

Joint Statement

The Impacts of Covid-19 on Formal and Non-Formal Workers

Phnom Penh, Thursday, June 17, 2021

We, the undersigned civil society groups, local organizations and associations working in human rights and labour sectors including sex workers, entertainment workers and factory workers, request the Government of Cambodia to continue to address the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers and expand the coverage of support provided to workers in the formal and informal sector. We request basic public services including public health services, shelter, water, electricity, and livelihood support in response to the increased violence and exploitation of all forms faced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Millions of people worldwide have lost their lives as a result of Covid-19. The pandemic has also brought about enormous social and economic impacts and interruptions to the global supply-chain. Cambodia is no exception. According to a recent civil society study on “ The impacts of Covid-19 on factory workers” “Sex workers’ experience the impact of Covid-19” and “Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on small-scaled farmers in Cambodia” and a survey on the recent responses and interventions by the Cambodian government to prevent the spread of Covid-19, findings indicate that some of the measures and actions taken by the government have further impacted and threatened the basic human rights of workers in the formal and informal sectors and that they have received very minimal protection from the laws. People working in these sectors have been facing major challenges especially in regard to working conditions, security of livelihood, violence, exploitation, discrimination, and social exclusion. So far they have received very limited support without income and job security due to the nature of the work they are doing.

As per our observations, during the Covid-19 period the government has provided some support for female and male workers in the textile, garment and tourism sectors during their suspension of employment, giving a sum of USD40 per month per individual. Workers in lock-down areas have received 160 000 riel as well as cash transfer support to poor households through ID-poor, health equity fund and food support programs. Meanwhile, the government has provided huge support to the employers including tax exemptions, national social security fund (NSSF) and other support to investors.

Based on our meetings and discussions with female and male factory workers, sex workers and entertainment workers, we found that government support for both formal and informal sectors has so far been very limited, leaving them to face even more severe challenges. Major issues are:

1. The government does not have a policy to reduce room and house rental fees. Factory workers and entertainment workers are not able to pay their rent, while most of the landlords have not reduced their fees at all, or only by a small amount. In reality, some sex workers have been expelled by house and room owners.
2. The price of food and other daily essentials has continued to increase while people are earning a lower income or have completely lost their jobs. As a result, they have had to reduce their food intake, while some do not have food to eat.
3. Workers are not able to pay for their daily and monthly water and electricity supply whether they are operated by the state or private sectors. Some of them have had their services disconnected by the suppliers.

4. Workers are increasingly in debt due to their inability to pay the principal and interest of existing debt, and the accumulation of new debt (owed to MFIs, commercial banks, and private money lenders) to cover daily expenses.
5. There is increased exploitation of workers both in the formal and informal sector by factory owners and owners of entertainment establishments, including the loss of benefits from the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), overtime payments, salary and labour.
6. There are no safety and legal protections for workers during working hours. Entertainment workers and those working independently in the informal sector experience harassment and arrest by officers in charge of public order. Garment factory workers who have to go to work during the Covid-19 pandemic do not have access to support services to ensure physical distancing and access to hygiene products.
7. Workers face increased emotional and physical health impacts due to various challenges as mentioned above. These are compounded by insufficient funds to pay for transport to receive treatment, pay for treatment services, and buy medication. They are also at very high risk of contracting Covid-19 because they continue to go to work to earn an income in order to sustain their livelihood and pay down debt.

We ask the government to immediately provide the following solutions to workers in both the formal and informal sectors:

- Exempt room and house rental, water and electricity fees for workers during the period impacted by Covid-19;
- Extend the timeframe to pay back debt (towards both principal and interest payments) to commercial banks, MFIs and private money lenders until employment renormalizes (employment contracts are provided with wages and benefits in accordance with the Labour Law);
- The Ministry of Health should strengthen public health service delivery by providing good quality services free of charge;
- The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training should provide employment security and dignified working conditions according to the Labour Law including immediate interventions when there are problems in relation to workers' rights and working conditions, and allowance support during employment suspension. The Ministry should conduct inspections and monitor garment factories and entertainment establishments to inspect their working conditions and hygiene measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19;
- The Ministry of Interior and local authorities should provide protection and safety and make an effort to end discrimination, violence (physical, emotional and sexual), harassment and exclusions in both the public space and workplace.
- Ensure access to equitable and fair public and social services provided by all relevant institutions for workers in both the formal and informal sectors.#

This statement is jointly endorsed by:

1. Women's Network for Unity (WNU)
2. Worker's Information Center (WIC)
3. Social Action for Community and Development (SACD)
4. The Messenger Band (MB)

5. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
6. Rainbow Community Kampuchea Organization (ROCK)
7. Peoples Action for Development (PAD)
8. Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
9. The Cambodian Young Women's Empowerment Network (CYWEN)
10. Women Peace Makers (WPM)
11. ActionAid Cambodia (ACC)
12. ARV Users Association (AUA)
13. Banteay Srei Organization (BS)
14. Action for Environment and Community (AEC)
15. Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC)
16. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
17. Focus on the Global South
18. Just Association Southeast Asia
19. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
20. Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)
21. Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation (CFSWF)
22. Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Development in Cambodia (ADHOC)

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