

In Cambodia, workers' rights for women slow to come

Female garment workers in Cambodia continue to face low wages, long hours and sexual harassment.

[Nathan A. Thompson](#) | 12 Mar 2016 09:12 GMT | [Poverty & Development](#), [Cambodia](#), [Women's Rights](#)



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The garment industry is Cambodia's biggest employer of women [Nathan A Thompson/Al Jazeera]

Phnom Penh, Cambodia - Srey Mao is leaving work. She flips a switch on her sewing machine. It makes an exhausted whirring noise as it powers down. She leaves her isolated workstation. Management moved her there to keep an eye on her. She even has to leave by a separate door. The sunlight hurts her tired eyes. Her old Nokia phone reads 7:10am in blocky text.

"They isolated me because I'm brave enough to advocate for the same rights Western women have," she says.

"Srey Mao" means "dark-skinned woman" in the Khmer language. It is an affectionate nickname in a country where dark skin is associated

with traditional values and rural life. The other workers also call her "mother", because, if they have a problem, she will put them in touch with the unions and address the management.

As the world celebrated International Women's Day on March 8, Srey Mao, one of Cambodia's 700,000 garment workers, was facing almost the same problems that the founders of International Women's Day confronted more than 100 years ago: scant wages, long hours and repression of unions.



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And while the situation for Western women has improved, the same problems persist in Cambodia and other countries in the developing world.

Workers' rights in New York

International Women's Day has its roots in the grime and sweat of New York City's garment industry in the early 1900s. About 80 percent of garment workers then were women, who laboured under terrible conditions.

They worked for up to 75 hours a week and had to buy their own needles, thread and, in some cases, sewing machines. Many faced sexual harassment - though the term wouldn't be coined for another 60 years.

The day is sometimes thought to have been set up to commemorate a 15,000-woman walkout in New York in 1908, but this theory has been debunked by Renee Cote, an activist and writer. In reality, the idea of International Women's Day was first proposed in 1910, at the second International Socialist Women's Conference, held in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The conference said it was "following the example of the American

socialist women", referring to a shirtwaist makers' strike in New York the previous November, in which 20,000 workers staged a mass walk-out.

The factory bosses thought that they would return as soon as the hunger and cold started to bite, but they were wrong.

"I'm not surprised the bosses hope to starve [us] into submission," wrote Theresa Serber Malkiel, in her book *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*, published in 1910.

"They forget that it ain't easy to starve these girls; they're pretty trained hands at that job." The strike ended in February 1910 with all the workers' demands being met.

Workers' rights in Cambodia

"I feel happy for them, but it's not easy for us to do the same," said Louk Saven, a Cambodian garment worker, when told the story. "My husband died and I have five children. I can't make their lives any harder." Her fellow garment worker Kong Sak concurred, saying, "I couldn't last more than a month without pay".

But Srey Mao disagreed, insisting: "We have to advocate for ourselves."

Many of the victories achieved by US shirtwaist strikers in 1910 have yet to be realised in Cambodia.

Garment workers still work 70-hour weeks during peak season, and discrimination against union members is rampant.

"If they see any girl talk to me, they will fire her," said Srey Mao.

"Because they know I am a union member." Srey Mao has been fired twice, but both times union lawyers were able to have her reinstated.



Cambodian garment workers Kong Sak, Louk Saven, Srey Mao [Nathan A Thompson/Al Jazeera]
Sexual harassment

Despite their accomplishments, the New York women were not able at the time to win protection against unwanted advances from male colleagues and management. It was only in 1964 that this protection began to be legally recognised in the US, starting with the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

For Cambodian women, sexual harassment remains a major grievance. "They will fire older women and recruit young girls because they want pretty girls to work in their factory," explained Louk Saven.

Srey Mao nodded. She said she is 52 years old, but tells her employers she is just 37.

"The management makes pretty girl supervisors so they can get close to them," claimed Kong Sak. "Often the girl is intimidated because she knows they will fire her if she disagrees [to sex]."

In recent years, Cambodian garment workers have fought for a living wage of \$160 a month. Under pressure from unions and buyers such as H&M, the Cambodian government raised the monthly minimum wage from \$128 to \$140 in January, falling short of the amount demanded by the unions.

Louk Saven shook her head. "My food costs alone are \$150 per month," she said. "I always skip dinner myself." The other women also said they were unable to afford to eat dinner.

The Cambodian government has struggled to meet workers' demands for a living wage while keeping the country's multibillion-dollar garment industry competitive.

Rival Vietnam has seen increased investment in its garment industry, thanks to free-trade [agreements](#) with major Western markets.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh - which also has a major garment industry - has a minimum wage of only \$68 a month.

Although International Women's Day is a national holiday in Cambodia, many companies in the garment industry - the country's biggest employer of women - are forcing workers to clock in as normal.

"They pressured us to sign a form changing our holiday from March 8 to an extra day at Khmer New Year," said Kong Sak. "I think they're worried about demonstrations."