

Together, Sex Workers Speak With a Louder Voice

by Debra Boyce

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PHNOM PENH—Seeking refuge from her abusive husband and rejected by her family, Tia fled her rural home for the anonymity of Phnom Penh, ending up in the Cambodian capital’s largest red-light district with a new life as a sex worker.

Two weeks later, she was badly beaten by a client. In her tiny room she nursed her bruises, swollen lip and black eye, feeling completely alone.

“There was no one I could talk to,” says the demure 28-year-old Tia, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. “I knew nothing about HIV and I was very worried about that. I didn’t know how I was going to survive this place.”

Determined that other women in the Tuol Kok red-light district not feel the same isolation, Tia and a handful of other sex workers decided the neighborhood needed a formal organisation where women could go and discuss their problems with their peers.

The result was the Cambodian Prostitutes’ Union. Since its doors opened in January, its senior members have divided their time between outreach work in neighborhood brothels and being available for women who drop by to chat.

While it has attracted the support of nearly 200 members, brothel owners are less pleased with its presence.

And although it has so far not been subjected to harass-

ment, the latest wave of police crackdowns on the commercial sex industry is driving many union members underground or to other parts of the city.

But if the fledgling organisation survives, Cambodian women’s rights advocates say, it will gradually help the women learn their basic rights even in an industry that many look down upon.

“The union works really well,” says Kien Sereyphal, director of the Cambodia Women’s Development Association, which offers the union advice and financial assistance.

“Before, (the women) felt powerless, felt isolated from society. Now they are starting to talk. The girls realise they must join together to protect their rights,” Kien Sereyphal explains.

The union’s office is housed in one-half of a wooden house on one of Tuol Kok’s busiest roads, nearly indistinguishable from the brothels that surround it on all sides.

On Friday mornings, members crowd into the sparsely furnished one-room office that is decorated with newspaper articles and posters depicting how HIV is transmitted. The dozen senior members lead discussions on health care, particularly HIV and AIDS prevention, and human rights.

“First you talk about HIV,” says Chan Dina, a 24-year-old sex worker who was sold to a

brothel at age 15. "Step by step you bring up human rights. Tell them that they have the same rights as other people. The same rights as men. Many of the women don't realise this."

On other days, Chan Dina and the other peer educators fan out into the brothels, armed with literature on safe sex. While other aid agencies visit Tuol Kok to talk about HIV with the sex workers, Chan Dina believes the message is more accepted when it comes from fellow sex workers.

"The union is very important," she says. "Other organisations might come here for an hour or two, but we are here all the time and we are their peers. They are comfortable with us."

With an estimated 40 percent of the country's sex workers being HIV-positive, AIDS awareness is a priority for the union.

But AIDS is not the only threat. Women come to meetings with tales of beatings and abuse. Brothel owners frequently accuse them of not earning enough money and punish them by forcing them to work around the clock or locking them up without food, says Tia.

Although the union cannot offer the women physical protection, she says, it encourages them to keep a record of their earnings as a small measure of protection.

Although more attention has been focused in recent years on the plight of Cambodia's sex workers, Kien Sereyphal says there has been no measurable improvement in their lives, mainly because their number has continued to grow.

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With the arrival of the United Nations peace-building mission, prostitution flourished in Tuol Kok, attracting many women like Chan Dina, who left her brothel in a northern Cambodian town and came to Tuol Kok during preparations for the 1993 election.

Some of the women were sold into prostitution by friends or relatives, others enticed by traffickers with the promise of fictitious jobs. Activists estimate that one-third are below the age of 18.

Although there is a law against trafficking, which includes penalties of 10 years to 20 years imprisonment for pimps and brothel owners, it is not seriously enforced.

When the women and girls are beaten, little is done by authorities.

Last year a brothel owner in northwest Cambodia beat to death a sex worker in front of witnesses, but a court dismissed the case, activists say, because he was protected by military authorities.

"The recognition of women's rights is not strong yet," says Kien Sereyphal. "It's written down in the constitution, yes. But there's no implementation yet. We have to change the attitude in society."

"Even if they work in prostitution they are still human beings and we must support them to protect and exercise their rights," Kien adds.

Tuol Kok brothel owners are afraid the union will encourage the women to run away or will hurt their profits, says Kien Sereyphal.

The police have left the union alone, but due to the latest crackdown on brothels, announced by Prime Minister Hun Sen in March, more than half of the union's 180 members have been driven underground or to other neighbourhoods. Chan Dina worries the union will lose too many members and will be forced to close.

Privately, one government official has accused the Cambodia Women's Development Association of using the union to block the government from closing down brothels, says Kien Sereyphal.

Although she has not spoken out against the crackdowns, she does not believe they are the solution. "When the brothel is open we can reach the girls so they can get an education and can protect themselves," Kien explains.

"If they are closed down they will just go underground, they won't come to us and we can't get any information to them," she points out. "If we can't talk to them, AIDS will continue to spread quickly."

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