

**Promotion girls/beer? (translated from Dutch to English)
[the diminutive 'biertje?' in the original title implies 'beer anyone?']**

By Joop Bouma
Trouw, 2003-05-23

www.trouw.nl

[Square brackets contain translator's comments]

Canadian psychologist Ian Lubek takes the side of [or more literally 'throws his lot in with'] Cambodian beer girls. Young women in nightclubs [lit: entertainment centers] serve exported beer to the customer. They wear tight dresses with the colours and logos of Heineken, Stella Artois, or Carlsberg. The number of HIV infections is high because sometimes an evening of beer drinking ends in unprotected sex with customers. Heineken is jointly responsible, according to Lubek.

"Mister, mister, do you want to try my bier?" laughing girls from Siem Reap call out to tourists. The city, near the monumental ancient temples of Angkor Wat, Cambodia's most popular attraction, is well known for its night life. In the cafés and restaurants hundreds of young women swarm. They are looking for thirsty customers.

The girls wear waisted [ie., cut in at the waist] uniforms. On their clothing is marked the logo of the imported beer that they wish to sell. The Heineken dresses are green-white, the colours of the beer company, with the name diagonally in large letters. In all of Cambodia there are four to five-thousand beer girls. They are paid per beer-cap or per tab (from the beer cans) that they turn in. In Siem Reap alone there are about two-hundred "peegee's", the name that the beer companies use for "promotion girls."

This phenomenon is not unique to Cambodia. In African countries, Thailand, actually in all of south-east Asia, beer is sold in nightclubs by hired girls and women. In China alone there are 1200 beer girls that sell Heineken beer.

"Nothing special" says spokesperson M. Berssenbrugge of Heineken. "It is just like the girls who used to give out radio and TV guides on the street in the Netherlands in a Veronica dress."

[trans. comments: An ingenious but false comparison, young women used to give out radio guides in the NL to get people to listen to commercial radio when it first became available, they were well paid and not coerced into sexual relations.]

The comparison is lame. Many Cambodian women earn extra money by going with the men they have met in the cafés after closing time. This frequently ends up in unprotected sex.

Ian Lubek, professor of psychology at the University of Guelph in Canada,

stumbled by accident on the Cambodian beer girls. On his way to Australia on a layover in 1999 he got to talking to a young Cambodian who told him about the AIDS problem in his country. "We were talking about my work in Canada. He told me that he only had his grandfather; his parents and other family members had all died of AIDS. Every night he went to a café where he drank twenty to thirty beers. Then he would go and party with the beergirls. 'We should use condoms, but we forget,' he said. He added that almost every week he had to bury a friend who had died of AIDS. 'There are no medicines' he said. 'You become ill, you go home and within a couple of weeks you die from malaria or some other complication.' He asked me directly what I, as a professor of psychology, could do to help this problem. It led me to thinking. For years I taught students theory but here I was being asked to put my knowledge into practice."

Shortly thereafter Lubek was involved in the establishment of an AIDS prevention project in Cambodia. With a modest grant from the Elton John Aids Foundation a modest program was established in Siem Reap in 2001. But Lubek thinks that the beer companies should also take responsibility for the health of the promotion girls.

"There is no good medical infrastructure in Cambodia" said Lubek. "Because of complications, AIDS patients die much more quickly in this country, usually within three months. In 2001 we tested a quarter of the beer girls in Siem Reap and of these almost 16 percent were HIV-positive. We think that of the beergirls, one in five is infected with HIV. There is some prevention but the problem with the beergirls is that they travel from city to city and café to café.

According to Lubek, the women are paid far too little to support a family on beer promotion. "They are able to get 50 to 60 American dollars per month. They have to have four or five sexual relations every month to make sufficient income. Even if the women are not directly employed by the beer companies, we find that they are indirect employees. Thus the beer companies, for whom they advertise, are responsible. Don't I have to assume that they are part of the promotion budget of Heineken or Stella Artois?"

Lubek wants Heineken and the other brewers to establish a decent [or adequate] health program for the beergirls in Cambodia. "They are prisoners of an unsafe work situation. But the most important thing is that they receive enough money to make sex for supplementary income unnecessary."

In the meantime, the psychologist has pursued the beer brewers for about two years with letters and emails. Most don't react or limit themselves to a one sentence evasive answer. Heineken is, for the Canadian professor, an important target because the company has established a progressive HIV/AIDS policy for its own personnel domestically and abroad. However the brewer does not see the beergirls as its own personnel.

Heineken has already explained company policy to Lubek and has also cut off

contact with the professor. "He keeps it up but we have our own way of doing things," said Hans Wesseling, who at Heineken is responsible for external social policy or the undertaking of social responsibility.

"We know the problem. We are also planning in due course [*degelijk* can also mean reliably] to do something for the beergirls." Wesseling points to a brochure from 2002 in which Heineken lays out its international HIV/AIDS policy. In the chapter on prevention there is indeed a statement that in countries where the brewer is active 'local programs are being developed for groups with a high infection risk.' The promotion girls are specifically mentioned.

"But," says Wesseling, "we are in the business of beer, not in medical care. Our primary attention is to our own employees. If because of local government there is no medical care available, then we have a job to do [lit: a task for ourselves]. For our own employees we have an HIV/AIDS program. In Cambodia this means that most 'peegees' are not employed by Heineken and, in addition, there is a medical infrastructure in that country."

But Wesseling denies that the beergirls constitute a risk group for sexually transmitted diseases. "That's why we are now trying to set up a world-wide information program, meant for all 'peegees' that Heineken *inzet* ['makes available,' a term that allows Heineken to say they are responsible for setting up the beer girls but do not hire them, so to speak]. It is important that there is enough supervision, that the women are escorted to and from the café's and that good agreements are reached." Next month Heineken wants to start in Cambodia with a pilot project.

Did the action of professor Lubek have any effect? Wesseling: "We were already active with this, but his activities remind us of the urgency to give this problem some care" [the latter phrase is a literal translation of the quote, meaning presumably that you have reminded them to speed things up].

Heineken does not plan to increase the payments received by the beergirls. "Poverty related problems we cannot solve out of The Netherlands. We pay the women there according to local standards. In Cambodia we belong to the best paying in the beer industry. The income the beergirls earn is even several times greater than what civil servants earn. Maybe it's not an ample income but it is certainly enough to live off."

Stella Artois reports from Leuven that the company barely uses beergirls in Cambodia. But this brewer too says that it is 'very conscious of the urgency of the right approach to this problem.' The Belgian beer company means that the girls need to be properly taught [trained] and accompanied [escorted].