



# LIKE GHOST CHANGES BODY

*Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime*

*Edited by Theresa DE LANGIS, PhD  
As told to and translated by Thida KIM*



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The views expressed in this book are the points of view of the survivors,  
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# **“LIKE GHOST CHANGES BODY”**

Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage  
during the Khmer Rouge Regime

June 2015

TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHOSOCIAL ORGANIZATION (TPO)  
CAMBODIA

Edited by Theresa DE LANGIS, PhD

As told to and translated by Thida KIM



## **“Like ghost changes body” – Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime**

The interviews in this publication make up the eight case studies of the research project *“Like ghost changes body” – A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime* by Theresa de Langis, Judith Strasser, Thida Kim and Sopheap Taing for the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia in October 2014. As such, this volume complements that research report. Funding for this publication was kindly provided by the Civil Peace Service of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. It was produced in context of TPO's "Women in Transitional Justice" project funded by United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women.

### **Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia**

The Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia, established in 1995, is Cambodia's leading NGO in the field of mental health care and psychosocial support. It is the only psychosocial organization in Cambodia engaged in transitional justice activities in the context of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Since 2007, and based on a Memorandum of Understanding with the ECCC, TPO Cambodia has been providing comprehensive psychosocial services to ECCC civil parties. These services range from on-site support at the tribunal, culturally-sensitive trauma therapy and self-help groups to truth-telling activities and research projects. TPO Cambodia also has many years of experience designing and implementing community-based programs aimed at combatting and preventing gender-based violence in Cambodia.

### **Gender-Based Violence during the Khmer Rouge Regime**

This publication can be downloaded in English and Khmer at <http://gbvkr.org/gender-based-violence-under-khmer-rouge/>. This website hosts a range of research information, documentation and other resources on sexual and gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge regime, including audio and film recordings.

### **Authors**

Interviews were edited by Theresa de Langis, PhD, an independent technical specialist on women's human rights in conflict and transitioning scenarios. She has been based in Cambodia since 2012 researching sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge regime.

Interviews were conducted by Thida Kim, then Technical Assistant to the Gender-Based Violence Project of TPO. Ms. Kim also provided Khmer/English translation and authentication of edited interviews against original recordings. Currently she is a psychologist with the Department of Psychology at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

## DEDICATION

*This volume is dedicated to the women and men who were forced to marry during the Khmer Rouge regime, and to those who resisted and were punished.*

*Their resilience in overcoming tragedy and trauma—evident in the vibrancy of today's Cambodian youth—is a testament to the unbreakable strength of the human spirit.*

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# PREFACE

Dear Readers,

Today, almost four decades after the devastation brought to Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79), Cambodians overwhelmingly continue to bear the psychological scars of this most brutal of regimes, both as individuals and as a society as a whole.

Much of what happened during those faithful Khmer Rouge years has been shrouded in a veil of silence and secrecy for far too long. However, with legal proceedings against former senior leaders of the regime underway in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)—also known as the “Khmer Rouge Tribunal”—the tide is slowly turning. Thanks to the brave victims and survivors of the regime testifying as civil parties at the ECCC, and thanks to many other Cambodians who are finding their voice and sharing their stories, Cambodia and the world are seeing more evidence of how the Khmer Rouge doctrine was implemented and enforced upon the population, with devastating consequences that are still pervasive in Cambodian society today.

This publication is intended as a companion to the 2014 TPO study, *“Like ghost changes body” – A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime*, by Theresa de Langis, Judith Strasser, Thida Kim and Sopheap Taing. By publishing the full case study interviews done during our research into forced marriage, we hope to give you a deeper insight into the nature and

impacts of these marriages over the short and long term. The interviews also provide a more nuanced narrative of what can only be described as forced marriages—from stories of people who stayed together as a couple and raised families, to those who were brutally punished for refusing to accept the forced marriage arrangement. In all cases, resilience of the human spirit emerges as the most powerful and enduring force.

With forced marriage and the rapes that occurred within those marriages being tried in Case 002-02 at the ECCC (and part of the charges laid in Case 004), TPO Cambodia and the interviewees feel that providing access to these full interviews is both timely and relevant.

By publishing these stories, we want to further open up community conversation about the past as a way of building a better future—a future based on mutual respect and equality in families and society.

Dr Sotheara CHHIM  
Executive Director  
Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia



# ● INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Kampuchea regime (more commonly known as the “Khmer Rouge regime”) controlled Cambodia between April 17, 1975 and January 7, 1979. In those four years, eight months and twenty days, close to a quarter of the population perished from starvation, exhaustion, illness, torture and execution, among other causes. The period is known as one of the worst mass atrocities in recorded human history.

Today, a United Nations-backed hybrid tribunal—the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)—is hearing charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide laid against surviving senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime. One of several truly unique aspects of the ECCC is that victims and survivors may stand as civil parties to the court as part of the proceedings, testifying about their experiences and recommending reparations and non-judicial measures for the harms endured. One of the largest groups of civil parties is made up of survivors who will testify about forced marriage, identified by the court in its current Case 002-02, as a principle means used by the regime to accomplish its ideological aim of establishing a nationwide communist collective.

The eight interviews included in this volume complement the mixed-method research, *“Like ghost changes body” – A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime*, conducted by the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia, published in October 2014.

For that study, the researchers interviewed 106 civil parties to Case 002-02 via a quantitative structured survey, with nine of them also interviewed using semi-structured questions to form the basis for eight qualitative case studies (including a married couple interviewed together). These eight interviews, with both men and women who have survived the regime, are presented here in full, covering events that occurred in Phnom Penh, Takeo, Siem Reap, Battambang, Pursat, Kampong Chhnang, Kampot, and other places.

Thida KIM, technical assistant to the Gender-Based Violence Project of TPO Cambodia at the time of research, conducted the interviews. The interviewees received psychosocial support throughout the study to mitigate re-traumatization. The interviews were conducted in Khmer, with the recordings subsequently transcribed directly into English. Theresa DE LANGIS, an independent senior specialist on sexual violence in conflict, edited the transcripts into case studies. The case studies were translated into Khmer and validated against the original recordings by Thida KIM. Confidentiality has been preserved by removing details of identity (people's names replaced with initials, place names replaced with xx) during the editing process.

Every effort has been made to preserve the voice of the interviewees, while at the same time editing for clarity and cohesion. Interview questions, in particular, have been much abridged and consolidated in order to prioritize attention to responses and to enhance narrative flow. A glossary of Khmer words appearing in the text in *italics* is included at the back of the volume. We also encourage readers to read the full mixed-method research study,

*“Like ghost changes body” – A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime*, for a wider discussion on methodology, informed consent, historical context and detailed findings.

Taken together, the eight interviews provide a distinct and consistent picture of the implementation of the Khmer Rouge marriage policy. Many of the interviews highlight the distinct differences between the Khmer Rouge forced marriages and the consensually arranged marriages and lavish traditional weddings of the pre-Khmer Rouge era. The cultural importance of marriage to the individual—and to women in particular—is described as so monumental as to be “like ghost changes body,” permanently animating and impacting a person’s identity. Yet, the Khmer Rouge usurped this central life decision via their policy, which often assigned strangers to marry each other and then ordered them to consummate the marriage through sexual relations while under surveillance of Khmer Rouge spies. The practice is described by one interviewee as an affront to human dignity, whereby women and men were matched like “cats and dogs.” Those who refused were threatened or subjected to harsh punishment, including sexual torture. It is no wonder that all of the interviewees describe their motivation for agreeing to the forced marriage as one of simple survival.

Forced marriage is described in the interviews as a form of sexual- and gender-based violence against *both* women and men, with complex implications. The long-term impacts of forced marriages as described in the case studies include poverty, discrimination, stigma and shame, and often these adverse effects are

multigenerational. Yet, in each of the case studies, parents tell stories filled with deep love and sacrifice for the children born of these marriages—a message that, in transforming tragedy, gives hope to future generations.

To share such intimate accounts of violation requires immense courage—one that is willing to break the silence on a topic seldom publicly discussed, and deeply personal to so many survivors and their families. We are grateful to those who agreed to be interviewed, and it has been our honor and our privilege to assist in bringing these interviews to a wider audience and to help preserve them for history.

We also extend gratitude to the Civil Peace Service of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH for the support to publish this volume. Appreciation is likewise extended to Annelies Mertens for her careful English proofreading and Julian Poluda for his insightful comments on an early draft. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia and the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women for their consistent commitment to support survivors of sexual- and gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge regime.

We hope that these personal accounts will contribute to a better understanding of forced marriage and other forms of gender-based violations in times of conflict and atrocity and, in doing so, contribute to preventing such acts from recurring.

Theresa DE LANGIS and Thida KIM  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia, June 2015

# CASE STUDY

## 1

*SBC, male, age 60,  
interviewed on April 29, 2014,  
at TPO Cambodia, Phnom Penh.*

***Pou, I am interested in your history and how you were married during the Khmer Rouge regime.***

***Were you married before the regime?***

No, I had not married yet before the regime. I was about 21 years old when the regime came to power. I was deported to xx commune in xx district, xx province. My parents were arrested in 1973 and they were tortured until 1976. I moved to my uncle's house with my younger brother. I have only one younger brother, and I am the oldest, and we went everywhere together. When we were sent to xx commune, I remembered an uncle who lived nearby. He was a base person.<sup>1</sup> So I rode my ox-cart to where my uncle lived. Along the way, Khmer Rouge people often stopped my brother and me for inspection. They thought we were trying to escape from being soldiers, as we were old enough to join the army. Later they stopped inspecting us because my uncle was a base person and we lived with him. I was not a soldier because I had been a monk at the pagoda before the Khmer Rouge. I lived with my uncle for a while, cutting trees and helping him to farm. After that, I was assigned to the mobile team for the xx dam.

***When did you find out you were to be married?***

I was married in 1976. I did not know I was going to be married. A Khmer Rouge team leader just told me,

<sup>1</sup>  
See glossary under  
"base people."

"Comrade, prepare your stuff because you must go to another battle." He told me in the evening, and he brought me to a new cooperative that night. In fact, I did not know what was happening when I first arrived at the new cooperative—that the Khmer Rouge members had arranged a marriage for me. When I arrived, people were already having their weddings. At first, I thought I had been brought there to congratulate the new couples. Actually, I was called there in order to *phdach nha* to being a new couple, to hand flowers to the bride and to receive flowers from the bride. I was very shocked when I realized what was happening, even to see such a strange wedding celebration that I had never seen before.

I got married the next morning at about seven in the morning. The Khmer Rouge cadre forced me to commit, and I was speechless, shocked beyond words. I asked the *chhlob*, "Did you bring me here to marry?" He said that, yes, I had to marry. I argued that I did not know the woman, and that *chhlob* responded, "Even if you do not know her, *Angkar* has prepared this marriage for you and you must accept." I felt my mind had left my body because it was all so strange and sudden. I did not want to get married.

[The commitment ceremony] for all the nearby cooperatives took place in the main meeting hall. At the meeting place, there was the chief of commune, team leaders, *chhlob*, and about six other people [attached to the Khmer Rouge]. There were about 20 to 30 people in total. They prepared tables and chairs for the event. There were seven couples married at the same time as me. The team leaders and commune chief sat in chairs and called

us forward to commit, to take and hand flowers to each other. I agreed to receive the flowers because it was Angkar's principle.

*“I felt my mind had left my body because it was all so strange and sudden. I did not want to get married.”*

### **How did you feel when you first saw your wife?**

I knew her, but I did not love her and only knew her as a friendly neighbor. She lived near me before the Khmer Rouge, in a neighboring village. During the Khmer Rouge time, we lived in different cooperatives, and she also was part of a mobile team. I too worked in a mobile team. I dug canals, carried earth, planted corn and cut trees with the others, readily and without complaint. Then one day after returning from work, I was brought to another cooperative and was married the next morning.

Honestly, I could not believe I was really getting married because it seemed to me I was meeting a stranger. After the marriage ceremony, we were forced to sleep together in a small house they had prepared for us. I felt so strange as my wife walked behind me that night after the marriage ceremony, because I thought it was not suitable that we were married. I had only talked to her that night [for the first time].

I asked her, “Comrade, did you know you were getting married to me?” She told me that she too did not know she was going to be forced to marry that day. I asked her, “What do you think now that we are married?” She responded that she did not want to be married yet. In that regime, we worked very hard and we did not have enough energy. I told her, “Now that we have been married, we

have to live together. If we do not live together, we will be suspected of not respecting *Angkar's* path."

### **How did she react when you told her this?**

She was very shy. During the day we did not see each other because we worked in separate mobile teams. She always got up early, so early I did not know what time she got up. At night, we only slept side-by-side for the first months, only sleeping next to each other. We both agreed to do this. Later, a cadre warned me, "I know comrade that you do not love your wife."<sup>2</sup> I responded, "I love my wife." He continued, "I notice you make many mistakes. If you do not respect *Angkar's* path, be careful." I was very worried. I was very concerned they knew. My wife was shocked even at having to sleep by my side and to have *chhlob* spying on us each night. After the warning, we prepared a speech in case we were asked again. We planned that, if Khmer Rouge members asked us, we should respond that we did sleep together. Actually, we were not sleeping together.<sup>3</sup> The plan was my idea. I thought my wife would not sleep with me unless she loved me and that our situation could cause problems in the future. I also did not have any desire to have sex with her or even to keep her as my wife because I did not love her at all.

Then they moved us to the river to plant vegetables. They moved us away from my uncle's cooperative because my wife would escape to sleep at my uncle's house whenever we were staying nearby [as part of our mobile teams]. We only started sleeping together<sup>4</sup> after we moved to the riverside, which was after almost a whole year of marriage.



## What was the place at the riverside like?

We were far from [my uncle's] cooperative and I thought we could be easily taken away and killed. When we were in the cooperative, they would not dare to do that because my uncle was a base person and a *chhlob* leader. He was old and he had stopped working, but Khmer Rouge members still respected him and they also invited him to assist in any celebrations. He also had warned me to be careful because I was not having sex with my wife. So I begged my wife quite frankly to sleep together<sup>2</sup> because if we did not, we would be separated and killed. I had to ask her a few times and she agreed after about six months, and so we slept together when we were at the riverside and had more privacy, in order to save our lives.

Soon after, we were separated from each other. I went to work in the mobile team and my wife went to work in a cooperative. We were allowed to go back home once every three or four months to see each other. When my wife became pregnant, I was allowed to visit her more frequently. But I did not stay for long because I was working all over the place with the mobile unit. Then the Khmer Rouge regime fell, and two months later my wife and I separated to return to our own home villages.

## Why did you separate?

Actually, I thought we should have stayed married, even if we did not love each other or plan to marry one another during the regime. It was my wife's idea to separate. We separated because of an argument we had during Pol Pot time.<sup>6</sup> While we were working together at the riverside, we had to return to work by one o'clock, even though we had to cook the rice by ourselves.<sup>7</sup> One day, I caught four fish

2

SBC is using coded language to talk about sexual relations. As becomes dear later in the interview, he and his wife did not have sex for the first year of their marriage, even as they were under surveillance of Khmer Rouge spies (*chhlob*) who monitored their sexual relations [Ed.].

3

I.e., they were not having sex together [Ed.].

4, 5

I.e., have sexual relations [Ed.].

6

See glossary under "Pol Pot."

7

In other words, cooking rice took added time during an already short lunch break [Ed.].

and asked my wife to cook them for lunch. My wife removed the skin from the fish before cooking them, which took extra time. I complained and called her stupid. She became angry and cried and said, "If I am stupid like this, why did you not refuse to marry me?" I replied, "I could not refuse. I would have been killed if I refused." Then she said something to me that we both never forgot: "Be patient until we get back to our home villages." She meant that, since I had shown disrespect to her and said she was stupid and had only forcibly accepted the marriage, I should wait until the Khmer Rouge regime was defeated and then we could separate.

She kept her promise. She said that in 1977, and in 1979 we separated after the Khmer Rouge lost power. She went back to her village to live with her mother. I did not forbid her [to go] because she had already said during the regime that she would leave me. Actually, neither of us wanted to be married to each other. I never expected I would accept her as my wife. She went to live with her parents, and about two weeks later her parents came to meet me, saying they wanted us to live together because we were already married and my wife was pregnant. They invited me to live with them, and I went to live with them. Once our child was born, I also thought that we should not separate. But my wife again refused to sleep with me, so after two months I decided to separate from her again.

***I wonder why you went to live with her parents?***

Because I was alone. I did not have parents and my younger brother also had died [during the regime]. I thought that I would be better-off if I lived with my parents-in-law, and that my wife and I would accept each other over time. In fact, she did not want to continue

being married to me, and she often repeated her phrase that we should separate after the regime was defeated. She often recalled our argument, "If I am so stupid, we can separate after I reunite with my parents since it is so difficult to live with me," and she often cried.

My wife gave birth to a daughter, and our child lived with her mother after the separation. I visited often though they lived about ten kilometers from my house. Now our daughter is married with children. When I separated from my wife, I gave her everything to support her and my daughter, such as cows, buffalos, and an ox-cart. I also bought the timber to build a house for her and my daughter.

*"I had to ask her a few times and she agreed after about six months, and so we slept together when we were at the riverside and had more privacy, in order to save our lives."*

### ***Did you live alone after separating from your wife the second time?***

I got married to a new wife about eight months after the separation. I decided to remarry because I was living alone. My second wife lived in the same village as me. At that time, I worked in the commune as a team leader mobilizing widows. I fell in love with one of the widows and proposed that she live with me. My new wife has never made any problems in the family. I have two more children with her.

### ***Do you still keep in touch with your first wife?***

Yes, and in fact I invited her to my house for Khmer New Year in 2014. I don't know why she did not remarry, but she always said that she did not want to marry again.

There were a few men who proposed marriage to her, but she did not agree to marry them. It seems she is heartbroken since the Khmer Rouge regime. After our marriage, she said, she did not want to remarry, but just wanted to live alone. She worked so hard.

She was so thin and got sick and almost died after giving birth to our daughter. I never expected my wife could get pregnant during that regime. We didn't know about these things, but she got pregnant because we lived together and we slept together to save our lives. If we did not sleep together, we would have been killed.<sup>8</sup> Honestly, I never expected we could have a child in such circumstances. We worked hard and had little food or energy. My wife was afraid to have a child, and especially an unplanned pregnancy. But she loved her daughter very much.

***Does your first daughter know the details about your marriage?***

Actually, my daughter only knows that my wife and I were married during the Khmer Rouge regime. She does not know that we were *bong khom oy reap ka*. The same is true for the children from my second marriage. I did not tell them about my forced marriage because I did not want them to feel guilty. In fact, I did not have any big problem with my first wife. We simply did not have a close relationship. However, I have a close relationship with my new wife.

***You said earlier you were not satisfied with the forced marriage at first. After you stayed with your wife for some time, you wanted to continue living with her even after the Khmer Rouge regime ended?***

Yes, that's right. During the regime, Khmer Rouge members allowed us to build a house, and I cut down the trees to build the house to live with her [by the riverside]. I started to think then we could live together forever and have children in that place. When the regime fell, I told my [first] wife that if we stayed near the river in our house, we could go fishing and, at that stage, I started to think that it would be an easy life for us. I talked to her a lot at that time trying to convince her. Even the neighbors [by the riverside] pleaded with her to stay. But after about two months, she still refused, so I brought her to her hometown to live with her parents. She always stood by her words, "We will separate when I meet my parents," and she always remembered what I said to her, "You are stupid."

I did not want to become a widower, and I did not want my wife to become a widow either.<sup>9</sup> I felt pity for her, and that was a reason why I wanted to continue living with her. I told her that I did not want to separate and that I wanted to have only one wife, even though we both were forced to marry. I also had great compassion for her because our parents had not been able to celebrate our marriage. A wedding is a great celebration in a woman's life. However, later, her parents and even the neighbors acknowledged that we were a couple, so I thought we should work to make our life as a couple better, even if we had not been able to celebrate our marriage in the traditional way.

8

Again coded language is being used. The general meaning is that they did not know about sex and reproduction, but as they were required to have sex or face death, his wife became pregnant (Ed.).

9

See glossary under "widow(er)."

I thought that a separation would have traumatic effects. If we separated, people would ask us why we separated. I did not want to be publicly known as a separated husband and lose my honor. I wanted others to admire me for living in a family harmoniously—like I do now, as I have never had big problems with my second wife. Some organizations came to my community to interview couples about their family situation and relationships, and I always participated in this with my second wife. Sometimes when my [second] wife gets angry, I just keep quiet and then later we are fine. We accept that everyone makes mistakes, and we do not spread our troubles over the whole family. My new wife really understands and encourages me when I have problems. I think we really feel empathy and compassion for each other.

My second wife also has reasonable knowledge, and my first wife could not read and write. I thought my first wife and I had bad karma because we lived together only for a short period of time and then separated. However, I still have compassion for my first wife because she never gossiped, she was gentle, and she never insulted me. The only reason she mentioned for wanting to separate from me had to do with our early argument: “If I am stupid, why did you accept the marriage?”

***Did you celebrate a wedding ceremony with your new wife?***

Yes, we had a small celebration to acknowledge that we were married, but I did not have a big wedding party like nowadays. My wife was a widow because her husband had died during the Khmer Rouge regime.

By law, if we would want to, we can have an official marriage certificate. With my first wife, we just said we were separating and went away from each other—we had no papers.

***You said earlier you were worried about your honor and how a separation might affect that. Did your first wife worry about honor too?***

Indeed, she also thought about that, and she did not want me to touch her or to sleep with her. She always insisted that we would separate when we were back in our hometowns... In my opinion, she decided too quickly that she did not want to continue married life with me. She was disappointed by what I had said during our argument [during Pol Pot time]. It was also my mistake at that time, but my words had been said.

I said those words because I wanted to have time to relax and still be back at work early. During the Khmer Rouge time, we could not arrive late to work and we had to respect all of the principles of *Angkar* because *chhlob* were always spying on us. If we went to work late, we would be suspected of wrong-doing and could be killed. One time during that regime, I almost died when I came back late for transplanting [seedlings] because my friend had asked me to go out to hunt birds. The Khmer Rouge team leader warned me that evening. From that time on, I started to feel afraid of making even a small mistake. I saw Khmer Rouge members take people to be killed when they did something wrong, accusing those people of not wanting to work for *Angkar*.

***During the period of the Khmer Rouge, did you ever think the regime would end one day?***

Actually, I met a man named S. He told me that the Khmer Rouge regime would not last for long because there were a lot of resistance forces. He also advised me to be flexible. I thought about his words a lot, and he was right. We had to adapt during that regime to survive; otherwise, we faced being killed. Yes, I never thought I would survive until now because I saw the dead bodies all around me and people dying one by one while I dug the canal and carried soil. I never imagined I would survive, and so I never thought about the future.



## CASE STUDY

## 2

*CP, female, age 65,  
interviewed on April 25, 2014,  
at TPO Cambodia, Phnom Penh.*

***You were married before the Khmer Rouge period.  
Can you tell me about this marriage?***

Yes, I can tell you. I went to live with my older married sister when my father died. We had a lot of buffalos, and it was my job to look after them, so I could not go to school. I worked very hard in the rice field to help my sister. My mother said, "You don't need to go to school. If you go to school and know how to write, you may write love letters to your boyfriend. So you don't need to study." So I lived with my sister and worked as a housemaid. When I got a request to marry, I simply let my sister and mother decide. I was married when I was 15 years old.

My sister arranged the marriage. She always said that if a rich man ever wanted to marry me, she would agree. This man was rich, and so she let him marry me. I did not refuse. I just followed my sister and my mother and father. If they wanted me to marry someone, I agreed. Then, if something went wrong with their choice [and the marriage did not work out], my family would continue to support and take care of me. Conversely, if I would choose my husband myself, they would not take care of me if my choice was not the right one. This is what they had told me—my parents and sister.

### ***Can you describe your wedding?***

During the engagement ceremony, people brought cake and fruit. We had music, and I had new clothes and my face was made up. When I looked at myself and realized I was still so young, I cried. I pitied myself because I was marrying an old man. He was 35 years old. We were like father and daughter at this wedding. My husband had been a monk, and he left the monkhood to marry me. His father was not happy with me because I was so poor. His siblings knew how hard I worked all day, just like a man, so they knew I was a good, hard-working person. Still, his father did not like me. Since his siblings liked me and were fine with the marriage, my husband did not care so much about what his father thought.

My marriage was fine. He helped me with the housework and fieldwork, and he took care of me. He also had a job in the commune. To me, he was like a father figure. I pitied him because he dared to oppose his father by marrying me. My husband did not hit or harm me. He loved me. Only my father-in-law caused hardship for me, asking me to do this and that, cook desserts and cake. I cried every day. It took a long time to cook these things, as I did not know how to cook at all. When the food was ready, I brought it to him and he refused to eat it. He turned his face away and would not eat at all. I had to be patient and beg him nicely to eat. He did not like me. When my husband had to work far from our house, my father-in-law told me to leave and go stay wherever I wanted. He did not want me to stay in his house while my husband was away. My husband's mother had died before our marriage.

***You were very young, so I wonder if you understood about marriage at the time?***

I thought marriages meant that we would live as siblings. I did not know that we would have sex as part of marriage. I did not allow my husband to touch me at first. One time when he touched me, I ran away because I was so afraid. He asked me why I was so scared.

I said that I did not know that married people touched each other like that, and that if I had known, I would not have married at all. Then one day, one of his siblings came to talk to me and explained to me what couples are supposed to do after they are married. So, I started to understand.

*“Yes, a Khmer Rouge captain loved me, and he killed my husband because of that. That captain, P., killed my husband so he could force me to marry him.”*

***During the Khmer Rouge regime, you were married, and then you were punished for refusing to marry another man. What had happened to your first husband by that time?***

Yes, a Khmer Rouge captain loved me, and he killed my husband because of that. That captain, P., killed my husband so he could force me to marry him. Captain P. managed around 35,000 people.

One day after work, I did not see my husband come back at dinnertime. I did not eat dinner that night because I was looking for him. When he still had not arrived at ten o'clock, people told me to stop searching because they had seen him being taken across the bridge to the prison at xx pagoda. People told me it was Captain P. who had ordered some cadre to bring my husband to a new work site. When I heard that, I began to shout loudly, “Please

bring back my husband!" I was chained for yelling for my husband. They chained me and brought me to the prison in xx pagoda. I was kept there for one night, and then Captain P. ordered them to release me. The night after I was released, a cadre escorted me to plant potatoes at the Chinese school at xx.

When I reached the school, I saw people were there already. There were nine couples, including me. As I was told I was to plant potatoes at the school, I asked the cadre, "You brought me to plant potatoes, right?" He replied, "No, you came here to be married with Captain P." When I heard that, I began to cry. I was determined that I wouldn't marry. Each couple was told to hold hands, and when it was my turn, the cadre said, "*Mith*, please give a speech." I said, "No! I don't know whose husband this is, but it is not my husband. I won't marry, and you can take me wherever you want and I don't care. If you kill me right now, I do not care about that either. I don't know where my parents and siblings are now, and when I say I won't marry, I mean I won't marry! So just go ahead and take me wherever you want!" Captain P. then slapped me in the face. He took his shoe and hit me on the head several times. [As he beat me,] he asked, "Marry or not?" I still said, "No, no!"

Captain P. then ordered his guard to bring me to the prison at xx pagoda. He said to the guard, "Bring her there and I will rape her [later]." At the prison, my clothes were taken and I was chained. They chained my legs wide open and my arms far apart. The more I tried to move, the more the chain became tighter. I was shouting, and Captain P. ordered the guard to beat me to make me stop. I was

screaming, "Take me to wherever you want, please go ahead! But do not punish me as I did not do anything wrong! I am already married and I won't marry anyone else! Please release me!" Then the young soldiers, around 15 or 16 years old, used their shoes to touch my vagina, and they kneaded my breasts and kissed me until I lost consciousness.

When I woke up in the morning, I saw Captain P. lying beside me. He said to me, "See? If you had agreed to marry me, you wouldn't be in trouble right now. Even if you do not agree, I already have you." And I did not know where those young soldiers came from, but every night they came and beat me and raped me until I lost consciousness. And when I woke up, I saw Captain P. beside me.

### ***No one passed by the prison and heard what was happening?***

Only their team, only the Khmer Rouge soldiers. It was quiet and people were not allowed to come too close to the prison. Soldiers were on guard around the prison [to make sure no one came near.] The prison only had a roof and no walls at all. I have no idea what that prison looked like during the daytime, because we all lost consciousness. We woke up around five in the afternoon. There were about 20 to 50 prisoners, all women.

Some were brought there because they refused to marry, like me. They raped those women. They put their penises into our mouths and used them to touch our faces. I have no idea how many people raped me per night. They raped women before our eyes and I just closed my eyes. My body was shaking. I cried day and night. Other women also

screamed and cried. There was one girl, she was so beautiful, but she died after one night. They raped her to death.

***Who raped you at the prison?***

Younger soldiers and guards. And every night, Captain P. came and raped me. Those young guards beat me and slapped me until I lost consciousness and then Captain P. came and raped me. I knew it was Captain P. who had raped me because I saw him sleeping next to me every time I woke up.

***Do you know why they did this to you?***

Because I refused to marry.

There was an old man who worked at the prison transporting food from xx to xx, such as salt, fish, and vegetables. I begged him to help me. I said I would pay gratitude to him and take care of him in his old age. So he paid Captain P. a lot of gold, and Captain P. took the gold in exchange for me, and I was released.

I don't know why he agreed to release me. Captain P. also told that old man to take good care of me and to heal my wounds. He sent a guard to follow me to make sure I was treated well. I thought maybe he wanted to have me again later on after I recovered, and that this was the reason why he had the guard follow us. Maybe, I wasn't sure.

***Do you think you were released because he pitied you?***

I don't know either. I have no idea.

***Why did the old man agree to help you?***

He had no siblings, parents, or relatives left [to care for him in old age] as the Khmer Rouge had killed them all.

I passed through many villages with that old man, and the guard followed us everywhere.

***You were imprisoned, tortured and raped because you did not agree to marry. What did you think and feel at the time when you realized this was your punishment?***

*“I refused because there were no parents, no music, no relatives, no wise man, no dress and make-up, and I did not see that person’s face [before the wedding].”*

I felt so miserable and alone. If they had proposed marriage to me as had been done for my first wedding, I might even have agreed to marry. I refused because there were no parents, no music, no relatives, no wise man, no dress and make-up, and I did not see that person’s face [before the wedding]. I only knew his name, and then I was told to marry him. I would have agreed to marry if it had followed tradition so as not to be punished like this. I thought I would be killed if I refused. I did not know of any punishment other than killing. All the other couples agreed. They were all single at that time, and only I was a widow.

***When you married your husband before Khmer Rouge times, you also did not know or love him, right?***

That’s correct, I did not love him. I followed my sister and parents.

***What is the difference between the two marriages?***

They were very different. For my first wedding, I followed my parents, siblings, and even if the marriage would go wrong, they would take care of me and still keep me in the family. I also did not refuse because I had parents, a wise man, and music to celebrate the wedding. And in the

Khmer Rouge time, they did not tell me in advance and did not ask if I agreed or not. They lied to me that I was going to work planting potatoes.

The marriage in the Khmer Rouge period had no meaning at all. No marriage registration, no one to acknowledge the marriage or the new couple. Some people killed themselves after being forced to marry. It had no meaning.

***When did this happen to you, ming?***

Around 1978. My husband died around eight months before the Vietnamese came.

***If you had agreed to marry Captain P., would your life be different now?***

I think that if I had agreed to the marriage, he would have stayed with me for a while and then he would have killed me. So refusing to marry him was the better way.

***I understand you were pregnant in the prison when this happened to you. Is that right?***

Yes, around three months pregnant.

***And your baby was still healthy even after the torture?***

Yes.

***After the Khmer Rouge period, you married again. What made you decide to remarry?***

Life at that time was very hard. Men who were already married came to my house at night and disturbed me, teased me, flirting and trying to persuade me to have sex with them. Sometimes when I went to the market or to join a ceremony in the village, they blocked my way and tried to hug me and touch me, and I tried to escape. I told



my mother and relatives and they suggested that I marry my cousin. I cried just like I had done in the Pol Pot time.

I cried because I felt pity for myself. Since I was born, I had a husband before the Khmer Rouge regime, and then during the Khmer Rouge era they hurt me like that, and after the regime my siblings had their own families. Since I used to be married too, I decided to live alone with my child. My life was so miserable. I tried to tell those men's wives that I did not love their husbands and asked them to please watch out that their husbands did not disturb me. My sister suggested that I marry anyone who would ask because my life was so horrible. I decided to marry again to have someone to protect me against those men who were trying to assault me. If it were not for that, I would not have married again. I did not want people to say I had too many husbands. My sister told me not to care about what other people said. My siblings could not protect me at nighttime when men would try to sexually assault me.

***Did your husband know about what happened to you during the Khmer Rouge period?***

Yes, he knows and he does not mind.

***Did you have a traditional wedding for your second marriage?***

No. We did have some traditional rituals, and some family and elders joined, but not the full wedding ceremony.

***How many children do you have?***

Eight children, including my oldest son with my first husband.

***Do your children know about what happened to you during the Khmer Rouge?***

Yes, I told them. They cried. I cried when I told them, so they cried too. I didn't tell the neighbors. Recently though, they kept asking me about my past because they could see that an organization was often coming to my house. I then showed them my testimonial therapy book.<sup>10</sup> They pitied me and admired me for having an organization that supports me and that is good for me.

***How is your marriage now?***

I sleep separately from my husband since my last child was born. When I urinate, I feel pain and bleed. My husband wants me to heal. He does not mind that we sleep in separate beds. After the Khmer Rouge regime, I went to see a Vietnamese doctor who came through the village for a cure. I was given medicine, and because of that medicine I am better. If not [for that medicine], I can't imagine how much worse my illness would be.

# CASE STUDY

## 3

*IBC, male, age 58, and*

*SC, female, age 54, are a married couple,*

*interviewed on April 29, 2014, at TPO Cambodia, Phnom Penh.*

*For ease of reading, marriage titles are used to distinguish speakers.*

### ***You have been married for a long time. What does a wedding mean to you?***

*Husband:* Today, weddings are celebrated traditionally and include participation by guests, family, relatives and friends from both sides. The weddings during the Khmer Rouge regime were totally different. The wedding celebration before the Khmer Rouge regime was very similar to the present wedding celebration.

### ***Ming, what do you think? What does a wedding mean to women?***

*Wife:* The meaning of the wedding is vague. The wedding is valuable to women because everyone acknowledges a married woman as a good daughter who is obedient. The woman makes up beautifully and receives a lot of guests. The wedding is vital for every Cambodian woman. It is considered bad in our culture if a couple loves each other without acknowledgment from parents or relatives and elopes. In Cambodian tradition, children must respect their parents and the wedding cannot happen unless the parents accept and celebrate it for them. If the couple does not respect the parents and decides independently to marry without the parents' agreement, they are not good children.

10

The testimonial therapy of the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia provides trauma treatment and psychological support to survivors in documenting their experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime and then publically share them as part of a Buddhist ceremony.

*Husband:* For men, it is the same because all men have to obey and follow the parents' arrangement. If a man wants to marry a woman and his parents are not satisfied and he still gets married with that woman, the family is not happy.

*Wife:* In that case, if the woman is a good girl, the parents will be fine with her [after some time]. If the woman is not good, the problems with the parents will be serious.

**Does the wedding totally depend on the wishes of the parents?**

*Husband:* Not totally. The wedding cannot happen unless there is agreement between the children and the parents.

*Wife:* Yes, the agreement of the child [to be married] is very important. For example, if your parents force you to marry a man who you do not love, what would you do? If we get married without love, we also do not have happiness in our life, even if that man has lots of money. During the Khmer Rouge regime, the leaders did not ask us for agreement. From what I know, they killed lots of people and forced people to marry unconditionally in order to form the new family.

**Did you expect to get married before the Khmer Rouge regime came to power?**

*Husband:* I never thought about marriage. Before 1975, I was still studying, and all I thought about were my studies and helping my parents. I did not think I was mature enough to get married.

*Wife:* I never thought about my wedding because I lived with my parents at that time. I was about 15 years old and did not yet have my [menstrual] period.

### **What does marriage mean to men, pou?**

*Husband:* It depends on the man. Some men do not want to marry because they will have children and they are afraid of losing their freedom so that they cannot go out to play and drink with friends. However, some men still want to get married because they are afraid of being alone when they are old.

*Wife:* To me, I think that being single and living with the parents is easier than having a husband. After I got married, I thought my life was very difficult. I had to take care of my children, and I also had to look for money to support the family and to plan for my children's future. A women's life totally changes after she gets married, like 'ghost changes body.' We cannot go freely for a walk. We have to inform the husband wherever we go. If we do not respect each other, we can easily separate. We cannot wear whatever clothes we want and we have to inform the husband about how we spend the money. Some men do not want their wives to wear sexy clothes, and some men want their wives to wear short or sexy clothes. So a woman has to think about her husband's desires. If a woman has a good husband—he does not gamble, does not take another wife, does not drink and go out all night—this woman is very lucky. If a woman does not have a good husband, it brings a lot of regret. The responsibilities of a wife depend on the husband. At first, she cannot know what kind of man he is. We only know him by living together for a while.

*Husband:* The same for husbands. Men also worry about married life because some women like to dress up and put

“A women's life totally changes after she gets married, like 'ghost changes body.'”

on make-up and go out. Other women are very responsible about caring for their husband and children and they try to save money and take care of everything and everyone in the family.

*Wife:* I think women are the victims [of marriage] because women get pregnant after the wedding and men do not. Men can go out and still have another girlfriend, and that makes it difficult for the wife. Comparing single life and life as a couple, it is easier to only take care of the parents in life as a single woman. I think I could not have lived unmarried forever because my siblings had their own families and my parents also will die one day. If I had stayed single, I would have no one to take care of me when I get sick, so I had to marry someone to stay with me, even if it is difficult sometimes.

***I would like to ask you about your forced marriage ceremony during the Khmer Rouge regime. Were you informed that you would be married?***

*Husband:* We were informed about the marriage about a week in advance. We were told we would be married on 20 August 1978.

***Who informed you?***

*Wife:* Two cadres. They were a [married] couple, a man and a woman. The cadres followed the Khmer Rouge principles and they were only responsible for informing the people who lived in their village [about who was to be married]. I was part of a work team of unmarried women, and the cadres ordered the female team leader to inform me that I would be married on 20 August 1978. I responded, "Where do I marry and why?" I was informed at night because

there was no time to tell me during the day when I was working [in the field]. I was informed at the nightly meeting. The cadres announced at the meeting who would be married. They announced, "C., you must marry on the night of 20 August 1978." They also told me that five or six other people would also be married at the same time. I was so full of regret when I heard this, and if I could have run away, I would have run away.

*"We did not know what to do and we wanted to run away, but we were afraid of being killed. So we just accepted the forced marriage."*

***You wanted to run away. Why were you unhappy?***

*Wife:* I did not know why I had to marry and live with a man. I did not want to marry because my parents were not with me, I did not have any new clothes, there were no relatives to assist with the wedding and nothing was special for me. We were introduced to each other [as husband and wife] and then we had to live together. When I first found out I was to be married, I refused and said I would not marry, and they said I had to marry. I was filled with regret, but agreed [to marry] to save my life because I could not run away from that regime. Others also refused, but they still got married because they had no choice. We discussed forced marriage secretly in the female team. We did not know what to do and we wanted to run away, but we were afraid of being killed. So we just accepted the forced marriage.

***Pou, how were you informed about your forced marriage?***

*Husband:* I was informed by a male team leader. He told me, "Comrade, you will get married on 20 August 1978." I was

informed during the daytime while I was taking a break, and then my name was called at the nightly meeting to be ready for marriage on 20 August 1978. They told us, "There are already women ready and you must marry on 20 August." I was also told the name of my bride. I was very unhappy when I heard the news because the cadres treated marriage like a plaything. I informed my parents about my marriage, and they asked, "Where does the woman live?" I told them I only knew that she lived in xx village, far from my parents' place—about eight kilometers. I told them I did not know her very well and that I had only seen her when she was working in a nearby field. We had never spoken to each other. In that regime, we were so thin we looked like old people.

### **What happened on 20 August 1978?**

*Husband:* We got married at seven in the evening.

### **What did you wear?**

*Wife:* We wore the black clothes.<sup>11</sup>

### **Were they old or new?**

*Wife:* Old clothes.

*Husband:* We did not have any new clothes at that time.

*Wife:* We had a meal of porridge and the celebration started at seven p.m.

### **How many couples were there with you?**

*Husband:* There were six couples. The cadres called the names of the two people to be married. After calling the names, the couples had to sit facing each other. Those who did not know each other at all were confused about who they were to marry since there were numerous couples there.



*Wife:* The couple after us did not know each other at all and they were very confused and forced together like cats and dogs.

**So they did not know each other even by name?**

*Husband:* No, not even by name.

**Who else was there besides the couples?**

*Husband:* There were [Khmer Rouge] cadres and team leaders.

*Wife:* Some of the children [of the Khmer Rouge members] were also there to be married. At that time, we got married like cows.

*Husband:* If we would reject the marriage, we would be sent to the mountain. The other comrades who did not get married were sent to work at xx mountain. I accepted the *bong khom oy reap ka* in order to stay in the village and to save my life.

*Wife:* We got married because we wanted to stay in the village, not because we loved each other.

**Did your parents attend the wedding procedure?**

*Wife:* No. We were children of *Angkar*. So *Angkar* could celebrate the marriage without our parents.

**Did you say any vows?**

*Husband:* Yes, we made a commitment speech. We said, "We will accept this comrade and live together for our entire life." It was so dark and also raining that night.

**How were you feeling at the time, pou?**

*Husband:* I felt unhappy because I was forced to marry. We did not know each other and did not love each other.

11

During the Khmer Rouge period, only black clothes were permitted to be worn.

Tradition also played an important role because our parents were not there to acknowledge the marriage with us.

*Wife:* Yes, these are both reasons why I was unhappy. I felt pity for myself. My heart and mind were very confused, and I didn't know what to do.

*Husband:* We could not cry even if we wanted to.<sup>12</sup>

*Wife:* And we could not run away. Honestly, if my husband had forced me to have sex [after the commitment ceremony], I would have killed myself. I had never loved any man before, and I never imagined wanting to have sexual relations with a man. Actually, he did not force me.

### **How was the first night of your married life as a couple?**

*Husband:* We went to our house and slept there. That house was about three-by-four meters.

*Wife:* The cadres built small houses in a line next to one another for the new couples.

*Husband:* We did not talk too much or too loudly because we were afraid that the *chhlob* would hear us. The house was made from bamboo and thatch. The house was small and its stairs had three steps. Inside there was no bed or mat.<sup>13</sup>

*Wife:* We each brought a mat and mosquito net from our old houses.

*Husband:* We stayed together in the same house, but we slept in different mosquito nets. It was so dark, and we just kept silent.

**Did you discuss first about sleeping in different mosquito nets?**

*Wife:* We did not talk about it first.

*Husband:* We were afraid of each other.

**Did you talk at all that night?**

*Wife:* We did not have much to say.

**When you were walking together to your house, did you talk to each other?**

*Husband:* No. We just walked silently, cleaned our feet and hands, and then went to sleep.

**How did you feel that night, ming?**

*Wife:* First, I was afraid that the cadres would know we did not sleep together.<sup>12</sup> Second, I was scared that my husband would force me to have sex.

*Husband:* I did not dare to sleep near my wife because I had never even talked to her before. I was also afraid because I had never loved someone before.

*Wife:* My husband also told me, "You should sleep and not make any noise. If the cadres think we are not getting along well together, we will be killed." *Chhlob* spied on us almost every night. One day, a team leader named R. accused me of not having sex with my husband. I told him, "What are you talking about?" It seemed as if that leader could tell I was not having sex with my husband just by looking at my body. When I rejected his suspicions, he simply smiled.

*Husband:* The team leader also asked me. He asked, "How is your relationship with your wife?" I answered, "It is good."

12

It is often mentioned that showing emotion (love, sadness, anger) was prohibited during the Khmer Rouge period as it was seen as a sign of disagreement with Angkar's principles.

13

Traditional Khmer houses are elevated on stilts to prevent floodwaters and animals from entering.

14

i.e., have sexual relations. See also Case Study 1. [Ed.]

**How long did you stay in the bamboo and thatch house?**

*Husband:* We stayed there together for about a week. After a week, I stayed in the house and worked near the house, and my wife worked at xx and slept there. The cadres permitted new couples to see each other once a month.

*Wife:* I wondered why they forced us to marry and then separated us. During that regime, they killed a lot of people, they arranged forced marriages, and then they separated the new couples.

*Husband:* I needed to stay near the village for my work. I was a fisherman and took the fish to the [collective] kitchen in the village.

*Wife:* I was the one who worked far from home. I cut trees and transplanted and harvested rice. I rarely went back home when I had a chance to go once a month. I did not want to go because I did not love my husband, and instead I escaped to my mother's house. I rarely went to see my husband. I told people that I did not go more frequently because the house was far from my workplace, about 10 kilometers. I had only one day off from work, and I worked so much that I did not have the energy to walk such a long way. But in fact, I never missed or even thought about my husband [when we were apart].

**When you were separated after being married for only a week, how did you feel about that, pou?**

*Husband:* I felt fine, and I did not miss her.

*Wife:* I did not care how far away I went from my husband.

**Were you happy to be separated?**

*Husband:* I did not think about being happy or not. The main thing I thought about was how I could stay alive. I did not think about what would happen in the future.

**When was the first time you had sexual relations together?**

*Husband:* We slept together only after the Khmer Rouge regime ended, at the beginning of 1979.

**I would like to clarify—you were married in 1978, but you did not have sexual relations until 1979?**

*Husband:* That is correct. We had to hide our relationship from the cadres.

*Wife:* At that time, my husband also stole food for me to eat. He stole fish for me.

**After the Khmer Rouge regime fell, how did you decide to stay together as a married couple?**

*Husband:* When we were de-mobilized in 1979, after the Vietnamese invaded, everyone ran to find family members. We no longer had to live with our teams. I went to live with my family and my wife went to live with her family.

**So you did not continue to live together at first?**

*Wife:* No, I lived with my mother.

*Husband:* I lived with my mother.

One day, someone told me where my wife was—a youth who lived in the same village as me. I had been asking people if they knew anything about my wife, and this youth said she was living with her mother in a faraway

village. My mother did not want me to leave my wife and she had an ox-cart. So she asked me to go pick up my wife to live with us because she did not want my wife to live on her own with only her mother. So I went to find my wife to bring her to my mother.

*Wife:* At that time, I did not have an ox-cart, my mother was sick, and we had things such as rice, plates and pots which I had to carry while traveling on the road.

*Husband:* I went to pick her up at noon.

*Wife:* That day, my brother said, "Who is riding in that ox-cart?" I turned around to look, and I wondered why my husband was in my village in an ox-cart. I continued on to my destination with my mother and I did not care where he was going or why.

### **Did you plan to be reunited with your husband?**

*Wife:* No.

### **Why did you go to find your wife?**

*Husband:* Because my mother asked me to pick her up to come live with us.

*Wife:* When I met him, he said, "My mother asked me to come get you, and she said that we should go everywhere together because we can take care of each other if we have problems." I realised that I did not have any means of transport and was afraid that I could not run for freedom [should the Khmer Rouge catch us] unless I went with him. So my husband put my stuff and my mother in the ox-cart, and we went to live with my husband's family. Really, I went with him because I did not have any choice: my mother was sick and my husband had an ox-cart. Actually, my mother-in-law loves me very much.

**Had you met your mother-in-law before?**

*Wife:* Yes, we had met before.

**If your mother had not asked you to pick up your wife, would you have gone to find her?**

*Husband:* I could not go to find her [without my mother's support] because I did not have my own ox-cart and that ox-cart belonged to my mother. In fact, I also wanted her to live with us so we could take care of each other along the way. Later, when we were traveling in the forest [for about a month], we experienced difficulties and we helped each other a lot. We started to feel good toward one another after that.

*Wife:* When we walked in the forest, my brother and I went to find water. My husband built a small hut to stay in temporarily.

*Husband:* I made a hut for my wife and my family to stay for three or four days while we were traveling. We spent that time together and we helped each other. After that, we started to love each other. Once we arrived at xx, we stayed together and have not been separated since.

*Wife:* One day, I asked my husband, "Do you know why we were forced to marry?" He answered, "No." I joked, "You are older than me, *bong*, why don't you know?"

**How many children do you have?**

*Husband:* We have seven children.

*Wife:* I became pregnant in 1979.

*Husband:* My first child was born at the start of 1980.

“... we experienced difficulties and we helped each other a lot. We started to feel good toward one another after that.

**Do your children know about your forced marriage?**

*Wife:* They know because I recently told them.

*Husband:* We told them that we were forced to marry, and that we did not know about love as much as the young generation does these days.

*Wife:* They were too young before, that is why we only told them recently. I think they are old enough now to understand about our situation during the Khmer Rouge regime. I also advised my daughters to respect tradition and to not let men touch their hand or body before marriage. I honestly told them, "I experienced many difficulties during the Khmer Rouge regime, and I did not love your father at first when I was married to him."

**Are your children married?**

*Wife:* We have one daughter who is not yet married. My other children's weddings were happy and celebrated traditionally. My first child runs a business buying and selling pigs. My second child is a farmer and my third child is a fisherman. My unmarried daughter is 19 years old and is studying in grade 11.

*Husband:* The children live nearby because we share part of our land in the village.

**How did you feel at your children's weddings?**

*Husband:* I felt happy for our children to have a marriage celebrated traditionally, and I also felt pity for myself because the marriage party during the Khmer Rouge regime was completely different from a traditional wedding. There were just a small number of guests during that regime, and no parents.



*Wife:* I also told my sons and daughters that a wedding is very good for life, that we only had a very small and fast celebration during the Khmer Rouge period.

***Do your neighbors know about your forced marriage?***

*Husband and wife:* They know.

***Do they ever discriminate against you?***

*Husband:* No, our marriage happened due to the Khmer Rouge and many others also had the same experience.

***Have you ever wanted to celebrate your marriage with a traditional ceremony?***

*Wife:* In 1979, my mother said she wanted to celebrate a wedding for us, but we did not have money. My mother cried when she found out how the cadres forced my husband to marry me. She pitied us. Most of her children got married happily during the Lon Nol regime.<sup>15</sup> She never expected my husband and I would be married in this way. We also wanted to celebrate with a traditional party, but we did not have enough money and now we are trying to save money for our old age.

***In 1979 and 1980, after the Khmer Rouge fell, did the new government do anything as reparation for forced marriages?***

*Husband:* No, not at all.

***Do you have a marriage certificate?***

*Wife:* No, we did not register the marriage. I did not want to go through the trouble because I am old now.

*Husband:* We took photos of us in traditional wedding clothes at a photography studio in 2000. We got all made

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The 1970-1975 government ousted by the Khmer Rouge. See glossary under "Lon Nol."

up. As we did not get married traditionally, we wanted to pretend by taking those photos.

*Wife:* I was so happy that I could dress up and put on make-up and take those photos. I love those photos.

***You have been together for a long time. Do you have any plans to separate in the future?***

*Wife:* No, we are old now. I decided early on to stay with him because we had children and good memories from the time we were in the forest. Today, I do not want to have to find another partner.

***How about you, pou?***

*Husband:* At first, my mother encouraged us to live together, and then we had children, and we love our children and decided to live together until today. But I also feel sorry that we could not be married one more time in the traditional way.

## CASE STUDY

# 4

*HO, female, age 52,  
interviewed May 2, 2014,  
at her home.*

### ***How old were you when you married during the Khmer Rouge time?***

At that time I was not yet 20. I was just about 18 years old. I was still young.

### ***I would like to know your ideas about marriage generally, before the Khmer Rouge regime. What does marriage mean to you?***

During Khmer Rouge times, marriage had no meaning. We had no *pka sla*, no *me ba*, no *achha*, no elders to acknowledge the marriage. We were just married by saying one or two words with no meaning at all. It was empty.

### ***Is a traditional wedding important?***

Yes, very much so. When I was young, I followed my grandmother to the weddings in our village. At that time, the wedding did not take just one day—it took three days and three nights. And they made cake and desserts, and the wedding was even bigger than nowadays. There was music, a loudspeaker, and makeup and dressing up in special clothes. In the past, like today, they had everything for a proper wedding. Only in my time did they not have anything.

The traditional marriage is very different from the Khmer Rouge marriage. Even when the elders or parents

arranged a marriage, they still made sure to get agreement from the children. Only during the Khmer Rouge regime did we have to marry people we did not want to marry.

***What was your wedding like during the Khmer Rouge period?***

It was meaningless. Fifty to 60 pairs at one wedding just saying a few words, lasting only a few minutes. How does that have meaning? It had no meaning and so there were divorces and separations, just like me now in my situation. The weddings of the old days were totally different, and after the marriage, husband and wife should live in happiness and work together to earn for the family. During the Khmer Rouge times, parents and relatives were not allowed to participate or acknowledge the marriage—“Oh, our children got married, like this or like that.” None of the relatives even knew we were married. Many of the marriages from the Khmer Rouge period ended in divorce—like maybe half or more are probably divorced now. Marriages from Khmer Rouge times have rarely lasted until now.<sup>16</sup> Divorce happened in Khmer Rouge marriages because there was no love between the couple, so when the regime fell, many couples separated and divorced, like my husband and I did.

***How did you first learn that you were to be married?***

At that time, a man made a request to the cadres. There was a leader for the men's youth unit and a leader for the women's youth unit, with 50 to 100 people in a unit. When a man made a request, the leader of the unit wrote down the name of the female youth the man was requesting to marry. Then the request was sent to the leader of the

women's unit—"This man requests to be married to this woman, etc." That night at the meeting, she would announce something like, "Oh, *mith* A., there is a man who requests marriage to you. *Angkar* now will marry you to this man."

Men could not simply make the request; it had to be approved by *Angkar*. They [Khmer Rouge members] looked up our family history and made sure to match "fit backgrounds." If we were the enemy of *Angkar*—meaning we had relatives who had been killed by *Angkar*—we were considered *khmang*, and *khmang* could only marry other *khmang*. For example in my case, *Angkar* killed my father, so I had a bad background because I was involved with *khmang*. The man who requested to marry me was also related to *khmang*, so they allowed the marriage. Only if the backgrounds of both the man and the woman are not related to *khmang* will they call it "fit backgrounds." This is what I was told by a cadre.

For my marriage, the unit leader told me at the nightly meeting, "*Mith*, on this date you will need to *pdach nha*. Your husband is this man, and you cannot refuse. Even if you don't want to be married, you must be married. Even if you don't want to marry this man, you must want to [marry him] because *Angkar* arranged this marriage for you, so you cannot refuse." The leader of the women's youth group was female. The meeting was always held at night because they did not want to waste working time during the day. All the meetings were held at night until about 10 or 11 at night.

Women could not request marriage, only men. I don't know why. The male youth would see a woman and

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According to the quantitative findings of the research for which this volume is a companion, 51.3 percent of these marriages remained intact at least for some period of time after the fall of the regime. See "Like ghost changes body"—A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia, October 2014.

maybe know her name because they worked together, or he might have a relative who worked closely with the woman. So his siblings might say to him, "Oh, you should request to marry this woman. She is good, like this or like that." Men got to know about women through this network. The same happened in my case. My husband's cousin worked with me, and she told my husband to request to marry me even though I had never met him before. She told my husband, "You should request to marry this woman. She works with me and she is gentle." So he requested to marry me. But, you know, sometimes there was no need to request at all. *Angkar* just arranged who was to marry whom.

***Were most of the cases arranged by Angkar or requested by the man?***

I cannot say, maybe it is almost equal. In some cases *Angkar* would just look at our backgrounds, and if our backgrounds fitted, they would go ahead and arrange for us to marry. About a week after the announcement at the meeting, we'd get married. I was told, "If *mith* refuses, you are not the child of *Angkar*. You must *pdach nha*." At the time, others were also getting married, and I wanted to survive and not be taken away to be killed. I figured that even if I had the chance to tell my parents, they would not dare to go against *Angkar*, so I had no choice but to follow what *Angkar* arranged for me. And when I did *pdach nha*, my parents did not even know about it at all.

***What was going through your mind?***

I felt like my *pdach nha* was not acknowledged by anyone, unlike the marriages before this regime. I felt disappointed with myself—disappointed that I did not have a normal

ceremony, that my parents did not know that I was married, that my siblings did not know. I just got married with a group of strangers, so I felt disappointed, but I agreed to marry to survive.

### **Can you say more about the ceremony?**

It was in xx, near the Vietnamese border. I worked there and after *pdach nha* I lived there too. It took place in the meeting hall, at night. There were 24 couples. I don't remember the date, or even know if it was a Sunday or a Monday. They gave us new black clothes to wear. My husband had seen me before, but I had never even seen his face. I just followed the order to *pdach nha*, and then two cadres showed us to the room where we would stay that night and I just followed them.

The rooms were one next to the other, with a small plain mat on the floor, and walls made of palm leaves. The hall of rooms was very long, with long bamboo logs as the floor. The rooms were not fully covered and you could see from one room to the other. That first night we did not have sexual relations because we were too afraid. We lay down on the mat back to back and didn't talk at all, and I could not calm my mind because I was sleeping next to a stranger. Unlike the youth today, we did not know about sex during my youth. We were stupid in that regime and knew nothing about marriage. There were spies and we were afraid to get into trouble, so that is why we tried to be quiet and go to sleep straight away. We were afraid the guards would beat us. We weren't allowed to leave the room they provided us, or we'd be beaten.

“We lay down on the mat back to back and didn't talk at all, and I could not calm my mind because I was sleeping next to a stranger.”

In those days, they abused us like animals. Yes, after *pdach nha*, they brought us to the room, guarded us and spied on us.

I was shy, and he was not as shy as me because he is a man. The next day, we were up early to go to our different work sites, and we didn't meet again until nighttime, around eight or nine o'clock, and then we would go straight to sleep. I did not even know what my husband looked like for the first month of our marriage because we only met at night. Then, one day, there was a big district meeting and I decided I wanted to see his face, so I secretly looked at him. My husband was dark and thin and not good-looking at all. I was so disappointed that I cried alone when I found out what he looked like, but what else could I do? I was so disappointed that there was no love, and I thought my parents would surely blame me when they found out about this marriage. Right after the district meeting, I was walking to my work site and I encountered my husband along the way. I did not talk to him, just like we were strangers.

### **Did you ever talk to each other?**

Sometimes we would talk, or he would ask me questions and I would give very short answers. He asked about my family, about work, this and that. But I was shy in our room because we were so close to the other rooms and we could easily hear and see the other people. So how could we talk openly? I did not even dare to move when sleeping since the floor was one long bamboo log. Whatever we did, people in the other rooms knew and heard it. We did not dare to make love because the others could hear us. Even you [referring to interviewer] would not dare to do that. I don't know why they brought us to



those rooms where we would not dare to make love and yet they spied on us.

***Did you come to love your husband over time?***

I felt both: love and not love. We just lived together peacefully, whether we loved each other or not, so we wouldn't get punished by *Angkar*. After a while, we were brought to another place where we were allowed to build our own small house, and then we could make love, as the conditions were more comfortable and private. We agreed together to live as husband and wife, since we could not separate and we wanted to survive. Love or no love, we wanted to prevent being killed. So we lived in harmony as others couples do. Maybe four or five months after we got married, the Vietnamese came.

At that time, I was pregnant with my daughter, who is an adult now. I did not know anything about pregnancy. We agreed to have a sexual relationship, but I did not know how to prevent getting pregnant, and neither did my husband. I didn't even know I was pregnant until I felt the baby move inside my tummy. I gave birth just after the regime fell. My daughter has three children of her own now.

After the regime ended, my husband and I went to live with my mother in my village. My mother-in-law lived next to the mountain in the same village. After a while, my husband demanded we move in with his mother. As I had my daughter to think about, I followed him. I gave birth to two more children while living there, so we had three children by the time my husband and I separated.

*“I did not even know what my husband looked like for the first month of our marriage because we only met at night.”*

### **Why did you separate?**

We separated because, after the Khmer Rouge regime fell, my husband was a soldier and he moved for work to xx town, and he had an affair. He had many girlfriends actually. Each time he earned money, he got married to another wife and left me at home with his mother. I had three children and I worked in the rice fields with my mother-in-law, and because he was a soldier he was rarely at home. It was pitiful. He'd get paid and then find a new girlfriend and stay with her for a few months. This was not a secret in xx town. I had an uncle in that town and he told me, "Your husband is getting married to another wife." I did not know what to do. I could not just leave to go find him every time, because I had a house and children, cows to take care of, a mother-in-law. So I didn't run after him and I said to myself that, when he remembered us, he would come back. When he did come home, I tried to talk to him, but he did not listen, and then he'd leave for a long period again and marry another wife. He had many wives, a bunch of wives.

Finally, he was getting ready to marry another wife at xx mountain east of xx town. I went to the place where he was getting married. I took the train. My oldest daughter was about 10 years old, and I took her with me to go meet my husband's boss. I filed a complaint with his boss to stop the marriage. His boss agreed with me, and he told my husband, "If you marry another wife, I will not allow you to go on missions as a soldier." The morning of the wedding, his boss detained him at the army camp and did not allow him to go to the wedding hall. His wife carried out the wedding with some of his clothes instead.<sup>17</sup>

After that, I came back home. I waited about a month, and he still did not come back home, because he was so mad at me for trying to stop his wedding. After another month, I asked my parents-in-law for permission to go live with my mother. I had three children and no one to help me raise them. My mother-in-law said, "I've never stopped you from leaving, and I've never asked you to stay because I know that your husband has hurt you and doesn't take care of you." My father-in-law tried to convince me to stay, but no matter what he said, I was determined to leave. I had built a house next door to my in-laws, and I had the house dismantled and used the lumber to rebuild at my mother's place. Since I didn't have transport, my children and I walked to my mother's house when we left.

After being with my parents for about a month, I decided to destroy the house I had lived in together with my husband. My mother begged me not to, as she thought I might still get back together with my husband since we had three children together. But after a month, when he did not come find me, I decided to destroy the house. Every night, I cried in that house. I have three children. I decided on my own to get divorced. I told my father, "You watch and see, I will not get back together with my husband. When I decide to leave him, I leave. I am so fed up with him and I want a divorce now." So I moved into my parents' house, and then my husband was too afraid of my father to dare to come over.

When I think back about that time of my life, I get so fed up, so fed up! In the rainy season, while I was working the rice field, I had no husband to help me. I had small children, and I went out to the rice field to farm. At night, I

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A Khmer tradition allows marriage in absentia by replacing the missing participant with an article of clothing [Ed.].

had to take care of the buffalos. By the time I got home from work, the children were already asleep. It was late at night when I finished cooking for them. Finally, one day, I became so fed up that I decided that, no matter what happened, I would never take him back. I had no faith in my husband, so I had the courage to raise my children on my own. You know, before he left to become a soldier, he was okay. He helped with the farming, made the sugar, helped with raising the children. He was fine, until he became a soldier and then he changed. It was when he became a soldier that he started to beat me. I have been a widow<sup>18</sup> since I was 30 years old, and I will never take another husband.

### **Why did you decide to not remarry?**

There were other men who proposed to me after I left my husband, but I refused. I decided, in one life, one husband is enough. I am fed up with hardship, so I am determined to not have another husband. I was also afraid that a new husband would try to harm my children and harm me. Having two husbands is not easy, so I took care of my children and didn't have time to think about another husband. I was so fed up with husbands and just wanted to raise my children! There were times when I didn't think I could do it all alone. There were times when I didn't think we could survive. He never visited the children after the divorce.

Pol Pot<sup>19</sup> arranged my marriage, and that mistake ruined the rest of my life. Do you see my life today? I don't have what others have. I did not get married like others did. To my children, people here were always saying, "Oh, your mother is a widow, and she did not have *kat khan sla*."

They do not invite me to join the ceremonies. I have been disappointed for the rest of my life because of that marriage. Society discriminates against me for being a widow. For example, during the *houb sla* ritual at the wedding ceremony, they do not include me. They don't invite any of the women who are widowed or divorced or separated. We are broken, like a tree branch—meaning, we have no husband. Even at my own daughter's wedding ceremony, I was not allowed to stand up as her parent, and my mother participated in the wedding instead of me.

18

See glossary for  
"widow(er)."

19

See glossary for  
"Pol Pot."

Both the children and the mother are affected by this discrimination for the rest of their lives. My daughter was never asked to be a bride attendant, and my son also faced this problem, because they have no father. I feel pity for them, and I don't like to think about it because it makes me cry. If the Pol Pot regime had not married me, I might have married someone different or not have married at all, or I could have had a traditional wedding and my children would have a good reputation today. Yes, I made a mistake with that marriage. We could not choose, we did not get to know each other in advance, and I did not know the family background of my husband. We didn't know anything about each other.

### ***Can you talk more about what raising your children alone was like?***

It was not easy. I took my old bicycle to collect herbs and ingredients and brought them to the market in Phnom Penh. I earned a lot of money with this business, enough money to send my children to school. It was hard, very hard, but I wanted them to have an education. All of them have graduated from high school. My daughter got

married when she finished high school, and my sons now continue their studies in Phnom Penh. I am lucky to have such good sons, who do not get into trouble. They are good children. Now, as they grow older, I don't need to work as hard, and I hope they will support me when I can no longer work at all. I see other children who have their fathers to raise them, and it is much easier than it has been for my children. Those wives have husbands whom they can think things through with. I have to make all the decisions alone. If I don't find a way to make ends meet, there is no one there to help me or to solve my problem. But I see that some widows are not able to support their children. I am proud of myself that I have raised children who went to school, who get good jobs and earn a good living. I am not too proud about this, but I do admire myself for this accomplishment. Even the villagers admire me, saying, "Oh, you are a widow, but your children are good children who follow the advice of their mother." So I see that my efforts have not been in vain.

## CASE STUDY

# 5

*PS, female, age 53,  
interviewed on April 25, 2014,  
at TPO Cambodia.*

### **What was your life like before the Khmer Rouge regime took power?**

My entire family—my grandparents, aunties, and uncles—lived near xx market in Phnom Penh. Most of my family was in the army. My uncle was a captain, and my father was a lieutenant. During Lon Nol<sup>20</sup>, my father and our family were evacuated to xx province to fight against the Khmer Rouge soldiers. When the Khmer Rouge won the civil war, my family was moved to xx province. The Khmer Rouge cadres announced that those who were soldiers during the Lon Nol government should dress in their military uniforms and come to the meeting hall. Hearing that, my father dressed up and reported there. That is when he was taken away and killed. I do not know where he was killed or what hole he is buried in because I was so young at the time. I was about 11 or 12 when the Khmer Rouge came to power, and I lived with the children's team. I was considered an April 17 person.<sup>21</sup> I was around 14 years old when I was forced to marry.

I didn't know I was to be married. No one told me. That day, I was carrying the yoke with cow excrement to the rice field and no one told me, "Oh, by the way, after this work you need to get married." Even my unit leader did not seem to know about this at first. I had seen the leader from the men's unit come to the field on horseback that

20

See glossary under  
"Lon Nol."

21

See glossary under  
"new people."

day and discuss with my unit leader, "We do not need to give them the whole day off just to get married. Let them work as usual and we'll have the wedding right after they finish work." They saw me listening and ordered me to get back to work.

One time [before this], on my way to the rice field, I had witnessed a person being killed. He was stabbed and I was so frightened I ran all the way to my work site. Later, that cadre called me from the rice field. He asked, "Did you see anything?" I replied, "No! I just walked past you, but I did not see anything." He said, "I will bring you to the tree and kill you, or I will force you to marry and then kill you [if you say anything]!"

### **When did you find out you were to be married?**

The day I saw the two unit leaders talking in the field. When I was done with work that day, I went to the rice hall, but there was no rice for me to eat. I asked a cadre there why there was no rice for me, and I was told that my food had been prepared in another place because I was getting married. Then I noticed the people walking into the meeting hall in pairs, and I asked my unit leader, "*Mith bong*, what is going on?" She replied, "Well, you also need to go in there." When I asked why, she responded, "When you go into that place, you will be able to eat all you want." My clothes were old and dirty from the workday. My unit leader said, "Change your clothes first," and then she took off her own *sompot* and gave it to me to wear. It was too big for me, so I used a belt my mother had given me, but when another cadre saw this she took it from me. I begged her to give me that belt back, and instead she used the belt to whip me a few times.



In the meeting hall, when I saw the people holding hands, I tried to run away and a cadre fired a gun into the air. I was told, "To keep you is useless and to kill you is no waste."<sup>22</sup> I was ordered to sit across from my husband, but I did not know him. He was much older than me, 28 or 29 years old, and a big guy. I did not dare to look at him. They ordered us to hold hands, and I refused, so they threatened me again with a gun. "Why are you ruining our plan? You will get nothing to eat!" they yelled at me. I cried and begged them, "I am too young and I am not mature enough yet to marry!"<sup>23</sup> I did not understand what love was yet and I had no mother to explain things to me, no parents to care for me and protect me.

22

A common saying of Angkar.

23

I.e., she had not yet begun to menstruate [Ed.].

My uncle was also there. He loved a woman and they had both requested to *Angkar* to be married, and so he was married at the same time as me. When I resisted, he pinched my thigh and whispered to me, "You must remain calm and be silent. If you resist, you will surely be killed!" There were 13 couples. Each cadre took turns giving a speech, and then they ordered us to repeat what they said, to promise to each other to produce children for *Angkar*. I tried to resist again, and the cadre said, "Do you want me to hurt you with my gun?" So I simply agreed.

[After the wedding], they brought us to a house with small rooms—oh, I don't want to talk about that! The rooms were adjacent to each other and the walls were made from grass. For three nights, my husband tried to force me to have sex with him, but I resisted. He tried to undress me, but I fought back, I kicked him when he tried to take off my clothes. This way, I protected myself and the first nights passed. But I did not get enough sleep. I woke up at

three in the morning to go to work before my husband was awake. Seeing me work so hard, the cadre said, "You are a clever girl because you are helping *Angkar*."

On the third night I escaped to another cooperative, but [a few days later] the *chhlob* brought my husband to find me. The guards said it had been almost a week and we still had not slept together, so that night we had to have sex. I did not agree. I said I did not care if I was killed. I would not agree! There were two guards, both women, and one of them is still alive today. They tied my legs and my arms to the bed and then they moved away to let my husband approach me. And that fucking husband raped me! He tore off my pants, and the two guards stood there and watched. My husband raped me and did to me whatever he wanted. He tore my pants and shirt. I felt so ashamed. My uncle was in the next room, he saw what was happening to me and just shook his head. My uncle couldn't bear to watch, but there was nothing he could do. After [my husband] raped me, he did not want to release me, he still wanted me [to be] tied up because he wanted to rape me again. I cried for help and begged him, "Please do not do this!", but [my husband] said he could not help me because he had to follow *Angkar*. They said they had married us to produce children for *Angkar*.

My vagina was bleeding because of the rape. I escaped and ran to my mother for help, but my mother did not know how to help me. A doctor who lived next to her told me to drink a herb tea to stop the bleeding. Then my mother asked me to leave her place, as she was afraid it would bring trouble to the family if I was caught there. My siblings were still so small, and I was afraid they might kill

me, so I walked away. After that night, my uncle tried to talk to my husband. He said I was too young to have sex and that my husband should wait until I was older. He convinced my husband to let me sleep with my uncle's wife, and my uncle slept with my husband. Since I was still bleeding, my husband agreed. On those nights, I slept so well! At the time, I was not menstruating since I was too young and so thin from not having enough food to eat. I did not get my period until late 1979. I was married several months before the Vietnamese entered the country.

*“The guards said it had been almost a week and we still had not slept together, so that night we had to have sex. I did not agree. I said I did not care if I was killed. I would not agree!”*

### **How long was your uncle able to help you?**

After staying about one week with my uncle and his wife, my uncle said he couldn't save me anymore, so I ran away and escaped to another village. I met S. and I asked her for food to eat because I was so hungry. I did not dare to go back to my work unit, as I was afraid I might encounter my husband. Cadres followed me when I escaped. So I hid in the forest during the day and came out into the village only at night. My husband searched for me and asked other people to also look for me. I was so afraid my husband would find me that I slept in the forest, sometimes next to dead bodies, and I didn't even care if the tigers would kill me. That's how much I hated my husband, and there was no way I could love him because of his cruelty toward me. On the night he raped me, while I was tied up, I bit him and he slapped my face. How could he be my husband and hurt me like that? If he had loved me, he would not have followed the guards' orders to abuse me. I did not even know his name until a few years ago.

***Do you know why the Khmer Rouge forced people to marry?***

I don't know. I don't know what they were thinking. They did not value women as sisters or mothers, and they did not consider women valuable in society. People who were married during that time were treated like animals. Neither men nor women had value as human beings. We were not allowed to protect our own bodies [from sex], and our parents were not there to protect us. I was raped, and they stood there and watched! I am still shocked by this. Women were treated like cats or dogs. When I think about this period in my life, my mouth becomes dry and my heart races. One time, years later, I went to the pagoda to bring food for the monks when I suddenly saw the people who did this to me, and I dropped all the food I was carrying on the ground. The ones who were so cruel were now trying to gain merit by coming to the pagoda.<sup>24</sup> I was so angry, and I have been avoiding that pagoda ever since. It was the sister of my husband and the guard who watched me being raped.

***Who did you live with after the regime fell?***

I lived with my mother. My husband never tried to find me. I passed him once on the street. He was with his new wife. I did not want to see him at all because I was feeling so ashamed.

***Why did you feel ashamed?***

After the regime ended, a man and I fell in love. He asked his mother to meet my mother to discuss marriage. But when she met my mother and learned about my past, she whispered to her son, "Oh, she was married during the

Khmer Rouge, son. She is a widow<sup>25</sup>, so I won't agree to you marrying her." He tried to convince his mother that he did not care whether I was a widow or not, and said that he wanted to marry me, but his mother would not agree. He asked me to elope, but I thought that since I had suffered so much during the Khmer Rouge period, I would ruin my family's reputation if I eloped with him. Later he married another woman, and I just cried alone by myself.

See? Although the Khmer Rouge regime is over, the shame is with me forever. After that proposal, I was determined to hide my past from everyone. Even my own children did not know about it. For example, when I sold morning glory at the market, I tried to avoid seeing anyone from the Pol Pot period. I felt too much shame. Can you imagine, once I was asked, "Where is your husband from the Khmer Rouge time?" I replied, "How can you ask such a question? It is shameful!" There were lots of people who knew what had happened to me, since our rooms were so close [in the conjugal wedding house]. I have been avoiding that market since then because I am nervous to face those people, and I sell at xx market instead because the people there do not know me and I am not asked any questions. My life is not like that of others, and I feel shame beyond description. Some of the women from my team are still happily married with their husbands from that time.

When the Vietnamese pulled their troops out of Cambodia [in 1989], a soldier fell in love with me. His parents came to talk to my mother. He was a widower too and had one child. I agreed to marry him because I assumed that, as we were both widowed, we were the same and he would not

24

A Buddhist practice in Cambodia where one gains merit for a good next life by giving offerings to monks [Ed.].

25

See glossary under "widow(er)."

look down on me. Before that, I had heard the elders come to talk to my mother all the time, saying that I should have a traditional marriage to solve my problems. So I decided to marry again, but life was not good with my second husband. He had a lot of girlfriends and he beat me. This must be the habit of men, because he also forced me to have sex with him. At the time we had no birth control, and I had no right to say or decide, "Today, we should not make love, and on another day we can have sex." I don't know why he forced me to have sex. All I wanted was a happy family, so I said nothing to anyone about his violence toward me. I tried to earn money for the children to go to school. He did not help me earning money. He left home for long periods and then would come back and stay for a few days. He was a soldier and had a lot of girlfriends around the country. If you want to know about my second marriage, just ask the old people in the village about the hardship I have had in this life. It is not easy at all. My second husband did not treat me well, as a wife should be treated. I was pregnant at the start of each year and at the end of each year. I worked so hard in the rice field that my uterus fell<sup>26</sup> after having so many children.

My second husband eventually fled with a girl to the Thai border<sup>27</sup> and did not come back. My children saw how other children's fathers came back for them, but my husband did not come back to take us with him. I had stayed with my husband through his abuse because I did not want my children to be fatherless, and then he did not come back for us and ran away to Thailand.

Years later, when we learned he had died, my children asked why I did not marry again. I told them I was so fed

up with husbands! I have now been a widow for 23 years, and I have been able to support my son to get three years of university education. Now, my son works in Korea because I no longer have the capacity to support his schooling. I have all daughters and only one son. My oldest is about 38 years old and the youngest is around 23 years old.

To me, both my husbands were the same because they did not perform their duties to me. I think the first marriage was wrong because we were not asked to agree with the match and we did not love each other. As for my second marriage, I had agreed to the marriage based on my own choice, and my parents had agreed too. If I would have divorced a second time, it would have ruined my reputation. If I had tried to run away from him, I would be shamed by other people again. So I endured. I had children, so even if I wanted to leave, where would I go? I was still carrying the shame of the Khmer Rouge marriage, so if I left a second husband, how would others judge me as a woman? I am not an educated person, but I thought about it a lot. I tried to work hard and to endure for the children. I have six children with him and one foster child. That husband is now dead, but whether he is dead or alive doesn't make a difference to me. In fact, my life seemed happier after he died.

26  
i.e., prolapsed [Ed.].

27  
During the period, a number of refugee camps for Khmer Rouge survivors were situated along the Thai-Cambodian border.

28  
The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) is the tribunal established to try Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. Survivors may file complaints of suffering to become civil parties to the court and participate in its proceedings. See the introduction for more information.

### ***Did your second husband know about what happened to you during the Khmer Rouge period?***

No, he did not know, and he did not ask. And I did not tell him either. It was only after my three daughters were married and had left home that I told someone, when the ECCC starting looking for people to file complaints.<sup>28</sup> I was asked if I was a survivor of forced marriage and I said,

"No." Then I was asked if I wanted to file a complaint for the death of my relatives, and I answered again, "No." I felt filing a complaint would make all those experiences seem new again. When they [ECCC officials] came back a third time, I decided I would file the form. I saw that many people were submitting a complaint, and my father and grandparents were killed during the regime and they were watching over me. That's how my children learned about my past, from my complaint. They were surprised and asked me, "Oh mom! You are a widow from the Khmer Rouge time?"

When the children were young, I was worried a new husband would harm them. Even now, I am still afraid about having another husband, even though my children are adults now. Even today, I feel like a woman who is wearing a pair of torn pants—disgraceful. I rarely visit other people's houses. I mostly stay home alone and don't bother with other people. And I see how the situation has impacted my children. I have heard with my own ears how people in the village have said they do not want their children to marry my children because I have had two husbands. When I heard this, I was angry and answered back, "If you have something to say, say it to me and don't bring my children into this." So, I thought long and hard about filing a complaint to the ECCC, since I didn't want to bring this all up again. But after sharing my experience, I felt like people listened to me and paid attention to me. Now, when I am asked to share my story, I share it all. I don't want to hide anymore. I want to tell it all so the world can know how much women suffered at that time.



## CASE STUDY

# 6

*HK, female, age 58,  
interviewed on April 28, 2014,  
at TPO Cambodia, Phnom Penh.*

### **Can you tell me about your childhood before the Khmer Rouge period?**

I was born in xx province. I was separated from my mother when I was an infant.

My mother and my father had fallen in love secretly. My paternal grandfather did not like my mother. He said it was his right as the parent to find a wife for his son, even if the woman he chooses would be very poor. So he split up my father and mother, even though at the time my mother was nearly ready to give birth to me. When I was a week old, my mother brought me to my [paternal] grandparents' house to be cared for, and then we lost contact with her. My mother and father were never married even though they loved each other and had a daughter together. Since my paternal grandparents did not approve of my mother, she decided to disappear from my father's life. I knew this story because my grandparents would talk about it, and I can remember those talks quite clearly.

My relationship with my father was distant, and more like an uncle and niece than a father and daughter. He wanted to keep it a secret that he was my father. Later, my grandfather found my father another woman to marry, and my father thought his wife might hurt me if she knew I was his daughter.

***Do you know why your grandparents did not approve of your mother?***

I think because they believed in the traditional saying, “The cake cannot be bigger than the pan”—that is, the child must obey the parents.<sup>29</sup> As a result, my grandparents raised me. Since my grandparents were afraid that my father’s new wife would hurt me, they raised me as if I were their own child. My grandfather would tell me stories about how they did not have money to buy milk to feed me, so they would go to the orphanage to get free milk for me when I was a baby.

Yes, I lived with my grandfather until I could no longer tolerate living with my relatives. When I was a child, there were two orphans who also lived with my grandparents, although they still had their mother. My relatives discriminated against me because I was the daughter of unmarried parents, which is against tradition. When I was very young, it did not matter much, but as I reached adolescence, my cousin often harassed and beat me. When I was 16, I decided to leave home and go work as a housemaid in Phnom Penh. I told myself that I had no relatives and that I was on my own.

***What was your life like in Phnom Penh?***

I worked as a housemaid. My boss was very kind and I had no problems living in his house. His relatives and family members were also very generous to me and loved me like one of the family. I took care of their house as though it was my own. My boss’ mother was a sister-in-law to my grandfather’s sister. She was very old and she asked if I could come live with her. At the same time, my boss had been searching for a long time for a good housemaid.

When he met me at his mother's house, he asked me to work for him. I felt so comfortable in his house, as though I was valued as a woman. His house was clean and neat, and I lived in a proper place with dignity. I thought my life was very bright at that time.

### ***Were you in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge regime took over the city?***

Yes, I was at the hospital. Before that, I had been taking care of my boss' elderly mother-in-law. I could change her serum for her after the doctor had shown me one time. The doctor said I was clever and suggested that I learn about medical care with him at the hospital. I frequently went with him during his night shifts to learn. Then, on 15 and 16 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders bombed the city. I did not dare to return home, so I spent the night at the hospital with the cleaners.

On the morning of 17 April 1975, people in the city started to wave white flags. The older people were so happy that the country finally had peace and not war. The Khmer Rouge had already captured Lon Nol's house at seven that morning.<sup>29</sup> Then cadres started to evict all the citizens from the city. I was separated from anyone I knew because I was at the hospital and not at home, and I was evacuated to xx province. I stayed there about a month. This place reminded me of home, so I asked the village chief if I could go to my hometown, but he refused. So I was sent to live in xx province, asking people along the way for directions since I did not know how to get there. At the time, I did not know where to go because I did not know which place was liberated and which one was not.<sup>30</sup> I did not follow *Angkar's* path yet. When I arrived at xx, my work was to dig canals and farm rice.

29

In other words, the parents, not the children, are the ones to arrange the marriage and the wedding, according to traditional practices [Ed].

30

See glossary under "Lon Nol."

31

I.e., she did not know what other areas were controlled ("liberated") by the Khmer Rouge after the fall of Phnom Penh. Indeed, there was uneven rollout of regime policies across the country over the course of the revolution, and some provinces had long been under Khmer Rouge control before 1975 [Ed.].

I knew no one and had no friends or relatives, but I was glad to be evacuated to a place closer to my hometown. I carried soil near xx lake, where there were plenty of mosquitoes. I got sick and they sent me to the hospital, but there was no room, so they sent me to the primary school where they had set up extra hospital beds. I was there for four months and then returned to my workplace, though I was still weak. An old woman advised me, "Ask the leaders to look after the birds in the rice field because it is not such hard work."

One day I wanted to make *ambok*, and I went to the rice field to pinch off about a small milk can of old rice. While I was cooking the *ambok*, a Khmer Rouge cadre arrested me. I was detained at the district office for a week before being sent to the detention center. About a week later, Khmer Rouge members interrogated me about my family. I answered truthfully—I was an only child, my parents were divorced and my father had a new wife. They asked me why I had stolen the rice and they made me confess [like this]: "I should not behave in a way that harms the revolution. I stole the rice because I am stupid and only wanted to make *ambok*. I did not steal from *Angkar* because I am hungry. If I am hungry, I will ask *Angkar* for food, and I will never behave like this again."

After that, they seemed satisfied and a female cadre said to me, "*Mith*, if you are honest with *Angkar*, you will not die."

My aunt also lived in that village, and she was a base person<sup>32</sup> so they did not let us live together. At the time, I did not know that they did not want us to communicate with our relatives. I did not know the principles of *Angkar* yet.<sup>33</sup> Then Khmer Rouge members began evacuating the

new people to a nearby mountain. In fact, they sent the new people there in order to deprive them of food and to let them die. Almost daily they were sending new people up that mountain, including Chinese, Cham, Vietnamese and Khmer. Since I was a new person, my aunt became nervous and asked me, "Do you want to go there and catch malaria?" I responded, "If I am going to die anyway, I might as well die there." I wasn't sent up the mountain, but I knew that I would die if I stayed much longer in my aunt's village. I could not work as hard as the others because I had terrible headaches. When I returned to the community hall at the end of the day after work, I noticed that the base people were cold toward me. Soon, I did not go back to the village anymore, but simply slept in the rice field since I felt more relaxed there by myself. The village chief thought I had mental problems and so he even shackled me at one point.

I was later evacuated to xx commune, xx village in xx province, closer to my hometown. I worked in the women's team there and was a cook in the mess hall. I had an injury on my leg that became ulcerous. I thought that surely would kill me. I still have a big scar now. Each day, everyone would go to the rice field and I would stay alone in the village because of my injury. After my leg healed, I went to the field to harvest with the others. One day I was coming back from harvesting and a cadre asked me to marry a man I did not know. I flatly refused.

### ***Did you expect that you would be asked to marry?***

I had received requests to marry twice before and had said no. They couldn't just ask me and then marry us. There was a two-step process: first they requested me, but it was only *Angkar* who could approve.

32  
See glossary for  
"base people."

33  
I.e., because she was separated from her family already, she was unaware of Khmer Rouge policies to dismantle and criminalize the private family. In the next sentences, HK explains that, because she was evacuated from Phnom Penh, she was considered a "new person," despite her upbringing in the rural ("base") areas [Ed.].

**What were the first two marriage proposals you received?**

First, a Cham woman asked me to marry [her male relative] while I was at her place warming up by the fire on a full-moon night. I told her I did not want to marry yet because I was waiting to be reunited with my family first. She was a new person, like me, so she had no power to pressure me.<sup>34</sup> Two weeks later, another woman, who was called K., asked me to marry her nephew. I refused again, and she didn't disagree, because she was a new citizen like me. That was about nine in the morning, and I went to the kitchen for work right after. K.'s sister was there and made the same request again. I refused again, saying I did not know the man they were asking me to marry. She walked away, and about five minutes later she came back to say the request was prepared by *Angkar* and that I could not refuse. She said, "If you do not agree, you will be killed." I thought about the fact that I wanted to live to see my family again and how the country was developing, and I did not want to die. I agreed finally to marry my husband because I thought people died very easily those days, and I figured I could run away from my husband after the Pol Pot time<sup>35</sup> ended.

I was married the next day, in 1977. It was around Khmer New Year, though I do not know the exact date. I was 19 years old. I got married along with two other couples. We were the first three couples to be married in that village by the Khmer Rouge.

**It sounds like you did not know in advance that you were to be married?**

I had no idea. I was coming back from picking the leaves to dye my clothes black<sup>36</sup> when I ran into a woman I knew.

She asked me where I had been since it was nearly time for me to get married. I asked her to tell me more, and in my mind I was imagining a traditional wedding ceremony. I hurried home and when I arrived a female cadre gave me some new black clothes and put powder on my face.

My marriage celebration was different from many others because we were the first couples to get married during the regime. The kitchen prepared duck for the marriage party. It was during the daytime, and it was not so different from a traditional marriage ceremony—there was an *achha* to lead the ceremony and even some of the rituals with special food. I even fed rice to my husband, like in a traditional wedding, but we did not do the haircutting ceremony. In fact, I did not dare to look my husband in the face the entire time. I was shy, and I did not even know that man.

Frankly, ever since I was young, I never wanted to marry. I used to ask the older people about what wives did after they were married. They said that we had to look after the children, take care of the husband and be responsible for the housework. I thought back then that I preferred not to be married because I could work and survive by myself and still visit my grandfather whenever I wanted. I was afraid to lose my freedom after I had a husband. I think a wedding is wonderful and glorious for women, yet, I was also afraid to have a husband who could hurt me. But during the Khmer Rouge time, I would be killed if I did not accept the marriage. I agreed to marry, and thought I could leave my husband after the regime was defeated. I remembered the Lon Nol regime and how things always changed. Still, I hoped the change would come sooner rather than later.

34

See glossary under “new people.”

35

See glossary under “Pol Pot.”

36

The regime required all people to dress in black.

The marriages that came later were different. The new people did not have special food, for example. The cadres used the marriages to attract the leader's attention to show they were doing a good job. They were interested in showing the large numbers of couples who were married in their villages.

### ***What happened after the marriage party?***

We were taken to a small house to stay together. That night, my husband tried to touch my hand and I had no idea what he wanted. I did not know about sexual relationships at the time. We had to get along and have sex or the cadre would kill us. So I just kept quiet and blocked out what was happening to me. I was so full of regret, and I promised myself that I would never marry again if I managed to separate from this husband.

My husband and I were spied on every night by *chhlob*. When I did not agree to have sex with my husband, I was sent to be re-educated,<sup>37</sup> thus I never refused and just let my husband do what he wanted. The relationship between my husband and me was not very good because my husband was not an open man and he did not understand partnership. I lived with him without happiness and even today we are still together.

[During the Khmer Rouge time], my husband and I lived and worked together cutting trees to clear land for planting corn. My husband and I argued a lot about sex—I was too tired and it hurt to have sex with him. He is still like this today, and over the years it has caused problems, arguments and beatings. At one point during Pol Pot times we were sent to different work sites, but then the cadres felt sorry to see us separated as a married couple so



they arranged for us to live together again. I was not happy to hear that, as I had been very happy to be separated from him for those three months.

### ***Did you have any children together?***

My first pregnancy came in January 1979. It was normal to have a delayed pregnancy at the time because we had so little to eat. Then, in January 1979, I got horrible morning sickness. I was feeling nauseous and dizzy. By that time, the Khmer Rouge regime was nearly defeated.<sup>38</sup> I ran away from my husband even though I was pregnant. I thought I was finally free from him. Then my husband found me and asked me to live with him. I thought about it long and hard. Finally, when I was five months pregnant, I agreed to live with him. I considered the facts that I was about to have a child, that I did not have any relatives to depend on, and that my husband and I were already married. I was poor and I did not have any resources allowing me to live without him, and I wanted my child to have a family. In reality, nothing turned out the way I thought it would. I stayed with him until my children were grown up and then tried to run away again. He begged my children to find me and bring me back home.

The big problem in our marriage is the sexual relationship. My husband is constantly begging me to have sex with him, and if we do not, we argue and he beats me. When he was young, we had sex once every other day. Later, I negotiated with him to have sex once every seven to 10 days. But during that week, he is restless and picking fights in the house. Since 2000, he has been accusing me of having a lover, yelling, "If your lover can have sex with you, why can't I?" I hear this almost every day.

37  
See glossary for  
"re-education."

38  
Vietnamese forces  
achieved victory over  
the Khmer Rouge on  
January 7, 1979.

I stayed with him out of pity for my children. I wanted them to have a bright future. I could see my neighbors who got divorced and how their children would start to drink and cause trouble. I wanted to do the right thing for the children and so I did not leave him. I had encountered a lot of difficulties as a child because of my own parents, and I did not want the same for my children. I thought it was the responsible thing to do, and even if it killed me, I would be dying for my children.

### ***So you have stayed together since 1977?***

Yes. Sometimes I talk about problems with my neighbors, and they all know what kind of man my husband is, but they cannot help me. When the police arrests and re-educates him, he beats me again as soon as he gets back home. I still have a scar on my elbow from when he stabbed me in 2012 while I was sleeping in front of the television. He locked the door to the room and stabbed me, and my children almost could not rescue me because the door was locked. He stabbed me because I sued him for a divorce. He said he was going to kill me and then kill himself so the police couldn't arrest him.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, I just accepted the marriage and had sexual relations to save my life. Later, I stayed because I had children with my husband. I have seven children with him. The oldest is 39 years old. Sure, they know how their father treats me, but they cannot take one side against the other. It is a sin [against Buddha] if they choose the mother or the father. Even though they have seen everything, I have always told them to treat their father with respect despite him being a bad husband.

Very few couples from the Khmer Rouge time are still married. Most of my peers from the Khmer Rouge era assumed I had separated from my husband too, but I am still with him. He has beaten me all these years, and I just keep quiet.

***Do you think your life would be different if you had not been forced to marry?***

I think it would be much better. In fact, when I was young and working, I thought I would never get married. Actually, I don't like men. When I was about 14 years old, I drank a tea of gall bladder to cure a fever. Ever since, I have felt hate for men. After the treatment, the traditional healer asked how I was feeling. I barely said one word to him and quickly walked away. He thought I was a shy girl but in fact I felt hate toward every man I met after that treatment.

When I think about my life, I cry until my eyes are swollen and red. Sometimes I cannot fall asleep at night thinking about it. My story is very complicated, from one point to the next. I have always had to worry about poverty and my family situation. I was not allowed to live with my parents when I was young. Then my cousin beat me. Then I had this cruel husband. Whenever I give blessings to my children, tears come to my eyes because I never received such blessing from my own parents. Maybe if I had had blessings from my mother, my life would have been happier. After my long life as an orphan, I thought marriage could mean an easier life for me. In fact, it is the opposite. My husband has never helped me at all, and I

*“During the Khmer Rouge regime, I just accepted the marriage and had sexual relations to save my life. Later, I stayed because I had children with my husband. I have seven children with him.”*

have had plenty of duties and I am very tired of handling those duties alone.

### ***Are your children married?***

Two daughters and two sons are married now, and I have two single daughters. One son has died already. The relationship with my sons was very good until they married. Then they started swearing at me and treating me badly and being disobedient. I don't want to talk about them. For my daughters, I want them to have good futures. I cannot decide everything for them, and I am afraid my daughters might marry men who mistreat them, and I am afraid that my sons will beat my daughters-in-law. I checked the family histories [of the intended spouses] before I gave permission for my children to marry. One of my daughters has a good husband. The other daughter is always having family problems. That daughter experienced difficulties because she was too meek; her husband gambled and lost money. Now he's committed to stop gambling and has gone to find work in Thailand. I am not convinced he has truly changed his behavior. Some marriages are good and some not good, but there is no way we can know our fortune—our own or our children's.

# CASE STUDY

## 7

*MSO, female, age 65,  
interviewed on April 28, 2014,  
at TPO Cambodia.*

### **Can you tell me about your marriage before the Khmer Rouge regime?**

I was 18 years old and my husband was 21 years old when we were married. My husband was a soldier in charge of training other soldiers, and I worked as a nurse at a hospital. We lived together in Phnom Penh, but we were from the same village in xx province and had studied in the same schools. Since we were both living in Phnom Penh, our parents decided to celebrate our wedding. We agreed and so that is how we got married, in 1973.

The wedding was a lot like the celebrations you see today. There was chanting and there were lots of guests at the wedding party. We had the haircutting ceremony in the evening and tied the red thread around our wrists in the morning. I welcomed the guests in a *kben*. The wedding was very different from the weddings under the Khmer Rouge.

### **What happened to your husband after the Khmer Rouge came to power?**

My husband and I had gone to our hometown to spend Khmer New Year there.<sup>39</sup> A few days after getting back to Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge took power and evacuated everyone from the city. We ended up close to our home district in xx province. About one or two days

39

Khmer New Year extends over three days in mid-April; the Khmer Rouge regime entered Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, during the Khmer New Year period.

after arriving, Khmer Rouge cadres rounded up all the Lon Nol<sup>40</sup> soldiers and assigned them to patrol the forest. Actually, I did not know it then, but they were taking those men to be killed. They even asked me to collect some supplies for my husband to use while in the forest, like a pot for cooking and clean clothes. I was pregnant when they took him away.

At the time, all my family members, except me, were considered base people because they had always lived in the countryside and some were Khmer Rouge. My husband and I were called new people since we had been evacuated from Phnom Penh.<sup>41</sup> After my husband had been away for a few months, I became suspicious and worried. One day, I asked my [younger] brother-in-law why my husband had been gone for so long.<sup>42</sup> He walked away from me without answering. This brother-in-law was a Khmer Rouge soldier and had been among the cadres who had accompanied my husband to the forest. It was obvious to me then that my husband had been taken away to be killed.

After they sent my husband away, I was mobilized from place to place, because I was suspected of having enemy associations with a Lon Nol soldier. I was not allowed to live with my mother and sister because I was a new person and they were base people. Later, when I had given birth to my first son and he was about six months old, my [younger] brother-in-law (the one who had taken my husband away) helped me to live in xx village with my mother and my oldest sister and her husband. Her husband worked for the Economic Department. He was in charge of materials and food supplies for the district.

When I lived with him, my son and I were never hungry.

During that time, my older sister died of an illness. Some time later, I was sleeping with my son and my dead sister's husband tried to rape me. I asked him, "Why are you doing this to me?" He did not answer. When the morning came, I did not go to work and told my mother how he had tried to touch me the night before. He responded that he had tried to touch me only because he wanted to marry me. I said, "If you want to marry me, why not ask me frankly?" Three days later, he proposed marriage. "Marry me please, and you can live easily," he said. I replied, "Hmm, my husband just died so I cannot marry you." He continued, "You might experience many problems if you do not marry me." I said again, "No, no, no!" When I rejected him so strongly, he asked, "Are you not afraid of dying?" I replied, "I am not afraid of dying at all. I do not care. If I die and no one looks after my son, just let him die after me."

### **What happened when you refused?**

My [older] brother-in-law proposed to me three times. For the third time, he asked the commune chief to accompany him, and still I did not accept his request. My mother talked to me in private. She said, "Daughter, you should marry him to save your life and the life of your child." In fact, I thought it would be great to die because I was living without having any rights. Death was always close to me after my husband had died. I just knew that I could not marry a perpetrator and that I would rather die than to do so. I refused because he was a Khmer Rouge member and it was the Khmer Rouge soldiers who had taken away my husband and killed him. Also, he was a stupid person, an uneducated person, who worked for a regime with leaders who ordered Khmer to kill Khmer.

40  
See glossary for  
"Lon Nol."

41  
See glossary for  
"new people" and  
"base people."

42  
There are two brother-in-laws in the story. The younger brother-in-law was a Khmer Rouge cadre who participated in the disappearance of MSO's husband. The older brother-in-law, who appears later in the story, was a district officer in charge of provisions who tried to force MSO to marry him.

That night, he ordered the young soldiers to come to my house and arrest me. It was around eight p.m., when I was preparing to go to sleep. My mother asked why they were taking me away and they responded, "Your daughter has made mistakes." My mother continued, "What mistakes has she made?" They answered, "She refuses to get married." I fully realized that my [older] brother-in-law was responsible for my arrest. They tied me up and they forced me into a truck in which there were already several other women.

We arrived in Wat xx prison at 10 o'clock that night, and the soldiers shouted at me and the other women to jump down from the truck. I was tied up and so I fell when I jumped. They shouted at me, "Do you want to die? Stand up!" They brought us into the prison and shackled us. There were around 10 people, men and women, in the same area of the prison as me. Then, five to seven young soldiers came in and raped the new prisoners, including me, by using their big toes. The soldiers were about 20 years old or younger. They shouted at me and the other women to strip off our skirts, and they started pushing their big toes into our [vaginas]. They always did this to the new prisoners. I was 28 years old at that time.

***You said there were men in the same area of the prison as you. Did they see the young soldiers raping the women?***

They surely knew as they sat next to the female prisoners and could see everything that happened in the prison. I felt so angry and ashamed. If I could have fought back, I would have. I did not understand how they could treat Khmer so badly. I do not ever want to see such bad things happen again.



### **Were the men also raped?**

I did not see them rape the men, but I saw the men were beaten and tortured during interrogation. We were not permitted to talk to each other or the guards would beat us, but we did manage to whisper to each other. I asked the other prisoners about the rapes. They said they only raped the new prisoners and only once, on the first night. I was told that people were in prison for escaping from forced marriage, for stealing rice, and so on.

I was raped on the first night only, and then a few days later I was sent to the big prison in xx. The prison was a pagoda surrounded by trees and it was very quiet. But there were no monks in the pagoda. There were only prisoners, soldiers and guards. The female prisoners and the male prisoners were put together in the same space. When I arrived, they interrogated me, "Why are you in prison?" I answered frankly, "I did not agree to marry my brother-in-law." They held me there for four days and then released me to work with the others at xx. There were hundreds of people working there, both base people and new people digging canals for the dam. Every night after the evening porridge, we'd see the cadres with 10 or so people taken to be killed. As soon as I arrived at the new worksite, I began asking the other prisoners, "Where were the Lon Nol soldiers taken to?" One of the other prisoners—she may have been ex-Khmer Rouge—said, "Do not expect that you will ever see them again." It was then that I had to clearly accept that my husband was dead.

*"I felt so angry and ashamed. If I could have fought back, I would have. I did not understand how they could treat Khmer so badly."*

After some time, I was asked to transport the roof tiles for a building being prepared for the arrival of Prince Sihanouk. I also transported mattresses and carpets and cleaned all the walls at that place. I did that every day until everything was prepared. Today that place is a hotel.

I slept in the prison at night and left to work during the day. One day, Khmer Rouge soldiers asked, "Who knows how to harvest rice?" I told them I could, and I was sent with other prisoners to another prison to harvest rice. The rice field where I worked was only about one kilometer from where my mother and son were living. I yearned to visit them, but I knew I could not or I would cause problems for them. Thus I stayed away even though I was so close. Around that time I met my younger brother-in-law, the one who was the Khmer Rouge soldier. He let my mother know I was still alive, and she was shocked as she thought, after such a long time, that I surely had been killed.

The work at the new prison was very difficult. Seven prisoners were ordered to harvest a hectare of rice per day. Then it was reduced to only five people to harvest the same hectare. One day, I learned secretly that I was scheduled to be killed three days later. A day or two later, I heard the sound of bombs exploding. An old man, a base person who looked after the cows, walked by listening to a radio. He asked me to listen with him, and the news was that the Vietnamese had liberated Phnom Penh, Kampong Thom and Siem Reap. I could not listen closely or for long because I was afraid to be killed by the guards, but I clearly heard, "Cambodians, do not be afraid! Hurrah! Hurrah! Cambodia has been liberated!" I thought that, surely, we

had been saved, and the old man was so scared that he ran away without taking his cows.

I stopped working in the field and went back to the cooperative. It was chaos. Some of the Khmer Rouge soldiers were stealing food to take while fleeing, while others ran away with no food because they were so frightened. I decided I would leave too and travel back to my hometown. Along the way, I saw Cham in combat with Khmer Rouge soldiers, using swords and knives. When I saw that, I threw away everything that I had brought from the cooperative [in case they came after me]. Finally, I arrived home and met my mother and son. My son did not even recognize me because we had been separated for so long.

***You were in three prisons for refusing to marry. Did you have any idea you would receive this punishment for refusing?***

Yes, I fully knew I would die, or worse. Whether I'd live or die, it did not matter to me. Death was more meaningful than life because I had no rights at that time. When the Khmer Rouge wanted to kill, they killed, and they did not give any reasons. In the past, when I was reminded of my life, I could not help but cry. Now, I have received psychological support and so I can control my emotions. The first time I talked about my experiences [with counselors at TPO], I cried right away. But afterward I felt so excited to live in a whole new era because my life is valuable and I have rights and can work where I want and do what I want. Yes, on the one hand I feel that my life is very bright now, and on the other hand, I think I may have done good deeds in a previous life and that this is why I

managed to survive until now. Although death was always close to me, I was never afraid of dying.

Now my older brother-in-law, my dead sister's husband, has died of illness. Before dying, he asked me to take care of his son, my nephew. He wanted his son to pursue studies at the high school in my village. I did not want my brother-in-law's son to live with me, as I considered the boy to be the son of my enemy. But my mother cried and begged me to have pity on her orphaned grandson. My brother-in-law brought him to my house on several occasions, and I had no interest in meeting him or talking to him, so I always made sure to be away from home at those times. I also refused to go to my brother-in-law's funeral, though my mother said it is always better to do the right thing, and so in the end I did attend. He had remarried and had two more children with his new wife.

Eventually, I considered that my nephew, my oldest sister's son, did not have anything to do with what had happened to me during the Khmer Rouge regime, thus I decided to let him live with me. When he first came to us, he was filthy and wearing rags for clothes. So I took care of him and helped him to finish secondary school. He wanted to become a policeman, and I helped him reach this goal. As for my own first son, he died when he was 23 of Meningitis.

***How did you support yourself after the Khmer Rouge regime fell? Did you remarry?***

Yes, I did, and I had two more children. I was offered a job in the provincial center of xx, but my mother was afraid the Khmer Rouge would come back and did not want me

to take this job. As she had already raised my son on her own for so long, I decided not to go. Instead I took a job at xx hospital with my former boss, and with my mother's agreement. I was able to get rice and food and enough income to support the family, which at that time included my mother, my son and the brother-in-law who had been a Khmer Rouge soldier. I had to walk about seven kilometers each day from my house to the hospital. I worked as a nurse.

*“You know, I never told my mother about my rape, but I did tell my new husband. He accepted my past. I have a son and a daughter with him.”*

I married again in 1980. My new husband also worked at the hospital. At first, I did not want to get remarried because I was afraid my husband would hurt my son. Then my [new] mother-in-law came to persuade me that her son was a kind and good man. My mother also wanted me to marry him. I still had reservations because of my son, and I reasoned that I could afford my family expenses so did not need to remarry, but I had lots of pressure from the family and so finally I decided to marry him. I also found out for myself that he was a good man. When we worked together, we talked about our experiences during the Khmer Rouge era. I told him my story, and he said there were much more severe cases than my case in the prison where he was detained. He said there were grave problems for women in that prison. You know, I never told my mother about my rape, but I did tell my new husband. He accepted my past. I have a son and a daughter with him.

### ***Do your children know about your past?***

Though I told them about the Khmer Rouge time, I did not tell them about my rape. I always said, “You are very lucky

to be born in a new generation, as life was very difficult during the Khmer Rouge regime. Do what is good for your life!" I am not ashamed of what happened to me, but I never wanted to tell them because I was afraid they would try to take revenge. Today, my son is 31 and my daughter is 28 years old. They are both married and have one child each.

## CASE STUDY

## 8

KN, female, age 57,  
interviewed on June 28, 2014, at her home.  
She is Khmer Cham (Islam).

### **Can you tell me about your life before the Khmer Rouge took power?**

When I was a girl, I did not go to school. I helped my mother selling fish. We lived in a Cham community. I was 17 when the Khmer Rouge came to power. I was part of a mobile team in xx village.

### **You said on your survey you were married during the Khmer Rouge regime. Can you describe that marriage?**

Yes, I was *bong khom oy reap ka* in 1978, when I was 21. They had asked me twice to get married and I refused. The third time I was told that if I did not agree, I would be killed. So, I finally agreed. I found out during the break at noon while working in the field that I would be making a "commitment" after work. A cadre said, "This evening after work, you need to make a commitment." I understood they meant marriage, but I did not know with whom. That made me nervous and afraid.

The ceremony took place around seven that night at the house of the village chief. There were 20 couples, and cadres to perform the ceremony. They told us to get grouped according to the color of our *krama*. There were a lot of couples in my commitment ceremony, and some people were confused about who their partner was. The cadres called our names to come forward, and we were

told to say a few words of commitment to our partner. Khmer and Islam were mixed together, as in my case. My husband and I were strangers, and he was black and skinny. The whole ceremony took about one hour, not long at all (*laughs*). I laugh because it was strange in that regime. I was afraid because I did not know my husband, and I was nervous because I am a woman, but I agreed because I didn't want to be killed.

***What are marriages like in a Cham community? May you marry Khmer Buddhist, or is it that Khmer Islam should only marry other Khmer Islam?***

Yes, we usually only marry other Khmer Islam, but if someone wants to marry outside of our religion, we don't blame him or her for this. Some women marry and their husbands will then follow the Cham religion and customs. Some marry Khmer and then follow their husbands and give up the Cham identity. It is up to each couple.

***What happened after the commitment ceremony?***

After the ceremony, they provided us with a room in the rice hall. They built the room for us. It was made from wood and close to the other rooms, but not close enough to see each other. My husband asked me, "You have committed to me, so do you love me or not?" I said, "Even if I don't love you and am upset with this marriage, I can't do anything about it." He responded, "It's *Angkar's* order, so we should just follow it."

We discussed together that night and agreed between us [to have sexual relations] because the cadres had threatened us, saying that if we didn't get along that night, they would take us to be killed. My husband said: "If



we don't get along, we will be killed, as the *chhlob* are spying on us now." He did not force me, and I was afraid of having sex, since I had no idea how it was done. We stayed together for one week, and then they separated us to work in different places, and then we could only meet each other once per month.

### ***Did you have children during that marriage?***

We had nothing to eat, but I knew that if we had sex I would get pregnant, and I had no idea how to prevent it or how to get an abortion. There was no medicine and no doctors at the time, and I thought that if *Angkar* knew [about an attempted abortion] I might get in trouble. I have three children from that time.

### ***You mentioned that your husband is Khmer?***

Yes, he is Khmer. He listened to me, unlike other men I was used to see in other marriages. I knew I was wrong to marry him, since I am Cham and Allah teaches that we should marry other Muslims, but at that time, what could we do? They forced me and I simply endured. At first my husband was okay and he listened to me, but we did not have a very good relationship and it was difficult to talk to each other later.

I decided that I would not stay with him after the regime lost power. I wanted to go back to my Cham community, and he is not Cham. If I followed him, I would have to give up my identity in the community. But he followed me back to my village and decided to convert to our religion, so I continued to live with him. If he had not converted to my religion, I would have separated from him, because no one in the community would have trusted him and I was

determined to live as Cham. If we follow Allah, whether we are dead or alive, the Cham community will take care of us and we belong to the community forever.

If I had followed my husband and given up my Cham community, my mother would no longer have considered me her daughter, and she too would no longer have been on good terms with the Cham community. My mother did not find out about my marriage until after the regime fell. Once my husband agreed to follow our religion, she was okay with the marriage. She and the elders prepared the ceremony for him to become Cham like me and to acknowledge our marriage. I wanted to have a traditional marriage ceremony, but I felt it was too late for me—I was embarrassed as I already had children. We lived happily until 1993.

### ***How did things change in 1993?***

He started to drink and beat me. He worked as a fisherman with the other men. Often, he would drink in the village and only come home to ask for money from me. In 2006, I finally decided to get a divorce. I was the one who decided. I made a complaint to the commune chief asking for help because I experienced such hardship living with him. When my husband found out about the divorce, he threatened me with a knife and I had to run to another villager's house to hide. The children were happy about the divorce. It has been eight years since we separated, and I have not remarried.

My community does not blame me because the Khmer Rouge made me marry that man. It is because of my forced marriage that I can't marry a better man. I did not remarry after the divorce because I was afraid my next

husband would harm me again and might not be good to my children. I know that if I were to marry again, I would be able to choose for myself and that my mother could prepare my wedding. I am upset because I did not have a ceremony like nowadays, but I am more upset that my husband turned out to be so cruel. In my case, I can't be angry with my mother because she is not the one who arranged the match.<sup>43</sup> I am angry with Pol Pot<sup>44</sup>, and I think the forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge constitute a very bad crime.

I know that some women were able to meet a good man out of their forced marriage during the regime, and that is their good luck. I would have been grateful to the regime if it had chosen a good man for me. But because of my forced marriage, my life changed forever. I think I would be living a more harmonious and happy life, just like other families that have no problems. The man is the cause of problems at home. We are the women—our happiness depends upon the man.

43

In both Khmer and Cham traditions, marriages are customarily arranged for children by parents, with mothers often taking the lead in matchmaking.

44

See glossary under "Pol Pot."

***Do you think there is a difference between the marriages of the Khmer Rouge time and traditionally arranged marriages?***

Yes, very different, because during the Khmer Rouge time we could not choose, and we were under pressure to accept for our survival. In a traditional marriage, our parents arrange it for us, but even the children must agree. If the marriage goes wrong, the community will still support us, because the marriage is also about luck, and there is good luck and bad luck. Like my daughter, she is now 25 and divorced, and she and my grandson now simply live with me.

## GLOSSARY

<i>Achha</i>	Religious layperson who, for traditional Khmer weddings, determines the auspicious date for the wedding and officiates the ceremony
<i>Ambok</i>	Traditional Khmer dessert
<i>Angkar</i>	Literally, “the Organization”, referring to the highest decision-making body of the Khmer Rouge regime
April 17 people	See “new people” below
Base people	Those who lived in the countryside or in areas controlled by the Khmer Rouge before the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Also called “old people,” they were afforded full-citizenship rights under the Khmer Rouge regime; see also “new people” below
<i>Bong</i>	Literally, “older sibling.” Used as form of polite address to a person who is older or of higher status than the speaker; see also <i>ming</i> and <i>pou</i> below
<i>Bong khom oy reap ka</i>	Forced marriage; forced to marry
<i>Chhlob</i>	Local militia who also served as Khmer Rouge spies in cooperatives
ECCC	Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, a UN-Cambodia hybrid tribunal mandated to bring to justice senior leaders and those most responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide allegedly committed during the Khmer Rouge regime
<i>Houb sla</i>	Areca palm fruit eaten as part of a traditional wedding ceremony
<i>Karma</i>	Buddhist belief that actions from a past life determine one’s status in the present life

<i>Kben</i>	Traditional Khmer wedding outfit (for women)
<i>Khmang</i>	Literally, “enemy,” referring to those who did not follow <i>Angkar’s</i> principles; also used to refer to those who associated with or were family members of those determined to be <i>khmang</i>
Khmer Rouge	The name given by Prince Norodom Sihanouk to the Democratic Kampuchea, the government under the leadership of Pol Pot (see below) that controlled Cambodian territory from April 17, 1975 until January 7, 1979
<i>Krama</i>	Traditional Khmer scarf
<i>Kat khan sla</i>	Traditional Khmer wedding ritual
Lon Nol	President of the U.S.-backed Khmer Republic from 1970 to 1975, when it was overthrown by the Khmer Rouge
<i>Me ba</i>	Go-between for the groom and bride during marriage arrangements
<i>Ming, Pou</i>	Literally, “aunt/uncle;” used as a form of polite address to a person who is older or of higher status than the speaker
<i>Mith, mith bong</i>	Comrade; <i>mith bong</i> refers to a comrade who is older or of higher rank or status than the speaker; see also <i>bong</i> above
New people	Those forced to evacuate from urban centers into the countryside after the Khmer Rouge regime takeover on April 17, 1975. Also called “April 17 people” and often under suspicion for “imperialist” tendencies, they were not afforded the same rights as base people (see above)
Old people	See “base people” above
<i>Pdach nha</i>	Commitment; to commit; also used to describe forced marriage during Khmer Rouge time

<i>Pka sla</i>	Flower presented to parents by their child during a traditional wedding ritual
Pol Pot	Born Saloth Sar, Pol Pot led the Khmer Rouge regime from 1963 until 1997, and orchestrated the Cambodian genocide between 1975 and 1979; survivors often call the period “Pol Pot time”
<i>Pou</i>	See “ <i>ming</i> ” above
Re-education	Term used by the Khmer Rouge to indicate indoctrination to the rules of <i>Angkar</i> , often involving some form of verbal reprimand or physical punishment
<i>Sompot</i>	Traditional Khmer skirt worn both as casual or formal dress
<i>Riep kaa</i>	Traditional wedding ceremony; may also refer to marriage in general
Widow(er)	May refer in informal Khmer speech to any person who was once married but no longer has a spouse due to death, abandonment, separation or divorce