

# Glossed Over: Cosmetic Toxins and Reproductive Justice

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HEALTHCARE



Over a decade ago, the environmental justice movement emerged and expanded the definition of “environment” to include not only wild habitats, but also the places where people live, work, and play. The new definition helped to uncover the disproportionate health impacts of occupational exposure to toxins on people of color. Despite this revelation, years later, we are yet grappling with a regulatory system that still fails to protect vulnerable populations like nail salon workers who are exposed to a number of toxic chemicals daily. There are over 380,000 nail salon workers in the U.S. cosmetology industry, of which 96% are female and predominately of reproductive age. The typical nail salon worker earns less than \$18,200 a year, lacks health care coverage, and is an immigrant Asian and Pacific Islander (API) woman with limited English language skills and education.

To address health and safety concerns of the national nail salon workforce, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, the National Asian Pacific American's Women Forum (NAPAWF), and Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE) formed the National Healthy Nail Salon Alliance (NHNSA) in 2007. NHNSA's goal is to connect efforts across the U.S. to protect and improve the health and welfare of women working in nail salons.

One of the NHNSA's biggest challenges lies in convincing US federal agencies to hold the beauty and personal care industry to a stricter standard to assure better protection for workers, owners, and the general public. On a daily basis and often for long hours at a time, nail salon technicians are exposed to substances such as toxic solvents, chemical solutions, glues, and cosmetic products, which contain thousands of chemicals; including some that are known to be carcinogenic or suspected to cause reproductive harm or other negative health impacts. These chemicals may

be inhaled or absorbed through the skin, some accumulating in the body over time. Childbearing women may also pass these toxins to their fetuses or breastfeeding newborns. Many API nail salon workers—recognizing the potential health threats to themselves and their future children—report that they plan to quit their jobs when pregnant to avoid toxic exposures.

"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," says Connie Nguyen, a California cosmetologist who has suffered respiratory problems from working in beauty salons for 13 years.

The top three chemicals of concern in many nail polishes are toluene, formaldehyde and dibutyl phthalate, also known as the “toxic trio.” These chemicals have been linked to cancer in addition to reproductive harms including miscarriages, infertility, and birth defects. However, despite the health impacts associated with the toxic trio, there is very limited governmental regulation or review over them and the 10,000 other chemicals used in cosmetic and personal care products. By law, nail products sold in the U.S. must be free of poisonous or deleterious



substances that might harm users under normal use. Nonetheless, the U.S. Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has no authority to require that cosmetic products be tested for safety before they go on the market. Instead, the FDA only asks that cosmetics manufacturers voluntarily report any adverse reactions or health risks. Moreover, the FDA lacks the ability to require recalls of products found to be harmful. Thus, any recalls result from the voluntary actions by the manufacturers themselves.

The NHNSA is addressing these deficiencies by working to pass federal legislation to prohibit the use of toxic chemicals in cosmetic products, and to give the FDA the authority it needs to properly regulate cosmetic ingredients. In the short term, the NHNSA is pushing manufacturers to reformulate nail products to eliminate known toxic ingredients, and working to increase salon owner and worker awareness of protective safety measures, including advocating for better safety information and training on toxic exposure. Underlying all of these efforts is the need to conduct more research in order to examine the long term health effects of working in nail salons and in the broader cosmetology industry. Women working in this low-wage sector should not have to choose between protecting their health and well-being, and protecting their livelihood.

For more information about the nail salon industry, see <http://womenshealthandtheenvironment.org> articles and other resources in English and Vietnamese.

