



Women Speak Out Over Khmer Rouge Sexual Violence
Michelle Fitzpatrick
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For three decades the scars branded onto Kim Khem's arms have been a reminder of the sexual torture she saw under the Khmer Rouge. Now, aged 80, she is finally breaking her silence on the horrors of the past.

"They did bad things and if I continue to hide it, it's like hiding an enemy in my village," she told AFP of the Khmer Rouge troops who terrorised fellow female inmates at a detention centre in Cambodia in the late 1970s.

"One day, soldiers came in with a red-hot iron bar and asked for 'naughty women'," the frail elderly woman added, a psychologist sitting by her side for support.

She went on to describe a brutal sexual assault inflicted on one woman using the implement. The soldiers then used the same scalding bar on her own arms, Kim said, sobbing as she unbuttoned her white blouse to show thick, jagged scars across her weathered skin.

In a country raised on the proverb "men are like gold, women are like white cloth" -- implying that only the former can be cleaned after being stained -- many Khmer Rouge survivors have kept their sexual traumas secret.

But a growing number of women are now coming forward to shed light on a largely hidden chapter of the country's "Killing Fields" era, when up to two million people died from starvation, overwork, torture or execution.

Kim said she outlived some 600 women at a prison in southern Takeo province after her guards were apparently spooked that she had survived being clubbed into a mass grave. Last month she told her story at a public forum in Phnom Penh.

"I speak on behalf of the dead women," the slight old lady said to an audience of some 400 people.

Tearfully, she recounted how women were taken from the facility to be "played with" by soldiers, never to be seen again. She said while she did not witness those rapes "I heard the screaming".

Kim decided to speak at the two-day event after attending Cambodia's first "truth-telling forum" last December, also organised by the non-profit Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP).

"Sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge was widespread but there has been little research on it," said Duong Savorn from the CDP, which has set up a series of events to raise awareness of the issue.

Led by the late Pol Pot, the hardline Khmer Rouge dismantled modern Cambodian society, broke up families and forced the population to work in huge labour camps in a bid to create a communist utopia during its 1975-1979 reign.

Its three most senior surviving leaders are on trial at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court, but the case is expected to be the last prosecution by the tribunal and sexual crimes are absent from the list of atrocities -- with the exception of rape within forced marriages arranged by the Khmer Rouge.

While the indictments acknowledge these crimes "were committed in diverse circumstances", judges said they could not be linked to the accused because official Khmer Rouge policy was to prevent rape and punish perpetrators.

This position was not shared by the prosecution, which argued in vain that "thousands of civilians were the victims of rape and sexual violence sanctioned... or condoned by the authorities".

Duong, who turned survivors' stories on the topic into a book last year, said he believed more people would again be inspired to speak out after last month's "women's hearing", which also heard stories from other conflict areas including Nepal and Timor-Leste.

"There is no hope of the (Khmer Rouge) court dealing with gender-based violence, that's why we do this to give the victims a voice, a kind of healing to find justice outside the judicial process," he added.

Kim, who was imprisoned for daring to mourn the deaths of her mother and husband, said telling her story for the first time was painful but necessary.

"I was afraid my children would be embarrassed by my history. But as long as I kept it to myself my chest felt heavy," she told AFP.

In another testimonial at the forum, Hong Savath said that when she was just 14 she was gang-raped by three Khmer Rouge cadres until she fell unconscious and was left for dead in the jungle.

She gave birth to a boy four months after Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge.

"As an unmarried mother, I could not hide that I had been raped," Hong, now 48, told AFP. "Some people were okay, others discriminated against me."

Hong is now taking part in the legal proceedings against the former regime leaders as a civil party for the deaths of her relatives, but she expressed frustration the court will not take her own experiences into account.

She said participating in the public forum was a way of finding closure.

"If we don't say anything, we'll regret it at the end of our lives. We have to tell the world that Cambodians suffered sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge."

But not everyone agreed that sharing memories was enough if the crimes went unpunished. As the event drew to a close, an elderly Cambodian woman from the audience stood up and took the microphone.

"I can't describe all my suffering because it's too much," she began, before asking how the victims could ever find "comfort".

"The Khmer Rouge trial is going to finish soon... and the government has not yet taken sexual violence (under the regime) seriously," she said.

"We feel disappointed. We are like floating weeds in the river."