

**Gender-Based Violence**  
**During the Khmer Rouge Regime**  
**Stories of survivors from the Democratic Kampuchea**  
**(1975-1979)**

Nakagawa Kasumi

March 2008

## **Cover Photo**

Mrs. LY Vanny, born in 1944 and she was lecturer at Faculty of Khmer Literature and her children;

1. KE Kanpiseth, Born 1966
2. KE Kannika, Born 1967
3. KE Dannine, Born 1969
4. KE Karpraneth, Born 1972

The family was last seen at the end of 1976, in Spean Tren village, Phnom Srok, Battambang province.

Mrs. LY Vanny was a first daughter of Mr. LY Kvang Pann, former minister of Justice during Khmer Republic.

If somebody knows about this family, please do not hesitate to contact:  
Ms LY Vichuta            e mail: vichutaly@hotmail.com

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*“I tried to protect myself by keeping my legs next to each other, but they forced open them. So I dared not move because I was afraid they would break my legs. I just let them do whatever they wanted to. Only one of them could put his penis inside me. The first man could not because his sexual organ was so big that he could not insert it. The first man said, “Today I couldn’t succeed, but next time I will make the vagina wider open.” Then, he let the other man have sex with me. After the rape, they said, “If you tell anybody about this story, your whole family will be killed because all of you have been classified as the Angkar’s enemies already.”*

*- A woman who was 12 years old when she was raped*

## **Preface to the second edition**

It is my honor to present the second edition of Gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge regime.

This edition added more information on gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge Regime by the younger generation. As a part of Gender Studies course at Pannasastra University of Cambodia, instructed by the author, approximately 200 students interviewed total 600 people regarding gender-based violence during the regime. This edition includes some of the striking stories that were collected with a permission of students who carried out the interviews.

The following students contributed their interview stories to this book.

The Khmer Rouge regime is a past but those stories told in this book are first revealed by breaking 30 years of silence.

Nakagawa Kasumi  
March 2008

## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

This publication is based on findings from research into gender crimes during the Khmer Rouge regime. The first research was conducted in 2006 by the Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP), a human rights NGO based in Phnom Penh. Initial interviews were carried out first by targeting 1,500 people who had been over 10 years old during the Khmer Rouge regime. Then 100 people were selected for the purpose of documenting their personal stories about gender crimes of the time. The author played a role both as research project manager and also in conducting field interviews, with both victims and witnesses.

Invaluable support was given by Ms. Niwa Masayo and Dr. Nakahara Michiko, of the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center, who encouraged the author to initiate the research and supported Japanese publication in 2006. Without them, this work could not have been realized. Special thanks go to Ms. Nakamura Rie, of the Open Society Institute (OSI) , who supported the author in applying for funding support.

Thanks also go to the author's former colleagues, Mr. Sok Sam Oeun, Executive Director of CDP, Ms. Bridgette Toy-Cronin, and sentinels of the network on the Prevention of Domestic Violence, of the Women's Resource Center at CDP, all of whom joined the author to carry out the research.

The author would like also to express special gratitude to Ms. Ly Vichuta, Executive Director of Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW) and best friend, who provided technical support and continuous encouragement throughout this research. Her personal story of her life during the Khmer Rouge regime was always a driving force behind this research.

The author hopes that the information provided in this publication can contribute to future generations in Cambodia, to help them know more about their own history and also to contribute to bringing justice at the Extraordinary Chamber in the Courts of Cambodia.

Nakagawa Kasumi  
July 2007.



*“During that night, I saw something that was very horrible. I saw a Khmer Rouge soldier brought a lady to tie against a palm tree without her shirt, she only had trousers on. They burned some metal until it was hot and they put it on her breasts. They pulled out her toenails and fingernails but I didn’t see anything anymore because I was very afraid and I escaped from that place.”*

*- A woman who was 12 years old traveling alone in the night seeking for her mother*





## 1. Introduction

The Khmer Rouge (KR) regime, officially known as the Democratic Kampuchea, seized power in April 1975 and governed Cambodia for the next three years and eight months.<sup>1</sup> The whole country was transformed into a living hell for people starved to death and suffered from forced labor and torture. At the time when the total population of Cambodia was estimated to 8 million, more than 1.5 million perished because of this extreme policy of the KR regime. People's rights and freedoms were completely ignored under the numerous revolutionary slogans. Every Khmer citizen who experienced the regime can immediately recall any unforgettable episode in which s/he is a victim of the KR regime:

*"(My mother) asked me how many men had raped me, and I told her that two men had raped me and she said, "Oh, god! You are so young ... But we have to be patient for the sake of our lives, so we have to surrender to what happened to us, we have to survive ..."*

*-A woman who was raped by Khmer Rouge militia in 1975 when she was 12 years old.*

The common belief among the Cambodian people in respect with gender crimes during the KR regime is that all the victims of gender based violence, particularly rape, were already killed after the crimes.<sup>2</sup> "You can not find any victims" was a common answer when the author conducted the feasibility study prior to this

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<sup>1</sup>Regarding the Khmer Rouge regime, see; Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why did they kill?*(2005); Craig Etcheson *After The Killing Fields*; Edited by Jaya Ramji and Beth Van Schaack(2005), *Lessons From The Cambodian Genocide*(2005); *Bringing the Khmer Rouge to Justice*; *Prosecuting Mass Violence Before The Cambodian Courts*(2005); Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away With Genocide?*; *Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal* (2004); Philip Short, *Pol Pot, The History of a Nightmare*(2004), Suzannah Linton, *Reconciliation in Cambodia*(2004); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime; Race, Power and Genocide* (2002); Stephen Heder and Brian D. Tittemore, *Seven Candidates for Prosecution; Accountability for the Crimes of the Khmer Rouge*(2001); David Chandler, *Brother Number One; A political Biography* (1999); Stephan J. Morris, *Why Vietnam invaded Cambodia; Political Culture and the Causes of War* ( 1999). Elizabeth Becker, *When the War was over; Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (1986); Francois Ponchaud, *Cambodia Year Zero*; Kimmo Kiljumen, *Kampuchea; decade of The Genocide*(1984); Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1974-1982* (1984)

<sup>2</sup> One of the exception is the documentary film shot by Documentation Center for Cambodia, titled "Survivor"(2004) . This film is a narrative story of Thang Kim, a victim of rape. However, in the end of the film she decided to choose to live as a nun, demonstrating how difficult it is for a woman to speak out about the sexual violence that they suffered.

research into gender crimes.<sup>3</sup> This myth has been reinforced by the Cambodian culture that the victims of sexual violence are pressured to remain silent for fear of discrimination from the society.<sup>4</sup>

Further, the Cambodian proverb “*men are god while women are white cloth*”, indicates their general perception that women who lose their virginity has no value or women who are sexually abused are given least value by the Cambodian society. In addition, women are encouraged to keep silent to such sexual violence in order to maintain family reputation because once outsiders know that a daughter is raped or sexually abused, her whole family would be targeted for a criticism and discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Finally, during the KR regime, family members of the victims of these violent crimes kept silent for fear of reprisal by the perpetrator. These factors combined have contributed to these untold stories

This research into the sexual violence challenged two perceptions: 1) that victims are killed and 2) that the culture of Cambodia prevents victims from speaking about crimes. It attempts to show the historical evidence of the gender crimes- and indeed quite a number of eyewitness and victims broke thirty year of silence for the first time.

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<sup>3</sup> Ms. Oeung Chanthol, Former Executive Director of Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center(CWCC), Ms.Ly Vichuta, Executive Director of Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW), and Mr. Sok Sam Oeun, Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP), all denied the author’s assumption that there is a survivor who can take interview for the research. However, all encouraged me to carry out research when asked about their opinion towards the author’s idea. It turned out in the end that there were quite a number of victims of sexual violence though.

<sup>4</sup> For discrimination against victims of sexual violence, see, Nakagawa Kasumi, *More than white Cloth? Women’s Rights in Cambodia* (2006)

<sup>5</sup> For detailed of discrimination, see ADHOC, *Rape, Attitudes and Solutions in Cambodia* (2004)

## 2. Khmer Rouge Regime: Background

Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953 and the Sankum Reak Niyum period began under the leadership of King Norodom Sihanouk. While the country enjoyed a semblance of development, it could not escape from being affected by the Viet Nam War. The war imposed a profound impact on the internal politics of Cambodia; the north eastern part of Cambodian territory was reported to be bombed heavily by the American military which created social instability in Cambodia. In 1970, General Lon Nol made a revolutionary coup to overthrow the leadership of King Norodom Sihanouk. Cambodia then entered into a civil war. On 17 April 1975, the Communist party headed by Pol Pot, seized the capital and brought widespread destruction to the country over its reign of three years and eight months. The KR regime forced all the people living in the cities to the countryside and to labor camps under the communist slogans. People living in the cities before 17 April were all called “new people” after their eviction to the countryside while farmers who had lived in rural areas were called “base people”. The “new people” were more likely subjected to hardship because they were labeled as “counter-revolutionary people” who had higher education and enjoyed capitalism in the cities.

During the KR regime, the *Angkar* governed all the aspects of the daily lives of all the people. The *Angkar* is literally translated as “Organization”, which in reality no one clearly knows what it was. “*Angkar Lue*” (Literally translated, “upper organization”) was a central government which gave numerous instructions to the lower level *Angkar*, down to the district level, and finally to the local level. Making any objection to the decision of the *Angkar* could result in the death, thus people were scared and feared to make any expression.

*The Angkar is master of the waters, master of the earth*

*-Official slogan for the masses*

The *Angkar* instructed its people to contribute to the achievement of the revolution by hard work; In reality, it was an endless forced labor that resulted in the deaths of the people. Although the *Angkar* fed the people, starvation was common; the amount of meals given was too small causing the people to starve to death. Furthermore, there was no medical service available, and many died because of the lack of medication or medical treatment. People had no right to own any property not even a piece of banana.

One of the policies of the *Angkar* was to destroy traditional Cambodian family structure.<sup>6</sup> For centuries, Cambodian people had established the close ties among family members with extended members and their livelihood was agriculture based. There was mutual trust between family members, and the community was strongly unified. The KR regime tried to destroy that traditional structure for the rapid achievement of the revolution. People were instructed by the *Angkar* to follow the revolutionary slogans, and each family member was separated from each other to contribute to the revolutionary cause. Children were separated from their parents to work in mobile groups or as child soldiers. The *Angkar* educated child soldiers to spy what their parents were saying against the *Angkar* to dissolve the tie between children and parents.

Another policy was the prohibition of “moral offence”. The crime of “moral offence” included the relationship between men and women without the benefit of marriage. The punishment, such as imprisonment, forced labor death, depended on the degree of the relationship such as showing love towards the opposite sex. Also, a pregnancy without a marriage was a moral offence and regardless of the reason why a woman got pregnant, both man and woman were punished. Even a victim of raped was punished for committing a “moral offence”. As long as the relationship was not acknowledged by the *Angkar*, the perpetrators and victims were punished.

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed information and family during the KR regime, see Kalyanee Mam, *The endurance of the Cambodian family under the Khmer Rouge Regime: An Oral history*, <http://research.yale.edu/ycias/database/files/GS22.pdf>

### 3. Forced Marriage and Marital rape

*“I said that I did not love him, so I don’t want to marry with him. And the Angkar said that if you don’t want to marry with him, “I will put you far away and put serious working condition on you.” And then, I saw somebody else they were taking away by the horse, like the horse was tracking them, so I was afraid of that. That’s why I agreed to marry with my husband”*

*-A female respondent*

#### ***Forced marriage***

*“My second husband was a new person. At the first day after the wedding, he beat me because I did not love him and refused to have sex ... he hit me on the thighs with his hands so I couldn’t struggle and it made it easier for him to have sex with me.”*

*- A female respondent*

No marriage was carried out without an instruction by the *Angkar*.<sup>7</sup> A slogan of the *Angkar* said, “*Angkar* endorses (your partner). If you do not obey *Angkar*’s discipline, you will be sent to a study session for a time”.<sup>8</sup> Marriage was not an individual matter, but was regarded as an important ceremony to make an oath to the *Angkar*. Therefore, it was strictly controlled by the *Angkar* at the village level. Objection to an order to marriage given by the *Angkar* might have resulted in torture or death; thus, most of respondents agreed to get married. Marriage was conducted not for the happiness of an individual, but for the achievement of the revolution; therefore the private sphere for newlyweds was completely ignored.

A man who was ordered to get married but refused explained;

*“I spoke to Angkar because I did not agree with this (the marriage), then Angkar took me to prison”*

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed examination of how forced marriages during DK operated see Kalyanee Mam, *Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979): Women as Instruments for Social Change*, and <http://www.hri.ca/partners/vawwvnet/camp2.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Henri Locard, Pol Pot’s Little Red Book; The saying of Angkar(2004)

*- A former Khmer Rouge soldier*

The process of a marriage during the KR regime was completely different from the Cambodian traditional way where a groom asks the approval of the parents of the bride, followed by the approval from the parents of the bride. Traditional marriage ceremony lasts three days, including numerous numbers of ceremonies and all the relatives and villagers participate in those ceremonies to celebrate newlyweds. On the contrary to such a tradition, during KR regime, the *Angkar*, through the village chief of the senior female leaders, orders an individual that “you are getting married”. An order to a marriage might be delivered to an individual day in advance or could be given on the morning of the wedding ceremony.

Marriage ceremonies were carried out by the *Angkar*, and only couples who were getting married were allowed to participate. A female respondent to the research explained about her mother’s disappointment that she was not able to join a marriage ceremony of her daughter. Even in current Cambodian society, a marriage ceremony including numerous ceremonies is of crucial importance.

The number of couples for one marriage varies from five to approximately 100, and these differences were observed from a region to another. A place for a marriage ceremony also varied from a temple to a rice field. There was no uniform order from a central government as to those matters. As long as all the marriages were carried out by following the orders of the *Angkar*, it was acceptable.

### ***Punishment for refusal to marriage***

*“My husband was a French soldier. They hanged my husband. Five months later they told me I had to marry but I refused. They took me to the forest and raped me. After they raped me I said to them, ‘kill me’ ... I said, ‘six of my children have already died so please dig a hole and bury me together with my four remaining children’ but I won’t agree to marry ... Now I am almost mad.”*

*- A woman whose husband was dead and ordered to get married.*

People were not allowed to make any objection to the decision of the *Angkar* and a marriage order was no exception. Refusal to marry could have resulted in torture, imprisonment or death.

A female respondent who refused a marriage order described how she was tortured to change her mind. She was forced to watch a torture of other women who refused to get married:

*“All the ladies were naked. They had no clothes on, and the three soldiers were also naked. Those ladies cried, and the soldiers stuffed traditional scarves into their mouths. They laid those women on beds, and they tied their arms and shackled their legs to the beds ... They asked me, “do you want to imitate these women? They have already been raped” ... I was so shocked that I decided to marry my husband.”*

*-A woman who was forced to watch rape of other women*

*“I saw the rape with my own eyes when I hid in a shrub nearby. I went to see the event because I felt much pity for my niece. The Khmer Rouge soldiers did not see me because they were busy with the rape. I felt so frightened with the happening that I ran back home. While I was running, I heard her call, “Aunt! Help me please!” Then, the soldiers asked, “Who is your aunt? Call her to come here now! I will kill all of you!”*

*-A woman whose niece was raped after she refused to marry*

### ***Woman as award for KR soldier***

Forced marriage was completely controlled by the *Angkar* at a local level; However, several cases were reported that the KR soldiers/officials were given privileges to choose a wife as a award for their contribution to the revolution.

A man who was a child soldier during the KR regime explained the privileges that KR soldiers could enjoy in choosing a spouse for a marriage;

*“One good thing about the Khmer Rouge was that if you wanted to marry someone you could suggest it to the Angkar but raping was absolutely prohibited ... You can marry anyone you love but you have to ask her and then suggest to the Angkar. If she did not agree then the Angkar would force her.”*

*- A former child soldier*

Reportedly, there were quite a number of KR soldiers who became handicapped during their tour of duty. The *Angkar* provided a special award to those soldiers: to select a woman whom they prefer to get married with;

*“My husband was a disabled person, he had a missing leg. They asked him to build a dam and he stepped on a landmine ... Angkar gave him the right to choose a wife and he suggested to the Angkar that he'd like to*

*marry me. He lost a leg during the Pol Pot time so he had the right to choose.”*

*-A female respondent*

### ***Forced sex within marriage***

*“I was very afraid and it was very difficult because we didn’t know each other. The next morning my husband said he was worried Angkar would take me away because I had refused to sleep with him ... I was worried but I also felt sorry for my husband because he was very gentle so in the end I agreed ... I slept with him on the third night”.*

*- A woman whose house was surrounded by KR soldiers at the marriage night*

After the marriage ceremony was carried out, the newly married couple was ordered to enter into a small hut and to spend the night together. According to the interviews with those who were forced to get married during the KR regime, newlyweds often spent two to three days together and then left the small hut to work in different locations.

A woman who was forced to marry but refused to have sex with her husband described how she was “persuaded” by her husband to sleep with him.

*“If I knew in advance about the marriage I would have run away but I did not know at all. The man who I married was a Khmer Rouge soldier. The top leaders forced me to marry him since he loved me and asked the top leaders to make me marry him. I was a new person living in that place, so I needed to follow them. I cried bitterly during the marriage ceremony, but the female prothean kang (unit leader) pinched me and asked me to stop crying; otherwise, the Angkar would see the crying and would kill me. She said, “Don’t cry! Don’t let them see you crying; otherwise they would kill you.” But for the first three nights, I did not agree to have sex with him. During these nights, the Khmer Rouge soldiers came near our house and observed us. Then, the Angkar asked my husband to get education, and they warned him that if we still didn’t have sex, they would kill us. When he got back home, he told me about that and persuaded me to have sex with him. Therefore, we decided to have sexual intercourse because we were afraid of being killed. If I hadn’t agreed to have sex with him, I would have been killed.”*

*- A new person who was ordered to get married with KR soldier*



Not only was the marriage decided by the *Angkar* sexual intercourse during marriage was also a process to accomplish the marriage. The KR soldiers came around the house of newlyweds to observe if a couple was having a sexual intercourse. If a couple fails to follow the order, they could be sent to an education camp, be tortured or be sexually abused.

The monitoring of the KR soldiers during the night was reported as follows;

*“The chhlop(militia) came to see whether we had sex or not if not they would take us to be educated. We were both willing to have sex because we were afraid of Angkar.”*

- *A woman who refused to marry twice but eventually agreed*

*“After the ceremony the soldiers came to observe us, ensuring that we loved each other and had sex, if not they would kill us. I saw them through some holes of the wall of my house. When we saw them, though we’d already had sex, we still felt afraid of them. My husband asked me first whether I loved him or not. I said, love or not, I had to follow Angkar or we would be killed. He thought this too. So we kept living with each other. The first night we did not have sex because I was very frightened and ashamed but we had sex the third night. We did not show that we failed to have sex the first night.”*

- *A woman who got married during the KR regime*

Despite a request by the husband, there were women who dared to refuse to have sex with them. The result of such a refusal was in most cases torture or rape.

A woman who was forced by the KR soldiers to agree to have sex with her husband described:

*“When I refused to have sex with him after the marriage, he reported it to the cadres, then they came to catch me and then in the house they forced me to take off my clothes in order that the man (the husband) can rape me. They said if I do not agree they will kill me. If I agree to have sex with him they will leave. So I had to agree because I had no choice.”*

- *A woman who was forced to have sex with her husband*

Having sex within the marriage was torture to most women because they were forced to sleep with someone whom they had never known before. However, there

were reports of men who also suffered because they were at a loss on how to deal with an obedient woman who is too afraid and too shy to speak about sex.

A male respondent explained how puzzled he was at a marriage night.

*“My wife and I did not have sex the first night because Khmer ladies are shy and I was afraid of making her angry, because then she might tell Angkar and I would be killed.”*

*-A man who was forced into marriage during KR regime*

## 5. Rape

*“I saw Khmer Rouge soldiers take a fat lady from a hospital to a forest. When I was transplanting rice seedlings, I heard a scream of the lady from the forest. So I, together with other four women, secretly and silently went to see what happened. We saw one soldier grasped her arms, another one grasped her legs, and the other one take off her clothes. Then, they raped her. And after the rape, they cut open her stomach, took out her gallbladder, threw her body into a charcoal kiln, and burnt the dead body. I was terrified, and we silently swam back from the scene without making any noise, feeling afraid that they might see and kill us because we know their deed.”*

*-A woman who witnessed the rape in 1978*

Despite the central government order to strictly punish the perpetrator of rape, it is reported that rape and other sexual violence frequently occurred during the KR regime. However, the actual number of victims of sexual violence would not be revealed due to the death of majority of victims.

*“The lower soldier would be killed by the higher ranking one if they found that the lower committed a rape and before they killed those men they put the sign on the body of those men that means “I committed immorality” and they had to dig a grave for themselves.”*

*- A man imprisoned during KR*

The instruction by the central government did not contribute to end sexual violence. On the contrary, the perpetrators repeated the crimes with impunity because the victims would not dare to report those crimes, perpetrating the cycle of violence.

### ***Rape before killing***

Many interviewees reported that they acknowledged rape during the KR regime and stated that “most victims were killed after rape”. However, this research was able to document some stories of rape from victims.

Rape before killing often happened when KR soldiers took a number of women to the field or to the forest. They raped women and killed them. Reportedly, gang rape before mass killing often happened, as the next story by a fisherman illustrated;

*“A woman called Vichara, who was accused of being an enemy agent, was raped before being killed. Soldiers asked me to send her by boat to them and I was on the boat about 10 meters away from where she was raped and killed by five low-level soldiers. They raped only beautiful women sent there. The place, where those women were raped, was in forest far away from the cooperative. The top leaders did not know the low soldiers raped women. If the high-ranking officials found the small soldiers raped women, those (small soldiers) would be killed.”*

- *A fisherman in Tonle Sap*

### ***Rape in prisons and in reeducation centers***

Prisons and reeducation centers were established all over Cambodia during the KR regime for the purpose of punishing non-revolutionary citizens. Many of the respondents who experienced imprisonment described their suffering in those places. Those who were found to be lazy, those who stole a piece of fruits/vegetables, those who complained about forced labor; all were sent to a prison or reeducation camp. The S-21(Toul Slen prison), a former high school which was transformed into a prison for torturing counter-revolutionary citizens during KR regime, was also well known as a place where many women were sexually abused and tortured.<sup>9</sup>

A woman who was raped at reeducation center (*monty korsang*) explained her story;

*“Before I entered the room, I had to think whether I should enter the room or not. This is the reeducation camp (monty korsang), and I was frightened because only he and I were in the room, you know, because he had planned everything. That’s why when he says something like he wants to rape me, I really want to get out, but I could not. At that time, I begged, I cried, I screamed just let him know that I not agree to have a sex with him because it was very cruel, but he rejected all I said to him. He put it [the gun] on the table, just let me know [it was there]. And then, he slapped me, and then we fought and I screamed very loudly just to let the other prisoners nearby know what he was doing to me. Men’s hands have a lot of energy. If they are holding your shoulders, you cannot move. Inside the room, there was one bed. You know, the rape was not on the bed; he just pushed me everywhere in the room and then raped me. He also hit me. I felt suffering on my whole body.”*

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<sup>9</sup> David Chandler, *Voices from S-21; Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prisons* (1999).

*-A female rape victim*

Some respondents explained that they were forced to watch rape while they were imprisoned.

*“The Khmer Rouge asked the prisoners to see because we were all going to die. They would say “look I’m going to rape this lady”. They took the lady behind the tree in the jungle and lay her down. There would be three Khmer Rouge soldiers, two holding her down and one on top of her. I can see this nearly everyday. They didn’t rape the men, just the ladies that they loved.”*

*- A man who was forced to see the rape*

### ***Rape by Khmer Rouge officials***

Reportedly, there were many women who were raped repeatedly; thus they were not murdered after being raped. In particular, young women who were “new people” were targeted for repeated rape. KR high ranking officers who hold a huge power in local governance were reported to abuse their power and raped young women whom they liked.

A man who repeatedly saw rape explained:

*“I saw it (rape) everywhere on the Angkar pheab (Khmer Rouge base) but I did not dare say anything because I was a small soldier. I had to keep away from that. When any soldier needed a woman to rape he told the woman to come to a meeting. But in fact the soldier just spoke a few words, then he raped the woman. I saw that because I watched secretly when I patrolled the base. Angkar trusted me so they let me patrol the base. If we said anything about what they did, they will kill or imprison us. They called many women to rape but at different times, one by one. If women who Khmer Rouge raped did not report this to others, they would not be killed.”*

*- A soldier during the KR regime*

Powerful soldiers had nothing to worry about their crimes- no victim dared to complain about the crime for fear of punishment. Impunity assisted powerful people

to repeat the crime. A woman who was raped in front of her small child reported how she was raped;

*“My husband was killed and I asked to have two days off because my child was sick. Then a day after they saw me at home they said that I should go to work otherwise I would be killed like my husband. I said that I would like to have another day off. At night [the] Kang Roy came to my house. ... The Kang Roy came in and said, “Do you have enough food to eat during your holiday?” I said I had enough but in fact I did not. Then he talked to me, “you are beautiful. If you love me I will not kill you”. I said I do not love you because I don't know where my husband is. I would rather die. At that time he said something to my small child [a four year old]. He said to my child “please go downstairs I will give some potatoes”. My child went downstairs and then he grabbed me and raped me, even though I struggled. He took his scarf to put it in my mouth. Then my child came and said “please do not hurt my mother. Please let go of my mother”. Then he pushed my child downstairs but he [my child] still came back. So the man beat him with his rifle until he was unconscious. I said to him “if you torture my child like this please kill me I don't want to live. You are very bad. You kill my husband now you torture my child”. Then he took my child away I never see him (my child) since then. Three days after he took my child away, the Vietnamese came. He said if I talk about this he would kill all of my relatives.”*

*-A female victim of rape*

There were reportedly a number of unwanted pregnancies as a result of such rape. Even though they were victims of sexual violence, they were subjected to punishment for having sex without a marriage thus possibly killed by the rapist or the KR leader to destroy the evidence. Women who were raped had to worry that she should not be pregnant; otherwise the consequence of pregnancy without marriage was death.

Pregnancy as a result of rape meant death because perpetrators needed to bury the evidence of rape. One respondent said that “they did not keep the girls until delivery (of the babies). No one who was raped delivered a baby.” In case a woman was found to be pregnant without the benefit of marriage, she had to be killed by either rapist to omit the evidence or by the *Angkar* for punishment.

A midwife during a KR regime who was asked to carry out an abortion for a young woman who got pregnant after a rape explained her sufferings;

*“ A village chief had raped a beautiful girl and she came to my house and cried in front of me and I asked her why do you cry, are you sick? She said no I’m not sick but I was raped by the village chief. I examined her and I knew that she was pregnant so I asked her to take some Khmer traditional medicine. There was only pepper and chheo pleong (a type of wood, traditional medicine) in order to cause her to miscarry but it didn’t work.”*

- A former midwife

She is still suffering from this incident because she thinks that the girl had died because of her failure to abort the pregnancy. She felt this way because the girl was never seen again after the Angkar knew that the girl was pregnant without the benefit of marriage.

### ***Rape among KR soldiers***

Rape was not limited to the ordinary people; female KR soldiers were also subjected to rape.

A female KR soldier, who was repeatedly raped by a powerful man described her story:

*“In 1973, I had lived in X District for three months before I heard that a protean srok (district chief) had raped 70 girls. His name was S. I had been a Pol Pot soldier and part of revolution since 1973, and I was sent to work in X District of Siem Reap Province for three months in that year .He took every woman who wanted to be promoted as kamaphebal (higher level cadre) into his room. He took each woman to the room and asked them to undress their clothes. Then, they were forced to have sex with him in return for promotion. He continually did this to 70 women in total. No one dared to let the cat out of the bag until a woman told everyone after she refused to have sex with him. The women were low-ranking members of the Angkar.”*

-A former KR soldier

### ***Rape against males***

Some respondents mentioned about rape against men, particularly gang rape by female KR soldiers, but none of the male respondents were either a victim or eyewitness of such a rape. However, a female respondent knew a 17 year old boy who was forced to have sex with a 45 year old female KR official.

*“The boy told me he was very afraid of this and asked for help but I could not help. The boy told me the woman always asked him to have sex in forest. Shortly after the militiamen knew that the boy and the woman love each other the woman used a water tank to cover him and put a big stone on it in order to hide the boy. He cried so much because it was hot and difficult to breathe. When I walked pass the tank he knocked the tank to show that he was inside. So I took him out. Later the story could not be hidden. So the boy was put in prison and tortured. The woman brought rice for him to the prison every day. Angkar accused the boy of loving the woman but she said to Angkar the boy did not love me; please take me to the prison. But she was not put in prison. Since then I did not know more about this. Then the Vietnamese came.”*

*- A woman who knew a male victim of rape*

One male respondent, who was a KR soldier, mentioned about rape against males at a military base established near the Phnom Penh international airport. He described that he “knew” several young male soldiers who were gang raped nearby and found naked and dead on the street, however, none of those stories were witnessed by him.

### ***Sex for survival***

During KR regime, the *Angkar* distributed food to the people but only a little portion of porridge was given to each person. Almost all the people had to suffer from continuous hunger all the time. Almost all the interviewees described how hungry they were during the KR regime. Many people died because of starvation. Young women who suffered from starvation and had no other choice for survival were reported that they had sex with KR officials to get food.

A female respondent said, “Some women, because they needed more food to survive, agreed to have sex with them. They gave them (women) nice clothes but soon after that those women were killed. If they did not have sex with Pol Pot (officials), they wouldn’t have anything to eat and no dresses. About a month later when they felt bored with the women they killed them”.



Furthermore, a Cambodian tradition obliges a daughter in a family to take care of aged parents. Under difficult conditions, daughters are expected to sacrifice themselves for the sake of parents. During the KR regime, medicines were scarce and when it was the only way to help a parent, the daughter might have approached the KR officials. This research did not interview any of those women offered their sex for survival, however, a man who was working as a mechanic and were close to KR officials reported that he “facilitated” such an approach when requested. Many respondents to the interview acknowledged that they knew or heard someone who offered their sex for survival. A woman reported,

*“ He abused many girls but some agreed to have sex with him. I was young so I was very scared. They were very hungry and they needed rice for eating so they agreed to have sex with him. I could not sell my dignity and virginity in exchange for food.”*

*- A female respondent*

## **6. Other Sexual Assaults**

Several types of sexual abuses were reported, both from victims and from eyewitnesses. During the KR regime, torture was carried out everywhere for no clear purpose and the vulnerability of women to encounter sexual abuse was high. Stories of mutilation of sexual organs were also reported, in most cases before killing. Forced nudity was also reported by a *Cham* (Muslim) woman.

### ***Sexual assaults against women***

A female respondent explained how she was forced to watch photographs of a Cambodian actress, Som Van Sodany, who was popular in 1960's. In the pictures the actress had been obviously tortured. She said,

*“It was a close up picture taken from the front. They tied her up, cut and scratched her flesh little by little, almost her full body and then they penetrated her vagina with a piece of bamboo.”*

*-A female respondent*

Asked her opinion why she was forced to see such photographs, she answered that the KR officials were trying to identify “enemies”; those who could recognize a popular actress were the city people, or capitalists, therefore deserved to be punished.

### ***Mutilation***

Other interviewees reported seeing dead bodies that showed signs of sexual mutilation, for example, a naked woman with wood protruding from her vagina, a militia holding down a naked woman and then cut off her breasts, and a group of militia slicing the buttocks of a man and woman who were kneeling naked and shackled in the forest.

### ***Forced nudity***

A widowed *Cham* woman during the KR regime reported that she was forced to take off her clothes with other two women:

*“There were two Khmer Rouge and one of them was a commune chief. He came frequently to chat after working hours at my house which three widow women lived in, including me. Some days, they said to us “you have white skin I want to see it. Can you take off your clothes?” First we said no but later we were afraid of being killed because they had rifles, so the two of us were forced to take off our clothes but we asked them to turn their backs. Then we took our clothes off and sat down. Another woman was not beautiful and she was thin, so she was not forced to do it. At that time we cried so much and were terribly afraid about whether they would rape, torture or kill us. They said to us “do not to cry, no one kill you. We love you”. They walked around us many times and touched our cheeks while saying “your skin is very beautiful”. But fortunately someone came in, so we asked them if we could put our clothes on.”*

*-A Cham woman*

During an interview, she was still scared to speak about this story for fear that the KR soldiers may come to arrest her. She tried to speak with low voice so that no one could catch what was spoken.

## **7. Research by PUC students**

Students of the Gender Studies course at PUC from September 2007 till January 2008 were assigned to conduct research on gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge Regime as a part of course works. This chapter introduces some of the striking stories that they collected through their interviews.

### 7.1. Constraints

Almost all students struggled to find someone that they can interview about gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge regime. Lack of a clear understanding amongst the older generation about the term “gender-based violence”, students had to explicitly mention the term “sexual violence” in order to get accurate information. This made many students feel uncomfortable or some of them were even criticized and educated by the older people.

### 7.2. Stories

### 7.3. Hopes from the students

## 8. Conclusion

*“I am happy that you ask about this. I will tell you all. It makes me feel better.”*

*- A victim of rape*

The actual number of victims of sexual violence during the KR regime will never be revealed. Hardly any discussion has been made on the issue among the Cambodian public because it is a social taboo to talk openly about sex.

This research could document some stories of those who dared to break 30 years of silence. Most of the victims were willing to talk about their past sufferings despite the fact that none of them was willing to state their names for fear of discrimination or reprisal from the perpetrator. Most probably, none of the victims of sexual violence would be willing to provide testimonies at the Extraordinary Chamber of the Courts of Cambodia (“the ECCC”).

There were several reasons why those sexual crimes happened despite the strict policy of the central government to prohibit it. A prime reason is impunity. A perpetrator did not have to worry about the punishment because they could destroy the evidence by killing victims. Furthermore, no victims or witnesses dared to make a complaint of sexual violence for fear of reprisal, and in most cases death. This impunity allowed a cycle of violence.

People’s expectation to the ECCC in bringing justice to them is highly observed. For justice to the victims of sexual violence, the author hopes that the ECCC would collect enough evidence for the prosecution of those senior leaders and most responsible leaders in respect to sexual violence.



## **Profile of the author**

Nakagawa Kasumi

Grow up in Kobe, Japan

M.A in International Public Policy, Osaka University, Japan

Since 1997, based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and worked for empowerment of women. Her current focus is women in marginalized status in Cambodian society; sex workers, beer promoters, and gay/lesbians.

2003- Lecturer on Gender Studies, Pannasastra University of Cambodia

Publications in English;

Street sex workers in Phnom Penh (2005)

More than White Cloth? -Women's Rights in Cambodia- (2006)

Gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge Regime (2007)

Contact;

Kasumi611@online.com.kh