

Challenges for Organizing the Beer Promotion Women in Cambodia

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Introduction

The worldwide financial crisis has caused huge damage to Cambodia's tourism, garment manufacturing and construction sectors. Those sectors comprise three of the Southeast Asian kingdom's four economic pillars (besides agriculture) and the bulk of its economic growth over the past decade. Tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs in the past 16 months or are earning less than before.

In Cambodia, women have already been particularly affected by the crisis, as they play a crucial role in the economy but are most likely to be low-paid and exploited. Women do much of the agricultural work, run the fresh food markets, and run other stalls and shops. On top of this, they continue to do the majority of the housework and childrearing.

Importantly, women also form the majority of the workforce in the formal sector, in Cambodia's export industries. The garment industry is Cambodia's largest export industry and has employed some 400,000 workers, mainly young rural women, over the past decade, bringing thousands of rural women to urban centres. Wages are very low and the women workers scrape by, living a very basic lifestyle. They are obliged to send part of their earnings back home to their poverty-stricken rural families, leaving them even less to subsist on. Many women who are without education or skills do unskilled construction work.

But since the global economic crisis, more than 51,000 garment workers have lost their jobs, and there have also been major lay-offs in the tourism, hospitality and construction sectors. All of this has meant that tens



Beer promotion woman wearing her uniform with prominent logos of Angkor Beer. Photo: CLC

of thousands of women in Cambodia have recently gone from low wages to no wages. Many are now left little choice but to return to their rural villages and seek new livelihoods. As the financial crisis continues to bite, many of the women who have lost their jobs will turn to low-paid hospitality or other service sector work, becoming so-called 'entertainment workers' – beer promotion and karaoke restaurant workers. Such jobs contribute to the important tourism industry, which has also stimulated the rise in related informal employment such as 'tuk-tuk' (motorcycle taxi) drivers and other informal service work.

In this article, we relate the working conditions of beer promotion women (also called 'beer garden workers', or commonly, 'beer girls') of Cambodia, and the efforts of the Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation (an affiliate of the Cambodian Labour Confederation) to organize them.

Note: Much of the data in this article is based on the collaboration research between Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and Cambodian Food and Service-Workers Federation (CFSWF), an affiliate of the Cambodian Labour Confederation and organizer of beer promotion women. The target group of this research was beer promotion women in Phnom Penh and the research was implemented by conducting a workshop and direct follow-up interviews. 101 beer promotion workers participated in the research workshop and they were from four beer companies; 45.5% of the workers were from Cambrew, 39.6% from Cambodia Breweries Ltd (CBL), 3.9% from Adwood (Heineken) and 10.8% from Asahi. (See Table 1 on p. 30.)

The full report will be made available on AMRC website: www.amrc.org.hk.

General Information

'Beer promotion women' (hereafter, BPWs) are a relatively new phenomena in Cambodia. Their job is to promote a specific brand of beer or other alcohol, and they work in beer gardens, restaurants, private parties and other entertainment establishments. Marketing research by beer companies has suggested that BPWs help increase beer sales, especially when the girls sit and socialize with customers.

Over 4,000 women and girls are engaged in the promotion of beer and alcohol in beer gardens, karaoke bars and local restaurants in Cambodia. This business attracts vulnerable young women and girls.

Many international beers are marketed in Cambodia with beer promotion women, and similar techniques are now being introduced into the rapidly expanding China market (see Bouma, 2003; van Luyn, 2004; van Pinxteren, 2004, at www.beergirls.org). The Interbrew family (recently renamed 'InBrew') is currently expanding and has marketed during the past two years a number of their international brands including: 'Three Horses' from the Netherlands, Stella Artois, Cass, Beck's, Labatt's, Hoegaarden, as well as Bass Pale Ale from the UK. Many other brands are marketed by the beer promotion women as well.

The Beer Brands

The majority of all of the brands sold by beer promotion women in Cambodia are imported from regional breweries, and distributed via locally managed distribution companies. There are just two breweries in Cambodia – Cambodia Breweries Ltd (CBL) and Cambrew, the national brewery. CBL has the license to brew and distribute Tiger, ABC Stout, Anchor, Anchor Strong and Crown beers. Cambrew produces and distributes its own-label beers of Angkor, Bayon, and Black Panther.

All beer which is brewed outside of Cambodia then legally imported, is distributed by one of seven companies: Anco Sutl., Asia Sunrise, Attwood Import and Export Co. Ltd., Duong Chhiv Import Export and Transport Co., Hak Soon Import Export Co. Ltd., Hosten Distributor and Soon Soon Import and Export Co. Ltd.

Beer is also reported to be imported illegally into

Table 1. Beer companies in Cambodia - No. and share of beer promotion workers (from AMRC/CFSWF survey)

Beer Companies	No. of workers	%
Cambrew	46	45.5
CBL	40	39.6
Adwood (Heineken)	4	3.9
Asahi	11	10.8
Total =	101	100

Cambodia, and sold without payment of the required import tax. The issue of illegal importation of beer has been said by legal companies to be a threat to their companies' ability to either maintain or expand their existing market share. Although the amount of beer which is illegally imported into Cambodia is unknown and therefore is difficult to assess how much risk illegal importation poses to the business of legal breweries and distributors in Cambodia, the issue of illegal imports remains, which also implies that more women are required to promote these new legally imported brands.

Recruitment

Beer promotion workers are recruited by beer companies and nearly all beer companies operating in Cambodia have women beer promotion workers who promote their products. Prominent examples include: Angkor, Anchor, Tiger, and Heineken beers.

Beer promoters are contracted by beer companies/distributors and as such are not regarded as direct employees. At the discretion of the beer company, however, they may be entitled to limited employee benefits (e.g. access to medical care).

Women hired for these positions are generally young and attractive, and are often asked to wear revealing, branded uniforms representing the beer they competitively sell in Cambodia's bars, restaurants, and beer gardens. They often sit and talk with the primarily male clientele, and continuously encourage them to drink their brand, pouring additional beer into the glass, opening new bottles or cans, adding ice to cool the beer, and drinking glasses of beer themselves.

Most beer distributors hire these young women from poor families with promises that they will earn plenty of money and be taken care of, and then throw them into the fray with less than an hour of training, and paying them only for what they sell. This comes to an average monthly salary of US \$50-55, which is less than half of what it costs just to survive. The young women are under heavy pressure by their employers to do anything that is necessary to sell the beer, and that means they have to drink with each of the men buying from her, often ending up very drunk at the end of the night.

Working Conditions/Employment Contracts

The 1997 Labour Law is the most up-to-date and comprehensive legislation governing the infrastructure, employment and treatment of workers in Cambodia. Under Article 3, 'workers' refers to every person of any sex and nationality, who has signed an employment contract in return for remuneration, under the direction and management of another person. Therefore, with the

exception of those working in the informal sector (for example street traders and domestic helpers), all female workers including beer promoters, garment factory workers and karaoke hostesses are entitled to their rights and benefits under the Labour Law.

The Labour Law has strong provisions to protect women against harassment and abuse in their workplaces. However it seems that public knowledge and legal enforcement of these laws is low or non-existent (CARE Cambodia, 2005).

Currently, even though the labour law requires a proper contract between workers and employers, the form of contract of BPWs with employers is still not clear. According to the workers surveyed, 10.8% were verbally contracted workers and 90% were non-verbally contracted workers (some of the non-verbally contracted workers were on probationary contracts which had only three months, which, after renewal, would be extended to six months and then one year.)

One hundred percent of BPWs said they were working on a full-time basis or for eight hours a day, for a beer company/distributor. In general, beer promotion workers congregate at the offices in the early afternoon and are subsequently dropped off at pre-identified restaurants. Changes in these 'assignments' take place only if the restaurant has few clients. In fact, some of them worked less than eight hours and others worked more than eight hours per day, because some of the jobs were shift work. In cases of overtime work, it was the responsibility of the company to pay an addition US\$20 per month to workers, according to the additional shift work done. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Working hours of beer promotion workers (from AMRC/CFSWF survey)

Working Hours	No.	%
5 Hours	65	64.3
7 Hours	15	14.8
10 Hours	21	20.7
Total =	101	100



Union organizer Ms. Ou Tephalin trains beer promotion workers on the impact of alcohol on workers' health.

Photo: CLC

Service Expected from BPWs

Each night, young Cambodian women wear branded uniforms and compete to sell different beers in venues including beer gardens, restaurants, soup shops, and karaoke clubs. Working in Phnom Penh and across the country, the beer promoters mainly provide two types of services:

1- In restaurants, karaoke lounges, and beer gardens:

When customers are seated around the table, beer promotion women from all the companies approach the table to promote their product. They advertise the quality of the beer, inform customers of any promotions and sit and serve the customer if they order their product.

2- At private parties:

Generally, at private parties the BPWs promote one beer and one wine/liquor, depending on the choice of the host. They pour drinks for the guests, provide ice, and ensure the guests always have full drinks. They generally do not sit and serve guests at private parties.

For instance, when you go to have drinking and dining at night at a restaurant or beer garden, there will be a lot of BPWs standing around you and asking you to 'drink my beer, drink my beer'. Sometimes, just as you reach the entrance of the restaurant, the girls will walk with you and hold your hands as well.

Besides the income they earn from their monthly salary and commissions, some of them play another role, of sex worker; they go to sleep with guests, if they agree to go with them. At this point, some guests do not respect the BPWs' rights because they view them as sex workers.

Some others only work for their wage or some extra commissions to support their family. Thus, some

women who work and serve as sex workers, undermine the reputations of other girls and women who do not. Generally, most people always regard the BPWs' work as being not good jobs.

Types of Occupational Hazard —a 'toxic workplace'

The female labour force participation rate is increasing, particularly among young women in sectors where the pay is low – the garment industry, beer promotion, karaoke and waitressing - and the low pay and poor work conditions also push many of the women into sex work for additional income.

In the Cambodian outlets, the women find themselves working not in a convivial entertainment venue as in other countries, but in a sinister, dangerous and sometimes 'toxic' workplace, in terms of workers' health and safety. They face: i) forced drinking with customers and nightly alcohol overuse (1.5 litres of beer nightly, 27 days monthly); ii) on-the-job nightly impairment with blood alcohol concentrations averaging almost 0.05g/100ml; iii) the non-provision to beer-sellers of a 'living wage' to feed their families, with 50% underpayment, in turn forcing half the women to exchange sex for money 2 to 2.5 times monthly; iv) reduced condom usage after heavy drinking with customers, increasing the consequent risk of infection from HIV/AIDS (prevalence rates 21.7%, 1995-2003); v) nightly exposure to physical and verbal abuse and sexual harassment, and vi) non-universal access to life-saving anti-retroviral therapy (ARVT) or highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART) for HIV-positive beer-sellers, and the industry's refusal to provide free treatment to its women workers, while providing HAART to male brewery workers (since 2003 in Cambodia).

Some companies prohibit beer promotion women from sitting with or drinking with customers as a way of reducing harassment. But within venues, women fall under the effective control of outlet owners and managers. Some of these owners/managers respect the women's refusal to sit with customers and drink. Others threaten the women that if they do not generally pander to customers then the owner will complain about them (on made-up grounds) to the company (CARE Cambodia, 2005, p. 20).

Outlet owners (along with the customers who consume the beer) are seen as important customers, crucial to brewery and distributor sales success. So, even though the workers get paid by the beer company, some restaurant owners and managers order them to do more jobs

in the restaurant that are unpaid, such as serving food or cleaning tables. The restaurant owners and managers use their power over BPWs, threatening that if they don't comply they will tell the BPW's manager to move her to other restaurants or workplaces where it is harder to get clients. Thus the BPWs feel they have to follow what the restaurant owners and managers say, in order to keep their stable work.

Working Conditions: Payment System

Although salary structures vary between beer companies, US\$50 per month is an average salary. Beer promoters are required to submit their sales figure on a daily basis.

In the case of beer promoters who were on the company payroll, they would generally receive their salaries on a monthly basis. Incomes were between US\$30-40 per month although some could get up to US\$100 due to their beauty, youth, and 'courteousness'. Only two companies, Cambodia Brewery Limited and Cambrew Ltd., paid fixed salaries per month. The former paid US\$40 and the latter US\$30 for new recruits. Interestingly, they majority of employers, representing 75% of the total, stated that they issued the workers' wages based on the amount of beer sold. Wages are reduced on a percentage basis if promoters fail to reach monthly sales targets, but workers are paid commission on an individual basis if beer sales exceed their target. In addition, most of them were paid per night or per time spent with the clients.

Organizing Strategies

In Cambodia, efforts are being made to establish a



Beer promotion workers taking company cars to their workplaces. Photo: CLC

sound and transparent industrial relations system where employers and workers can identify common interests and seek peaceful solutions to problems and labour disputes in a bipartite setting and through tripartite mechanisms. These initiatives are recent and require further strengthening.

The 1997 Labour Code enables freedom of association and successful organizing among employers and workers in the formal economy. In contrast, associations which aim to defend the interests of their members are hampered by ambiguity in the laws that regulate their operations. In addition, the lack of time-bound regulations for accepting the registration of an association means that in practice bribes need to be paid to allow for registration.

Based on our experience, we still have to use our old ways of organizing such as just going to the factory, talking about the union and asking workers to join.

But it is not easy to collect and organize the informal workers and organizing them requires a rather long time to make workers understand and feel confident towards trade unions, federations or associations.

According to the survey result of CLC and AMRC on the organizing of beer promotion workers in Cambodia, we observed that there are some similarities and differences among the experienced organizers' strategies for organizing beer promoters, such as:

- Meeting at workers' workplaces in restaurants and beer gardens when they are free from work.
- Meeting at workers' houses because there they have more time for discussion, feel it easier to communicate and live close to other beer promoters.
- Organizing through activists, union leaders and members who used to participate in the workshop trainings by explaining to them to spread this information to unknown workers.
- Firstly providing training to workers whether they are our members or not, because it will be easy for the next step in organizing.
- Organize in the beer companies when they gathered for the meeting before they are sent to different individual workplaces.
- Organize at car waiting places at night times after the beer promoters finish work.



Beer promotion workers and trade union leaders went on strike in front of Angkor Beer company in March 2010. The workers and trade union demanded, among other things, the right to change the beer promotion manager from the company to a new one, in an election that the trade union could participate in.

Photo: CLC

- Organize in the restaurants where they work together by explaining about the union and other benefits in organizing.
- Try to collect and know beer promoters' phone numbers
- Conduct a small group meeting at the outside eating places, then make good relationships and talk about the union.
- Organize when they have health problems by accompanying them to the hospital or clinic in order to show our caring and protection.
- Offer legal consultation when they have problems at workplace.
- Organize when we launch a campaign or strike for improving workers' working conditions or demand other benefits for them.
- Build trust in the union, by providing resolution conflict services to them.
- Even after applying the above successful strategies for organizing the BPWs, organizers still face some difficulties, because some BPWs are reluctant to join unions, thinking that it is useless and a waste of their time. Also, we still have do not have enough human resources for organizing; especially, organizers do not have enough personal time for implementing organizing activities.

Opportunities to strengthen the organizing work

In order to strengthen the organizing work more effectively, there are three strategies or opportunities for organizers to improve their organizing skills, as follows:

1- Building Workers' Trust

In case of a formal working situation like for permanent workers in the garment industry, it is easier for the trade union to deal with these obstacles, because workers and organizers can meet and discuss topics quite frequently in a reasonable safe environment. They can meet regularly, share about their problems after work, exchange about their rights, learn who they can trust and who they can not trust. They can share their burdens, and when in the union they can start sharing the responsibility.

But the more informal the situation becomes, the stronger the obstacles above, and the more difficult for the organizer to build trust. In the informal economy for instance, workers are alone; they don't even know they are a worker with rights, and they live with fear all the time. In an informal situation, workers know few other workers and cannot easily compare, share and talk about their problems.

2- Building a Strong Union

Permanent workers in the garment or tourism sector can more easily build up a strong union in which leadership, knowledge, membership, commitment – also in dues – can be constructed over a longer period of time. Also provision of services to permanent workers is easier.

In the case of workers in informal conditions, this all becomes very difficult. Because of the flexible character of informalized workers, the union needs to adapt itself and become more flexible also. Regular meetings and communication, training, coaching the local leaders, decision-making, and general provision of services become costly, slow and painstaking if we apply the same methods as in the formal sector.

More than in the formal sectors, the strength of the union must be created at the level of the member. We need to be aware not to create a dependent relation between workers and union leaders, because we cannot guarantee that the leaders will solve the problems for them via negotiation. If we fail, the union will collapse. So besides



CFSWF President Mora Sar being interviewed by journalists while beer promotion workers were striking in front of Angkor Beer company in March 2010. Photo: CLC

providing services, the organizer must facilitate the building of relations between the workers and strengthen the capacity at the lowest levels. This requires additional skills, competences and resources.

3- Conducting an Effective Struggle

An important obstacle to defending the rights of informalized workers is the unclear relation to the employer. This is closely linked to the type of contract the workers get. If workers have a temporary contract or no contract, or work on commission, then it becomes difficult to push the employer to respect the labour law, because there is little legal basis, or workers are simply afraid. Moreover, in many cases, it is not clear who the employer is, such as in the case of the BPW, and who should take responsibility.

This complicates bargaining for informalized workers: what demands can we defend, and who can we talk to?

In the case of the informal economy workers, the employment relation is completely gone, yet they face exploitation and intimidation.

This means that the negotiation is no longer between two parties (the trade union and the employer) but between more parties (which are different according to the case, for example: the trade union, local authorities, traders, employers, users of the services ...) Bargaining becomes more difficult, because the trade union has less bargaining power compared to all the other parties.

In that case, building alliances with other groups who

are similarly affected can be a way to increase that power and networking between small groups. Other strategies than collective bargaining may need to be applied such as campaigning. For the union it is a challenge to do so, because these forms of action are not protected or regulated in the trade union law.

Conclusion

Generally, women who are working in the entertainment industry in Cambodia are stigmatized by society, whether it is karaoke, massage parlours, or the beer promotion work. They are considered to be bad women. Across Cambodia about 4,000 women work as beer promoters in hundreds of beer halls, with the job of persuading men to drink their brand of beer. The majority of all of the brands sold by beer promotion women in Cambodia are imported from regional breweries, and distributed locally; thus the women are really contributing to the profits of large multinational companies.

Most beer distributors hire these girls from poor families with deceptive promises, and then throw them into the fray with less than an hour of training, paying them only for what they can sell, which amounts to a low monthly salary that can barely cover the workers' survival costs if at all.

The Cambodian beer promotion industry is inherently decentralized, as informal work sectors often are; relying on entertainment establishment owners, managers, and local contacts from the international beer companies. It therefore becomes difficult to organize all employees along any guidelines, such as Codes of Conduct or training curricula. It is strongly up to unions to tailor their organizing methods so the beer promotion workers can be motivated to form or join unions, and identify successful means to achieve improvement of their work conditions through their collective power.

In conclusion, in order to strengthen the organizing work more effectively, organizers, union leaders and national federations, associations and confederations have to drive their own activists and organizers to build workers' trust, importantly build their own strong union which can include workers of different sectors, and conduct an effective struggle.

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