

**International Women's Day
Grassroots Women Speakout
March 8th 2005
“WE CAN STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION”**

I. Introduction

March 8th marks the day when women in the west successfully claimed their rights to 8 hours a day work, 48 hours a week. A lot of women workers sacrificed their lives, time, blood and sweat in the struggle to obtain equal rights for women the same as for men. Women, and men, regardless of their nationality, race, skin colour, religion or culture throughout the world celebrate this international women's day and send out a message to all people that they are struggling for equality, non-discrimination, justice and peace.

In Cambodia, women's participation in the formal and informal sectors is widespread. The agricultural sector is where the overwhelming majority of women work on the field. In the garment sector, women represent 90% of the total workforce and it employs 21% of women aged between 18-25 years old; garment products are the leading export, in both volume and dollar amounts, of this country and the strength of the economy is heavily dependent on this one industry. Other sectors such as tourism, street vendors, sellers at the market, night-street sellers etc are other areas where women actively participate. Apart from the active role women play in supporting the Cambodian economy, they still suffer from violence, discrimination, exploitation, stigmatization, social exclusion.

WAC's mobilization of grass-roots women for the IWD 2005 aims to:

- Advocate for an end to gender-based violence that is reinforced by gender and social inequality, and also
- A chance for the grass-roots women, especially sex workers and garment workers, to have a space where they can share their problems and fight together for their rights.

IWD is a day that reminds all women that their struggles should continue in solidarity with other women.

II. Pre-IWD activities-Anti Rape Signature Campaign

As the theme suggests, “We Can Stop Violence Against Women and Gender Discrimination”, the WAC team initiated a petition and signature campaign to stop all forms of rape and violence against women. The signature collection started on March 29th 2005. Garment workers and sex workers actively participated in collecting signatures together with WAC team members. All people are targeted: women workers, sex workers, ordinary people, students, monks, and villagers.

WAC sent the petition through key women workers from the factories and sex worker leaders to organise the collection. The signature and thumbprints were counted on the IWD and released. A target was set to collect 35,000 signatures, and once that number is reached, they will be sent to the government as well as related Ministries for action and to address the issue more seriously. Up to March 8th 2005, 21,900 signatures/thumbprints were collected.



III. Activities of IWD at WAC

IWD grassroots women speakout in 2005 had the participation of nearly one thousand women, sex workers and garment workers. We had more than 500 workers representing 55 factories and more than 400 sex workers from all areas in Phnom Penh. This year activities were designed solely for grassroots women to take to the stage, discuss their situations and raise demands.

- The day started with a “wishing dance” performed by the Srey Sros group who are Members of the Women’s Network for Unity-WNU, a national sex workers union. It was followed by the Khmer traditional Chapey speaker/singer on the history of International Women’s Day, the situation of Cambodian women and the contributions they have made to the country and economy in particular.

- After the solidarity song called “Bread and Roses” sung by women workers, the Women’s Network for Unity role-played the situation and the struggles of sex workers who challenged an unethical clinical trial. This trial planned to test the efficacy of a potentially HIV preventative drug called *Tenofovir* that was planned to be conducted among sex workers in Cambodia starting in 2003. It was a mime-body language role-play. The WNU called for the complete stop of this unethical drug experiment, as the research group continues to try to persuade women to participate in other ways, although the Prime Minister announced called it off in August 2004. Then there was a solidarity song sung by a Philippino friend. The song, “APNSW hymn” was composed by the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers during a workshop in December in Phnom Penh.



- The anti-rape documentary “Silent War on Women,” that reflects the real situation women face in their everyday lives; from male violence against them, the growing number of rape cases and rising gang rape was shown to the audience. During the showing of this short film, many women cried as they can empathise that they are the most vulnerable group and can be subjected to any form of violence at any time, anywhere in their daily lives.
- After the documentary, one worker took to the stage and aired her feelings on the issues of violence against women, violence that is happening everyday and called for action. The action has to start from us individuals, as doing nothing or denying that is a crime is something men usually do. People cannot always expect the government to take responsibility to fix our problems. She said it is true that the government plays an important role in addressing the legal issues but citizens and other agencies have to show concern and take action against this crime.
- Garment workers then presented their role-play. What is expressed in this presentation is the hardship faced by rural households and debt when their crops fail. Rising debt accumulated from involvement in NGO credit

programs shown in the play, pushes families to loose their land. As a result of this, families are forced to send their daughter(s) to work in the factories in the cities. Here they are forced to do overtime work, work under exploitative conditions, encounter violence and attacks from gangsters, discrimination from doctors/nurses when they get sick and they are denied services because they don't have money to pay for. At the end of the story the women called for cancelling the crippling debt that many households owe to the various NGO credits program.

- One worker talked about her feelings of the credit programs and how the situation in the rural areas is increasingly difficult now. Many households borrow money, get into debt where it traps them and finally they lose many things: land, house, productive assets, break down of traditional family and face increase costs to treat diseases. After they have lost all, they lose their lives. The conditions that are imposed when a farmer borrows money is same as the conditions the Cambodian government has to comply with when they take loan from the World Bank, IMF or other agencies.
- Activist friends from Thai Labour Campaign joined with workers to share their views of the labour struggle and share solidarity songs of the working class with the women. **Many reasons** %%%% has brought many young women to cities and they end up working in a factory. But workers deserve to work in safe conditions, live a decent life and have better pay. That was the reason that 200 years ago, women workers struggled to fight for their rights and better pay. We recall and continue the struggle every International Women's Day. So every woman worker across all borders must fight for better lives and better pay. We have to continue the struggle. *"We have rights over our bodies and the right to make decisions. No man can have any right to rape women. This is unacceptable to us!"* They sang two songs of the working class struggle, "The Iron Man" and "Solidarity of workers."



The last activity was the fashion parade of the Srey Sros group with the following messages:

- Cancel Debt
- Stop Violence Against Women
- Stop All Forms Of Rape
- Stop Tenofovir
- Long Term Health Insurance for all Participants of any Tenofovir Experiment
- Give Us Rights To Enjoy Life

Then there were two songs sang by all participants: ‘Together We Preserve Women’s Rights’ and “Women Together”.

IV Conclusion

- IWD 2005 played an important role in raising the advocacy and demands of women, women workers and sex workers.
- Through participating in event like IWD, workers can strengthen their solidarity with more women groups that are facing similar problems like them and also in the struggle for their rights and respect. It shows cross sectors as well as cross border solidarity with activists from the region.
- Information, knowledge, awareness that are sent through to these grass-root women through various workshops, campaigns and networking show them and encourage to see that they are not alone in this struggle. There are groups of women workers in Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Europe doing similar activities like what they are doing. Women Network for Unity struggle and advocacy is very much similar to the work that APNSW is doing for the sex workers in the region.
- They are confident to talk about their problems and ready to fight for their rights and betterment of working class.
- The activities got broad media coverage; newspaper, radio and TV reporting in Khmer, French and English.



- I hate RAPE! Stop now!
 - We can stop VAW
 - Stop RAPE now before your loved one becomes the next victim!

