Overview of economic and labour market trends and occupational health and safety issues in the hairdressing sector

Economic structure of the sector

There are between 400,000 – 500,000 hairdressing establishments in the European Union which receive around 350 million potential customers per year. Italy has the largest number of businesses in the sector (73,000 in 2012), followed by Germany and France (over 65,000 businesses per country). The sector is also sizable in terms of number of businesses in the Czech Republic, Poland, Spain and the UK (more than 35,000 businesses respectively).

Overall, the trend development in the sector over the last decade is one of growth. This is true for 13 out of the 18 countries which could provide trend data. The most recent sector specific information shows growth rates of between around 12% (Estonia, France and Germany) to 149% (Malta). However, a few countries (e.g. Denmark, Greece and Lithuania) witnessed a trend decline of the last decade. Figures from the years of the height of the economic crisis throughout the EU show the significant impact of economic trends on the earnings and growth potential of the sector. Economic trends play the most important role influencing the ‘health’ of hairdressing businesses, as clients increase the period between appointments or forego more costly treatments during times of strained household budgets.

The hairdressing sector is dominated by SMEs and micro-enterprises, with the average businesses consisting of five hairdressers (often one owner operator and four staff members). In recent years, the share of micro companies (ranging from companies run by owner operators to those having up to 2 employees) and franchised salons has grown at the expense of what can be considered to be ‘small’ businesses in the sector (between 3-10 employees). This is largely due to the expansion and increasing national (and in some cases trans-national) brand recognition of certain companies and due to policies to support self-employment. Franchised salons now constitute between 6% (Spain) and 23% (UK) of the sector in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK.

At an EU average, the share of owner operated businesses without employees is between 50-60% of all businesses in the sector. In term of individuals active in this sector, the share of owner operators without employees stands at around 27%.

Labour market trends in the sector

Around 1 million individuals are active in the hairdressing sector in the European Union. On average, the hairdressing sector makes up approximately 0.5% of total employment in the Member States. Germany has the largest number of employees in the sector (around 274,000), followed by other large Member States including Poland, France, Italy and Spain.

According of Eurostat data, self-employment in the sector (which includes self-employed with and without employees) ranges between 26% and 57% of total individuals active in the sector. There are significant variations between countries The share of self-employed is lowest (below 30%) in Austria and Ireland and highest (above 50%) in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Sweden. Self-employment is significantly more prevalent in this sector than in the economy as a whole.

Employment in hairdressing is highly female dominated, characterised by a young workforce with vocational level qualifications at ISCED level 3 or 4 and is relatively low paid. Around nine out of ten individuals active in the sector are women. Although there are some differences between countries, even where they share of men is higher, it does not exceed two out of five workers. Part-time working is also more prevalent than in the economy as a
whole (between 33-40%). Anecdotal evidence shows that migrant workers make up an increasing share of the workforce in many countries.

As can partly be deduced from the age profiles of those active in the sector, staff turnover is relatively high. Based on existing studies, a recent EU-OSHA report refers to an annual staff turnover rate of 15%, which is around twice of average measured across all sectors. Evidence from stakeholders and the medical-scientific literature indicates that up to 45% of hairdressers leave the sector because of work related health problems, prime among them being hand eczema. Studies show that this condition often arises very quickly after starting work in the sector, whereas other health impairments can take longer to emerge. Nonetheless, MSDs and asthma have also been shown as significant reasons for leaving the sector. In a Danish study by Lysdal (2011), which found that around 45% of ex-hairdressers gave hand eczema as the main reason for leaving, a further 30% quoted MSDs and 10% asthma. The latter two were more often reported as reasons in combination with other health complaints whereas hand eczema is more likely to act as the sole health reason for the change of occupation among hairdressers.

Undeclared work is seen by many as a significant challenge facing the sector, presenting issues for consumers, individual workers and formal businesses operating in the hairdressing industry. The Belgian tax authorities estimate the size of the undeclared economic in the sector to be in the region of 30% of the sector's overall turnover. Other studies place this figure even higher. Evidence from the Member States suggests that it is the level of taxation and other charges payable by registered businesses rather than health and safety legislation which push individuals to operate in the undeclared sector.

**Industrial relations in the sector**

Collective bargaining coverage varies significantly between Member States, from 100% (e.g. Finland, France, Italy and the Netherlands) over countries with a high level of coverage (around 70-80%, e.g. Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria) to countries with no sectoral bargaining (e.g. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the UK). Even in countries where there is no collective bargaining in the sector, there is often social dialogue, including on health and safety issues (e.g. UK, Poland).

**Overview of OSH problems in the sector**

According to EU-OSHA, OSH risks affecting the sector include ergonomic factors; exposure to hazardous substances; biological factors (hygiene); physical factors; electrical risks; slips, trips and falls; burns and cuts; fire risks and psychological factors. The most important risks have been demonstrated to revolve around exposure to hazardous substances and resulting dermatological and respiratory diseases and musculo-skeletal disorders resulting from poor ergonomic workplace adaptations. A recent analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey (Eurofound, 2013) indicates that hairdressers are more likely to report exposure to vibrations, breathing in dangerous vapours, being in skin contact with chemicals, work in tiring positions and carry out repetitive movements compared to workers in other sectors.

Data from the Danish Work environment authority shows that for both skin diseases and MSDs, the incidence of work related illness is significantly higher in the hairdressing sector than in other sectors of the economy. For skin diseases the incidence is almost 10 times higher. Furthermore, hairdressers have a higher probability of developing hand eczema that a randomly selected control group (Lind et al (2007)).

Research on respiratory disorders among hairdressers shows that the prevalence of certain conditions is higher among hairdressers than workers in other sectors or in the wider
population. Despite taking longer to manifest, the prevalence of MSDs is also high among hairdressers. In Member States where such data are available, there is evidence that alongside skin disorders, MSDs can be 5-30 times more prevalent among hairdressers than among other occupations (GHK, 2011).