



Research Snapshot: Study of indirect sex workers from the garment industry

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Background

The ILO has recently conducted a number of diagnostic research studies to examine the impact of the global economic downturn on the Cambodian garment industry. The main objective of these studies is to strengthen our understanding of the human, enterprise, and sector level impacts of the downturn, examine the responses adopted, and to assist in the design and implementation of programmes and policies to help the industry recover and help its workers –both employed and displaced- obtain decent, productive employment and access to social protection.

This research snapshot presents the findings of a small complementary study examining the plight of a group of much talked-about but little understood workers: those who have left the factories during the crisis and started work as indirect sex workers in the entertainment sector. The specific focus of enquiry in the study concerns the vulnerabilities these workers face to HIV/AIDS -one of the most critical workplace issues in Cambodia today.

The narratives obtained in this study lend a much-needed human face to a group of workers who are too often the subject of negative stereotyping. Such stereotyping not only demonises and degrades these workers as humans, but it also undermines their ability to claim fundamental human rights and entitlements and pushes them into further marginalised positions away from vital health and educational services. The end goal of the study is thus to better understand the situation of these workers so that we can then offer practical assistance to reduce their HIV related vulnerabilities.

The study was conducted by the Australian development agency Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, which has extensive experience working in Cambodia (25 years) and with direct and indirect sex workers in the country. Participants in this study were identified by the Cambodian Women's Development Agency, a local NGO that works on a range of issues to promote women's economic and social rights.

Methodology

Qualitative interviews conducted with 16 ex-factory workers who had been laid off during the economic crisis, and who were now (currently) working in the entertainment sector and selling sex in Phnom Penh.¹

Following this, two focus groups –of 8 women each- were then conducted, to clarify and elaborate on the information gathered in the interviews. The insights were then synthesised into short case studies addressing common themes:

- *standard of living during childhood*

Worker selection criteria:

1. *Recent employment in a garment factory;*
2. *Current employment as an entertainment worker, e.g. in karaoke, massage, hostess, waitress, or beer promotion;*
3. *Currently involved in indirect sex work - providing sexual services for money or other material benefits, in addition to their main employment.*

¹ Six focus groups in total were conducted -four before and two after the in depth interviews. The post-interview groups each comprised eight women from the target group, but not including any from the previous focus groups or in depth interviews.

- *experience in the garment sector*
- *experience in the entertainment sector*
- *experience working as indirect sex workers*
- *changes in standards of living between these occupations and notable impacts of the economic downturn*
- *condom use with clients and non-clients*

Profile: Surveyed Workers

- **All were aged between 17 and 38**, with an average age of 25;
- **Most came from poor, rural and semi-rural families**, with parents typically engaged in farming and/or small-scale food vending. Most came from families of more than 5 children;
- **Most women were already working by their early teens**, as street vendors, housemaids, and in family businesses;
- **All women finished formal schooling between grades 1 and 7**, with the average being grade 4. Most common reasons for early school withdrawal were (a) poverty and (b) cultural beliefs (i.e. that women are better suited to domestic work);
- **About half of respondents were married in their late teens/early twenties**; however the vast majority have subsequently divorced;
- **A quarter of women had children**; most of the children were currently in the care of relatives whom the women support financially;
- **Almost all women questioned could attribute leaving their factory jobs to the global economic crisis**, although whether or not this is the reality cannot be verified. One woman resigned from her factory job prior to the financial crisis, while another was fired for poor workmanship;
- **Of the remaining women, half were laid off as a result of factory closures**. The other half had their contracts terminated prior to the closure due to wage-related complaints –which may or may not be linked to the economic situation.

Key Findings

HIV-related Vulnerabilities

HIV-related vulnerabilities of entertainment sector workers are closely connected to their formal working conditions. Many stem from underlying structural and policy issues, and overall improvement in working conditions would lower their vulnerabilities to HIV.

■ Workplace violence and abuse

All workers had experienced some form of workplace abuse –ranging from verbal abuse to serious physical and sexual assault. However, most instances of abuse occurred at their formal workplace rather than in the context of their sex work. (One woman interviewed was raped in her workplace by the brother of her boss.)

■ Lack of skills to negotiate safety

Many of the new entertainment workers that have entered the sector during the economic downturn do not have experience in dealing with unwanted sexual advances from clients and male staff members, or with drunk, unreasonable or abusive clients.

■ **Pressure not to use condoms with clients**

From this limited sample, it appears that condom use with clients is relatively high among entertainment workers who sell sex; however, given the fact clients tend to pay more for sex without a condom and given the economic downturn, women may be in a weaker position to negotiate condom use.

■ **Low condom use with non-commercial partners**

Almost all of the women interviewed reported having sex without condoms with non-commercial partners, including both husbands and boyfriends. They also reported having sex without condoms with men whom they did not regard as commercial clients but from whom they accepted regular gifts, money and other forms of support.

■ **Forced alcohol consumption**

Chronic alcohol abuse is a major issue for entertainment workers in Cambodia. Clients expect that, when asked, entertainment workers should be available to sit, drink alcohol and entertain them. Focus group participants at one karaoke lounge reported drinking between 10 and 12 cans of beer each night. Two women interviewed were forced to drink until they became unconscious.

Supplementing entertainment work with commercial sex

■ **The women interviewed began supplementing their income with informal sex work after suffering a series of labour-related abuses throughout their lives**, starting from forced entry into the labour market as child workers, abuse as domestic workers, mistreatment as factory workers, and degradation at the hands of managers and clients as entertainment workers.

■ **For all workers interviewed, the decision to supplement their income with commercial sex work was made out of financial necessity** –i.e. the need for supplementary income to cover accommodation, food, and remittances. Most made this decision independently, with only a few being persuaded by someone else.

■ **The recent economic downturn, coupled with changes in national legislation², have led to thousands of young women entering the entertainment sector**, where informal (hidden) sex work is replacing formal brothel-based sex work.³

■ **As women enter entertainment and indirect sex work, they are not being covered by the previously-successful 100% condom-use programme.⁴** Moreover, given that the presence of condoms is often used by police as indication that illegal sex work is occurring, this provides a disincentive to continue HIV/AIDS outreach to informal sex workers at a time when they need it most.

■ **Some workers, particularly masseuses and waitresses, are paid such a low wage for their work that selling sex becomes a coping strategy to make ends meet.**

■ **Sex with clients is usually negotiated at work directly between the woman and the client.** Once sex is agreed upon, beer promoters, waitresses and hostesses typically arrange to meet clients after work in a nearby guesthouse. For women working in massage parlours and karaoke lounges, rooms are available on site for a small hourly rental fee.

² This refers to the application of the recent anti-trafficking law (passed in 2008), which by criminalising prostitution has led to profound changes to the way commercial sex is sold and solicited in Cambodia (i.e. away from brothels, which are now illegal, and into more informal entertainment settings such as karaoke halls, massage parlours and beer gardens).

³ Indicative figures from NCHAD and KHANA (combined) datasets show a 14,128 rise in entertainment sector employees between 2008 and 2009 (see main report page 14 for breakdown by establishment type).

⁴ The 100% Condom-use policy was designed specifically for brothels, and assumes a legal framework that allows health workers to reach sex-workers within them. It does not cover non-brothel establishments (such as massage parlours, beer gardens and karaoke halls) where sex work may take place or be solicited.

- **Women's relationship with the guesthouse appears important to their sense of safety.** Some workers rely on security at the guesthouse for protection and to supply condoms to their rooms.

Comparing factory life with entertainment work and sex work:

- **Almost all workers interviewed preferred entertainment work to working in garment factories.** Most felt life was harder in the factories, with lower pay, long hours, harsh (and unhealthy) working conditions, and overly controlling managers.
- **By supplementing entertainment work with sex work, workers said they were better able to support themselves and their families financially.** They also approved of the shorter working hours and greater individual freedoms these jobs permit.
- **Opinions are mixed on whether women plan to continue entertainment work and sex work in the future.** However, despite their pitfalls, most felt these jobs were preferable to the garment industry; many even suggested they would turn down a factory job if offered one again.

Case Studies

Below are three case study examples of women retrenched from the garment sector who are now working as entertainment and indirect sex workers in Phnom Penh. Full versions of these stories, plus those of other workers, are available in the final report (available on the *Better Factories Cambodia* website).

Phary, 26, from Battambang

After working on-off in the garment sector for nearly ten years, Phary lost her factory job in 2009, and is now working as a beer promoter in Phnom Penh.

With few opportunities and growing financial difficulties (she had received no severance pay from her factory when it closed), Phary first found work in a Karaoke bar, and soon after this, started supplementing this by having sex with clients for money. This allowed her to boost her standard \$60-a-month salary and pay for medical treatment for her mother.

Three months later, however, Phary resigned and started work as a beer promoter. Here she works fewer hours for more money (around \$70 per month), but still supplements this with sex work. She now has four or five clients per month, each paying \$50 per time.

Having disliked both garment and karaoke work, Phary says she is satisfied with her current job, as it allows her more freedom and the ability to work without coercion or control. She practices safe sex with her clients and believes she is well educated about HIV and other STIs.

Devi, 31, Phnom Penh

Devi is also working in beer promotions, after the factory she had worked at for four years closed unexpectedly. After several days of protests, Devi and others were paid \$300 in severance pay from the factory owner, and this helped tide her over until she found a new job in a restaurant. However, having sold no beer in the first month, Devi survived only on tips and selling sex to clients.

Now, she has sex with clients about two times per month (always with condoms), and receives

between \$10 and \$15 per time. Devi considers herself fortunate, since she is now able to send \$30 per month to support her parents and daughter.

Since leaving the factory, she also believes her living conditions have improved, and she also enjoys the freedom her current work allows.

Sotha, 23, from Prey Veng

Until its closure in 2009, Sotha worked as a seamstress in a garment factory, earning \$55 per month. After her retrenchment, she moved to stay with family in Kampong Som, gaining work as a waitress. At first, she didn't sell sex, and was protected by the restaurant owner, who didn't allow her to sit and entertain clients. However, owing to her low salary –just \$25 per month- she finally decided to sell sex to a customer, just one time, for \$100.

Today, she works in Phnom Penh as a hostess, where she receives \$40 per month (including tips). Combining this with regular sex work, Sotha now earns around \$200 per month. Whilst recognising that garment work was harder than her current job(s), as a hostess she pities her boyfriend, who doesn't know she sells sex.

Although Sotha uses condoms with clients, she only uses them occasionally with her boyfriend, and has never had an STI check-up. On one occasion, when working as a waitress, Sotha was threatened at gunpoint by a customer who wanted sex with her. However this did not deter her from eventually moving into sex work.

Recommendations

The results of this and other studies provide the basis for the following recommendations:

- (1) Launch a campaign against violence and other abuses in the entertainment sector, and hold owners and managers accountable for such abuses.** This is in view of the clear and compelling link between harassment and dangerous workplace conditions and heightened vulnerability to HIV in entertainment establishments.
- (2) Produce specialized informational and educational materials that respond to the vulnerabilities identified in this report and disseminate them to workplaces, targeting managers, entertainment workers and their clients.** Such materials should also cover issues relating to basic workers' rights, including decent wages, (overcoming) gender inequalities, and union membership.
- (3) Actively include entertainment establishments in propagation of Prakas #086 (implementing legislation) on the Creation of HIV/AIDS Committees in Enterprises and Establishments and the Prevention of HIV/AIDS in the Workplace.** This would serve as a permanent, institutional platform to reduce the vulnerabilities of entertainment workers to HIV.
- (4) Develop a licensing process for entertainment establishments that includes a basic set of conditions for employers to implement and comply with.**
- (5) Develop a tripartite monitoring mechanism to conduct regular on-site inspections of conditions at entertainment establishments,** in partnership with the Ministry of Tourism, the

Department of Occupational Safety and Health, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, and Employers and Workers' Organizations.

- (6) Strengthen advocacy efforts to apply Decree 066 on the implementation of the 100% condom use program to entertainment establishments.** For this, the Decree would need to consider the special context of sex work within entertainment settings, including the practice of indirect sex workers not using condoms with regular clients and non-commercial partners.
- (7) Facilitate a role for the tripartite partners to address the underlying vulnerabilities within the entertainment sector.** Unions should consider working in partnership with NGO associations for entertainment workers to begin addressing fundamental health and workplace safety and access to social security. Strengthening the partnerships of associations and unions is an essential step for improving health and safety conditions for entertainment workers.

For the full version of this report please go to the Better Factories Cambodia website:
www.betterfactories.org