Women, Haircuts and the Price of Self-Esteem

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WHEN Ann Snitow, a professor of literature and gender studies at the New School for Social Research, had her curly hair straightened a year ago, the compliments from friends were lavish and immediate. Since then, Professor Snitow, 65, has been a regular customer at Marie Bové Salon on East 20th Street, near Broadway, where she returns about once a week for maintenance.

She was swathed in one of the salon’s brown robes on Wednesday, sitting on one of its revolving chairs, when she was asked to explain the place of a good haircut in a professional New York woman’s life, a pressing question in an age of tenuous employment and high costs. An assistant was sweeping up, and stylists were resting between customers by the shampooing station, behind two Ionic columns.

“It’s part of identity,” Professor Snitow began, but acknowledged, “It’s not the same as food and rent and mortgage.”

While she is sensitive to consequences of the economy and aware of how bad things can get in a depression, she said, she also knows the importance of presentation, especially in Manhattan, where so much of life is lived in public and spending on grooming feels a little less discretionary.

“Things would have to be even worse than they are now for me to cut my haircuts,” she said. “I don’t treat it as a luxury. I treat it as being an acceptable, professional person.”

The cost of keeping up may soon rise, if only slightly. As part of his proposed budget, Governor Paterson hopes to expand the state sales tax to apply to haircuts, as the city’s tax already does. It would add about 4 percent to the cost of a trim, and would come at a time when hairdressers say they are seeing some customers less frequently or are hearing fewer requests for pricier services like coloring.

It would seem a worrisome development for stylists and salons. But at Marie Bové, which is near the middle of the pricing scale in the city, and where the average cut or color costs $150 to $200, haircutters said they were not too worried. Dino LaValle, a nine-year
veteran of the Manhattan hairdressing scene who works at the salon, said that although any new cost would be a cause for concern, there were certain eternal truths.

“People are vain,” he said. “They still want to look good. No matter what, their hair is going to grow, and if they like you, they’re going to come to you to cut it.”

Lisa Greco, a manager of the salon, has seen signs of strain: Some unemployed customers arrive for their appointments armed with résumés for their hairdressers to pass along discreetly to better-connected clients. Marina Moldavsky, a stylist, said that some customers who pay $85 for a haircut were refugees from more expensive salons where they were paying $150. And they are less likely to arrive in a taxi. “I had a lady, she walked 20 blocks today,” she said.

Sian Griffiths, a 26-year-old Englishwoman who had come for a quick appointment before boarding a flight to London, knows the financial crisis well; she was laid off from JPMorgan Chase & Company in November. People who are like her and her former co-workers, she said, make up the bulk of the customer base at a midrange salon like Marie Bové, she said. It seems inevitable, she said, that hairdressers, who depend on tips for a major part of their income, will begin to suffer as their clients in the financial industry get poorer.

Then, sounding a bit like the Wall Streeter she was, she said, “I just think in an economic crisis, sales taxes are a really flawed way of generating revenue because sales taxes decrease spending.”

Her blond hair bouncing as she spoke, Ms. Griffiths said she felt for the stylists.

At the moment, though, the customers may not mind so much. Professor Snitow, for one, said that while running out of money would keep her away, an 8.625 percent tax would not.

“I’ll put it this way,” she said, “I’ll save my money on hair when it doesn’t matter what women look like anymore. When the feminist revolution is entirely achieved, I’ll save money on hair.”
auditors in the financial crisis.

and the right are in agreement more than they realize.