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Can hair extensions be ethical?

Virtually every female celebrity, from Cheryl Cole to Kate Moss, has had hair extensions. But where does it come from?



Helen Brown

Virtually every female celebrity, from Cheryl Cole to Kate Moss, has succumbed to the lure of the oomph-giving hair extension. The rest of us can't help ourselves, either: the industry is now worth £65m a year in the UK alone. And while it may be dislodged tendrils or post-extension bald patches that are caught by the paparazzi wide-angle, what has generated a more worrying media story is the origin of the hair that is being used.

Four years ago, the deputy director of Moscow's Centre for Prison Reform confirmed that some prison wardens were shaving inmates' heads as a way of earning extra cash, while the editor of the ethical shopping directory The Good Shopping Guide had reports of asylum patients' hair being sold to extension companies.

Of course, if your extensions are synthetic, where they come from is immaterial. But when the choice is between real hair with a natural swing, which can be styled as normal, and synthetic hair that may frazzle if your dryer is on anything higher than a chill setting, which would you choose? These days, thankfully, it is possible to find ethically sourced real hair extensions.

It's a hot topic, and one that the pop star Jamelia has embraced in the upcoming BBC documentary *Whose Hair Is It Anyway?*, which examines the origins of hair used for extensions in the UK. Her inquiries take her on a journey from a nightclub in Essex to Moscow, where a shifty-looking hair dealer explains that he has collectors all over Russia who source hair for him. Despite insisting that the hair comes only from reputable sources, and none of it is taken from the dead, the margin for error seems wide. That's not to mention the fact that, on visiting rural parts of the country, you see posters offering £20 for a whole head of hair — a

price that begs the question as to whether donors are being exploited.

Jamelia's research also takes her on a second journey, from a forensics lab in this country to a Hindu temple in India. There, she finds that some women are only too happy to sacrifice their hair. "It was a month that changed my life," says the singer. "Never had I placed so much importance on hair. I wanted to find out what these women were like and why they would give their hair."

As Jamelia discovers, in certain parts of India, women sacrifice their hair as an offering to the deities, a process known as tonsuring. She witnesses them visiting a temple in Chennai, where their heads are shaved by a man wielding a cut-throat razor. She is told that the women hope the act will bring them good fortune — whether finding a husband or just keeping a roof over their heads. Of course, they don't know their hair is being sold on to extensions manufacturers — a fact the singer finds incredible, until she discovers that the high priest redirects the money back into the community, using it to feed the local homeless population.

Such acts at least give our western vanity a benevolent gloss. It is through the tonsuring process that the extensions company Great Lengths sources its hair, from the Tirumala Hindu temple in Andhra Pradesh. It prides itself on having its own factories and a full-time employee in India, who ensures the money is channelled back into the community to fund schools, orphanages and hospitals. With an annual turnover of £80m and a yearly growth of 25%-30%, it is a strategy that is paying off — although even the company would probably admit that this is more likely due to the quality of the extensions than an overwhelming desire among clients to have their crowning glory ethically sourced.

"Hair has a cuticle that runs from root to tip," says David Gold, the founder of Great Lengths. "The hair extension has to be attached in the same direction as the natural hair, or it will tangle." As hair provided through tonsuring is taken in one go, it is easy to ensure that it all runs in the same direction, making it easier for the wearer to manage. Hence, the matted tangles, common among manmade extension wearers, are avoided.

Sadly, such ethical hair extensions are still in the minority, so rigorous probing is a must. "It is important to push the shop- or salon-owner to ask exactly where the hair came from and, if they don't know, to take your business elsewhere," says Jamelia. "We mustn't think only about ourselves and our own vanity."

When I raised the issue with a spokesperson from the Fairtrade Foundation, she responded: "How would this be relevant to fair trade?" which suggests there are greater lengths to go yet.

Smooth talking

Worried about tangles and rats tail-like tendrils? Hairdresser and extensions expert Errol Douglas offers this advice:

* Have a thorough consultation first. It is a lengthy process so you need at least 45 minutes in which to explain how the extensions will sit, how the hair will be cut and how it will feel.

* Hair extensions can go a bit crazy overnight so it is good to tie it up at night.

* Make sure your operator knows how you will style your hair so they can fit the extensions accordingly. If you pull your hair up, for example, and the extensions are too close to the root, the effect will be unnatural and unflattering.

* Try to match up the texture of the extension with your own hair, and not just the colour, as this will make it easier to style.

* Beware of using the wrong brush. Avoid small round brushes and go for big paddle brushes instead. Or try a Tangle Teezer (£9.99; www.hqhair.com) to gently pull out knots.

* Don't use products that are not oily as these may cause the extension to slip. Similarly, only apply conditioner to the mid lengths and ends of hair.

* Don't rub the hair too vigorously when shampooing. Instead, massage it gently with the balls of your fingertips.

* Give your hair a holiday after each set of hair extensions. You need to leave your hair extension-free for 3-6 months to give it a chance to recuperate. Make sure you have plenty of scalp treatments in between too.

Jamelia's Whose Hair Is It Anyway? will be aired later this month on BBC3. To find a Great Lengths salon, call 0113 216 3070