

WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR UNITY

June 1st, 2008

Our Dearest Prime Minister,

It is with great urgency that we, The Women's Network for Unity (WNU) a union of sex workers of Cambodia, invite you to support us as we bring to light the ways the outlawing prostitution negatively affects our ability to earn a living and provide for our families. The recent law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation was originally conceived to provide relief for victims of human trafficking. Unfortunately, it has not done so, resulting in a massive violation against the universal rights of the women in our country, the families we belong to and the people around us. The WNU is the first line in reporting these violations. We stand to be a voice for sex workers living in fear, unable to bring legal action against their perpetrators. On June 4th, we wish to increase awareness of the crisis at our "Opening Day of Action" event. Our theme will be on defending sex workers rights to livelihood. Your attendance at this occasion, as the figure head of our country and the leader of a new page in Cambodian history, would mean a great deal to us as we shed light on the countless human rights violations stemming from this law.

The sad reality is that many women who rely on sex work do it provide for their families. Sex workers are claimed to be a threat to the female image of purity, but sex work is work, and we are people first and foremost. The decision must be our own. It is a hard choice that a person makes when the only thing of value left in their lives that they can sell is their own body. This choice is taken as each one of us struggles to sustain a life in the face of adversity. But since the institution of this new law, we now are seen as not just sex workers, but criminals in the eyes of their community and the public. We are victims and being at a higher risk of being raped and severely beaten by members of the police force is a sad reality of the criminalization process. Then as punishment, we are then taken away to rehabilitation centers that were initially designed to help women, but are more like detention camps. Sub-standard conditions in these facilities make us vulnerable to discriminatory persecution, sickness, forced labor, malaria, rape, and beatings. After brothel raids and sex worker arrests, our forgotten children are left to fend for themselves on the streets while we, the mothers, are held against our will. The futures of our citizens and our children, remain threatened now and forever as these laws endanger the well-being of all citizens of Cambodia. "Stigmatize one of us, and it stigmatizes us all."

With the introduction of the new law, programs focused on the prevention of HIV/AIDS such as the 100% Condom Use Program have collapsed. Prior to the law, we could go for monthly check-ups and had access to low cost antiretroviral (ARV) medications. However, now that sex work is illegal we are underground fugitives. We are more vulnerable to unprotected sex and do not have access to our ARVs. HIV-positive sex workers are in desperate need of daily life sustaining medications and are unable to obtain them. This is a violation of the human right to health care and endangers the lives of sex workers.

The WNU members have outlined many case studies and compiled videos portraying the personal accounts of abuse victims and have concern that this law has allowed for rape of sex workers to escalate to unprecedented proportions. Though we oppose the law, we have alternatives that can offer a solution and we would be deeply proud if you would join us to support our cause on June 4th at 8:00am on #1, Sisowath Quay, Sangkat Srah Chork, Khan Daun Penh (Former Vimean Kongkea Night Club Opposite Camintel Company).

As a great humanitarian leader and father of us all upholding the values essential to every Cambodian, who has defended the banning of unethical drug trails in sex workers of the past; we ask you today to come hear our calls of reformation towards a new law that will protect our families, our livelihood, and most of all our inalienable human rights. Please join us on this special day as we provide a voice for those who have not been heard.