Opinion

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Letters to the editor

My dignity, my beer

WOMEN serving Angkor beer have been demonstrating for several days in front of the company's main office in *The Phnom Penh*. Their demand: decent pay and better work contracts in compliance with the Cambodian Labour Code. Women who serve beer work under the most dangerous conditions in terms of health risks: nightly alcohol over-use, violation and abuse – verbal, physical and sexual. As women in the entertainment industry, they are devalued by society and, without union membership, they have no voice.

It is in our collective interest to give our support and to encourage the participation of women in the non-formal sector as they are the core breadwinners and contribute actively to our local economy.

The first step is decent work and decent pay. Without a doubt, US$50 is not going to make ends meet; it's not enough to save for the future or for potential shocks such as medical emergencies or poor harvest years.

Research by the Cambodian NGO SIREHSI shows that since 2004, beer-sellers have consistently been without a living wage, underpaid by 50 per cent or more compared with the expenses they incur to support their families. With international beer companies aware of this situation, and restaurants displaying suggestive advertising posters, some Cambodian men still visit beer gardens believing that buying international brands for an evening may also bring sex.

Women beer sellers are often coerced into drinking with the men. Then, with all parties' judgment impaired, they engage in risky or unsafe sexual acts, even in the workplace itself.

They do this just to make up economically what their employer systematically withholds in Cambodia but does not dare to do in nearby places such as China, Singapore and Hong Kong, where sellers of the same beer brands earn proper salaries, work in protected environments and do not have to face the nightly risks to health, safety, dignity, self-respect and self-esteem that occur in Cambodia.

The general principle we may all agree on is that basically, access to "decent work" – work that is adequately remunerated and covered by social protections – is a requirement for households to meet their bottom lines.

An Angkor beer promoter cries during a protest outside the Cambrew headquarters in Phnom Penh yesterday.

Another key ingredient of "decent work" is dignity. When we remain silent to the abuse and exploitation faced by our women working in the entertainment sector, we are a part of the problem. The website www.beergirls.org keeps a memorial list of more than 80 women who died at an average age of 25 while selling beer. We should honour their memories and should become part of the solution, in solidarity with the women currently protesting.

Angkor beer, our national beer, should address the decision of the Arbitration Council in July in favour of the beer sellers. Contractual commitments made by beer companies to provide safe working conditions should be fulfilled as part of employers' obligations to the 1997 Labour Law.

As consumers, we should give a clear message to beer companies: we support a responsible approach to alcohol and fair business dealings with its sales force, predominantly women, who are responsible for a majority of their sales and profits. As a society, we say NO to the exploitation of women beer sellers.

Mu Sochua,
MP Sam Rainsy Party

Where is the law?

ARTICLES in *The Phnom Penh Post* on July 26 and 28 on the protests by women beer promoters made me greatly disappointed in Cambrew Ltd for its exploitative practices and disrespect for Cambodian labour law.

Cambrew is one of the largest breweries in Cambodia, and we, as Cambodian citizens and your customers, feel proud of the company's motto, "My Country, My Beer" and the latest promotion song, This is Khmer's Heart. But we cannot continue to drink Angkor beer, Angkor Extra Stout, Bayon beer, Black Panther, Klang beer and other Cambrew products that are produced and promoted under the exploitation and violation of workers' rights.

As an Angkor Beer consumer with a Khmer heart, I strongly urge Cambrew to take immediate and appropriate action to comply with the ruling of the Arbitration Council to provide fair compensation and double the Sunday overtime wage of the beer promoters.

Moreover, we insist that Cambrew Ltd adheres to the workers' rights under Cambodian labour law. If this does not happen, I and my networks will continue to boycott all products of Cambrew Ltd, as we cannot swallow beers that have the taste of exploitation.

Meas Sopheareak
Kratie

Losing our thirst

AS a Cambodian citizen, I was moved by stories in *The Phnom Penh Post* last week about the protests by women beer promoters employed by Cambrew. As a customer of the company, I was bitterly disappointed to learn it is unfairly and unlawfully paying its employees.

I am proud of the motto "My Country, My Beer". But "My Country, My Beer" should be produced and promoted with respect for the labour rights of "My Workers". I strongly urge Cambrew to take immediate action to comply with the Arbitration Council's ruling and ensure fair wages and decent working conditions for its workers.

I am sure a large number of Cambrew customers will be carefully watching the company's response to this matter before we decide to drink its beer again.

Sim Socheata,
Melbourne, Australia

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