

Affordable beauty - but at what cost?

As the nail salon industry grows, health care officials worry about the risks Vietnamese workers face

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OPEN-TOED shoes, bikinis and vacationing folks have meant double the number of clients this summer for some nail salons, where customers get anything from manicures and pedicures to waxes and facials. The increase over the years of "discount salons" - now an unpopular term associated with unsanitary conditions - has brought down the price for a manicure from about \$25 to as low as \$7. As the nail salon industry has burgeoned, making mani/pedis affordable for the average Jane or Joe, demand for workers in the Vietnamese-heavy industry has increased.

About 80 percent of California's manicurists and salon owners are of Vietnamese descent, while the numbers are about 40 percent nationwide, according to NAILS, an industry trade magazine. As places like Oakland, San Francisco and San Jose become saturated with salons, entrepreneurs and workers are moving to suburbs and to other states. A cosmetology school director says that many of his graduates begin in an Oakland salon and then move on to work in or open shops in Fairfield, Pittsburg, Livermore, Walnut Creek, Pleasanton, Palo Alto and Mountain View.

California is home to about a quarter of the nation's nail technicians. The number of licensed manicurists in the state has tripled - from 35,000 in 1985 to 105,000 in 2005, according to the State Board of Cosmetology and Barbering. There are currently 38,000 cosmetology establishments in California, which includes nail shops, hair salons and barber shops. Despite some of the well-publicized sanitation issues focusing on consumers' health risks, including a recent lawsuit against a salon for an infection that allegedly led to a client's death, community health advocates say the mostly immigrant, limited English-speaking, and uninsured salon worker population is most at risk. While the idea of beauty and getting one's nails done conjures up pretty images, nail salon employees actually work with heavy, industrial-strength chemicals - including a few commonly used ingredients that are linked to birth defects and cancer.

Vietnamese cottage industry

"All are new immigrants," says Cecilia Ngu, longtime San Francisco nail salon

owner and now instructor at the International College of Cosmetology, gesturing toward the dozen or so manicurists-in-training practicing on clients. The school, which opened its San Francisco branch in May and already has 100 students, is just outside the border of Little Saigon near the Tenderloin district.

Ngu said that many of the students studying for their manicurist license have only been in the United States for a couple of months. They attend school for 400 hours - 2[1/2] months full time - compared to 600 hours for a skincare or 1,600 for a cosmetology license. In California and several other states, aspiring nail technicians can take the manicurist license and not have to know a word of English. Since 1996, 60,551 have taken the state's manicurist licensing test in Vietnamese, according to state board data. The only other language it's administered in is English, while the cosmetology test is only given in Spanish and English.

In total, there are 15,904 licensed manicurists in the nine-county Bay Area, and 1,286 in San Joaquin County. The largest numbers are in Santa Clara (6,562), Alameda (3,475) and Contra Costa (1,770) counties. A least 37,420 in the Bay Area are licensed as cosmetologists, who can also give manicures. Many attribute the relative ease of obtaining a license and the Vietnamese language test as reasons why so many Vietnamese turn to this industry. And as many salon workers have moved up to managers, owners and beauty product suppliers positions, people began paying attention to the buying power of Vietnamese salons.

Just this spring, three Vietnamese-language beauty and nail magazines launched at the same time. One of those is VietSALON, an offshoot of NAILS.

"The industry kind of grew once the Vietnamese opened up the market," says Hannah Lee, executive editor of NAILS and VietSALON.

Many interviewed say nail salon workers can make "good money," but the average nail technician makes \$18,500 a year and does not get benefits, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. As to why this has become a burgeoning industry, Oakland-based Asian Health Services outreach worker Kim Dung Nguyen says, "The younger generation is the one just arriving from Vietnam, and they have no English skills. You make a couple thousand dollars a month right away, and you don't need to know a lot of English. You go to Vietnamese beauty school, you get training, you pass the test. It's easy."

Salon workers in-training

Jimmy Luong dons wire-rimmed glasses, a lavender shirt, a matching tie and black slacks. At 49, Luong, who is of Chinese and Vietnamese descent, says his cosmetology school is "his baby." At his flagship International College of Cosmetology school, just a block from the Fruitvale BART station in Oakland, students listen attentively to a lecture in Vietnamese by an outreach worker from Asian Health Services.

Later, the outreach worker, Phuong An Doan-Billings, says the majority of workers in this industry are uninsured.

"For people who work in the nail salon industry, if you don't have children, or if you're under 65, you have to be on your own," she says.

Of the 40 or so students listening to the presentation in Vietnamese, 12 are men. Luong points out two men in their 50s who are taking the manicurist course; one of them, a 57-year-old, was recently laid off from work in the high-tech industry.

"We try to give them a chance to go to school," says Luong, who personally gives scholarships to those who can't afford the \$2,730 for the manicurist course, the cheapest one.

He points to an advertisement in Vietnamese that offers the course for \$750 and says he realizes many who seek work in this area are low income. At the Oakland school, which opened in 1999, Luong estimates he graduates 1,000 students a year with about 100 enrolled right now. The San Francisco school, which just opened in May, is on pace with the Oakland school. Many are studying for the manicurist license, while others are studying for skincare and cosmetology licenses. A cosmetology license allows one to practice nails, skincare and hair cutting.

Luong says that the demographics at his two schools are vastly different. In Oakland, more than 50 percent of his students are Vietnamese, while another 30 percent are other Asians such as Cambodian, Mien, Lao, Chinese and Thai. Another 20 percent are Latino. Luong predicts that Latinos will begin operating nail salons in the next few years. Luong says his San Francisco students are mostly recent Chinese immigrants.

His Oakland school, a neat, airy space where students diligently work on walk-in clients, boasts an 89 percent passing rate for licensing tests. Luong is a pioneer in the industry. As an immigrant in 1992, he took the manicurist course at the Hayward Beauty School, then began translating for other Vietnamese students. Soon, he began teaching at the school and then became a supervisor. Seven years later, he started the Oakland school.

"The first thing you do when you come to America, you're looking for someone who speaks your language," says Luong. At his Oakland and San Francisco schools, he has instructors who speak Vietnamese, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese. He sees his role very simply: by operating clean schools "with heart," he's helping new immigrants.

"I like to help give the people a chance." As for coming to America, he says, "If you think you come here for enjoyment, I don't think so. You either work, or you study."

Salon workers

Dozens of nail salons line International Boulevard, from the Eastlake district all the way to San Leandro. Similarly, 12 nail shops are within a 3-block span on Grand Avenue near Lake Merritt in Oakland. All are small, independently owned nail shops. Almost all are owned by Vietnamese. But within the nail shop world, salons differ. In a day-long visit to six nail salons with Lenh Tsan, an outreach worker for the Asian Law Caucus, she points out potential stops. Several on International Boulevard in East Oakland have gates with the door closed, and Tsan says the fumes in there are almost unbearable. A part of Tsan's work is to educate workers on how to protect themselves, including wearing gloves and more heavy-duty masks. Several workers began wearing eye goggles, to prevent eye irritation. At a shop in East Oakland, the shop manager, who goes by Pham, is concerned about getting fined by the state because they recently sent her a letter stating new sanitary regulations for foot baths.

"They always concentrate on the consumers, it's always been that way," says Pham, 50, as teenagers walk into the shop early afternoon to get their nails done. "When there is something wrong, they always point to the workers. That is the only time they talk about the workers."

Pham has worked in the industry for 16 years, and says she is concerned about longterm health problems, such as arthritis and repetitive stress syndrome. And one of her friends who has worked in the nail industry for many years has uterine cancer, but Pham said she doesn't think it's possible to get cancer from working in a salon. At the shops along Grand Avenue, most had doors open with clients walking in and out during the weekday afternoon.

Hai-Yen "Jeanie" Bui, 23, is an Oakland High School and Laney College graduate. She has worked in the salon industry for three years and currently works at a family salon on Grand Avenue. Bui says she's not concerned about the chemicals, several of which are linked to cancer or reproductive harm, only about the fumes that cause her eyes to water.

"If you look at all the bottles, nothing says anything about birth defects," she says.

Later, though, she says that in her training program, instructors taught them things about sanitation, disinfection, how to make people look pretty and client safety, but "they never talked about your own safety." Bui says she hopes to go back to school and teach cosmetology courses at Laney College. Jennifer Trinh, 51, owns a shop near downtown Oakland with one employee. Trinh, who supports her parents and two younger brothers, exudes older sister aura. She says she expected to go back to school when she came to the United States, but economic circumstances led her to work in the nail industry. Trinh says that when she sees a younger nail salon worker, she encourages them to work only part time and to get an education. At the same time, she doesn't see herself leaving this industry.

"I love all my customers," she says. "They are really nice to me. They taught me English. That's why I've stayed here for 16 years."

Though she loves her work, Trinh has had some health problems, including skin rashes. She has also heard of other nail salon workers having miscarriages, lung and liver cancer.

"I'm always scared (about the health risks)," she says. The rashes on her hands comes and goes, something, she says, that "never heals."

Health concerns

Of the many products used in a nail salon, several contain chemical compounds known to cause birth defects and cancer. Toluene, formaldehyde and dibutyl phthalate are just some of the common ingredients in nail polishes, hardeners and glues, and all are listed under California's Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986, more commonly known as the "Proposition 65 list," to either cause cancer or reproductive harm - such as birth defects or miscarriages. Other chronic health problems crop up among workers, from nose bleeds, infections, skin rashes, headaches and dizziness to difficulty in breathing.

"The majority of them know that the environment they work in is not healthy," says outreach worker Nguyen. "They are well aware when they smell the chemicals that it's not good for their health. But they have no choice, they come here, and that's the only skill they can learn right away to support their family when they just arrive to the U.S."

When asked how workers can and should protect themselves, Luong, who

operates the two cosmetology schools, says that he does train new workers on best practices, such as wearing dust masks. While dust masks may prevent large particles from being inhaled, such as nail filings, many chemicals still penetrate through. Some alternative products with less harmful ingredients exist, but few salons use them.

Alameda County's Green Business Program coordinator Pam Evans says that currently, they have not certified any nail salons in part because they are aware of the many toxic chemicals used in nail products. Evans says she is not even sure if it's possible to have a "green" nail salon, and that they would probably have to set up different standards for the industry.

"Meanwhile, we're just sort of staying away from it," she says.

Environmental groups, breast cancer research advocates, health care professionals and legislators have tried to regulate the billion-dollar cosmetics industry. A few years ago, Assemblywoman Judy Chu, D-Monterey Park, tried to ban phthalates in products (it's also used to make baby bottles, among other things), though unsuccessfully. Last year, the state approved Senate Bill 484 by state Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, which makes manufacturers of cosmetic products reveal if any of their ingredients contain chemicals on the Proposition 65 list. Currently, products are protected from releasing all ingredients because formulas are seen as "trade secrets," so oftentimes, workers don't know what chemicals they are working with. In addition, there's the myth that because there are no warning labels on the products then it must be safe to use. Ask cosmetics makers, and they will say only traces of those toxic chemicals exist. While customers are also exposed to toxic chemicals, salon workers - many who toil hours a day in poorly ventilated spaces just to make some extra money - are exposed day in and day out.

Luong is adamant that it's up to workers to protect themselves, a notion echoed by many instructors at his schools. But when asked what they can do and if they have control over their environment, he hesitates, then shakes his head.

"Yes, that is true," he says finally. "They don't have control."

New faces, same stories

Kim Dung Nguyen, an outreach worker for Asian Health Services, knows many friends who work in the industry. She says that three of her friends, all in their 40s and 50s who have worked in nail salons for more than 15 years, have had breast cancer, yet they are still working in the salons.

"But we cannot say it's because of the nail salons," says Nguyen, noting that there are no studies that have been done to determine whether working in a nail salon leads to cancer.

Many nail salon workers stay in the industry for decades, contrary to the myth that people only work in it for a couple of years and then transition to a different job. At the same time, immigrants now have role models to look up to - ones who are successful, like manager Pham, salon owner Trinh, school director Luong, and instructor Ngu. They can start at the very bottom, then work to become managers and then one day open up their own shop.

The relative ease of getting trained and licensed as a manicurist continues to funnel new immigrants to the field. And for many, a lifelong career in this industry just compounds health risks. Most do not have other skills to move on to another industry.

"Most of them stay (in this industry for) quite a long time," says Nguyen. "They have no choice, unless they can learn something else."

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