocked at the salon’s treatment of my hair. Thanks to society’s obsession with sleek straight hair, I already had the impression that 4C hair, the tightest type of curls to exist, was a struggle to work with. I was used to stylists touching my hair and sighing loudly

whilst they aggressively combed it, wishing it wasn't as thick and tiring for them to do. It was especially hard for me to form a healthy relationship with my hair, as it was clearly a chore for other people to work with.

[Relaxing hair](#) is the process of using chemicals to break disulphide bonds within hair strands, altering the curl pattern. These bonds are what creates curls and hair texture, meaning that once bonds are broken, hair loses its natural formation. Breaking these bonds leaves the hair in a very vulnerable state as disulphide bonds are largely responsible for the strength of hair. Not only this, but due to the abrasive chemicals found in these products, overuse of relaxers can cause long term health implications such as irritated scalp, alopecia [and in extreme cases, cancer](#). Despite the detriments associated with relaxers, especially with improper usage, it was praised by Black women and seen as necessity to get rid of curls. For years early publications such as Ebony magazine heavily normalised being reliant on a hair relaxer in order to fit in with western beauty standards of straight hair.

From my childhood experiences of stylists doing my hair, to visiting the salon where I received heat damage, it is clear that afro hair still isn't being understood and nurtured properly. Whilst this may be expected from mainstream hairdressing chains as the industry requirement to study afro care [did not come until 2021](#), it's unfortunately true for Black hairdressers too.

The lack of knowledge is evident in the mishandling of delicate hair via overuse of relaxers and poor techniques. I recall having overly tight braids that caused for my edges to be significantly weakened due to the strain and pull applied on small delicate hair. It became normalised to take paracetamol after my hair was finished being braided, glossing over the fact my hair was causing significant pain, rather than addressing how hair should not be treated this way.

I decided to stop relaxing my hair when I was just 12 years old. It wasn't because of my mother's advice, or recommendations from professional hair dressers when they saw my weak and scarce edges (they never thought it to be a concern), but due to me independently finding the natural hair community on YouTube. I'd never seen so much curly hair before in my life. There were memes, product recommendations, and an abundance of women genuinely caring for the health of their hair. It was refreshing to see that the internet had so much information for me - yet concerning as to why hairdressers and stylists I experienced did not share the same standard, despite being responsible for so many people's hair.

The disconnect between the online community and supposedly qualified Black hair specialists is alarming. It shouldn't be the case that I pay for a service from a specialist that would leave my hair in a poorer state than if I followed online tutorials, but that's the reality. Despite this, I still didn't want to give up going to the salon. It's meant to be an exciting and relaxing experience, but rather it was consumed with stress and discomfort. It shows the issue of how western beauty standards dominating the media for so long has impacted the psyche and physical health of so many Black women. Older generations subjected to this social pressure have inadvertently passed down these deep-rooted insecurities that alter how afro hair is seen. [Research](#) has shown that "Black and mixed

heritage women over 45 were 24 times more likely to conform to societal pressures when it came to their hair than 18–21-year-olds”. Being a young girl subjected to hair texture scrutiny does not foster a healthy relationship with their self-esteem and image. Consequently, these same individuals would enter the hairdressing industry with a preconceived disdain towards afro hair, showing up in forms of micro aggression and mishandling of the hair, simply because they do not know any better.

Within the overall Black community, there has been a large emphasis of unity. This has been illustrated through the concept of hair care – the act of doing another person’s hair has been largely glamorised as an intimate act, with salons and barber shops being depicted as the settings where they can be their authentic selves, and ‘let their hair down’. Black hair stylists, often viewed as a mother/aunty/sister role, are seen as the best confidant who you can trust and are excited to talk to. With the misconception that the hair salon experience for a Black woman is pure bliss and an easy-going experience, it ignores the issues and inconsistencies.

Despite my seemingly scathing review of my salon experience, it wasn’t all bad. It was there where I finally came across the best products to use for my hair at home, after years of experimenting with drugstore brands. A lovely (and different) hairdresser was more than happy to sit with me and breakdown her recommendations for caring for my coils. There was no judgement, strange comments about my hair mistakes, or looking down at my hair texture. It is clear that there are still amazing salons and stylists passionate about afro hair, able to provide memorable experiences. Without her I would not be where I am today in my natural hair journey. After mourning my bouncy coily curls, I felt glad knowing I left the salon with more knowledge than before.

Rather than trying to initiate a national boycott of Black hair salons (already niche businesses), it is clear that changes need to be implemented to establish a safe and welcome environment within them. Networks of afro hair stylists can be formed to share tips, work and feedback to each other, not only developing their craft but improving care and passion within their motivation to work. This would especially be a good chance for older stylists to have more exposure to newer ways of looking at afro hair. Societies like the Beauty Beat Event, or more specifically The Black Hair society established in 2023 purposefully serving to “empower afro hair salon owners and stylists across the UK” and raise industry standards. With initiatives dedicated to restoring the quality of service provided for black women, the haircare industry as a whole will improve and be wholly inclusive. The expectations of the salon being a natural hair haven can finally be a reality, as it should be.

Moving forward, I will not be returning to the salon for the foreseeable future. However, this has forced me to take care of my hair on my own; doing my own braids, washes, and blowouts have been extremely rewarding. Just one instance of heat damage has gifted me with improved patience and self-esteem. And the best part? I have saved a *ton* of money in doing so!