

My Struggling Life as a Widow

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Before the arrival of the Khmer Rouge in my village, I lived in harmony with my parents and my siblings. Even though we were from a farming family, we were still considered a middle class family by Khmer Rouge standards. My family did not send me to school, but I didn't mind so much because I enjoyed farm work. A few of my brothers, however, had enough formal schooling to gain employment with the official government. They were paid a decent salary. When I was 17 years old, my parents arranged for me to be married to a man from my village. We raised 6 children later on and were able to send two of the eldest children to the City (Phnom Penh) to study.

However, in 1974 Khmer Rouge soldiers entered my village and forced villagers to work very hard. I was forced to work on building the dam, digging and moving dirt as well as, carrying water by hand to irrigate the rice fields. I became seriously ill and also injured my back, which still bothers me. To this day, I cannot lift or carry anything heavy. Two of my children came directly from Phnom Penh and were forced to work more heavily than others because they were "strangers," as a Khmer Rouge soldier pointed out.

One of the most shocking things that I have ever seen was the site of four hundred people tied together in one row and forced to walk to their killing site. The Khmer Rouge considered them "traitors." When they reach the site, the prisoners were forced to dig a large grave in order to bury themselves.

The secret murder of my husband and my oldest son haunts me to this day. My son just finished lower secondary school from Phnom Penh. In the beginning, the Khmer Rouge guard unit took them to another mobile work brigade. I did not know where they were or how they were doing. I always prayed that they were alive and doing well but, day after day went by and I never heard from them nor received any news of their whereabouts. I started to lose hope realizing that my husband and my oldest must have been killed already. I felt so much pain and sadness that I couldn't even find the words to express the sorrow I was feeling. When they took my husband and son, they complained that they were newcomers from Phnom Penh. This was clearly not the case, as my husband, at that time, was only visiting my son in Phnom Penh. Since the cadres labeled them as 'newcomers,' they were forced to be 'reeducated' in another mobile group. This is how I lost my husband and son.

Since my children were separated from one another, especially far from me, I felt very nervous and worried often whether they had enough food to eat and how they were being treated or mistreated by the Khmer Rouge. I also missed them terribly because we were only allowed to see each other briefly once every two or three weeks.

Immediately after the Khmer Rouge lost control of the country, I had to start my life all over. I became a widow and felt so lonely that I decided to walk back my home village to find my children. While walking toward my village, I felt so hopeless: I had no idea where my children were. They were scattered all along different villages. Luckily, I met my kids one by one because they were looking for me as well.

My children and I had to walk a very long distance to our village. We desperately needed food and water. On the way back home, we saw many people walking back and forth asking each other for food, exchanging things for food, rice or edible things. My children and I did not have any food or even rice to cook. However, seeing one another was what we had desperately wished for four long years. It was hard for us, despite not having any food or home, to not be grateful that we survived and were finally together.

When we reached our home village, the village authorities gave us farm land. The farm land was not distributed equally. Those who had more working-age adults in their family received more land. I had mostly children in my family and thus only received a small plot of land. I worked hard farming with the help of my small children.

Now that I am at my home village, I feel better than before. However, it has been hard to raise five children by myself. I struggle with being sick frequently, but could never rest because I had to raise my children.

I will never forget the man who took my husband and my eldest son away from me. He still lives close to my house. At first, I could resist and ignore my anger towards him. Yet, I never considered him as my neighbor nor have I ever spoken to him. Later on, this man became mentally ill and would wander through our village begging for food. He never remembered what he did to our family, but I did give him food because I am a Buddhist. I kept thinking in my mind the Cambodian proverb, **“being hatred, without hatred”** which meant that, although people may experience hatred or evil, they should not become evil or hate by seeking revenge. Seeking revenge is another hatred or evil which perpetuates more evil and more hate in a never ending cycle. If we want it to disappear, we must not think of revenge or commit it.

Obviously, I experienced much evil in my life during the Khmer Rouge regime, on the other hand, I thank ICfC for helping me tell my story and work through my feelings and memories. I feel like I can now live in peace again. This is the greatest gift I can receive so I don't expect any reparations or repayment for the loss of my relatives. Just telling my story to world has been enough for me, I feel. Thank you ICfC for sponsoring this project and giving me opportunity to describe my own story.

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