

TOXIC BEAUTY PRODUCTS IN NORTHERN MANHATTAN

Often driven by the pressure to meet Eurocentric standards of beauty, women of color in Northern Manhattan and the South Bronx frequently use toxic beauty products that can have a negative impact on their health.



KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

We found that respondents in our study, primarily women of color, are frequent users of chemical straighteners and skin lighteners. These products are widely available in their neighborhoods in New York City.



Achieving a certain **standard of beauty** was the top reported reason **why respondents used these products**.



44% of respondents reported using **chemical straighteners** in their lifetimes; among Non-Hispanic Black respondents, use was higher at **60%**.



Respondents who **thought that other people believe that straight hair makes women look wealthier or more professional** were more likely to use chemical straighteners in their lifetimes than women who did not have these beliefs.



25% of all survey respondents reported using **skin lighteners** in their lifetimes; among Asian respondents, use was higher at **57%**.



Respondents **born in other countries** were more likely to **use skin lighteners** than U.S. born respondents.



Respondents who **thought other people believe that lighter skin makes women look more beautiful or younger** were more likely to **currently use skin lighteners** than women who did not have these beliefs.

WHY ARE THESE PRODUCTS TOXIC?

Chemical straighteners can contain phthalates, parabens, and formaldehyde. Use of these products has been associated with increased risk of uterine fibroids and breast cancer.

Skin lighteners can contain hydroquinone, corticosteroids, and mercury. Mercury exposure can cause kidney and nervous system damage and corticosteroids can cause metabolic effects.

WHY DO WOMEN OF COLOR USE THESE PRODUCTS?

Racialized beauty norms are prevalent in our society and give material advantages to women with certain Eurocentric features, such as light skin and straight hair.



OUR RESULTS IN CONTEXT

Black and Hispanic/Latinx women reported using more hair products and cosmetics, respectively, than White women.* Understanding the potential drivers of product use could help reduce exposure and risk of disease.

Our data show that racialized beauty norms can impact personal decisions to use chemical straighteners and skin lighteners.

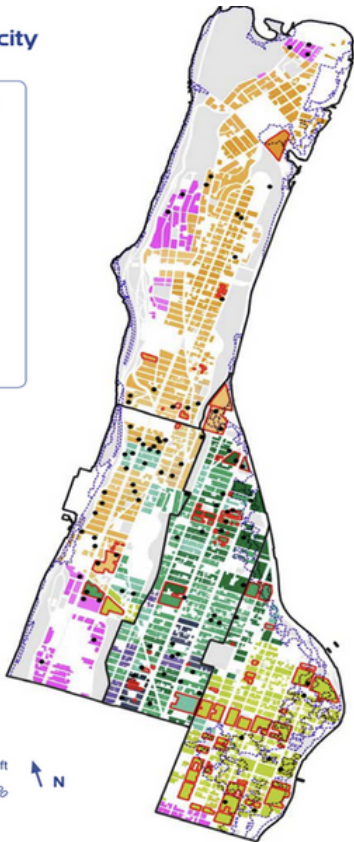
Our findings have the potential to inform prevention and intervention strategies in New York City. It also points to the need for legislation that ensures safer products, like the Safer Beauty Bill.



ABOUT OUR STUDY

Our study goal was to characterize chemical straightener and skin lightener use among diverse respondents in Northern Manhattan and the South Bronx. We asked respondents how, where, and why they choose to use and buy these products in order to better understand both use of and sentiments toward these products.

Map: Race and Ethnicity



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Femme-identifying individuals and women were surveyed in nine NYC neighborhoods:

MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS
HAMILTON HEIGHTS
MANHATTANVILLE
INWOOD
WEST HARLEM
CENTRAL HARLEM
EAST HARLEM
WASHINGTON HEIGHTS
SOUTH BRONX

ABOUT THE BEAUTY INSIDE OUT CAMPAIGN

Launched in 2019 by WE ACT, the campaign seeks to educate WE ACT's community members about environmental racism in the beauty industry and to reduce the demand for and sale of harmful products, including skin lighteners and chemical straighteners.

[Visit Our Website for More Info](#)



Read the full study:
[Edwards et al., 2023](#)

Citations:

[The Safer Beauty Bill](#)
[Zota and Shamasunder, 2017](#)
[Dodson et al., 2021*](#)