
WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR UNITY

STORIES OF CHANGE



WNU Co-ordinating Committee.

Srey Leap, 23, has a diary. Like many teenagers she started writing down what worried or bothered her and her hopes and feelings. She wrote down every time a customer laid a hand on her, every time she was mis-treated by the police, harassed by a man, or looked down by others just because of her profession. She wrote about her family and how important it is to provide for them. She wrote about her mother and how she sold her virginity when she was 16 years old. Two years ago she added some annotations she wished could have been there before, the words have inspired her to “fight back”. She now writes about the rights of Cambodian sex workers, about her rights.

Dara, 50, is a transgender woman. She knew her identity since she was 14 years old. Her parents gave her an ultimatum, “quit saying you are a woman or stop being our son”. She walked three days from her home village in Kampong Speu to Phnom Penh. She didn’t have anyone to lean on and became a sex worker. When she sings in the Karaoke or talks to the girls in the clubs she is full of life. She has a motherly touch. Her life hasn’t been easy, maybe that’s why her favourite part of being an active member of Women Network for Unity (WNU) is when she is able

to tell her story in front of an audience. Being able to stand up for people like herself, she never thought that a crowd would “listen and give me a warm welcome”.

Sok Linda, 28, works like Srey Leap and Dara in a Karaoke venue. She came to Phnom Penh when she was 16 years old to be a babysitter. Like many girls in Cambodia, she wanted to help her family that was in need. So she moved to the city searching for a job. She worked as a waitress and eventually entered the sex industry. For her, it gives “enough money to support my family”. Her relatives receive the contribution but they don't know how she earns it, she is afraid of the consequences if she tells them. She hopes for society to accept her work and stop discriminating against sex workers, meanwhile she shares what she has learnt from the organization. “I empower other women as WNU has empowered me”, she says.

These are three stories amongst thousands of sex workers and thousands of members of WNU. These are three stories from the Coordinating Committee members, and why they are motivated to change theirs and others lives.

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- DARA

Legal advice is just one the roles of the coordinators, as part of their outreach activities. In the field, they are the social workers with a higher degree of responsibility. They also give health advice and undertake blood tests and other analysis to diagnose sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, they are the first contact when sex workers are arrested and put in detention centres like Prey Speu, where drug addicts, homeless people, scavengers and beggars of all ages are rounded up to “clean the streets”.



WNU Members

“The community legal service raises awareness to the community. If any customer or the establishment owner abuses them they can file a complaint to the team leader at WNU. They need to have evidence, so if the sex worker has physical marks because of the violence, first they need to report the incident to the local authority, if their issue cannot be solved, then they can seek further advice and support with the legal service of WNU”, Dara explains when talking about her role in the organisation.

Dara knows personally how it feels to be invisible and vulnerable as a sex worker. She was imprisoned when she was 17 in a prison in Kandal province for being a sex worker. It took her three years to get out thanks to her good behaviour. "Before, women were trapped for many years because there was no organization asking for their release ", she states.

Another role of these women at WNU is to manage and collect 1000riel (0.25 dollars) contribution every month between the members. It serves as an emergency savings to help anyone in the community in case of an accident, funerary costs or any other exceptional circumstance.

Change is a difficult thing to measure in the sex industry. The discrimination is still there, the guilt imposed by society, by families, by other communities; stigma lingers like a gag that suffocates and silences. But it can be challenged when Linda talks about her self-image she says, "I never thought I could educate others, tell them about rights, but after joining WNU I can teach them and they will listen to me, it makes me feel really proud of myself because I didn't even attend high school".

Srey Leap used to feel guilty for being a sex worker. She attended a vocational training course at an NGO and the students there pushed her away because of her profession. Even some members of her own family and neighbours still criticise her, but not her mother. Now, she knows better. "It is not stealing someone else's staff, if it can feed the stomach of my family, it is the right job", she states.

Looking back at when she started working for WNU in the late nineties, Dara thinks women didn't know whom to count on when facing violence, now, she adds, women tend to be more courageous. For her WNU is "like a mother", it is what has shaped her as the person she is today. The support she has received has allowed her to keep the hard times in the past and she no longer feels that she can give up the fight.

"There is a simple slogan in a bathroom of a school, or was it a guesthouse?" Linda doesn't remember well but she is sure it matches some positive changes that have happened in the working environment, in the lives of people like Dara and Srey Leap. "If you want to be respected, you have to respect others". Maybe Srey Leap will write this in her diary tonight.