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Behind the beauty routine

While social media fuels the booming beauty industry, who supports the workers keeping both alive?

The rise of social media and the growth of the beauty industry over the past decade have been symbiotic. In hairdressing, this relationship has not only restructured the market for beauty products but also set new trends in haircare techniques and styles. It has fuelled an insatiable demand for hairdressing services, while simultaneously enabling consumers to recreate professional looks at home, leading to a boom in DIY beauty routines.

Yet, despite this marriage of convenience between the beauty industry and social media – with the occasional nods to environmental sustainability and inclusivity – the gaze has seldom landed on those at the heart of it all: the beauty workers themselves.

Significant challenges

As demand for hairdressing services has grown, the European hairdressing industry has faced significant challenges, chief among them the shrinking pool of salon employees. This has forced governments across Europe to address recruitment issues. While many employers, governments and the EU itself tend to frame shortages as a skills mismatch – proposing training programmes or importing workers as solutions – few officials are willing to openly acknowledge how working conditions and pay contribute to recruitment struggles.

One exception to this trend is Christie Morreale, the former Walloon Minister of Employment, who recently reported a 'critical' labour shortage in the hairdressing sector in francophone Belgium, citing unconventional working conditions, insufficient training and undeclared work. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the crisis, as many qualified hairdressers, having weathered prolonged closures and uncertainty, have chosen to leave the profession altogether.

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pay and working hours, play a role in the sector's declining attractiveness. This year, part-time jobs with fixed-term contracts made up the largest chunk of hairdresser job offers in Belgium. Despite a significant wage increase a decade ago, pay remains relatively low, deterring many potential workers.

Similarly, in France, the sector is struggling to recruit 10 000 workers, equivalent to 20 per cent of the required workforce. French recruitment specialists attribute these difficulties to the impact of non-standard work schedules on work-life balance and the physically demanding nature of the job.

The expectation to work evening and Saturday shifts places a particular strain on employees in the hairdressing industry, especially women with children. Balancing personal and professional commitments has become a tightrope walk, compounding the sector's labour shortages. In Germany, limited morning shifts have discouraged mothers from re-entering the field after parental leave, further exacerbating the gap. Since the pandemic, women's employment in the German hairdressing sector has dropped by seven per cent, while men's participation has risen by four per cent — a shift that starkly underscores the gendered pressures forcing some to leave the profession.

All this is hardly surprising. Across Europe, the sectors struggling most to attract and retain employees within EU member states tend to be those where workers are bound by precarious contracts, pressured to meet tight deadlines and often scheduled for unsocial hours.

Tackling skills shortages

Shortages are also tied to a lack of skilled personnel as on-the-job training remains essential. Currently, Norwegian hairdressing unions are fighting to preserve the comprehensive education and training system that has supported the sector for decades. In larger salons, however, skilled hairdressers now earn the same wages as unskilled staff, removing incentives for further training. Yet, such training has proven invaluable not only for improving service quality but also worker health and safety.

Moreover, these larger employers in Norway are increasingly reluctant to take on apprentices. Salons prioritise accelerated service delivery at the cost of offering only simple 15-minute dry cuts — no washing, blow-

drying or dyeing. This shift, along with the rising numbers of self-employed hairdressers, threatens the apprenticeship system by reducing opportunities for aspiring hairdressers to acquire a full range of skills.

Germany has also recognised that well-trained workers can remedy labour shortages in manual occupations, including hairdressing. Last year, the German government raised bonuses for the 'master of crafts' qualification, seeing it as contributing to the sustainability of companies.

In other contexts, further training is viewed as the means to stem the labour shortages. Belgian unions are working closely with employers and the educational sector to improve the curriculum and draw in more students. Coach Belgium, for example, is a training centre for hairdressers and beauticians, funded jointly by employers and unions.

Solidarity in vogue

In Belgium, the collective bargaining agreement signed in June 2024, after nearly a year of negotiations, offers improved benefits but falls short of delivering a substantial wage increase. It includes some boosts in social benefits – support for childcare, dermatology and osteopathy visits and long-term illness coverage – but these measures expire in two years, requiring fresh negotiations.

Wage increases above the inflation index remain prohibited. Stefan Van Linden, president of the Hair & Beauty sector at the trade union federation UNI Europa, remarked: 'A 2017 law by the right-wing government blocks any margin to negotiate better wages for hairdressers. Meanwhile, employers wonder why employees are in short supply.'

One of the recent success stories of the trade union movement in hairdressing emerges from Italy. In preparing for their latest round of collective bargaining, Italian unions consulted their predominantly young and female members, who identified work-life balance and a living wage for apprentices as their primary concerns.

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By tailoring their negotiating strategy to reflect the sector's specific gender and age dynamics, the unions won a substantial pay increase of €183 and the implementation of a seniority pay scale for apprenticeships. Notably, they secured an additional two months of paid leave for employees who were victims of gender-based violence. These victories not only bolster the sector's sustainability by improving retention

field for businesses and diminishing the impact of informal work on the sector.

among young workers but also emphasise the unions' commitment to addressing pressing gender issues as labour issues.

Collective bargaining has emerged as a powerful avenue for improving wages, working conditions and access to up-to-date training for employees, while also ensuring a level playing field for businesses and diminishing the impact of informal work on the sector. UNI Europa, the European trade union federation representing workers in personal services, is supporting unions' efforts to improve working conditions, a work that builds on the commitments of Coiffure EU and UNI Europa from the landmark 2016 European framework agreement.

'With a workforce largely composed of women, advancing collective bargaining means addressing the issues that disproportionately affect them, ensuring their fair treatment, health and recognition. We hope not only to draw new people into the sector but also to demonstrate the impact of collective action and empower existing employees', said Oliver Roethig, UNI Europa's regional secretary. These priorities align closely with those of European Commissioner-designate for People, Skills and Preparedness, Roxana Mînzatu, who emphasised her commitment to strengthening social dialogue and collective bargaining.

As the beauty industry continues to flourish in the wake of social media, it is essential that we direct the 'ring light' to the dedicated professionals who sustain it, ensuring that they receive the recognition, support and resources necessary to thrive in the sector.



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