Reactions to public order draft law: A tool for protection or oppression?

Som Kanika and Sok Srey Lux / Khmer Times

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A woman is seen wearing “revealing” shorts in the capital. KT/Siv Channa

A draft of the anticipated Public Order Law which was obtained by Khmer Times last week has caught the attention of many in the Kingdom, with uproar coming from select provisions which have been deemed controversial and carry the potential of undermining human rights. Indeed, one of such provisions which gives the government the authority to regulate how Cambodians dress in public – has hit right at the centre of the feminism movement.

Khmer Times’ Som Kanika and Sok Srey Lux took to the streets this week to test public opinion on the important social issue.

Rachana Cheu, International Studies student of the RUPP

Rachana Cheu, one of the 11,080 online users petitioning for the amendment of the draft, expressed grave concern that the draft opens the door for other forms of human rights violations.

“I expect that the government would at least pause to reflect after seeing how vocal we have been and consider the negative criticisms this draft law will foster from both domestic and
international audiences regarding the violation of human rights that would ensue if this draft law is put into effect. I am also proud to see that more and more Cambodian people, especially the youth, are being vocal about this issue, which has honestly come as a surprise.”

The youth’s strength in possibly prompting the desired amendment of the draft, said Cheu, comes from their character to actively participate and thus be heard.

“I am pleasantly surprised to see how the younger generation has taken a stand on this issue. I hope this level of engagement persists regardless of the social issue that needs to be addressed, to keep people involved in the law making process.”

Catherine Harry, feminist blogger

Catherine Harry said the draft law could adversely affect women more than men. “Even though the draft law mentions rules for how men should behave and dress, it comes from a different perspective. They do not use words like ‘cultural protection’ or ‘preservation’ when trying to enforce laws on men as they do with women.”

“There are laws in other countries which concern dress conduct, but that does not mean they should be applied in Cambodia. The fact is, most public officials are men and they cannot understand the hardships women face, yet they are making the decisions on this draft law.”

Som Panha, graphic designer

Som Panha said the draft law should provide clear context as its vagueness could spur controversy and public criticism. “I don’t mean the law shouldn’t exist. It should be drafted and limited first to a certain extent that would be acceptable to the general public. It would be better if the law would be implemented only for people in the education field since this is a certain area where the law would certainly be needed as many young students need to have role models to look up to.”
“Regarding public places, the law should not completely limit people by telling them not to wear shorts or be shirtless. There should also be clarifications. What would be considered ‘too short’? Where are men not allowed to be shirtless? Schools or, perhaps, pagodas? The draft law should take into account the fact that the general public comprises different types of people with different sets of values and not everyone would want to be policed for how they conduct themselves.”

**Ham Pidor, blogger on body positivity**

Ham Pidor said the idea behind the draft is firmly rooted in conservative values which further oppress women’s rights rather than empower them, particularly impinging on their freedom to express themselves through the way they dress.

“I hope the government reconsiders the provisions in the draft seeing as once it takes into effect, it will just be another form of oppression toward women. Instead of focusing on how women dress, they should invest more on women and empower them to contribute more in society. They could also pay closer attention to the issue of poverty, challenges in our economy and the COVID-19 situation.”

**Chak Sopheap, executive director of Cambodian Center for Human Rights**

Chak Sopheap said: “Indeed, the draft law on public order contains many highly problematic provisions that undermine civil and political, as well as economic, social and cultural rights of everyone within Cambodia’s jurisdiction. The draft law seeks to police the actions of citizens and appears to criminalise a vast array of public, and even private, behaviour.”

“The draft law does contain some positive provisions that seek to improve the health and safety of the public and aim to protect the environment. For example, the required placement of warning signs to prevent accidents (Article 19) and the prohibition of littering (Article 12). Despite this, the law appears to have been written without adequate consideration of human rights and requires significant revisions for it to be compliant with Cambodia’s human rights obligations.”
