U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Cambodia's Garment Workers Overcome Stigma, Learn How To Prevent HIV

HENG, A 22-YEAR-OLD GARMENT WORKER who lives near Phnom Penh, Cambodia, has lofty dreams. She wants to become a lawyer. But in the community where she lives, Heng has been stereotyped as a "bad girl," a "loose woman"—all because she works in Cambodia's garment industry.

Heng is among 170,000 Cambodian females from poor, rural families who work in the garment business. She is part of a young labor force that flows into Cambodia's capital city, desperately seeking an escape from poverty. What little money Heng and other garment workers make goes toward paying rent, buying food, and supporting their families back home. Their days are long and their work conditions difficult. Even worse, many are shunned by a society that believes young girls should not live away from their families.

> USAID effort to recruit, train, and deploy a network of HIV/AIDS volunteers within the garment industry is emblematic of the many small steps Cambodia has taken to rebuild itself.

Young men, who seek these women out as sexual partners, would never dream of marrying them. Although the women are proud of their independence and their roles as wage earners, many are at risk for HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), together with CARE/Cambodia and local nongovernmental organizations, is working to reduce these risks through a workplace health program for garment workers called *Sewing a Healthy Future*. The program promotes education and awareness of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, disseminates information on reproductive health care, improves access to clinical services, and increases health provider knowledge of HIV/AIDS, particularly among factory clinic staff. Informal peer networks are one of the program's highlights: the clinic staff regularly plan HIV/AIDS education events and have established health materials libraries at worksites.

Photo courtesy of CARE

Sewing a Healthy Future promotes reproductive health education, HIV/AIDS awareness, and access to clinical services. Here a factory clinician provides medication for a young garment worker.

As of early 2003, *Sewing a Healthy Future* had reached more than 35,000 women in 15 major garment factories, about 20 percent of the women employed in the sector. The initiative is currently expanding to cover 10 additional factories and has been extended through September 2005.

Delivering HIV/AIDS messages to vulnerable groups is key to reversing Cambodia's well-established epidemic. After decades of political and economic turmoil, the country is struggling to curb the highest HIV infection rate in Asia, but must contend with a severely weakened health care infrastructure. There are signs

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of hope, however. Adult HIV prevalence in Cambodia dropped from 4 percent in 1999 to 2.7 in 2002, and a national 100 percent condom use policy has been effective in significantly reducing HIV infections among sex workers.

USAID's effort to recruit, train, and deploy a network of HIV/AIDS volunteers within the garment industry is emblematic of the many small steps Cambodia has taken to rebuild itself. For thousands of young women like Heng, a future without AIDS is a few steps closer.

Cambodia, October 2003