

Cambodia's 'Beer Girls' Learn The Dark Side of Selling Brew

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Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

May 31, 2000 11:17 a.m.

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- At the bustling Shady Bamboo bar and restaurant, a flock of uniformed young women descends on arriving customers, each woman pitching a different beer. "Uncle, uncle, please try my brand," they playfully plead.

Tain Aeng is among them. Dressed in a bright blue blazer and miniskirt, with a badge that says "Made in the USA," she flashes a big smile and pushes a Pittsburgh export called American Beer. While scrawny chickens dart under the table and a boy peddles grilled crickets, eight other "beer girls" jostle to promote Becks, Carlsberg, Tiger and other brands.

It's a successful marketing technique used by beer and liquor distributors in Cambodia, Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia. But behind the brew and banter, it is a business with a hidden side, as Ms. Aeng well knows. Male customers have pulled her arms and grabbed at her breasts, and the one time that she complained to her supervisor, she says, he just laughed.

A greater blow came later. Like many beer girls, the 24-year-old Ms. Aeng says, she has supplemented her \$50-a-month salary by sometimes going home with customers. Now, although thin and often feverish, she still works seven nights a week. But she has the AIDS virus.

How beer girls became a part of Southeast Asian restaurant commerce isn't clear to the distributors. But at this point, they say, they can't afford not to recruit a small army of attractive young women to promote their brands at the point of sale. Their competitors do it, and customers expect it. "Most guys who drink beer, probably they don't want to taste the beer or know the quality of the beer," says Bunthean Chin, who recently hired 37 women to promote American Beer. "They just want to see the pretty girl."

Hok Bor, sipping his drink at the Lively Evening restaurant, concurs. "Sometimes I prefer Fosters, sometimes Victoria Bitter," he says. "It depends on the girl."

Bad Habits

Distributors say they provide the young women with transportation home from work, and if they don't use it, that is their choice. "We cannot meddle in their social life," says Dennis Soon, sales and marketing manager for Sutl Corp., which distributes Budweiser here. Women who don't take the company van home after work are simply asked to change their clothes so they aren't "seen wearing the uniform and going around with guys."

He doesn't claim the workplace is free of hassle for beer girls, though. "Cambodians ... have very bad drinking habits," says the Singaporean Mr. Soon. "They like to touch their buttocks, they like to grab their hand After a while, you get used to it."

As for Budweiser brewer **Anheuser-Busch** Cos., it says it expects those who employ young "Budweiser ambassadors" to provide a safe and healthy work environment, as it does for its own employees.

Ms. Aeng tries to stay healthy with vitamins. The costly drug cocktails taken in wealthy nations to keep AIDS at bay are essentially unavailable here. The country's cash-strapped Health Ministry focuses its limited efforts chiefly on groups deemed most at risk, such as brothel workers. It's just another way that the beer girls of Cambodia fall through the cracks.

City Lights

Ms. Aeng's route to the Shady Bamboo was a circuitous one, beginning as a flight from rural poverty. Her father is a rice farmer. One of 10 children, she made meals for neighbors to supplement the family's meager income. This skill led a friend to recommend her for a cooking job in Phnom Penh at a bride brokerage that specialized in matching Cambodian women with Taiwanese men. So in 1996, at 20, she left home and headed for the city.

She says she worked at the business for about six months, until the owner's son crept into her room one night and raped her. Distraught, she quit and moved in with a family elsewhere in Phnom Penh, agreeing to help with various chores. She had few other opportunities, having completed only the fourth grade in school, and going home was out of the question. "Since that day, I felt too ashamed to face the neighbors in my homeland," she says.

Her new landlady knew of a job promoting Stella Artois, the Belgian beer, and went with her to an interview. When asked if she had ever worked as a beer girl, Ms. Aeng simply said yes. She got the job.

The distributor provided brief training, including a lesson in how to pour beer without creating foam. She was told to put down a \$5 deposit for a scarlet Stella Artois uniform and advised to request tips on makeup from her co-workers.

The company sent Ms. Aeng to Best Star, an open-air restaurant on a busy street, to work from 3 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. every day. The pay would be \$40 a month -- more than most government employees here get -- provided she could sell 18 cases of beer a month. She would earn an extra dollar for every case over the quota and lose a dollar for every case under it. To prove how much she sold, she was told to collect the bottle caps and pull tabs and turn them in each night.

Ms. Aeng quickly learned that customers could be flirtatious and aggressive. "They start their first beer, then talk, talk, talk," she says. One night, after her first week, a customer grabbed her breasts. She retreated to a corner and burst into tears, trying not to let the man see "because the guests could not learn that I got angry."

The restaurant's owner also got angry -- at her. Ms. Aeng says the woman told her, "You're a beer girl -- why can't they grab you?" Despite fearing she would be fired, she complained to her supervisor at the Stella Artois distributor, Duong Chhiv Import Export & Transport Co. He laughed, she says, and said, "They just grabbed you. Nothing wrong Normally the beer girl always gets grabbed by the customer."

The supervisor, Men Chhan, who has switched jobs, says he doesn't recall the case but would never have responded that way: "No. Never. Impossible." The restaurant owner, Chhay Sokheun, denies she got angry at Ms. Aeng, saying that if a customer treated a beer girl that way, she would "tell the girl not to go to that table anymore."

Ms. Aeng stuck with the job, learning how to drink beer, though she doesn't like it. Most distributors here want beer girls to share a drink with customers if invited because it sells more beer. Mr. Chhan, who says he is now with the distributor of San Miguel beer, says he "trains" girls to drink beer if they don't know how.

Philippine brewer **San Miguel** Corp. says it tells importers and distributors that its policy bars beer girls from drinking. But "it's very difficult for San Miguel to control the way our beer is promoted in Cambodia because we don't really have a presence there. Our relationship with our importer is basically that of a seller," says spokeswoman Maria Rosario B. Avancena. When told of some of the things that happen to beer girls in Cambodia, she says, "Frankly I'm shocked. We definitely wouldn't stand for it if we could help it."

Some beer girls say they are instructed to swallow "anti-drunkenness pills" such as an herbal preparation from India that is sold for the liver. The maker of the preparation, called Lycovin, says it makes no claims about alcohol consumption.

Taken by Force

One night at the Best Star, complications arose. A group of four regulars had been tipping Ms. Aeng \$5 or \$10 every evening and pressuring her to leave with them after work. She says she always refused, but this night, they wouldn't take no for an answer. She says the men forced her into a car and drove her outside the city to a school building, where they pushed two tables together, made her lie on top, and one man raped her. She was still in her Stella Artois uniform.

She didn't fight back. "I was afraid if I resisted, the other men would beat me," Ms. Aeng says. Afterward, she says, the men abandoned her at the school, leaving her to flag down a moped taxi to get home. "They didn't even give me money for the fare," she says.

Ms. Sokheun, the restaurant owner, says she remembers such an incident, and "it was the girl's fault." The owner's version is that the beer girl -- she says it might have been Ms. Aeng -- had agreed to leave the restaurant with some customers who regularly paid her for sex, but when her boyfriend showed up, she hesitated and a scuffle ensued. The customers then pulled her into a car. Ms. Sokheun says she doesn't know whether there was a rape, but "if it happened, it was because of the girl."

Ms. Aeng says she didn't tell the police because she "didn't know the city yet." She says she did tell Mr. Chhan at the Stella Artois distributor and asked for a transfer but was refused, so she quit.

Mr. Chhan, after first denying that any such incident occurred, says, "It's a very long story... . Maybe it happened a long time ago, but I don't remember." A current manager at the Stella distributor says he was never told about such an incident.

Interbrew SA, the private Belgian company that brews Stella Artois, declines to answer any questions about the sale of its beer in Cambodia.

Ms. Aeng says she bounced around, promoting several beers and a French wine. "When you're good-looking, it's always possible to get a job," she says.

AIDS in Cambodia

She doesn't hide the fact that many times she went home with customers after work. She says she earned from \$10 to \$100 extra a night this way. But Ms. Aeng doesn't regard herself as a prostitute because unlike a worker in a brothel, "I get to choose who I go home with, unless I'm abducted."

A recent Cambodian government study of 379 beer girls found that 40% admitted exchanging sex for money or gifts, and said they "report the lowest rates of consistent condom use during commercial sex" of any group studied. The government estimates that 19% of "indirect commercial sex workers," in which it includes beer girls, are HIV-positive.

In Cambodia, poor education and the years of isolation that followed the Khmer Rouge's genocidal reign in the 1970s have combined to create a profound ignorance about the virus. "Cambodians just don't believe in AIDS," says Pok Panhavichetr, of the Khmer HIV/AIDS Alliance.

Geoff Manthey, director of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS in Cambodia, says there's "a significant level of denial from the beer companies that their girls are engaging in sex with their customers." He says distributors should acknowledge it and offer sex education and free condoms. A typical response to this idea comes from Budweiser distributor Mr. Soon: "If you do that, then you will be in a way encouraging them," he says. "It's like saying it's OK to sleep with a customer."

It's Positive

Last year, one of Ms. Aeng's past sex clients, a man she calls her godfather, thought she seemed sickly and arranged for her to have an HIV test. When the result came back, he wouldn't tell her what it was. He thought that "if I didn't know, I would live longer," she says.

Worried, Ms. Aeng arranged another test. She took along her boyfriend, Toun Sambath, a security guard she had met while serving him beer. When the results came back, he remained silent. She returned to their one-room apartment and cried. They both had tested positive.

Slowly, Ms. Aeng's good looks are beginning to fade. Behind her thick makeup, her face is pale, her large eyes circled with shadows. Medical records show she has complained of poor appetite, a cough, fever, headaches, fatigue, a whitish tongue and a skin disorder, and has visited a women's clinic at least 46 times since August. It has given her vitamins, soap, cough medicine and generic Tylenol.

About two months ago, the couple stopped taking even this mild medicine after being told they had to start paying for it. They say they barely make ends meet, what with \$20 a month for rent and utilities plus debts Mr. Sambath owes and \$10 that Ms. Aeng gives to a brother each month so he can study English.

They haven't told anyone about their illness. To avoid shaming her family, Ms. Aeng has never told them what she does. They think she is a garment worker.

Two months ago, Ms. Aeng took a job promoting American Beer, a brand introduced here by Mr. Chin, a Cambodian who once lived in the U.S. and whose wife and child still do. By paying a little better, his firm, Superspeed Transportation Ltd., recruited a team of experienced beer girls. There was no shortage of applicants.

'Disposable'

Mr. Chin says he thinks some of the women sleep with customers, because about a third don't take the company van home most nights. He says he makes them sign a liability waiver, a practice he learned about in the U.S. But he says he doesn't believe any carry the AIDS virus. Ms. Aeng hasn't told him that she does.

American Beer is made by privately held Pittsburgh Brewing Co. It deals with an exporter and says it doesn't monitor and can't control local practices. "Marketing efforts that are done overseas are really not something the brewery participates in at all or really has any knowledge of," says Karen Krynicky, export manager at the brewer.

But the president of the firm that exports American Beer to Cambodia, American Beverages & Commodities Co. in Kingston, Mass., is well aware of the beer girls. The attitude in Cambodia seems to be that "the women are second-class citizens -- they're disposable," says the executive, George Trawinski. He adds: "I'm not in charge of the morality of these countries, and even if I were, I couldn't change it."

Ms. Aeng says she enjoys selling American Beer. "It tastes like Heineken but you don't get a headache when you drink too much," she says. And customers at Shady Bamboo haven't been too aggressive. "No one has grabbed my breasts, just my hands and side," she says.

Vanished Dream

On a recent warm evening, after a long shift, Ms. Aeng grew wistful as she described the dream she had when she first became a beer girl. "I was hoping one of the clients would be rich enough,

and good enough, to take me to be his wife," she says. That things didn't work out that way, she adds, isn't anyone else's fault. She views things from a Buddhist perspective. "In my former life, I must have done something wrong," she says.

Ms. Aeng hasn't heard about the drugs that can control HIV if taken assiduously. "I was told in the year 2000 they will find a medicine that will cure" AIDS, she says, though she admits her hope is fading. She goes regularly to a temple to burn incense and pray.

She and her boyfriend, Mr. Sambath, have become husband and wife. After the test results they decided to get married and held a big ceremony at her home village. The bride wore pink. Ms. Aeng says she comes from a traditional family and wanted to make her parents happy. Among rural Khmers, an unmarried woman her age would carry a stigma.

But she and her husband had a secret reason for marrying. "After we knew the two of us were going to get AIDS," she says, "we decided to die together."

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