



Under the Varnish

Vietnamese nail salon workers face the highest exposure to dangerous chemicals—but who's responsible for their safety?

By Momo Chang

Mily Vo, 33, has been working as a manicurist in Springfield, Massachusetts ever since she was laid off from her assembly job. Her sister-in-law, who owns a nail salon, asked her if she would be interested in working for her, and she now works five days a week for ten hours a day in the salon.

Vo says her favorite part of her job is helping to make people look and feel better about themselves. For her, the biggest pet peeve is being unable to communicate well with customers because of her limited English.

She has one child—"one beautiful boy"—who is 3-and-a-half years old. His only way to get nutrition is through a feeding tube. He had to get gastric surgery after he was born because of a condition that affects his digestion, where he could not eat food without vomiting. Vo speculates that this condition was caused by exposure to chemicals, especially since she worked all the way through her pregnancy in the nail salon.

"I asked the doctor the question," she says in Vietnamese. "Is it related to the chemicals and toxins or not? But no one has answered this question for me, because no one seems to know for sure."

ANH DAO KOLBE

Unregulated Beauty Products

We've all heard horror stories of clients entering salons in good condition—with maybe a chipped acrylic nail or feet in need of some serious scrubbing—and leaving with the unpleasant surprise of a fungus infection or leg lesion. Paula Abdul has testified in front of lawmakers in California, urging stronger regulation in nail salons after a visit to one gave her an infection and required emergency surgery.

Much of mainstream media's focus has been on regulating immigrant-owned "discount salons" that are portrayed as unhygienic, yet there has been virtually no mention of health risks to the 1.2 million cosmetologists in the United States, many of whom are recent immigrants.

The \$35 billion cosmetics industry has successfully found loopholes in the alphabet soup of government agencies—the FDA, EPA, OSHA—and its own self-monitored Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR), allowing for an abundance of toxic products like nail polish, acrylics and disinfectants to still be used today. At the same time, nail salon workers have fallen between the cracks as a group of laborers who are not protected but are exposed to large amounts of toxins on a daily basis. Most are young, Asian immigrant women of child-bearing age, and many are not fluent in English.

For workers and consumers alike, knowing what chemicals are toxic requires knowledge of chemical names and diligent reading of microscopic labels. Some common chemicals found in nail salons are toluene, formaldehyde and a group of chemical compounds called phthalates. Toluene and formaldehyde are both deemed by the EPA to cause cancer, and phthalates are linked to birth defects and have been banned in Europe from cosmetic products—yet all are still used in cosmetics sold today in the United States, right at your local Walgreen's.

That's because the EPA and FDA can't regulate what goes into a bottle of nail polish. Since cosmetics are not food we eat nor air we breathe, this group of products lies in a nebulous zone. The industry funds

its own CIR, which tests some ingredients—but alarmingly, 90 percent of ingredients currently used in products sold on the market have never been tested.

As average consumers, we might use 10 personal care products a day, from shampoo and moisturizer to deodorant and hairspray. We might dye our hair a few times a year and get our nails done too. Salon workers, though, could be sitting in cramped, poorly ventilated spaces for more than eight hours a day, breathing in toxins, over a span of many years.

In states like California, Texas, New York and Massachusetts, Vietnamese immigrants find nail salons to be an affordable way to own their own business and make a living. Much like the Chinese laundromats of the 1800s, the work does not require a high level of education nor fluency in English. Recent immigrants, especially young women, are often funneled into jobs in this industry.

While California legislators are trying to change the way the industry is regulated, community-based organizations in towns like Springfield, Massachusetts and cities like Oakland, California are spearheading the movement in changing the lives of Vietnamese nail salon workers. It became clear to many community workers that relying on government agencies alone to regulate and protect workers would not be enough.

Working with Salons

In the last year, Thu Pham has seen 32 women who work in nail salons with chronic asthma, fungal infections and skin rashes. Six other women miscarried. She is a community health worker with the Springfield-based Pioneer Valley Project who has served as a bilingual healthcare worker for many years.

Nail salon workers are often not protected by OSHA because the businesses are small and many workers are independent contractors, renting out space in a larger complex. By law, OSHA can only regulate workplaces of more than nine employees, and independent contractors are considered self-employed.

"OSHA doesn't cover many of the haz-

ards largely because they're under their radar gun," says Richard Rabin, an environmental engineer with MA/OSHA. "There are also concerns over chemicals that OSHA doesn't even have a rule for."

Rabin got involved in this issue when businesses near nail salons called his office, complaining about fumes coming from the establishments. And to this day, he says, "We've never gotten a complaint to our office from an employee, largely because they're unaware of what the health hazards are, they're unaware of any agencies out there that can help them, and because of language skills—they may not be speaking or reading English to any great extent."

Fred Rose decided that he'd heard enough about Vietnamese women and children with skin rashes, asthma and birth defects. He started as a community organizer with the Pioneer Valley Project in Springfield and has worked closely with the Vietnamese community for many years on issues of environmental and economic justice. Most of Springfield's Vietnamese population immigrated to the town after the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1988, which brought children of American soldiers and Vietnamese women to the United States. There are approximately 300 nail salons in Springfield, and more than half are Vietnamese-owned.

Rose is now heading the Model Nail Salon Project, funded by the EPA, and his group hopes to complete a model nail salon, where workers in the town can get trained in how to ensure their safety, as well as the safety of customers in their work environment.

To help nail salons stay in business, Rose is working with owners and employees to do basic education, so they will at least know what chemicals they are being exposed to and what it could do to their health. Part of the outreach is offering best practices on keeping a hygienic, and safe, environment.

Pham says that hygiene is a real problem in many of the salons. "There are just a lot of messy salons," she says. Many salon workers don't know, for example, that dust masks do not prevent inhalation of chemical fumes.

Some changes seem simple enough, like

not eating on the counters where products have been used, keeping the lids of formaldehyde and other chemicals closed and wearing gloves. Others, while practical, would require larger changes, like better ventilation, yet this is still something salon owners can control.

But how much can the workers control? When Vo was asked if she has thought

AHS, is that the government does not regulate chemicals that are being used in the products nail technicians work with daily. “There’s not any state or federal agency that actively reviews cosmetic ingredients for safety,” she says.

Mike Horowitz, district manager in Oakland’s Cal/OSHA, says that he has gotten complaints from time to time about skin irri-

ing the state some authority to investigate work conditions.

Even if OSHA protected these workers, the workers themselves would have to want to report to an agency. According to outreach workers, organizing salon workers has proven to be a slow process.

“Many times, these salons are very small environments, maybe only five to eight workers,” says Helen Chen, staff attorney at the Asian Law Caucus and partner in the Bay Area Healthy Nail Salon Project, which is providing nail salons with bilingual materials about health hazards.

“For a worker to speak up about hazard is difficult, because there is fear of retaliation in the workplace,” she says.

Judy Le, 19, represents a new generation of workers. She has nine cousins who work in nail salons in Oakland. In a year, she will take the state’s board exams to become a licensed cosmetologist. She thinks she will cut, or maybe color, hair, especially after finding out about the dangers of nail salons.

She is a part of Oakland’s Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, which is educating teenagers about toxins in their cosmetics. Most of the teens in the organization have family members or friends who work in a salon, and some have considered working in the beauty care industry.

Le says that she will definitely not work in a nail salon. “Cutting hair is not as bad for your skin and body as doing nails,” she says. But she also adds that she is still not sure about her future and might become a hair colorist, which would also mean high exposure to chemicals.

For young women like Le, it’s more than just the daily dose of toxins average consumers get—any regulation, outreach or education could affect her livelihood. And for many low-income Vietnamese communities, this cottage industry has provided some economic stability for women and their families—but at what cost? ■

Momo Chang is a writer and educator based in Oakland, California.

Thu Pham provided translation services.



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about working in a different field, she replies, “I have to make a living. I haven’t thought about anything but still working there.” She makes \$200 to \$250 a week in the small salon where it is just her and her sister-in-law. Her baby is getting better, and she says that doctors will remove the feeding tube soon.

Pham says that she would love to see her clients not have to work during their pregnancy. “But who will pay their rent? The people I’ve been working with know it’s dangerous because the smell is not good, but they’re not quite sure how dangerous it could be. If they know how dangerous it is, maybe they would choose another job. Who knows?”

Livelihoods at Stake

Oakland-based Asian Health Services (AHS) has been outreaching to the Vietnamese community for more than 20 years on general healthcare issues, and 15 years specifically on health risks to nail salon workers. This came about after health educators saw chronic problems such as asthma and skin rashes.

In California, there are more than 83,000 licensed manicurists and 80 percent of them are of Vietnamese descent.

Part of the problem, says Julia Liou of

tation and asthma, but that regulating the cosmetology business is complicated.

“Nail salons are definitely areas with possible health hazards due to the chemicals used in cosmetics,” he says. “Many of the chemicals they use, we don’t even have standards for.”

That’s because the industry produces more than 6,000 new chemical compounds a year. There is virtually no way for any government agency to keep up with, and test, all of them.

“They are always finding new twists on ingredients and adding them to products,” says Horowitz about the cosmetics and chemical industry.

In California, the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association spent \$550,000 in 2004 lobbying successfully against legislation like Judy Chu’s (D-Monterey Park) AB 908 that would have banned phthalates from cosmetics sold in California. State Senator Carole Migden’s (D-San Francisco) SB 484 requires cosmetics companies to reveal all ingredients deemed hazardous by the state. The bill would affect consumers—currently, the industry can hide toxic ingredients under labels like “fragrance” and “other ingredients,” which are considered trade secrets. The bill, which is now on the governor’s desk, was also created to help salon workers by giv-