



Issue Brief

The Nail Salon Industry: The Impact of Environmental Toxins on API Women's Reproductive Health

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For Asian Pacific Islander (API) women, reproductive justice includes the fundamental principle that all individuals have the right to live, work, and play in environments that are safe. Yet, environmental and workplace toxins disproportionately impact many API women and families, which result in poor health and reproductive health care problems. For instance, API women are concentrated in manufacturing, garment, and cosmetology industries where they risk exposure to dangerous chemicals and toxins that have been linked to cancer, respiratory problems, birth defects, and miscarriages. Thus, it is clear that for many API women, the connection between environmental justice and reproductive health care is profound.

In particular, API women dominate the nail salon industry, representing over 40% of all nail technicians nationwide. In recent years, the industry has received increasing attention from policymakers, health care providers, API

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organizations, and environmental justice advocates. The industry uses more than 10,000 chemicals in its products, 89% of which have *not* been evaluated for safety by any independent agency prior to marketing. For instance, many of the substances that are used in cosmetic products are also used during manufacturing to clean equipment or soften plastic. Nail salon workers typically work long hours and routinely handle these products, which result in illnesses, lung and skin irritation, and other health care problems.

This policy brief provides an overview of the nail salon industry and discusses why there is cause for concern from both the consumer

perspective and the API immigrant women viewpoint. To fully realize and achieve reproductive justice for all API women, advocates in both the reproductive rights and environmental justice movements must continue to collaborate and mobilize campaigns at the grassroots, state, and national levels.

Demographic Profile of the Nail Salon Industry in the U.S.

The cosmetology industry is the largest professional licensed population in the nation. Nail salons have more than tripled in size over the last two decades. Over 95% of all nail salon workers are female, and many are of reproductive age. On average, a nail salon technician is typically 38 years old and has worked in the industry for 9 years.

Although it is difficult to calculate the exact number since race and ethnicity are not collected on licensee applications, the industry estimates approximately 42% of all nail technicians nationwide are Asian, with

Vietnamese women comprising 39% of the entire industry and Korean women comprising 2%. In California, where over 83,500 manicurists or 21%

of the national population of nail technicians work, it is estimated that 80% of nail salon workers are Vietnamese immigrant women, and more than half are of reproductive age. While over half of all Vietnamese nail technicians work on the West Coast, it is estimated that close to 22% work in the South, 14% in the Northeast, and almost 9% work in the Midwest.

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API women, particularly Vietnamese immigrant women, are attracted to the nail salon industry

for a number of reasons. First, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of Vietnamese-owned shops and Vietnamese instructors in beauty schools, which attracts many Vietnamese immigrant women to the profession. Second, the training required to become a nail technician is relatively short and

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inexpensive. Finally, the profession does not require a higher-English proficiency level in order to carry out his/her job responsibilities and

duties. For Vietnamese immigrant women, many of whom come to the U.S. as refugees with limited education, training, and English skills, the nail salon industry, therefore, represents an accessible entry point into the workforce and an immediate way to earn money for their families. Today, Vietnamese immigrant women and men are often credited with reshaping the industry and increasing the number of salons by 374% over the past decade.

Nail salon workers share many of the same characteristics, some of which are mentioned above. In addition to their immigrant status and limited English skills, they also tend to earn less than \$16,000 a year. Many API nail salon workers also lack knowledge of the legal and health care systems in the U.S. as well as lack basic health care coverage. Lastly, most nail technicians are not formal employees of the salon, but rather rent a station from the shop, which further contributes to the complex nature of the employee/employer relationship; many of the owners themselves are also workers.

What is the Problem: A Consumer Perspective

For decades, cosmetic manufacturers have been freely placing chemicals in their cosmetic and beauty products that have been linked to illnesses, cancer, and reproductive harm. These chemical hazards include phthalates (the largest concentration found in nail polish), formaldehyde, benzene, and methylene chloride, all of which are known or suspected carcinogens; acetone, glycol ethers, and methyl methacrylates (banned), all of which have been

linked to birth defects in animal studies; and ethyl ether, camphor, and toluene, all of which are allergens.

At present time, there is no independent governing agency that reviews cosmetic ingredients for safety prior to being placed on the market. Under the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act and the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is authorized to inspect cosmetic manufacturing facilities and subject them to regulatory action if it is

determined that their cosmetics are misbranded, deceptively packaged, or adulterated. However, unlike other products, the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic

Act does not require cosmetic products and ingredients to undergo FDA pre-market approval, with the exception of color additives. The FDA does not test cosmetics before placing them on the market nor can it require that a warning label be posted on products that have not been substantiated for safety. In other words, the FDA cannot prevent dangerous ingredients or products from entering the marketplace.

Instead, cosmetic manufacturers themselves are responsible for substantiating the safety of their products prior to their introduction in the market. At present time, they are not required to list phthalates on their ingredients labels. Some manufacturers argue that the link between phthalates and reproductive

health care is tenuous at best, and that the testing and studies have been performed on animals as opposed to humans. Others argue that there is a lack of sufficient

evidence connecting phthalates with health care problems, or that the levels are within U.S. safety standards. (Federal regulations have established the safety level for phthalate exposure at a threshold that critics and advocates argue is not only too high, but misses the overarching point. Advocates argue that federal regulations should focus on prevention. We are

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constantly exposed to phthalates through cosmetic and beauty products, water bottles, saran wrap, etc... Even though all of these products individually contain low levels deemed safe by U.S. standards, the totality of the exposure can be quite high and harmful.) Yet, other countries, including the European Union, have banned phthalates from all cosmetics because of these studies. In response to community outrage and pressure, some U.S. companies are following suit and discarding phthalates from their beauty products as well.

Thus, from the consumer perspective, without proper labeling or governmental oversight, consumers have no way of knowing which cosmetics and beauty products are safe and which contain chemicals that may be hazardous to their health.

What is the Problem: From the API Women Perspective

As mentioned above, Asian women, particularly Vietnamese and Korean immigrant women, dominate the nail salon workforce. Typically, nail salon technicians work long hours to maximize their income potential and clientele

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base, which prolongs their exposure to some of the dangerous toxins found in nail polish and other beauty products. Many of the studies that have been conducted on phthalates have indeed found that prolonged exposure has been linked to cancer, miscarriages, and infertility. Moreover, for pregnant women, phthalates can also be transferred across the placental barrier to the developing fetus, resulting in birth defects and poor birth outcomes.

In addition, Asian nail salon technicians face other hazardous workplace conditions. The poor ventilation within the shops has been linked to asthma and other respiratory problems. As a result of the chemicals in which they daily come into contact, they are more prone to developing skin allergies and dermatitis. In addition, many report work-related injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome and back pains. And, because the

safety data sheets are often not translated into Asian languages, such as Vietnamese or Korean, many Asian workers also end up improperly handling dangerous products. (Manufacturers are required to include information about proper handling techniques, but they often fail to do this. The state boards of cosmetology are also responsible for educating workers on safety issues, but they also fail to do this.)

Further, the recourse for many Asian immigrant women who work in this industry is limited, particularly for those who are undocumented. Since most rent a station from the shop, they tend to lack job security.

Surveys of Asian nail workers have found that many believe that the products used do in fact have adverse health

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consequences. Yet, many Asian nail salon workers feel that they are unable to change their workplace or report the situation to government officials, given that this may be their sole source of income, and many of the owners themselves are relatives or family members. Instead, many Asian nail salon workers state that they leave the work when they become pregnant.

Campaigns Supporting Nail Salon Workers

The rapidly-growing nail salon industry has been historically ignored, with little research devoted to understanding the long-term health consequences for both employees and consumers. Yet, in recent years, there have been grassroots efforts to highlight the unique needs of API nail salon workers.

For instance, in California, Asian Health Services (www.ahschc.org), a community health organization, spearheaded efforts to bring together advocates from environmental groups, API organizations, and the health care profession to form the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. The goals of the Collaborative are to reduce the use of and exposure to toxins in nail salons that may cause cancer, reproductive health harm, and other illnesses, increase the public’s knowledge about

environmental health in nail salons, and promote increased health and safety of nail salon workers and owners. Through these efforts, the Collaborative hopes to empower nail salon and cosmetology workers so that they have the means to advocate on behalf of their own health, families, and communities.

Asian Health Services is also partnering with the Northern California Cancer Center on a community research collaborative that aims to systematically collect data on the cancer risk profile for nail salon workers in Alameda County. Asian Law Caucus (ALS, www.asianlawcaucus.org) in California, also part of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, has been doing work around the health and safety of low-wage workers for years through community education, legal representation, and policy advocacy. ALS works in partnership with other grassroots organizations that serve low-income API communities in the Bay Area where they facilitate interactive workshops to share information about the Occupational Safety and Health Act as well as the workers' compensation system.

In Houston, Texas, the Nail Salon Project was created by local community groups who were concerned about the health of Asian nail salon workers. Initiated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, this unique partnership brings together federal, state, and local government, community, and business partners to better understand the unique concerns and needs of Asian nail salon workers and to identify better workplace practices to improve worker safety, health, and well-being. The Project developed brochures and materials in English, Vietnamese, and Korean (forthcoming).

In addition, the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics (www.safecosmetics.org) launched an action alert in April 2006 concerning OPI nail polishes and nail hardeners, which contain toluene, formaldehyde, and dibutyl phthalate (DBP) – chemicals linked to cancer, birth defects and other health care problems. OPI is making safer products for its European customers because those countries have passed stricter cosmetic

laws, but it refuses to sell its safer products to U.S. customers. The campaign particularly targeted the Aveda company because Aveda continues to carry OPI products.

Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice in California recently developed POLISH (Participatory Research, Organizing and Leadership Initiative for Safety and Health, www.apirh.org), a project aimed at bringing together youth and nail salon workers to learn about the toxins in personal care products. The project is multi-year and will combine popular education and community-based participatory research with leadership development and community organizing. POLISH is also part of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative.

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Finally, chapters of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF, www.napawf.org) have also been conducting outreach into the Vietnamese nail salon community. The Yale chapter collaborated with the Vietnamese Student Association and the Asian American Student Association's Political Action and Education committee to educate the community about the hazards that nail salon workers face and encourage them to demand that nail salons switch to non-toxic chemicals. Their presentation was also translated into Vietnamese.

In addition to the campaigns above, there are other efforts across the country to bring more attention to the profound link between cosmetic toxins and the reproductive and health care status of all nail salon workers.

Policy Implications

As the momentum around the nail salon industry builds, policymakers are using this opportunity to respond directly to the concerns of their communities and constituents. In 2005, California Governor Schwarzenegger signed into law the Safe Cosmetics Bill, SB 484, which requires cosmetic manufacturers to disclose hazardous ingredients in cosmetics to the California Department of Health and Human

Services and gives the state authority to conduct studies and investigations about the impact of these chemicals. Although passage of SB 484 is a major step in protecting the health and safety of nail salon workers, more work is needed to ensure that the government and cosmetic manufacturers remain accountable. California lawmakers recognized that self-regulation by the cosmetic industry has failed to work in the best interest of public health. With the passage of SB 484, advocates hope that other states will follow suit.

In addition to state legislation, stricter federal regulation of cosmetic manufacturers is needed. The FDA must be given more oversight of and control over the products entering the marketplace. In particular, stricter labeling

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practices and more resources devoted to studying ingredients that are suspected of causing harm are needed to ensure the safety and well-being of

consumers and workers. In addition, the FDA should develop guidelines and standards for manufacturers regarding how to substantiate safety for their products so that all companies are following consistent safety procedures. Finally, the FDA must be given more enforcement and investigative power to protect the public health of all communities.

Finally, environmental justice and reproductive rights advocates must continue to recognize the overlap between their two movements. By continuing to combine their efforts, legislation at the federal level may be a viable way to eliminate the dangerous workplace hazards that nail salon technicians face. Federal legislation would provide consistency and universal standards across the country.

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