Case Study of Beer Promotion Girls in Cambodia

I dropped out from high school at 16. The only job available for me that time was serving beer at a restaurant. I was recruited by an agency. The agency always seeks young and good-looking girls to boost the beer sales. We all work on a contract basis. The restaurant manager ditches the girls once they get married and give birth. We also have to clean up the restaurant every night. Beer promotion girls are also vulnerable to sexual harassment... and whenever we complain about the harassment then the restaurant owner always argues that we have to keep the guests entertained...

(As told by a beer promotion girl at a nightclub in Phnom Penh)

Chanthal (name changed) works as a Beer Promotion Girl, or simply ‘Beer Girl’ as they are known locally. She is one of the many young girls who are working in one of the most ‘toxic’ workplaces in Cambodia. It has been described, for years, as one of the toughest, and most demeaning and hazardous jobs for young Cambodian women. The job entails promotion of famous beer brands to the customers in bars and restaurants; they may have to sell a case of beer daily for a monthly salary as low as US$60! – insufficient to sustain their families. They are often forced to accept propositions and sell sex for money in order to sustain themselves and those dependent on them. Job hazards also include being forced to drink with customers – sometimes large quantities of alcohol – sexual harassment, and violence at the workplace. These workers also acquire HIV/AIDS at the workplace at a high rate. Customers tend to perceive them more as ‘sex workers’ rather than as workers of a beer company.

There have been efforts to improve the conditions of the Beer Girls, following the sustained media reports about the exploitation of these women. In 2006, major beer producers in Cambodia came together to form Beer Selling Industry Cambodia (BSIC), an industry alliance which includes famous brands like Heineken, Carlsberg, Tiger and Guinness. Efforts were made to have an industry code of conduct for beer promotion by setting industry standards for health, education and safety for the ‘beer girls’. Companies boasted the workers would be provided with a proper work contract and would be covered under the Cambodian Labour Law. Unfortunately, not much has changed at the ground in terms of the real working conditions of these women.
**AMRC Intervention**

Workers in the informal economy in Cambodia account for 85 percent of the total labour force. Nevertheless, the number of informal workers in Cambodia is on a constant rise due to the recent financial crisis, which has provoked mass dismissals and factory closures. Tourism is one of the industries in Cambodia which has played a prominent role in encouraging the growth of the informal employment such as “tuk-tuk” (motorcycle taxi) drivers, beer promotion girls and other informal service work to support the industry.

As part of a broad research to document informalization of labour in Asian economies and efforts to organize informal sector workers, AMRC and our local partner, CFSWF (Cambodia Food and Service Workers Federation) - affiliated to CLC (Cambodia Labour Confederation) - have been focusing on informal service work in the tourism industry in Cambodia. Beer promotion girls or beer girls have been chosen as a case study to highlight the precarious nature of their work in the informal economy. The project involves workers and organizers to formulate innovative ways to organize beer promotion workers, to strive for their better working conditions and workers’ rights.

A survey on organizing beer girls in Cambodia was carried out in three areas, i.e. Phnom Penh, Siam Reap and Poipet. The findings of the survey confirmed the precarious and exploitative conditions that these young girls work in, which have been drawn into the spotlight many times in the past by media and research studies. Some of the findings include that the beer girls get sexually harassed while they are working; because of their low income they get dragged into prostitution out of the need to make ends meet; they are forced to perform additional work in the restaurant that is unpaid for and their jobs are precarious, dependent on agencies who decide on the length of their contracts; they are not entitled to any maternity rights and holidays; and they are weak and marginalized with no bargaining power, and at the mercy of the will of the employers. Besides eliciting data from the ground, the surveying process also served as an entry point to raise the awareness of beer girls to fight for their rights.

**Empowering Beer Girls as the Agents of Change**

The young girls who enter this profession because of their attractive persona and their young ages are looked upon as commodities in the beer promotion business, and are exploited by agencies and employers alike. The ambiguity of the nature of their job and lack of clear work boundaries leads to outright exploitation, sexual harassment and coercion into prostitution, leading to a loss of their dignity, labeling of them in society and demeaning of their social status. Though there have been previous initiatives by the industry to establish a Codes of Conduct for the beer girls, it has really not made any significant change in their working conditions, wages or their status at the workplace; and these efforts have proved to be futile. The way forward, therefore, is to empower the girls and organize them so they take control of their lives, health and dignity.

Raising the beer promotion girls’ awareness of themselves as agents of change and
encouraging them to gain control of their work, health and bodies became one major objective of AMRC and CFSWF in conducting the survey and sharing the results.

At the same time, beer promotion girls are only one group among many groups of informal workers in Cambodia, whose rights and potential for collective bargaining are deprived due to unclear employer relations and divisions among workers. Building solidarity linkages with other informal workers in the tourism sector and beer factory workers would change the power relations for these young Cambodian girls, making them stronger and more in control of their working conditions. To help the beer girls do so, AMRC and CFSWF facilitated a workshop that involved workers from various service industries such as casino, restaurant, transportation and also manufacturing workers, as well as the beer girls. In the workshop, AMRC and CFSWF shared the findings of the survey and compared them with the situation experienced by other informal workers, inspiring participants to discuss the obstacles in organizing workers of the informal sector. As a result, the participating groups recognized the need for capacity-building activities such as training on organizing skills and building solidarity links with workers from different sectors. A promising reflection of the awareness and unity created among workers in different sectors after the workshop, is the protest support given by Angkor beer factory workers, for an Angkor beer promoter who had been sacked from her job. (See box, above.)

AMRC has worked closely with the local Cambodian partner to assess their needs, to support their initiative to reach out to other informal worker groups, and to provide analysis that helps informal workers recognize their common vulnerability,
situation as well as latent organizing potential. AMRC will continue working with the local partners to facilitate extension of the activities above and document the overall process and impacts, which will become learning materials for other workers in their organizing initiatives in other sectors and even countries.

References
1. The Mekong Challenge – Cambodia’s Beer promotion girls
2. beer girls in Cambodia http://www.beergirls.org/

\[\text{\textsuperscript{i} Media Coverage Re: Cambodian Beer Promotion Women by Peter Olszewski}