

Garment industry employment alters social context

The garment sector, which employs nearly 300,000 people, doesn't only provide jobs and incomes to Cambodian women, but has brought a special change to Cambodian society. Cambodian women, especially those from rural areas who used to live under strict traditional rules, show a nearly complete change in behavior and attitude after working in a garment factory for a while.

They have changed from people who always listened to parents' advice to people who have the rights and freedom to make their own decisions without asking for the opinion of their parents. Although some parents expressed regret at their daughters' behavior, the parents do not dare oppose their daughters' ideas because their daughters are the breadwinners of the family.

Female garment workers "are financially independent. They are more open and understand their own rights. They are not reluctant to oppose if their rights are violated. They are more active than women in the previous generation."

Fifty-eight-year-old father Oum Chhan said that after listening to his daughter's words, he felt that his power in the family was weakened. "I nearly don't believe myself. My daughter before used to do the farming near me. Now she earns her own living and also supports us. I think that having a daughter is a big burden because she cannot cover financial expenses by herself," the 58-year-old man said showing his surprise.

The day he knew that his daughter was different was when she introduced her boyfriend in Phnom Penh to her parents.

"She has failed to ask us about our opinion toward the man, but we don't dare blame her for her own decision. However, being parents, I am very sorry that I am not able to engage in the issue, but ... she is the breadwinner," he added.

Many boys in villages feel jealous of girls because factories are not interested in hiring them and without an education they have no hope of obtaining a job.

"I want to have a job as they do. But, I don't know what to do since factories need only girls. Girls in my village who have been employed in factories changed their behavior completely. Furthermore, they are not interested in boys living in the same villages anymore," complained 23-year-old Vibol, who quit school in his youth due to poverty.

According to Khus Thida, executive director of the organization Silaka, women's newly active lives clearly reflect changes in ideas. "They are independent in terms of financial problems. They are more open and understand their own rights. They are not reluctant to oppose if their rights are violated. They are cleverer, but they also have serious burdens because they have to support their families and they still work in the kitchen. However, they are more active than women in the previous generation. But, at the same time, they only have small roles," she said. She also added that many girls encounter dangers while working in cities.

"Girls have received very little sex education. Since they have complete freedom in the city, they can have relations with some men who are not honest with them," she said. She suggested that they be trained so that they can benefit fully from their independence and solve the problems they face.

(*Somme Thmey, May 29*)



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