

Research Paper  
on

*“Promoting Leadership and  
Strengthening Rights for Women Workers”*

Research by:



Sponsored by:



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## Contents

I. Introduction.....	3
1.1: Project Background.....	3
1.2: About the Research.....	3
II. Research Methodologies.....	3
2.1: Target group .....	3
2.2: Research objective.....	3
2.3: Process of data collection and analysis.....	4
III. Women workers in garment and shoes industry in Cambodia .....	5
3.1: Overview on women garment workers.....	5
3.2: Work place for women.....	5
IV. Working conditions for women at workplace .....	6
4.1: Income and Minimum Wage .....	6
4.2: Working Hour .....	7
4.3: Social protection and other benefits for women.....	7
4.4: Legal Protection .....	8
4.5: Discrimination against women.....	8
4.6: Health and Safety for Women.....	8
4.7: Sexual Harassment .....	9
V. Women workers organizing .....	9
5.1: Organizing Strategies.....	10
5.2: Challenges in Organizing .....	11
5.3: Negotiations .....	11
VI. Women’s Leadership.....	12
6.1: Women’s representation, leadership and decision making.....	13
6.2: Challenges in promoting women’s leadership.....	13
6.3: How to promote women in leadership and make it sustainable.....	13

## **I. Introduction**

### **1.1: Project background**

In general, we have seen that women workers face difficulties in areas such as Leadership, Organizing, Conflict Resolution, Union Management, and problems which occur during maternity. We have heard about these problems from here and there; however, there have not been any proper studies or official documents. That's why the Asia Monitor Research Centre (AMRC) in cooperation with the Cambodian Labor Confederation-Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union (CLC-C.CAWDU), conducted a research study on "Promoting Leadership and Strengthening Rights for Women Workers."

What are the challenges for women workers? What skills and knowledge do women workers need to have in order to be potential leaders at the local level? What are successful organizing strategies? What are the conflict resolution mechanisms or methods in responding to challenges women face?

To answer these questions, the working group at CLC-C.CAWDU have actively worked together with potential women and normal garment workers to collect data and asked them to share their experiences with us to produce a documentation to be used for advocacy and training programs.

### **1.2: About the research**

This research project took 6 months starting from June to December, 2014. This research was made possible by the sponsorship of AMRC technically and financially. This research was conducted by Gender working group and skilled staff of Cambodian Labor Confederation-Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union (CLC-C.CAWDU).

## **II. Research methodologies**

### **2.1: Target group**

The target group was women workers who hold leadership roles in a union, women at factories, and women activists. Their positions were president, vice president, secretary general, and organizer. There was additional participation from potential women activists in this study in the form of opinion giving.

### **2.2: Research objective**

This research is aimed to promote the participation of women in decision-making processes which will lead to the promotion of labor rights, better living conditions, and dignity for women workers.

### 2.3: Process of data collection and analysis

Before starting the research, the research team held many meetings to discuss how to make this research process more smooth and effective. There were four participants at each meeting who discussed in detail the planning, budgeting, direct interview questionnaires, and questionnaires for Focus Group Discussion, target group identification, and other administrative tasks. There were suggestions from each of us as well as recommendation provided by CLC-C.CAWDU leaders.

Data collection was divided into three steps:

1. **Focus Group Discussion with women:** the research team organized a meeting with women workers on July 13th, 2014, at Eden Park restaurant, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The meeting was attended by 4 women activists and 7 local women leaders. Participants were divided into 2 groups to discuss 2 different questions.
  - Question 1: What are the main challenges women face at work places?
  - Question 2: As a woman leader, what should you do in order to progress and achieve success?
2. **Direct interview:** the research team had meetings to formulate questionnaires to interview the 8 women workers who came from different factories. Those questionnaires included:
  - General information (name, address, marital status, education, working experiences, etc.)
  - Working condition (minimum wage, working hours, contract, type of contract)
  - Organizing (experiences, challenges, solutions, and their importance)
  - Negotiation (CBA, definition, issue, benefits for women workers)
  - Leadership (women leadership, women roles, knowledge, attitude, and skill)
3. **Consultation meeting:** for our research to be more effective, we organized a consultation meeting with 17 women workers who represented local leaders, women activists, normal workers, as well as the president of CLC. This consultation meeting was held on 31st November, 2014, at Rock Grill. The meeting was aimed to seek input for this short research project on promoting and strengthening women rights, strengthening women capacity, and promoting gender justice among the structure of unions confederation, programs and campaigns to promote women participation in society and sharing knowledge and experiences of women advocacy.

### **III. Women workers in the garment and shoes industry in Cambodia**

#### **3.1: Overview on women garment workers**

Nowadays, the garment industry in Cambodia contributes so much to its national economic growth. This industry constitutes 70 percent of Cambodian exports, which is equal to 16 percent of local products in total. It has offered jobs to over 600,000 women, about 1/3 of total jobs with wages, or equal to 78 percent of jobs with wages besides agriculture and public services for women. 90 percent of workers in factories are women aged between 19 to 30 years old. However, this research shows that there has been many human and labor rights violations, for instance, falsifying identification cards to increase the ages of girls so that they can be employed.

After the CLC campaign to increase the minimum wage of garment workers, the workers received a minimum wage of \$128 per month in 2014. However, because this minimum wage is very low, women cannot cover their basic living costs. Garment and shoe workers may earn extra income by working as beer promotion girls at night or even become sex workers.

Even if the family of garment workers is able to receive benefits from the garments factories, the workers still need to work for long hours in poor working conditions. They need to spend money on food, rent, water, electricity, and health care and also need to send money to their family.

#### **3.2: Work place for women**

This research has shown that there are many more women in the garment industry compared to the tourism and service sectors because they can be more easily employed due to more demand within this garment industry. Most women workers from far rural provinces have to leave their hometown to find jobs as garment workers in Phnom Penh. Based on the research, women have reported that they migrated due to poverty, low education, and difficult family conditions such as domestic violence. Most of the workers we interviewed are single and under 25 years old.

Having low education made it difficult for them to get high paid jobs. On the other hand, they do not have access to job opportunity information. Women workers can be easily cheated by the middle men.

All the women we met have reported that they are employed under short term contracts of 2 months, 6 months, or 1 year. They added that this short contract made them lose cash benefits because when women become pregnant, they can be fired. As a result, some women have to abort their babies so that they can continue working at the factories.

## IV. Working conditions for women at workplace

The working conditions for women in the garment industry have been mentioned in a lot of reports especially by the International Labour Organization's Better Factories Cambodia project. It should be noted that most of these women workers came from far provinces and generally live far away from family protection and also because their awareness of their rights and the laws is limited, they can easily become victims of human rights violations and all forms of violence.

### 4.1: Income and Minimum Wage

#### ▪ **Women's wages**

In Cambodia, 83 percent of all women workers are self-employed or work in family-based small businesses, which do not offer salary or wages, compared to men whose percentage is only 77 percent. At the time of the interviews, the women workers earned an average income of between US\$100-134 per month. This income is divided into three types:

- (1) minimum wage of \$95 for probation workers,
- (2) minimum wage of \$100 per month for full employed workers,
- (3) minimum wage of \$110 per month for skilled workers.<sup>1</sup>

#### ▪ **Wage gap between men and women**

Women and men have shifted from agriculture to the industrial sector even though there have been differences between women and men based on the type of work and type of industry. The majority of men get high-level jobs while women get low-level jobs.

Household responsibilities and taking care of family also create limited choices for women. Taking care of the children and family have been acknowledged as an obstacle for women as it prevents women from receiving good opportunities to build their capacity, knowledge, and skills, and to step into high-level jobs like men.

The growth in the garment industry may have promoted general equality but did not promote equal income. Even if there are fewer men than women in the garment industry, their level of education and physical strength are higher than women, so men receive a higher income (higher than the minimum wage). Some women are able to earn enough for themselves and their family; however, they are faced with violence and harassment.

This research shows that the wage gap between men and women is between \$10-20 per month.

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<sup>1</sup> As of October 2015, the minimum wage for garment workers has been increased to \$140 per month, effective from January 2016 onwards. See: <http://www.voanews.com/content/cambodia-raises-monthly-minimum-wage-to-140/2996627.html>

## 4.2: Working Hour

### ▪ **Overtime (OT)**

Generally, workers work 48 hours per week and 26 days per month. However, due to low wages, they need to work overtime to earn extra income. For women workers, they face many challenges during overtime, especially in regards to personal safety. Many rape cases have been reported when women are on their way home from their overtime work.

### ▪ **Forced labor**

The women workers report being forced to work extra hours in addition to their normal working hours in the factory or else they would be fired or their wages would be deducted. This forced labor by employers has affected women worker's health. Working heavily for so many hours during the day and night affects women both physically and mentally. They are also looked down on by their employers or team leaders in factories. Sometime, they are also sexually harassed if they reject to work overtime.

## 4.3: Social protection and other benefits for women

### ▪ **Maternity leave and other benefits**

Article 182 of the Labor Law of Cambodia states that in all enterprises, all women have the right to 90 days of maternity leave and for 2 months after the maternity leave, women should only do light work. The law prohibits employers from firing women during maternity leave even with prior notice. Article 183 of the same law states that women are entitled to half pay including subsidiary benefits from employers. However, this research has found that pregnant women were kicked out by their employers with the excuse of short term contracts and they were discriminated against.

Some factories do not have child daycare or allow women to breastfeed their babies, despite the fact that article 186 of the Labor Law stipulates that all enterprise owners who employ at least 100 women must offer a breast feeding room and child day care center within the enterprise territory or nearby.

This research has found that 90 days of maternity leave and half pay are not sufficient for pregnant women and for delivering the baby. Therefore, the Cambodian government has to sign the ILO Convention No. 183 on Maternity Protection, which would allow women to have no less than 14 weeks of paid maternity leave at 100 percent of wages, with additional subsidiary cash benefits.

#### 4.4: Legal protections

There have been so many acts of injustice on workers, especially on the women. Even after submitting complaints of rape, domestic violence, and other violence cases such as the incidents of violence on workers at Veng Sreng Road and Streng Mean Chey bridge in which lots of workers were killed and injured, they still have not received any compensation and nobody has been charged.

Participants of this research said these injustices have been happening without proper solutions being offered by the authorities, public officers, police, or court. The law enforcement in Cambodia is limited; therefore, participants have requested the Cambodian government to strengthen and offer legal mechanisms effectively, especially where the judiciary has to be fair, transparent, and accountable. Participants have suggested having Labor Courts to deal with the employment sector.

#### 4.5: Discrimination against women

Discrimination against women when they join trade unions has been increasing in Cambodian society. Women are fired because they join as member of union. The reality is that when women workers are seen joining activities of unions, especially protests, they are fired.

In addition, women activists face obstacles and challenges in their daily life with family and people around them. Nobody is happy with their decision to join unions, including their own husbands. People around them always try to convince the women to rethink their decisions about joining a union by saying, *"It is very dangerous. You can be harmed anytime. This decision is not correct for you as a woman."*

Even with this situation, the women have continued their work with unions. They try to prove to the people around them that they have made the right decision because what they are doing with unions is legal and that their work will contribute to a better quality of life for Cambodian people. Women activists believe that if they give up, they will continue to face more challenges and there won't be any change.

#### 4.6: Health and Safety for Women

Working conditions, the environment, and the working context are very important for workers' health especially for the women who work in factories. This research has found that most factory owners don't care much about the health and safety of the women workers, which caused increasing health problems. In 2013 and 2014, there were many cases of women fainting during their work in the factories. Therefore, it is the obligation of the enterprise owner to urgently deal with this issue effectively.

Beside the responsibility of the factory owner, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), a state institution, is responsible for providing social security insurance to all workers and employers as stated in the Labor Law.

However, this research has shown that, there remain many challenges for workers to enjoy a safe work place, and in the event of work-related harm, access compensation and medical treatment:

1. Workers and Employers' awareness of the NSSF is limited.
2. The quality of health treatment by hospital is not acceptable and slow.
3. There are too few NSSF staff at hospitals.
4. The compensation process to workers is complicated and slow.
5. The management of NSSF member's data is inefficient.
6. The NSSF does not give enough attention to health and safety standards at the work places for workers.
7. Some companies are not registered to the NSSF and do not take responsibility for harm to workers that occurs during working hours.
8. Companies that employ fewer than 8 workers are not insured by NSSF
9. Some workers do not have marriage certificates.
10. Sickness other than work-related dangers are not covered by the insurance.
11. Workers who have worked for so long do not receive retirement funds.
12. Trucks that transport workers do not obey traffic law and does not ensure safety.

#### **4.7: Sexual Harassment**

Few women reported sexual harassment, but this does not mean that sexual harassment does not occur. This is may be because Cambodian women are hesitant to tell their problem to others, due to the pressures of tradition. Another reason is the fact that Cambodian women do not understand what sexual harassment is. Sometimes they dismiss sexual harassment as an act of joking between friends; therefore, they can easily be harassed by their employers, co-workers, and other people by words or physical touch.

The factory owners usually only employ men as skilled workers, which is one of the reasons why women, who are mostly un-skilled workers, have fewer opportunities to get jobs and are poorer. That's why women decide to migrate to neighboring countries where they would face many challenges such as sexual harassment, human trafficking, low pay, physical and mental violations. They are looked down on by employers or team leaders in the factory. Sometimes they could be sexually harassed if they refuse to work overtime.

## **V. Women workers organizing**

During this research, many workers told us about working conditions and violence that they have faced directly and indirectly in their family and at workplaces. They have also told us about not receiving other benefits that they supposed to receive according to the law. Workers, especially women, want their rights and voices to be

acknowledged, justice and solutions to be given for better working conditions, decent work, and non-violence.

Those workers talked about organizing, which is an important topic for women to understand and implement to achieve gender justice in society. Organizing is really important in dealing with challenges that they face such as representativeness, leadership, women decision making, low wages, bad working conditions, short contracts, health, and security, etc.

They have told us about organizing such as strategies to gather women and the challenges that they face during the organizing process. They also told us about negotiation which did not include enough women's issues.

### 5.1: Organizing Strategies

During this research, participants have agreed that organizing is very important for the union because only when they have more members, they have more power, which would strengthen their ability to advocate and negotiate with the government and employers to protect workers' interests. They were given training on organizing; however, the knowledge, skill, and strategy on organizing of activists are still limited, and they continue their traditional way of organizing. This research has shown that their organizing did not concentrate on building a network of women, and the target group was not clearly identified. However, even if that was the case, the number of members increased. That's why this way of organizing didn't mainstream Gender. Gender equality doesn't only concern women's issues but it is a foundation of union objective.

This research also found that in the union structure, the majority of leadership positions are held by men, who have rights in decision making, while women hold less important positions such as assistant, secretary, accountant, and activists even after they have contributed a lot to Cambodia's economic growth.

To respond to these problems above, participants have suggested that organizing needs to focus especially on women and their needs. Therefore, in order to gather women better, the network leader must know the root cause of the problems and why there is a need to build networks of women. What the women's network can do is to propose that women's issues be in the agendas of the union and include Gender in all the policies, programs, and activities, and ensuring that women have equal opportunity to participate in decision making positions.

Women would be interested in being member of the union, only if the union serves their interest and provides solution to their issues and effectively represents them. Unions should have a strategy in building networks which reflects the needs of women at appropriate times. For example, the venue for network meetings must be safe and held at appropriate times of the day. Agendas and meeting times need to

take into account women's housework and responsibilities at home. Below are points that were added by participants for successful network building:

- Introduce clearly about C.CAWDU policy.
- Study the problems and needs of target groups.
- Include concerns of target group in union's goal and bring their information to negotiate with employers.
- Study reality, needs, and characteristics of target groups.
- Awareness on foundation of union, association, Gender, and law.
- Have clear plan, stand point, and vision.
- Organize monthly or weekly meeting, plus urgent meeting when necessary.
- Solve workers' problems.
- Network builder must have capacity, skill, and be able to provide clear explanations to workers.
- Network builder must be friendly, patient, hardworking, and be confident.
- Monitor and evaluate the results of organizing.

## 5.2: Challenges in Organizing

This research has shown that organizing women is not easy. It is more difficult than organizing men because women are busier with housework and taking care of their family on top of working at the factory, which makes it difficult to meet them. Participants acknowledged that the differences in having the responsibility of housework and taking care of the family have limited women's choices and opportunities. The responsibility of taking care of children and the family are acknowledged to be the main obstacles for women to step into the union and attain high level positions like men.

On the other hand, women have a lack of confidence in being members of unions due to their safety concerns and worries about being fired by their employers. Pressure from their family and neighbors also play a part in women's uncertainty in joining unions. For example, a woman stated that, "My husband does not allow me to join a union because I am a woman, and it can be very dangerous for me."

Discrimination against unions is one of the problems that reduces union membership and makes it difficult to form networks, as we have seen continued threats on network builders and organizers, and interference from employers and unions that are biased towards the government and employers.

Besides discrimination against women and unions, some other challenges raised by some participants included limited knowledge and skill of the network builder/organizer, and the lack of clear understanding of union policies.

## 5.3: Negotiations

Topics such as short contracts, working conditions, minimum wage, and other cash benefits were raised in negotiations with employers. However, specific women's

problems are not widely represented such as maternity leave, child day care, discrimination, wage gap between men and women, and sexual harassment.

It should be noted that women are less represented in negotiations, which is a reason why women's concerns are not raised during negotiations. This research has shown that there are so many women who take part in non-violent protests and big campaigns; however, there are very few women at the negotiation table. In reality, there are so many women in the garment industry but their representativeness is limited; therefore, their voice is not heard and their pain is not seen.

The following recommendations and requests were made by the women during this research:

- Study the problems and needs of women
- Ensure women's participation at the negotiation table
- Include women's problems and concerns in negotiations
- Put women in leadership roles in the union's structure
- Increase women's representativeness
- Create more women's networks
- Provide local and international training for women

## **VI. Women's Leadership**

There are about 650,000 to 700,000 workers in the garment and shoe industry, the majority of which are women. In the current labor situation of Cambodia, workers are facing poor working conditions, limited implementation of the law by employers and limited enforcement of the law by authorities, low wages, short contracts, poor living conditions, poverty, lack of knowledge, lack of skill, immigration, injustice, human trafficking, and violence, etc. The research found that while the majority in this industry are women, there are still very few women who are leaders of unions, associations, and organizations.

We have seen that even if there are positions which women hold in unions, associations, confederations, NGOs, their ability to influence decision making is limited, despite the fact that women have put a lot of effort, time, money, and sacrificed family time. We all know that when women become leaders in the union, they would be able to help more women; however, they are still not valued in society. Nevertheless, the Gender Committee of CLC has put lots of effort into promoting women to be leaders in unions, organizations and associations, so that more women would promote workers' rights and push for gender equality among men and women in society, as well as, support to CLC.

### **6.1: Women's representation, leadership and decision making**

Participants in our research agreed that women in leadership are very important in order to help other women develop more capacity and confidence and to have the ability to manage, organize, and advocate.

Related to self-development, this research has found that women have tried all means at both local and national level: studying, participating in campaigns, participating in advocacy so that their voices would be equally represented, and to have equal position and decision making power so that they could help other women when they face problems because women know more about women's issues. Some qualities of women leaders cited by participants were that women leaders are soft, smart, hard-working, patient, committed to their obligations, flexible, punctual, and responsible. As a leader, they try to increase members, gain support, gain membership fee, fight for good working condition, decent wages, and inspire confidence and warmth to their members.

### **6.2: Challenges in promoting women's leadership**

Research on challenges in promoting women in leadership positions found that women are facing many challenges in leadership roles such as: discrimination, pressure from family, threats from employers, authorities, gangsters, and other unions. Other challenges included low education, not having supporters, fear, and limited knowledge of the law, regulations, and related conventions. Nowadays, they are facing challenges such as short contracts, low minimum wage, overwork, lack of safety, and health.

### **6.3: How to promote women in leadership and make it sustainable**

This research has shown that in past confidential elections, even if women are confident enough and stand for elections, men would be elected with majority vote and fewer women are elected for leadership positions. However, if we really want women to be elected for a particular position, we could reserve such positions for women only. Then, we can help to promote them and support them by introducing the works, giving opportunity to study, gain experience and skills, and taking part in social activities such as advocacy campaign, promote them in public speaking, or travel abroad to gain experience.