

# WEEKEND

The CAMBODIA DAILY

Issue Number 591, 1,200 riel/30 cents  
Saturday and Sunday, July 11-12, 2009



## FOR A FEW DOLLARS MORE

The Stories Behind the Women Who  
Work in the City's Hostess Bars



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At a Steady Pace



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# Hostesses' Hard Choices

## Tracing the Career Paths of Phnom Penh's Hostesses

BY SIMON MARKS  
AND PRAK CHAN THUL  
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Just three months ago, Nary was working nine-hour days inside the Kentex garment factory on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. But like thousands of other young women who had thought that work was plentiful in the once-booming textile industry, she lost her job earlier this year.

With no income and desperate for employment, the 21-year-old soon discovered an outlet for some quick cash: Phnom Penh's hostess bar scene, an area of the city's entertainment industry that thrives off its flirtatious female employees and gray areas surrounding prostitution.

"It's better than working in a factory," said Nary, recalling her time under the dim light of her sewing machine. "We were very tired and earned very little money, but here we have enough to earn a good living."

After losing her factory job, Nary, who asked that her surname not be revealed, said that she had no desire to go back to her rural home village and work the land with her family, a trend that some government officials and economists had predicted, saying that the rural migration would help revitalize the nation's economy.

Nary now spends her nights under the red neon lights of a hostess bar on Street 136, where in return for flirting with her male customers, she receives financial security.

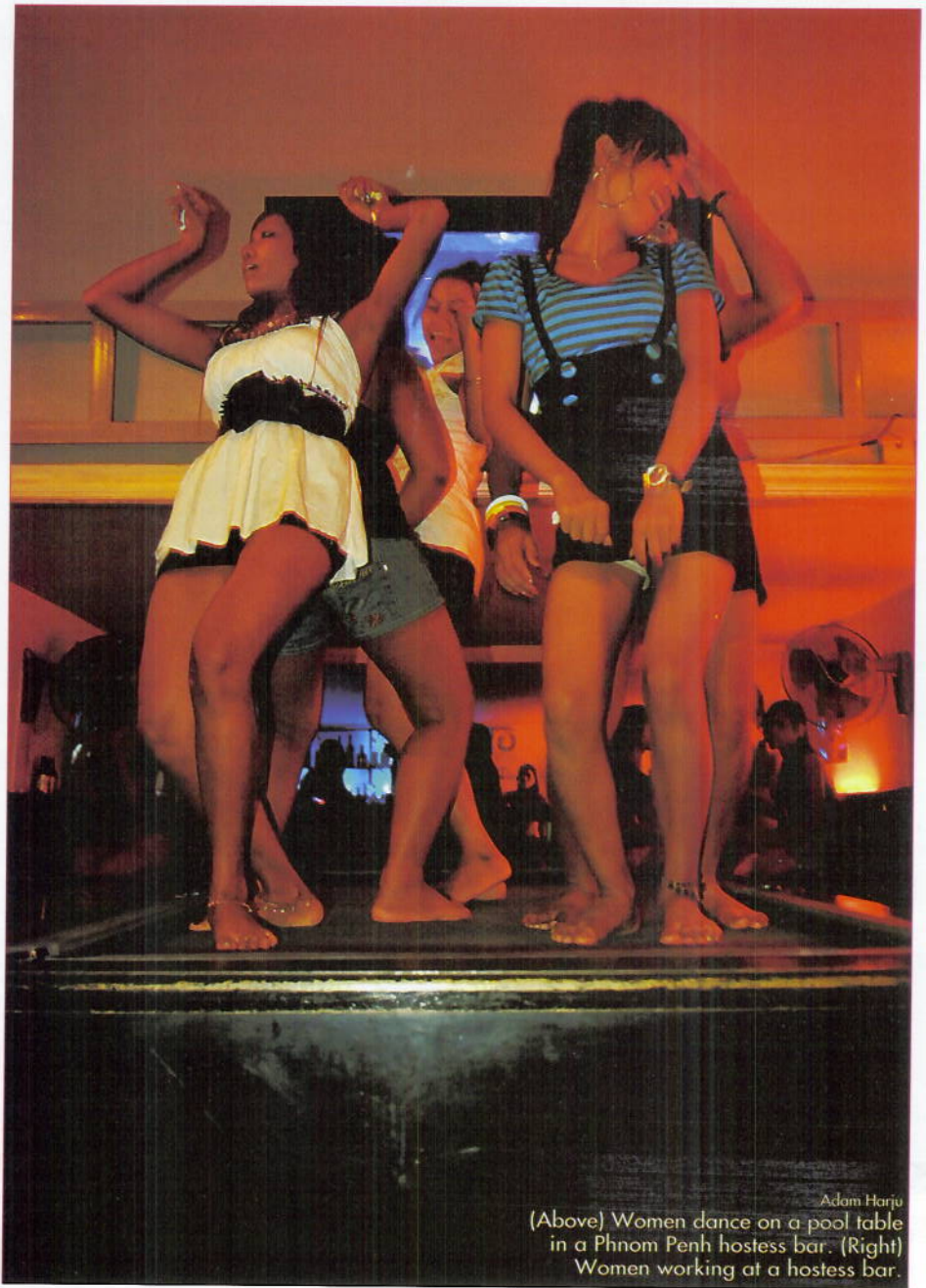
Hostesses and bar owners say they have noticed an influx of girls looking for work in their establishments in the past several months, a period that coincides with the global economic downturn and thousands of job losses in the garment sector.

Hostess bars in Phnom Penh started to spring up about five years ago when an increase in the numbers of tourists coming to Cambodia inspired entrepreneurs to provide a new source of entertainment. The result was a sort of diluted form of the activities one can experience in Bangkok's famous Soi Patpong and Nana Plaza.

But despite its softer image compared to the more hardcore Bangkok equivalent, the jobs at Phnom Penh's hostess bars may be pushing young women into areas of the entertainment industry that under different economic circumstances they would have tried to avoid.

"With the hardship stemming from job losses, particularly in the garment industry, one result is more girls looking for work in the entertainment sector, including bar girls, making them more vulnerable to exploitation," said Patrick Clayton, field office director for the International Justice Mission, a US-based group that focuses on rescuing women and children from the sex industry.

"We have seen a trend of girls moving into



Adom Harju  
(Above) Women dance on a pool table in a Phnom Penh hostess bar. (Right) Women working at a hostess bar.

the fringes and edges of society," Clayton said, adding that one of the reasons young women are grabbing jobs in the entertainment industry was due to the narrowness of the Cambodian economy, which relies on just a handful of sectors, including garments.

But some of the women who have found work in Phnom Penh's hostess bars say that they consider themselves lucky, explaining that the extra cash they make through sideline prostitution is not the result of exploitation, but their own choice.

Sitting conspicuously under a flickering violet neon light inside a bar on Street 136, Nita, 29, a former garment worker who has worked in Phnom Penh's hostess bars for six months, explained that she thought at least 20 percent of all those are working in such bars had lost their jobs as garment workers since the beginning of 2009.

"Our job is to attract clients and flirt with them. When you work in the bar the clients

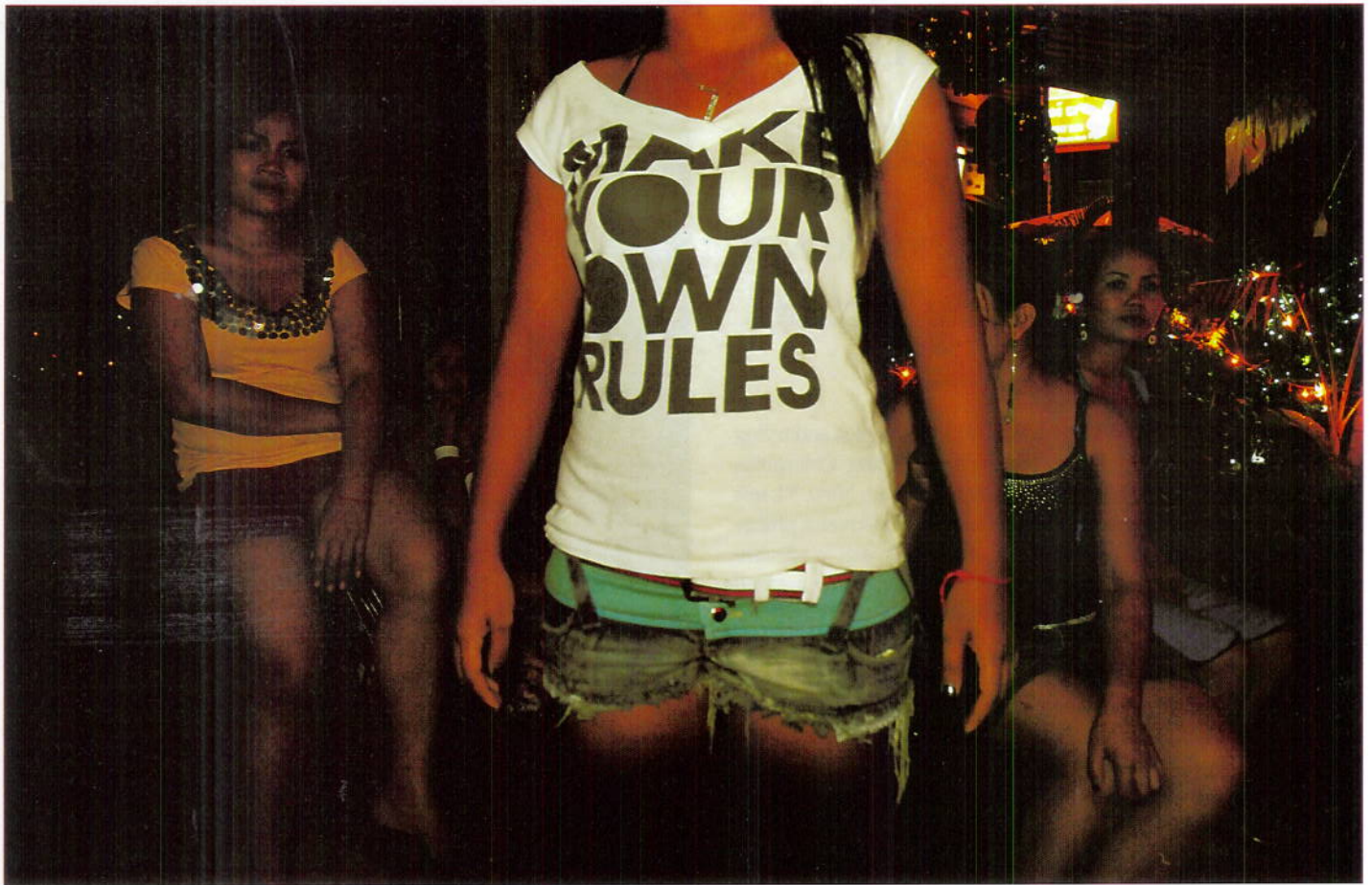
need to be happy," Nita explained.

"Boom boom, yes, it happens," she said, using a common euphemism for sex. She added that most of the bar girls she knows, including the newcomers from the garment factories, had dabbled in prostitution at least once, while others were hoping to find a husband among the ranks of anonymous customers.

"Some [men] take a girl for one night, others take her for a long time. Sometimes so long the man ends up buying his wife," she said.

Nita now has a purse with more than a few thousand riel inside. She works three days a week in Phnom Penh and has bought herself a house in Kandal province. Food is no longer scarce, she said.

Not surprisingly, the managers of hostess bars don't see themselves as some might—pimps or madams—but say they are creating new and sustainable jobs in a country that currently offers very little in the way of opportunities.



"People come here because it is the only place in Phnom Penh that is open 24 hours. There are great bars, food and people from all over," said Nory Chinvanny, manager at the Top Ten bar on Street 136.

Opposite her business, residents have moved out of the shop houses that once had a dominant presence on the now brightly lit side street off Sisowath Quay that is now littered with bars and young women in their twenties dressed in anything from glimmering ball gowns, with sequins that catch the neon lights, to more simplified high street fashion items.

Mrs Chinvanny said that most of the hostess bars that have cropped up over the last couple of years pay their girls at least \$70 each month—more than what most earned inside a garment factory—and sometimes provide accommodation, food and even health care.

"What the girls do with the clients is nothing to do with my business," she said. "That is their business."

Ms Pin, manager of the Candy Bar on Street 136, who refused to give her surname, says she sees scores of young women asking for a job at her bar every week. Most of the women she sees come through her door are there on a short term basis, she says, and primarily do the job as a means of making quick cash.

"Some of the girls get bored and go where there are more clients," she said, adding that more clients mean more money from tips and from behind closed doors.

Sy Define, secretary of state at the Women's Affairs Ministry said that although she was concerned about women falling into prostitution due to the high numbers of lay-offs in the garment sector, the issue was "not serious."

"Not all of them go to work in bars," she said. "They returned to their homeland or went to work in other factories."

But Choun Mom Thol, president of the Cambodian Union Federation, said that many of the thousands of young women who had lost their jobs recently have been absorbed into the entertainment industry—a term he used to describe restaurants, beer gardens and hostess bars.

"Girls working in the entertainment industry are paid at least \$50 per month and have big

**"Working in a bar is not good, but it is helpful to people who have no way out."**

— NITA,  
HOSTESS BAR WORKER

tips from clients. Also they sometimes have free housing, free electricity and free food," he said, adding that some had no doubt fallen into the informal business of prostitution.

"The girls negotiate with clients and arrange a price," he said.

Srey, 27, found herself a job in Bar 69 on Street 136 four months ago and later moved across the road to Up and Down Bar. She used to make \$60 a month when working as a garment worker. Now she earns \$250, most of which comes from tips and clients who pay for other services. She says she is relieved and happy about her newfound financial security.

"Those working in the factory had no good food to eat. Here the boss allows us to sleep and sometimes clients give us tips so we can eat," she said.

Lea, an employee at the Rose Bar on Street

104, said she has seen a large increase in girls looking for work since the garment factories began to close down. Out of the 30 girls working at the bar on a recent night she said that four of them had lost their job as garment workers and ended up working in the bar.

Completely surrounded by girls in short skirts and laced strapless tops, Vin, a hostess at the bar, said that the array of new bars in the capital was providing an outlet for many women holding poorly paying jobs inside Cambodia's informal economy.

"Five months ago I was selling cakes in the street making a few dollars a day. I had to walk tens of kilometers and came home shattered," she said.

Her job as a hostess, although not her first choice, is a safe bet when it comes to earning a living.

Indeed, while Cambodia's economy continues to feel the strain of the downturn in the global economy, the rise of Phnom Penh's hostess bars is an alternative to financial hardship and a means of survival. But it comes at a price.

Sothea, 21, who has worked as a hostess in a bar down Street 104 for the past five months explained that her evenings are often plagued by men who continuously come back and ask to have her company for the evening.

"And I can't do anything," she said, "It's annoying."

Moreover, she says that men often get too drunk, pawing over them with little self-restraint.

"Anyway, I am probably going to leave this month. We'll see," she said.

For Nita, the initial consolation of finding a job soon wore off once she discovered the reality of her new life among the lonesome and sometimes lecherous males that are intrinsic to Phnom Penh's hostess bars.

"Working in a bar is not good, but it is helpful to people who have no way out," she said. ■