

Hairdressers: forgotten victims of cosmetic products with every reason to get grey hair?

Dimitra Penidis

Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, construction, industry and energy
(*Confédération des syndicats chrétiens, bâtiment, industrie et énergie*)

Every day, people working in the hairdressing sector in Europe face substantial occupational hazards, first and foremost through their exposure to cosmetic and chemical products, and scarcely anyone bats an eyelid. Women make up more than 80 per cent of the workers in this sector and they are the primary victims. In Belgium, a quarter of these women are forced to give up their profession before the end of their careers. One reason for these premature exits is to be sought in the skin disorders and allergies caused by cosmetic products and chemical substances that they use every day, without adequate protection.

It is, however, difficult to measure the exact extent of the problem, both at European and at national level. This is because of the glaring lack of statistics on and dedicated studies of the issue. Although we do have some information on the number and nature of accidents in the workplace and occupational illnesses in the hairdressing sector, many (female) workers in the sector do not speak out about occupational health or the health problems they face. All too often hairdressers resign themselves to their fate; quit their jobs and slip away unnoticed. François Laurent, trade union chair of the sectoral social dialogue, points out that 'there's an urgent need to raise the profile of the risks being run by people working in the hairdressing sector. It would be possible to prevent these early exits by means of information, training and awareness-raising and enable these workers to continue to practice the trade that they have chosen and that they love'.

Europe can do better!

When one sees the hard work that all the social partners in the sector have had to put in to reach a framework agreement on health and safety to be transposed into a European directive it is a shame that health and safety in this sector is not really a priority for the European Commission (see Box on the framework agreement). On this point François Laurent said: 'Although both the employers and the trade unions had reached agreement on improving working conditions and establishing better prevention in the hairdressing sector we were forced to change our approach. As it turned out, the REFIT simplification programme, together with pressure from certain EU member states, made the transposition process complex and opaque. It had to wait until Jean-Claude Juncker's presidency of the EC before we finally saw light at the end of the tunnel and resumed constructive dialogue. In Belgium, however, signing the health and

safety agreement, which exactly replicates the European framework agreement, encountered no problems. We even negotiated an annual (reimbursed) visit to a dermatologist.’

There are multiple professional hazards to workers’ health in the hairdressing sector. The most important concerns the contraction of skin disorders. Although the skin is a marvellous organ, it is a veritable sponge that absorbs the chemical components of cosmetic products or the nickel in certain hairdressing implements, such as scissors, tongs and clippers. Furthermore, working in such a humid environment only makes things worse, fostering the development of various occupational skin disorders, such as irritant contact dermatitis or allergic contact eczema. In many instances, such undesirable effects could be avoided simply by putting in place certain collective and individual protection measures, such as alternating wet and dry tasks, wearing adequate protective gloves (latex-free, preferably nitrile) and regular moisturisation of the hands using a neutral, fragrance-free protective cream.

Hazards include aerosols, products in powder form (especially bleaching powders with alkaline persulfates, which are highly volatile and remain in suspension in the air for a long time) and irritant ammonia vapours from certain colouring products, which cause many respiratory problems among hairdressers, such as rhinitis and asthma. Good ventilation of the hairdressing salon, as well as the use of products in non-volatile form, such as gels and granules, make it possible to considerably reduce occupational risks.

We must also not forget musculoskeletal disorders (MSD), tendonitis or other back complaints caused by prolonged standing, repetitive movements of the wrists and fingers and poor posture when performing various tasks. Here, again, possible preventive measures include task alternation and correct posture.

Are the dangers for pregnant women underestimated?

Other occupational hazards merit closer attention, including those caused by the use of cosmetic products by pregnant women or those of childbearing age. This issue again raises numerous questions. Their regular use is suspected of having negative effects on women (including lower fertility, miscarriages, early menopause, fibromyalgia and breast cancer) and on their unborn children (deformations and retarded growth of the foetus, premature birth, learning disabilities). Owing to the lack of detailed investigations, however, it has not yet been possible to establish formal links. Some national studies nonetheless offer advice on prevention and recommendations, such as adaptation of the workplace, job rotation or even simply abandoning this line of work. But even here national regulations within the EU diverge. It is high time to conduct a European inquiry and to introduce robust legislation in this area.

Cosmetic and chemical products are often factoring in the development of occupational hazards. The fact is, however, that there is no obligation on the part of the manufacturers of such products that pose a potential health risk to take into account the additional exposure of professionals in the hairdressing sector in the course of their work. The sole obligation incumbent upon them on the basis of the European Directive on cosmetic products is to evaluate the health risks to non-professional users. This state of affairs is even more absurd given the fact that hairdressers, who are mainly women of childbearing age, use these products several times each day, in shampooing, colouring, doing perms and bleaching. The manufacturers must, as a matter of urgency, put serious efforts into research and development on less harmful cosmetic products, provide adequate protective gloves (currently, these are only made available to non-professional users) and improve the readability of instructions for use, which all too often are framed in complex language and in very small print.

There can be no doubt of the urgent need to implement a real European health and safety plan for the sector that enshrines both the principle of prevention and the principle of substitution for dangerous substances. The same goes for toxicological studies and analyses concerning those working in the sector to clearly assess the risks to health and reproduction, thereby making it easier to legislate effectively and coherently. The European Commission should make particular efforts to promote instruments such as SafeHair (an information and awareness-raising tool developed by the social partners in the sector) and OIRA (Online Interactive Risk Assessment) for hairdressing. The European social partners in the sector will not rest in pursuit of these goals and are stepping up their joint initiatives aimed at improving hairdressers' working conditions and health and safety. It is time that the European Commission stepped up to the plate and properly recognised and supported their efforts and expertise.

Hairdressing sector in Europe: fact sheet

- Number of workers: around 1.5 million
- Share of personal services: 8 per cent of the personal services sector
- Status: chiefly made up of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and 'TPE' (very small enterprises)
- Proportion of women: above 80 per cent (mainly on part-time contracts)
- Number of salons per capita: on average 1 salon/10,000 people (the average is higher in Belgium, Italy and Finland)

The revision and signing of the European framework agreement on the protection of occupational health and safety in the hairdressing sector

Dimitris Theodorakis
UNI Europa

In January 2015 the social partners in the hairdressing sector (UNI Europa and Coiffure EU) decided to revise the agreement that had been reached by the sector's social dialogue committee. The agreement, signed in 2012, was blocked by the European Commission, which was under pressure from certain EU member states that sought to oppose it. Following the social partners' desire to have the agreement implemented the revision process was initiated with the European Commission's Legal Service.

The aim of the agreement is to enhance the protection of occupational health and safety in the hairdressing sector, in which the majority of workers are young women. Work-related illnesses are prevalent in the sector, which has a high staff turnover for that reason. The agreement concerns occupational health and safety measures, ergonomic measures and principles of work organisation. The main elements of the agreement include the wearing of gloves when using hazardous substances, adopting a healthy posture while working to prevent musculoskeletal disorders later on and avoiding or substituting the use of products identified as problematic. In addition to combating precarious employment in the sector the agreement seeks protection against skin complaints, musculoskeletal disorders and breathing disorders, while ensuring good coverage of workers, regardless of status. The agreement is also aimed at covering self-employed hairdressers working alongside regular employees and employers in order to obtain the same degree of social protection. Since 2012 the European Commission had been blocking legal implementation of the agreement by the social partners and had been exerting pressure to exclude the self-employed and to avoid conflict with existing regulations on cosmetic products. The social partners, however, jointly managed to ensure broad coverage of all workers in the same salon, whatever their status.

The revision and signing of the text represent a victory for the sector, for workers' health and safety and for the European trade union movement as a whole. The agreement enshrines the principle of prevention and strengthens the substitution principle with regard to hazardous substances. It covers self-employed workers whose work activities can have a negative impact on the health and safety of regular workers in the same salon. When it is implemented, the agreement will make it possible to protect occupational health and safety, help to reduce the costs borne by the social security and health insurance systems and promote sustainable working conditions in the sector. The European Commission has modified its position on a highly contentious issue, especially extension of the coverage of the agreement. The social partners hoped from the outset to include the self-employed alongside employees in the same hairdressing salon. The Commission initially rejected their position, but eventually they were able to have the European legal definition of 'worker' included in the agreement and to procure equal coverage for the self-employed when their activities can have a negative impact on employees' health and safety in the same salon. The agreement could set a precedent. If the activities of self-employed workers verifiably have a negative impact on the health and safety of employees in the same workplace they must be included within the scope of application of agreements arising from the

European social dialogue. By extension, that could also be applied to all sectors whose workers are susceptible to negative occupational health and safety effects from self-employed workers working alongside them. The agreement is a concrete example of what can be achieved for protection of workers' rights through the sectoral social dialogue.

The social partners in the hairdressing sector have been able, after numerous disappointments and many assaults on their autonomy and legitimacy, to instigate a proposal of social legislation at the European level, acting on the basis of the rights conferred on them by the European treaties. The agreement and its implementation by a decision of the Council now hinges on the European Commission, which has to undertake an assessment of the agreement in accordance with the principle of 'smart regulation', before putting it before the European Council to decide on its implementation.