

Sex behind beer

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PHNOM PENH (Cambodia Herald) - Sometimes, she gets unwanted kisses. At other times, customers fondle her thighs. With more than ten years experience, Keo says she's seen everything from forced drinking and insults to sexual harassment as a beer girl

The 32-year-old is among an estimated 40,000-50,000 women promoting beer and other drinks in workplaces ranging from beer gardens, karaoke bars and restaurants to private parties and other establishments.

Beer girls often sit and talk with their primarily male clientele, encouraging them to drink, pouring more drinks, opening new bottles or cans, offering ice and even drinking glasses of beer themselves.

They work until late at night, with male clients often intoxicated and sometimes abusive. The job has been described for years as one of the toughest, most demeaning and hazardous jobs for young Cambodian women.

Beer girls suffer various forms of vulnerability to their health and safety, not to mention nightly exposure to verbal abuse, sexual harassment and violence.

Average salaries are about \$50 to \$60 a month, forcing some women to accept propositions for sex in exchange for money. Condom use is low and HIV rates relatively high.

Researchers estimate that about half the beer girls are also sex workers, earning an extra \$25 a couple of times a month to supplement their regular salaries.

"They are among the groups most at risk to HIV/AIDS infection," said Ly Penh Sun, deputy director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and Sexually-Transmitted Diseases (NCHADS). Others, he said, are men who have sex with men and injecting drug users.

Job hazards also include forced drinking. On average, the women drink up to five cans a night up to 28 nights a month, according to research by Siem Reap's Citizens for Health, Educational and

Social Issues.

"The daily amount they drink can easily destroy their livers and digestive systems and can even kill them if they are pregnant," Dr Penh Sun said.

The perception is common that all beer girls are sex workers.

"Besides guests, my neighbors also look down on me despite many video spots encouraging people not to discriminate against us," one said.

There are many forms of violence against the women. Some victims even reported being chased home and raped.

Most beer girls are recruited by brewers or distributors and are not treated as employees. Nearly all beer companies in Cambodia hire women to promote their products.

There are now five local breweries, namely Cambrew, Phnom Penh Beer, Khmer Brewery, Cambodia Brewery and Kingdom Breweries. All beer brewed outside Cambodia and legally imported is distributed by one of seven companies: Anco, Asia Sunrise, Attwood Import and Export Co, Duong Chhiv Import Export and Transport Co, Hak Soon Import Export Co, Hosten Distributor and Soon Soon Import and Export Co.

There have been efforts to improve working conditions for beer girls. 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 girls by setting industry standards for health, education and safety.

Companies said workers would be provided with proper work contracts and covered under Cambodian labor law. However, not much has changed in terms of real working conditions.

The Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation meanwhile aims to raise the awareness of beer girls as "agents of change", encouraging them to gain control over their work, health and bodies.

There are also efforts to establish a sound and transparent industrial relations system whereby employers and workers can identify common interests and resolve problems and labor disputes. These initiatives are recent and require further strengthening.

"We are bargaining to get better income and working conditions for workers, especially the beer promotion women as they are not only abused by the firms but also the guests," said Sar Mora, director of the workers federation.

To protect women from threats from clients and managers, the federation intends to dispatch monitors to entertainment establishments.

Dr Penh Sun said NCHADS provides the women with training on health impacts and the use of condoms and health care services. It also introduces them to places where they can find health services when they face abuse and educates the public to better respect their dignity.