

## Statistics reveal job risks for beer promoters

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An Anchor beer promoter serves a customer at a beer garden in Phnom Penh on Monday night.

Photograph: Pha Lina/Phnom Penh Post

Malis, not her real name, appears forlorn as she describes what her daughters go through to secure tips from their customers.

The young women, promoters for a major beer company, reluctantly spend their nights getting drunk on their own product – it's what customers demand and can be the difference between the promoters earning tips and leaving their restaurants empty-handed.

Malis would know – she sells for the same beer company.

"I very much pity my daughters for following me into this work, but what can I do?" the 42-year-old says.

Getting drunk may be only a weekly or monthly pleasure for the customers, but for the women who serve them in restaurants, beer gardens and karaoke venues, it can be a full-time job – 27 nights a month.

"Every night, I have to talk to clients and persuade them to drink my beer," Malis says. "I have to force myself to drink with the clients because it's the only way they will buy it – I can't avoid it."

According to Ian Lubek, adjunct professor of psychology at the [University of Guelph](#) in Canada, about 85 per cent of 1,660 Cambodian beer promoters he has surveyed between 2004 and 2012 regularly drink at work.

"Our research shows that beer promoters are consuming on average 1.5 litres of beer per night – that's six glasses of beer, 27 nights per month," Lubek says.

Research Lubek conducted in 2002 showed that the average beer promoter made US\$55 per month, but had monthly living expenses of about \$110.

Women were drinking with customers and offering sexual services as a way of making up the difference – ensuring they could provide for their children or send money to their provincial families.

According to Lubek's most recent study, conducted this year, the promoters' average monthly wage has climbed to \$75, but expenses have grown even faster, to about \$180 per month.

"[Now] they're averaging a BAC or blood-alcohol content of .05. They're basically drunk every night," Lubek says.

"Overuse of alcohol at such a high rate leads to liver disease. Also, women aren't told not to drink when they're pregnant."

Major companies involved in Cambodia's beer industry including Carlsberg (an owner of Angkor Beer) and Heineken (an owner of Anchor, ABC and Tiger) established [Beer Selling Industry Cambodia](#) (BSIC) in 2006.

Included in a code of conduct it released were commitments to increase education for beer promoters, scrap demeaning uniforms, provide contracts and crack down on sexual harassment. To address drinking, the COC specifies that beer promoters "should not" drink with customers. According to the BSIC Monitoring Report 2011, authored by [Indochina Research](#), there is a marked difference between the conditions of beer promoters employed by BSIC companies and those working for non-BSIC companies.

The report, based on monthly interviews of beer promoters last year, says 61 per cent from BSIC companies never drank with customers, while 38 per cent sometimes did.

Only 31 per cent of beer promoters from companies not part of BSIC never drank with customers, while 56 per cent sometimes did, the report claims.

Vo Thi Mai Trang, public relations and communications manager for Carlsberg Indochina, says the number of beer promoters drinking in Cambodian workplaces has decreased dramatically since BSIC was formed.

"And this is thanks to [the] BSIC Code of Conduct (COC) as well as the intensive training that we provided to our [beer promoters]," she says, adding that Carlsberg's beer promoters are the highest paid after two pay increases last year.

John-Paul Schuirink, a spokesman for Heineken International, says promoters who sell his company's beer are also well paid.

"The current average base salary . . . is \$92 per month for a 30-hour working week. A 10 per cent increase was implemented this year. [It] compares favourably to the average income in Cambodia," he says.

Schuirink says his company recognises the risks associated with beer promotion, which is why it founded BSIC and banned workers from drinking.

"Research shows that the beer promoters working for Attwood [a distributor for the company in Cambodia] have the highest rate of awareness and compliance with this rule," he says.

Heineken's priority was preventing alcohol use during working hours by giving training and information about its consequences, Schuirink adds.

"Besides that there is medical assistance available in case of problems," he said.

Lubek, however, believes the COC has been largely ineffective.

"Statistics don't show any improvement in the amount of beer drunk in the workplace . . . our research shows that company health education, if any, may come six to 12 months after they begin working . . . That's too late to prevent HIV/AIDS and alcohol dependence."

One company not affiliated with BSIC, the Phnom Penh Beer Company, says its workers are "not encouraged" to drink.

"We don't want them to drink because we want them to maintain their dignity . . . It also looks bad for the company if they drink," a spokesman says.

When asked if the company provides health services for workers battling alcohol addiction, he says, "No, we don't have any problems like that."

[Kingdom Breweries](#), also not affiliated with BSIC, says it no longer has beer promoters, but would not elaborate.

Dave Welsh, country director of the [American Center for International Labor Solidarity](#), says beer companies need to do much more to ensure their promoters' rights are protected.

“There’s a real health issue with unregulated drinking,” Welsh says. “It’s an unhealthy environment to work in, frankly.”

Offering beer promoters a wage that covered their monthly expenses is something beer companies should consider, he says.

“The amount of profits that are flowing back, not just to Angkor or Anchor, but to world-famous breweries like Carlsberg gives them a lot of leverage.”

Carlsberg is, however, taking positive steps toward establishing a memorandum of understanding that could improve conditions for its workers, Welsh adds.

Phol Sophea, deputy director of the [Cambodian Food and Service Workers’ Federation](#) (CFSWF), in Siem Reap province, believes some progress is being made to improve conditions for beer promoters, but problems such as drinking remain.

“Many workers have problems with physical health,” Sophea says.

“I ask them to visit the health centre, a service the companies provide free of charge. “But there is no support from the companies if a beer promoter becomes dependent on alcohol.”

CFSWF advises its members to tell customers that drinking on the job will make them sick.

“But some clients just don’t listen,” Sophea says. “So if the women don’t sit and drink beer with clients, they won’t sell their products and they won’t have any tips.

“The clients are kings to them, because they have money.”

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