

February 6, 2025

To: Representative Susan Donovan, Chair
& the Honorable Members of the House Health and Human Services Committee
& Representatives Lombardi, Hull, Potter, and Felix

Re: H-5117

"The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman."
- Malcolm X¹

I submit this written testimony in support of the proposed legislation which aims to "require that all cosmetics manufactured, sold, delivered, held or offered for sale contain a label that completely and accurately lists all of their component ingredients".

I urge you to support this proposed legislation - as it is a necessary step to protect the general public from nefarious manufacturing practices. We must emphasize at the outset that the *supply* of products in the cosmetics industry is made possible by a *demand* set in motion by conventional beauty standards. The main organizing principles of the western world are capitalism, racism, and sexism. Our understanding of 'beauty' is inextricably linked to these systems of oppression. Consequently, the aesthetic 'value' of each person is determined by their proximities to and distance from the established norms for humanity: being white, being male, being wealthy, being heterosexual, being thin, being able-bodied, etc. Black women are in the most precarious position, as they reside at the intersections of race, class, and sex/gender.²

Considering this configuration, it should come as no surprise that black women spend the most money on cosmetics. This is not simply a matter of personal choice or presumed lack of self-esteem. There is a systemic pressure on black women (and other women of color) to decrease their visual distance from whiteness by altering their natural appearance. Research shows that black women with natural hairstyles (such as afros or braids) are less likely to receive callbacks for interviews because they are perceived by employers as "less professional".³ Black women are also considered the least desirable mates on dating apps⁴ – adversely impacting prospects of family formation. This is, unfortunately, not an exhaustive list of consequences for black women's inability or unwillingness to 'play the game'.

At the same time, many hair-straightening products marketed specifically to black women are clinically linked to increased rates of breast cancer, leukemia, and other adverse medical

¹ See transcript for speech at the funeral of Ronald Stokes by Malcolm X (1962)

² See generally: Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*"

³ See article from Ashleigh Rosette (2020) via Duke University, available at: <https://www.fuqua.duke.edu/duke-fuqua-insights/ashleigh-rosette-research-suggests-bias-against-natural-hair-limits-job>

⁴ See Lizz Mineo (2024) article "*How Dating Sites Automate Racism*", available at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2024/04/how-dating-sites-automate-sexual-racism/#:~:text=Black%20women%20are%20the%20least,%E2%80%9Cexoticism%2C%E2%80%9D%20she%20said.>

conditions.⁵ Despite the efforts of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), these toxic products are still available for sale on digital and physical shelves. Although President Biden signed the Modernization of Cosmetics Regulation Act of 2022 into order, the law contains loopholes big enough to drive a truck through. Black women are in an untenable position: they are paid less money because they are black and because they are women, *and then* told they need to spend money on cosmetics to conform to an anti-black beauty standard, *and then* exposed to toxic chemicals from those cosmetics, *and then* told the government is unwilling or unable to do anything about it. Opposing this common-sense legislation continues the tradition of disrespecting black women, failing to protect black women, and neglecting black women – during Black History Month, at that!

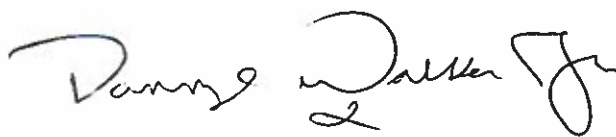
The written testimony filed for this meeting by the Personal Care and Products Council [PCPC] opposes this legislation.⁶ The PCPC is primarily concerned with protecting the “product formulas” and “trade secrets” of manufacturers. But we must remember that black women are more than just mere “consumers” in an economic transaction – and that their health and well-being is infinitely more important than “putting manufacturers at a disadvantage in the global market”. The proposed law is one that simply seeks the bare minimum from manufacturers: honesty. Is that really too much to ask for!? The fact that manufacturers (as represented by the PCPC) are scoffing at a demand for transparency signifies that deception is a pillar of their business model.

Quite frankly, the proposed law [H-5117] is a paper tiger that *does not go far enough*. This law, as written, is just a list of prohibitions - without an accompanying list of consequences for violations. This law could and should be re-crafted so that it has more ‘teeth’.

As the tide of neofascism continues to rise and is emboldened by a conservative majority in each branch of the government, science will continue to be discounted. The Environmental Protection Agency and FDA – while certainly imperfect – are still the main lines of defense against manufacturers behaving with even more reckless abandon. Unfortunately, both of these agencies are at risk of having their budgets and authority slashed under the current administration. It is imperative that the Rhode Island General Assembly acts swiftly and forcefully to protect the public from manufacturers.

H-5117 is a small but important step in that direction.

Respectfully Submitted,



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⁵ See Tasneem Mohammad (2024) “An Intersectional Approach to Regulating Women’s Health”

⁶ See testimony from PCPC available here:
<https://www.rilegislature.gov/Special/comdoc/House%20Health%20and%20Human%20Services%202025/02-06-2025--H5117--Personal%20Care%20Products%20Council-Katie%20Bernard%20Wright.pdf>