



# THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY AND THE IMPACT OF COSMETIC TOXINS ON API WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

★ NATIONAL ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN WOMEN'S FORUM ★ WWW.NAPAWF.ORG ★

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**“You can’t imagine how many chemicals are being used by workers in nail salons everyday. Most do not have any knowledge about the health hazards of the products they are using.”**

*- Connie Nguyen, a California cosmetologist who has suffered respiratory problems from working in beauty salons for 13 years*

For Asian and Pacific Islander (API) women, reproductive justice is achieved when all women and girls have the ability to make well-informed decisions about their bodies, health, sexualities, families, and communities. Yet, environmental and workplace toxins disproportionately impact many API women and families, which result in poor health outcomes. 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.

Asian women in particular dominate the nail salon industry, representing

over 40 percent of all nail technicians nationwide. However nail products contain more than 10,000 chemicals,

**“NAIL PRODUCTS CONTAIN MORE THAN 10,000 CHEMICALS IN ITS PRODUCTS, 89% OF WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN EVALUATED FOR SAFETY...”**

89 percent of which have not been evaluated for safety by any independent agency prior to marketing. Many of the substances that are used in cosmetic products are also used during manufacturing to clean equipment or soften plastic. In addition, 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. Thus, it is clear that for many API women, the connection between environmental justice and reproductive health care is profound.

This issue brief provides an overview of the nail salon industry and discusses why there is cause for concern from both the perspective and of consumers and immigrant Asian women workers. 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 and is still growing. Nail salons have more than tripled in quantity over

the last two decades. Women comprise over 95 percent of all nail salon workers, and most are of reproductive age. On average, a nail salon technician is

38 years old and has worked in the industry for 9 years.

Because race and ethnicity are 

not collected on licensee applications, it is difficult to calculate the exact number of API nail salon workers. However, the industry estimates that approximately 42 percent of all nail technicians nationwide are Asian,

work in the Midwest.

API women, particularly Vietnamese immigrant women, are attracted to the nail salon industry for a number of reasons. First, in recent

training, and English skills, the nail salon industry 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 percent over the past decade.

**“...42% OF ALL NAIL TECHNICIANS NATIONWIDE ARE ASIAN, WITH VIETNAMESE WOMEN COMPRISING 39% OF THE ENTIRE INDUSTRY...”**

with Vietnamese women comprising 39 percent of the entire industry and Korean women comprising 2 percent. In California, where over 83,500 manicurists or 21 percent of the national population of nail technicians work, it is estimated that 80 percent of nail salon workers are Vietnamese immigrant women and more than half are of reproductive age. Over half of all Vietnamese nail technicians work on the West Coast, and an estimated 22 percent work in the South, 14 percent in the Northeast, and almost 9 percent

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 inexpensive. Finally, the profession does not require a high English proficiency level in order to carry out her job responsibilities and duties. For Vietnamese immigrant women, many of whom come to the U.S. as refugees with limited education,

Nail salon workers also share many other characteristics. In addition to their immigrant status and limited English skills, the workers tend to earn less than \$16,000 a year. Many Asian nail salon workers also lack knowledge of the legal and health care systems in the U.S, and lack basic health care coverage. Lastly, most nail technicians are not formal employees of the salon. Rather, they rent a station from the shop, which further contributes to the complex nature of the employee-employer relationship. Moreover, many of the owners are also workers.

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## **WHAT IS THE PROBLEM: A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE**

For decades, cosmetic manufacturers have freely placed chemicals in their cosmetic and beauty products that have been linked to illnesses, cancer, and reproductive harm. These chemical hazards include phthalates (a high concentration is found in nail polish), formaldehyde, benzene, and methylene chloride, all of which are known or suspected carcinogens. Chemicals linked to birth defects in animal studies have also been found in acetone, glycol ethers, and methyl methacrylates—which have been banned.

Linked to both reproductive harm and cancer, toluene and formaldehyde are two top ingredients of concern because of the prevalence of these chemicals in nail products. Toluene is a clear colorless liquid that acts as a solvent. It is found in many nail products because it helps form the smooth finish across the nail. Because toluene evaporates into the air as nail polish dries, exposure to toluene can affect the central nervous system with low level symptoms such as headache, dizziness, and fatigue. At very high exposures, toluene has been found to be toxic to the kidneys and liver, and is a possible reproductive or developmental toxin.

Formaldehyde is a chemical commonly used in resins and as a preservative. In nail products, this chemical functions as a nail hardener and helps create a smooth finish. Known as a human carcinogen, formaldehyde is an irritant to the eyes, nose and throat, and repeated skin exposure can lead to skin irritation, an allergic rashes or dermatitis, and coughing and wheezing.

Presently, 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—with the exception of color additives—to undergo FDA pre-market approval. Thus, the FDA does not test cosmetics before they are released on the market and it cannot require the placement of warning labels on products that have not been substantiated for safety. In short, the FDA cannot prevent dangerous ingredients or products from entering the marketplace.

Instead, manufacturers are responsible for substantiating the safety of cosmetic products prior to their introduction in the market. However, they are not required to list potentially hazardous chemicals like phthalates on their ingredient labels. Many manufacturers argue that the link between phthalates and reproductive harm is tenuous at best due to a lack of sufficient evidence connecting phthalates with health problems. Additionally, manufacturers argue that existing phthalate levels are within U.S. safety standards. However, health advocates argue that

the established safety level for phthalate exposure is too high, and misses the overarching goal of prevention.

U.S. consumers are constantly exposed to phthalates contained in a range of commodities including cosmetic and beauty products, water bottles and saran wrap. Even though these products individually contain phthalate levels deemed safe by U.S. standards, exposure to a combination of these products can be quite high and harmful. In fact, the European Union banned phthalates from all cosmetics because of these concerns.

Although some U.S. companies are following suit and discarding phthalates from their beauty products, the self-regulated cosmetic industry is reluctant to eliminate even the most harmful chemicals from nail products. The industry's trade group, the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association (CTFA), has 600 member companies, including Aveda, Clairol, L'Oréal and Unilever, and standing committees on government relations, public affairs and international issues. The well-resourced and aggressive lobbying arm of CTFA, along with the chemical and plastics industries, have spent over \$3.5 million on lobbying in the last two years to defeat various legislative measures that would at a minimum,

require cosmetic manufacturers to clearly label toxic chemicals in their products. In addition to lobbying, the cosmetic industry is employing a public relations strategy designed to combat the mounting health concerns and consumer demands for regulatory

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oversight. For example, the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association changed its name to the Personal Care Products Council, revamped its website to inspire more consumer trust, and commissioned focus groups about cosmetics safety issues.

Despite industry efforts to improve their public image, 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. Additionally, factors such as poorly labeled products, limited availability of safety information, and inadequate ventilation all serve to exacerbate the effects of toxic exposure in nail salons.

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## **WHAT IS THE PROBLEM: THE API WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE**

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 base, which prolongs their exposure to some of the dangerous toxins found in nail polish and other beauty products. While there is a significant lack of research

examining nail salon worker health, an increasing number of studies confirm the adverse health effects of exposure to toxic chemicals contained in nail products. 

Many of the health studies that have been conducted on phthalates have indeed found a link between prolonged exposure and cancer, miscarriages, and infertility. In addition, researchers have found that pregnant nail salon workers are at increased risk of various reproductive harms such as spontaneous abortions and birth defects or poorer infant health outcomes due to the transfer of phthalates across the placental barrier to the developing fetus. Nail technicians have also been found to have greater problems with cognitive processing and memory.

Additional studies have documented self-reported health disparities by nail salon workers. An unpublished survey of Vietnamese nail technicians in Boston found considerable awareness that their occupation was affecting their health. Survey respondents reported experiencing work-related headaches, skin and respiratory problems, and carpal tunnel syndrome. In a California study, an analysis of calls to a California occupational hazard hotline demonstrated that nail

salon workers are concerned about the health impacts of their work, particularly as it relates to their pregnancies. The analysis found that manicurists

**“MANY NAIL SALON WORKERS STATE THAT THEY LEAVE WORK WHEN THEY BECOME PREGNANT.”**

and cosmetologists were the third largest occupational sector to make pregnancy-related inquiries to the hotline. Many nail salon workers reported that they quit their jobs when they became pregnant to avoid the increased harm of exposure.

In addition, Asian nail salon technicians face other hazardous workplace conditions. Many shops are poorly ventilated, which can exacerbate asthma conditions and other respiratory problems. Because nail salon workers come into daily contact with a range of chemical-laden products, they are also more prone to developing skin allergies and dermatitis. Moreover, safety data sheets are rarely translated into Asian languages such as Vietnamese or Korean. Thus, many

Asian workers unknowingly and improperly handle dangerous products. Although manufacturers are required to include information about proper

handling techniques, they often fail to do so. Most state cosmetology boards also fail to adequately educate workers on safety issues.

Further, many Asian immigrant women--and undocumented women in particular--who work in this industry have limited avenues for redress. Since most rent a station from the shop, nail technicians lack job security. Although many Asian nail salon workers believe that the products they use do in fact have adverse health consequences, they often feel unable to change their workplace environment or report the situation to government officials because the job provides the sole source of income for their families. Moreover, many nail salons are family-owned businesses where the owner is a relative.

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## **NAIL SALON WORKER ADVOCACY**

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

In 2005, a group of advocates,

community-based groups, nail salon workers and owners, and public agency allies came together to form the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (hereinafter, the “Collaborative”). The goals of the Collaborative are to reduce the use of and exposure to toxins in nail salon products, increase the public’s knowledge about environmental nail salon concerns, and promote the 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.

On the national level, the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum (NAPAWF), Women’s Voices of the Earth (WVE), and the Collaborative established a national alliance 🤝

in 2007 to connect various regional and local activists and organizations dedicated to improving nail salon worker health and safety and stricter oversight and regulation of the cosmetic industry. Known as the National Healthy Nail Salon Alliance (NHNSA), the group launched a website that serves as a “one stop shop” for important information and resources about toxic chemicals in nail products and worker health issues.

In addition, the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics ([www.safecosmetics.org](http://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. The company already manufactured safer alternatives for its European customers because the European Union has stricter regulations over the chemical composition of cosmetic products. The campaign succeeded when one year later, OPI announced that it would remove toluene from its products.

In addition to the campaigns above, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) distributed grants to enable nail technicians, health care providers, state regulators and other partners to build model nail salons featuring safe and affordable chemical management and reduction practices. These

model salons will be used to provide hands-on training for nail technicians and help nail businesses learn about chemical safety and ways to protect the health of employees, owners and customers. The partnerships created through these model nail salons will also help develop culturally-appropriate training materials for the most impacted communities like the Vietnamese community and create educational programs on chemical risk protection.

Numerous local, regional, and statewide efforts across the country are bringing more attention to the profound link between cosmetic toxins and the reproductive and health of all nail salon workers.

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## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

As momentum around the nail salon industry builds, policymakers are using this opportunity to respond directly to the concerns of their communities and constituents. California lawmakers in

studies and investigations about the health impacts 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

in San Francisco’s City Hall in support of workplace safety in California’s nail salons. The hearing was an organized effort led by California Senator Carole Migden (D-San Francisco) and the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. The purpose of the hearing was to determine what California can do to enhance protections for salon workers. At the hearing, nail salon workers provided personal testimony about the serious health effects they experienced from prolonged exposure to the unregulated chemicals present in cosmetics products. Experts and allies also testified about the known health effects caused by workplace toxins and conditions. It is critical that more states follow California’s lead in providing a forum for nail salon workers and their advocates to educate

### **“[S]ELF-REGULATION BY THE COSMETIC INDUSTRY HAS FAILED TO WORK IN THE BEST INTEREST OF PUBLIC HEALTH.”**

particular recognized that self-regulation by the cosmetic industry has failed to work in the best interest of public health. In 2005, California Governor Schwarzenegger signed into law the Safe Cosmetics Bill, SB 484, which requires cosmetic manufacturers to disclose to the California Department of Health and Human Services any hazardous ingredients used in their cosmetic products. The legislation also gives the State authority to conduct

needed to ensure that the government and cosmetic manufacturers remain accountable. Nevertheless, advocates are hopeful that other states will follow suit.

Two years later, California took another important step towards better nail salon worker protections. On November 15, 2007, the California Senate Labor and Industrial Relations Committee held a legislative hearing

policymakers and the public.

In addition to state legislation, stricter federal regulation of cosmetic manufacturers is needed. The FDA must be given more oversight and control over the products entering the marketplace. To ensure the safety and well-being of consumers and workers, stricter labeling practices and more resources are needed to study

the ingredients that are suspected of causing harm. 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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