

## **UC Berkeley**

### **Charlene Conrad Liebaw Library Prize for Undergraduate Research**

#### **Title**

An Examination of Forced Marriages and their Impact Under the Khmer Rouge

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wt5d3m6>

#### **Author**

Cong, Stephanie

#### **Publication Date**

2016-12-01

Undergraduate

Stephanie Cong

An Examination of Forced Marriages and their Impact Under the Khmer Rouge

SEA10A 2016

Prof. Penelope Edwards & GSI Uyen

12/16/2016

## I. Introduction

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge, also known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, seized power in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> The Khmer Rouge attempted to transform Cambodia into a classless society — they abolished basic institutions from schools to churches, and replaced these with farms, prisons, and education camps.<sup>2</sup> Civilians were forced to move from their homes to participate in agricultural work, and many died during this process.<sup>3</sup> The Khmer Rouge also removed concepts such as money and free markets, and furthermore, discouraged the display of affection, humor, or pity, even through familial relations — the party wanted full obedience and respect towards Angkar, a name the party used to refer to itself.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, the Khmer Rouge put forced marriage into practice, and also used this as a method to grow the population, their potential workforce.<sup>5</sup> Nearly a quarter of Cambodian citizens were forced into marriages under Khmer Rouge, and these marriages had many adverse effects on civilians.<sup>6</sup> Through this paper, I will show that forced marriages led to abnormal and abusive dynamics between husband and wife, forced pregnancy and rape, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and shame or the inability to remarry. These effects of forced marriages have lasted long beyond the regime of the Khmer Rouge, and these actions are now being tried as crimes against humanity.<sup>7</sup>

In order to show these adverse effects of forced marriages within the Khmer Rouge regime, the paper will be broken down into seven sections. The first section will provide background knowledge needed to understand the rest of the paper, detailing the historical context regarding the Khmer Rouge, the purpose of forced marriages, and a comparison of forced marriages with traditional Cambodian marriage rituals. This section will use information from secondary sources, such as books and journal articles that provide information on the Khmer Rouge and the normal tradition of marriage practices in Cambodia. Three photos, which show transition of the state of marriages after the Khmer Rouge will also be introduced as primary sources within this section.

---

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Heuveline and Bunnak Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia,” *National Center for Biotechnology Information* 43, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>2</sup> “Khmer Rouge History,” *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor*, Northwestern University School of Law for Center for International Human Rights and Documentation Center of Cambodia.

<sup>3</sup> “Khmer Rouge History,” *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor*.

<sup>4</sup> “Khmer Rouge History,” *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor*.

<sup>5</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>6</sup> Maria Lobato, “Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings,” *Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition*, (2016): 15.

<sup>7</sup> Leonie Kijewski, “The effect of forced marriage on couples and families,” *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor*, (2014).



Figure 1. (Wedding day before Khmer Rouge, *Stilled Lives*, Wynne Cougill et al., Documentation Center of Cambodia, 1975)



Figure 2. (Forced Marriage Ceremony, Democratic Kampuchea, Tuol Sleng Image Database, 1977)



Figure 3. (A Forced Marriage, Democratic Kampuchea, Tuol Sleng Image Database, 1977)

The next four sections will be focused on each of the four effects from the thesis: abnormal and abusive dynamics between husband and wife, forced pregnancy and rape, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and shame or the inability to remarry. Each section will lay out and explain relevant facts, background knowledge, and concepts that support the thesis through information attained from secondary sources, such as books and journal articles. Then, information from primary sources, mostly written and video interviews as well as survey statistics, will be analyzed in order to back up the information from secondary sources, and show a more direct perspective.

The last two sections before the conclusion will be a small rebuttal to my thesis, and a section on the current events regarding the Khmer Rouge forced marriages. The first section responds to the claim that there are couples who have stayed together happily after being forced to marry during the Khmer Rouge regime, and the second section is an overview of the current trials against Khmer Rouge leaders regarding forced marriages. The approach for these two subsections will be quite similar to the four subsections above, with the exception that most of the secondary sources will likely be news articles rather than journal articles or books. The rebuttal will show that though there are happy marriages that have lasted after the Khmer Rouge regime, they did not originate from an optimal place, and that the vast majority of marriages have resulted in pain and separation.

Most papers, articles, and books that cover forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge generally agree with the point of view of this paper, shedding a negative light on the concept and effects of the actions of the Khmer Rouge. However, the majority of material on this topic is either very general or very specific — the material either provides a very brief overview of forced marriages, or delves into one aspect of forced marriages. Also, most material focuses on the execution of forced marriages, but not its lasting impacts, and there is also a lack of research on the impact of forced marriages on the mental health of victims. This paper will provide a medium between these two extremes listed above, examining the topic of forced marriages during and after the Khmer Rouge regime, while also honing in on specific effects of these marriages. This paper will focus more on the impacts of forced marriages rather than their execution, and will dedicate a section to the research that has been done on the mental health of victims, looking specifically at research regarding PTSD. Also, as the trials ongoing in Cambodia against the Khmer Rouge for forced marriages are very recent, not much literature in

the area has covered those events, which I hope to cover at the end of my paper. Hopefully, this paper will allow anyone to understand what forced marriage was under the Khmer Regime, the specific ways in which these marriages affected citizens then and now, and how these marriages have led to trials for crimes against humanity against the Khmer Rouge today.

## **II. A Comparison of Traditional and Forced Marriages**

Traditionally, Cambodian marriages were mostly arranged by the parents of those who were to be wed — with a focus on the social status of the other family and the economic benefits a wedding might bring their child and their family.<sup>8</sup> Parents also paid attention to the character traits of their child’s spouse, but not as much as they factored in the social and economic benefits the partnership might bring.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, however, when the Khmer Rouge seized power, they put an end to this practice.<sup>10</sup> The party wanted to rid Cambodia of all individual ties besides those linked to politics, and did this through prohibiting all display of affection and emotion as well as halting traditional rituals of Cambodian society such as marriage ceremonies, religious ceremonies, and kinship responsibilities.<sup>11</sup>

The Khmer Rouge forced many couples to marry through instituted mass marriage ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> Usually, most pairs were created arbitrarily, and the traditional process where parents vetted their child’s spouse was not followed nor respected.<sup>13</sup> Wedding ceremonies under the Khmer Rouge were far from traditional as well. Traditional ceremonies were usually an elaborate, vivid, and joyous multi-day affair with guests dressing up in fancy attire, and filled with many lively events and lots of gift giving.<sup>14</sup> Marriage ceremonies during the Khmer Rouge, however, were carried out quickly — most couples met each other for the first time during the ceremony, held each other’s hands, pledged their loyalty to Angkar rather than their love to each other, and were pronounced husband and wife.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 shows a couple to be wed in the year that the Khmer Rouge rose to power. They are wearing ceremonial flowers, but even at this point, right before the regime took power, they are wearing dark colors, as opposed to more vivid, traditional wedding clothing, and look grim, as if they are not having a joyous ceremony.

---

<sup>8</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>9</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>10</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>11</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>12</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>13</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>14</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>15</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

As time goes on and the regime gains power, the circumstances of marriage distance themselves from the traditional Cambodian marriage norms even further. As seen in Figure 2, the mood of the room is far from joyous as it would be during a traditional ceremony, the setting is quite dismal, and the room is quite bare and dismal. In Figure 3, it can be seen that the mood is somber, that the couple in front do not look as if they have feelings of affection for each other, and it can also be seen how there are multiple people or couples within the room, all waiting to be married at the same time. Both pictures are taken in much bleaker settings than Figure 1, and those waiting to be married are wearing much simpler, more desolate clothing.

The Khmer Rouge had many purposes in terms of instituting the policy of forced marriages. First, this helped the party reach its goal of abolishing all displays of emotion and all meaningful individual ties that did not relate to the political hierarchy. They were now able to control sexuality and prevent couples from being too romantically bonded with each other.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, as couples pledged their loyalty to Angkar during their wedding ceremony, they increased the numbers of civilians loyal to the party, and also provided a surefire way for couples to reproduce and therefore grow Angkar's workforce.<sup>17</sup> Because of these benefits, the higher officials within the Khmer Rouge ordered local officers to institute the policies of forced marriages.<sup>18</sup>

### **III. Abnormal and Abusive Relationship Dynamics**

Traditionally, Cambodian marriages place women under the authority of their husbands after marriage. Married life was generally simple and balanced, couples slowly developed affection for each other, and the couple usually lived with extended family they could turn to for support at any time.<sup>19</sup> Marriages that resulted from the Khmer Rouge regime's mass forced marriage system did not usually end up following these generic dynamics — the relationships between husband and wife were almost always abnormal.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Lobato, "Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings," 12.

<sup>17</sup> Lobato, "Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings," 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Red Wedding: Women Under the Khmer Rouge*, directed by Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon (2012; Cambodia: Bophana Center, Bophana Production, and Tipasa Production, 2012), DVD.

<sup>19</sup> Keo Mony, "Cambodian Marriage," *EthnoMed*, (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Heuveline and Poch, "Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia."



In many cases, husband and wife had no feelings or affection for each other, and no regard for the well-being of the other party.<sup>21</sup> After one week or one month, many couples were separated from each other due to different work locations, and only saw each other once or twice a month.<sup>22</sup> This is very different in contrast to the loving and balanced relationship that most couples would keep in traditional Cambodian society. When IBC, whose name has been shortened to maintain anonymity, was interviewed by the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) and asked about how long he stayed with his wife after their forced marriage, and how he felt about their arrangement, he answered “We stayed 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... I felt fine and I did not miss her.”<sup>23</sup> It is evident that IBC did not have strong feelings for his wife, whose name has been shortened to SC. He was ambivalent about the fact that his wife and him did not see each other regularly, does not seem to want to see her more often, and does not mention any affection between him and his wife, or any events that might want to suggest that they want to further the emotional depth of their relationship. These sentiments are widely echoed and amplified from his wife’s perspective — when she was asked the same question she responded “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 told people that I did not go more frequently because the house was far from my workplace ... But in fact, I never missed or even thought about my husband... I did not care how far away I went from my husband.”<sup>24</sup> In SC’s case, it is not that she is ambivalent about her husband, but that she simply does not care for him in any way. She feels as if she wants to escape from the burden of seeing him the one day a month she is allowed to see her supposed “lover,” and no matter how far away she is from her husband, the thought of him is never important or meaningful enough to occur to her. In comparison to traditional Cambodian marriages, these forced marriages pushed couples to undergo abnormal relationship dynamics, as couples did not live with each other, very

---

<sup>21</sup> De Langis, Theresa, Thida Kim, Judith Strasser, and Sopheap Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Transcultural Psychosocial Organization*, (2014): 78.

<sup>22</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 78.

<sup>23</sup> Theresa De Langis, “Like Ghost Changes Body Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Transcultural Psychosocial Organization*, (2015): 38.

<sup>24</sup> De Langis, “Like Ghost Changes Body Interviews of on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 38.

rarely saw each other, and usually never had the chance develop any sense of affection for each other.

To take it a step further, forced marriages sometimes led to violent and abusive relationships as well, usually with the husband inflicting the violence or abuse upon the wife.<sup>25</sup> In a survey taken by the TPO of Khmer Rouge survivors, nearly one-fourth of those surveyed reported that they had experienced spousal abuse.<sup>26</sup> Out of those who responded that they had been a victim of spousal abuse, 35.7% reported that they experienced physical violence, 25% reported that they had experienced verbal abuse, 21.4% reported that they had experienced rape and/or sexual violence, and 14.3% reported that they had experienced verbal threats.<sup>27</sup> These figures make it very clear that abusive relationships were noticeably taking place as a part of forced marriages. Also, it should be taken in to consideration that while mostly wives were the ones to undergo this abuse, this survey was distributed to both husbands and wives, so it is likely that more than a quarter of wives underwent spousal abuse during this period.

A simple example of an abusive relationship comes from an anonymous interviewee, interviewed by the TPO. When asked to describe the abuse in her relationship, one woman replied “He always forced me to have sex with him, and if I did not want to he would slap me and after intercourse I was weak and pale.”<sup>28</sup> When the interviewee did not obey the commands of her husband, she was punished physically and then sexually assaulted — markers of an abusive relationship.<sup>29</sup> It is evident that most couples experienced separation from each other, and in many cases, had violent relationships, showing that the institution of forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge regime led to abnormal and abusive relationships.

#### **IV. Forced Pregnancy and Rape**

As mentioned before, a goal that the Khmer Rouge set in place was increasing the size of their workforce, and the way in which they sought to achieve this was through forced marriages,

---

<sup>25</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>26</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>27</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>28</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ginny Nicarchy, “Getting Free: A Handbook for Women in Abusive Relationships,” *Seal Press*, 1982.

followed by forced pregnancies.<sup>30</sup> Though couples were usually separated due to work after they were married, the party mandated that the couples consummate their marriage as quickly as possible after their wedding, and continue those sexual relations as frequently as possible in order to increase the chances of pregnancy — one visit a month for each couple was allowed for this purpose. Consequently, in a survey done by the TPO, the majority of couples who wed under forced marriages, 76.2% to be exact, were reported to have had at least one child, with 44.9% of these respondents having four or more children.<sup>31</sup> As couples pledged their loyalty to Angkar when they got married, Khmer Rouge party members commanded that couples continue show their loyalty to Angkar by consummating their marriage and producing more children for the workforce.<sup>32</sup> On top of this, the Khmer Rouge also used many other threatening methods to force couples to have intercourse shortly after their weddings.<sup>33</sup> In the same survey conducted by the TPO mentioned earlier in this section, when couples were asked why they felt forced to have intercourse after their wedding, 48.8% reported that they were verbally threatened, 32.6% reported that they were being spied on by the Khmer Rouge, and 16.3% reported that they were fearful of punishment, such as torture or being sent to a re-education facility.<sup>34</sup> The threats of these punishments many times led to the rape of wives by their husbands, as husbands would pursue intercourse with their wives without their consent, claiming that they were pledging their loyalty to Angkar, or attempting to avoid any form of punishment.<sup>35</sup> Many knew that they would be questioned by party members about their sexual relationship with their spouse, or could be spied on by party members as well.<sup>36</sup>

The film *Red Wedding: Women Under the Khmer Rouge* directed by Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon follows a forty-eight-year-old woman, Sochan Pen, through her daily life in Cambodia, and also narrates her experience during the Khmer Rouge as a victim of forced

---

<sup>30</sup> Lobato, “Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings,” 12.

<sup>31</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>32</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>33</sup> Lobato, “Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings,” 12.

<sup>34</sup> Lobato, “Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings,” 12.

<sup>35</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 75.

<sup>36</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 75.

marriages.<sup>37</sup> When asked about her experience after her wedding, she replied “My husband hurt me. During the wedding night, he ripped off my clothes...he tied my hands behind my back. I couldn’t move. I wore two pairs of pants, but he tore them, he tore everything, he took off my clothes and he dishonored me.”<sup>38</sup> Pen’s experience shows how the expectation for couples to consummate their marriage as quickly as possible led to rape, as in order for her husband to have intercourse with her, he had to tie her hands behind her back, rip off her clothes, and make sure she could not move — which was definitely, then, not consensual intercourse. He raped and dishonored Pen, and there was nothing Pen could do about the situation.

An example of a couple who were spied on by the Khmer Rouge and were threatened with punishment is seen by TPO’s interview with a woman, HK. When asked about her relationship after her wedding, she replied “I did not know about sexual relations at the time. We had to get along and have sex or the cadre would kill us. My husband and I were spied on every night... When I did not agree to have sex with my husband I was sent to be re-educated, thus I never refused and just let my husband do what he wanted.”<sup>39</sup> HK’s experience shows how she gave up her right to decide whether she wanted to have intercourse with her husband due to Khmer Rouge spies and the threat of being tortured at re-education facilities. After being re-educated once, she did not want to have to undergo the possibility of being sent back to the re-education facility, and gave in to the orders and policies of the Khmer Rouge. As seen through surveys and the experiences of women during this time, the majority of women were forced to bear children, and many had to experience rape, or intercourse that was not completely consensual to avoid punishment from the party.

## V. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

The TPO also surveyed survivors of forced marriage on whether they were currently dealing with any mental health problems. The majority, 70.2%, of all respondents reported ongoing mental health problems, “reporting distress and anger at being forced to marry.”<sup>40</sup> Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as defined by *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

---

<sup>37</sup> Chan and Suon, *Red Wedding: Women Under the Khmer Rouge*, Bophana Center, Bophana Production, and Tipasa Production.

<sup>38</sup> Chan and Suon, *Red Wedding: Women Under the Khmer Rouge*, Bophana Center, Bophana Production, and Tipasa Production.

<sup>39</sup> Theresa De Langis, “Like Ghost Changes Body Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Transcultural Psychosocial Organization*, (2015): 74.

<sup>40</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 16.

*Disorders* is a condition that is set off by a trigger, or a traumatic event, that causes “clinically significant distress or impairment in the individual’s social interactions, capacity to work or other important areas of functioning.”<sup>41</sup> In an interview with the Phnom Penh Post for their *Marriage Under the Khmer Rouge* series, a psychologist, Thida Kim, from TPO, states that “Based on our experience... we can say that it still affects [forced marriage victims] even though it was more than 30 years ago. The effect that we often see is an emotional disorder called PTSD. They still experience flashbacks to scenes from when they were forced to marry, especially the day or night when she was forced to have intercourse with her husband.”<sup>42</sup> What can be deduced from both TPO’s survey and Kim’s input is that the majority of the victims of forced marriage are currently dealing with mental health issues, and the most prominent issue that these victims are experiencing is PTSD.

There have not been many interviews done regarding victim’s experiences with mental health issues in general, let alone the experiences of Khmer Rouge survivors. However, in an anonymous letter from a daughter who was forced into marriage by her own mother, she states “I have no memory of that wedding day... I was later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder so, thankfully, my mind had somehow blanked out most of the memories that caused me such distress.”<sup>43</sup> This is one example of a case where a forced marriage led to traumatic events that later on triggered PTSD in a woman’s life, and is most likely somewhat similar to the experiences that many other Cambodian women underwent in regards to PTSD. Furthermore, available research has shown that symptoms that women who are victims of domestic violence or abusive relationships display are consistent with major symptoms of PTSD.<sup>44</sup> As many women in forced marriages experienced abuse and domestic violence throughout these relationships, this provides more evidence that many forced marriage victims may be suffering from PTSD. Ultimately, though not much specific research has been done in the area, it can be seen through the limited survey data and accounts available, and research on the relationship between

---

<sup>41</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5* (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Chanrasmeay, Koan and Griff Tapper, *Marriage Under the Khmer Rouge*, Online Video (2016, Phnom Penh: Phnom Penh Post, 2016)

<sup>43</sup> “A letter to... my mother, who forced me into marriage,” *The Guardian*, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, Loring, Margaret Hughes, and Ulrike Unterstaller, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Victims of Domestic Violence : A Review of the Research,” *San Diego State University*, (2001): 100.

domestic violence and PTSD that these forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge may have caused many to undergo mental health issues such as PTSD.

## **VI. Shame and Remarriage**

After the Khmer Rouge regime, many people, especially women, were ashamed to have been part of a forced marriage.<sup>45</sup> Since forced marriages were very different from traditional marriages in the sense that parents were not involved and many other cultural rituals for the wedding were not followed, many only accepted these marriages as semi-legitimate, and looked down upon them.<sup>46</sup> Agreeing to these marriages, even though they were forced by Angkar, was viewed as an act of disobedience within regular Cambodian society.<sup>47</sup> This caused many to feel very shameful about these marriages, even though they were married against their will. Though most people did at some point disclose to others that they were involved in a forced marriage, according to the TPO, 52.6% of those who did not disclose the fact that they were involved in a forced marriage cited feelings of shame, and 36.8% cited fear of stigma and discrimination.<sup>48</sup> This shame is further seen in an interview response from PS, who told the TPO regarding her forced marriage that she “[feels] shame, so much shame, and I do not want anyone to know about my past. When I am selling morning glory in the market and I see people from that time, I avoid them. I don’t want to see them and I feel so full of shame... So now I go to another market where people do not know me. Yes, shame. Shame beyond what I can describe.”<sup>49</sup> Years after her forced marriage, PS still feels the shame even when selling vegetables in her local market. She still feels as if people are passing judgement onto her for her forced marriage, to the point where she would go out of her way to sell flowers at a new market with different customers, because she believes her marriage is so lowly looked upon.

In many cases, the shame that forced marriages caused many victims also led to the inability to remarry if they had separated from their first partner. Chbap srey, the Cambodia code of conduct for women, valued women based on their sexual purity and their place in the

---

<sup>45</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 16.

<sup>46</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>47</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>48</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>49</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

household.<sup>50</sup> Due to this relatively conservative code of conduct, and due to the fact that forced marriages were heavily looked down upon, a second marriage after a forced marriage was considered to be too many marriages — women were forced to either remain single and divorced, or remarried but thought of as having “too many husbands.”<sup>51</sup> In an interview, KN expresses her thoughts on why she believes she cannot marry to the TPO by stating “It is because of 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 am angry at Pol Pot and I think the forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge is a very bad crime.”<sup>52</sup> KN is obviously upset about the fact that she had to undergo a forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge regime, and explicitly states that she believes that the reason she cannot remarry is because of her prior marriage. It also seems as if her first marriage somehow made her distrust men, and would make it hard for her to have a second marriage. All in all, forced marriages during the Khmer Rouge period caused many victims lots of shame after the regime fell, and made it quite difficult, especially for women, to remarry if they separated from their first husband.

## VII. Successful Forced Marriages

Of course, not all forced marriages resulted in divorce, abuse, or rape — there were cases of marriages which did last until long after the Khmer Rouge.<sup>53</sup> In an *Al Jazeera* news article which features successful marriages after the Khmer Rouge, writes about the story of Sok Ran, a 61-year old woman who just recently decided to renew her vows with her husband that she was forced to marry under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>54</sup> Sok Ran is described as a woman “who once upon a time slept with her back to [her husband], terrified at the thought of his touch; who made him wait a year before she consented to have sex; who said she stayed with him at first because she was “too lazy” to find another man — grabbed his face without hesitation and planted a kiss full on his lips.”<sup>55</sup> Sok Ran’s marriage has definitely turned out to be a success many decades later

---

<sup>50</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>51</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>52</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 93.

<sup>53</sup> Dene-Hern Chen, “Only ‘lovers’ left alive,” *Al Jazeera America*, (2016).

<sup>54</sup> Chen, “Only ‘lovers’ left alive.”

<sup>55</sup> Chen, “Only ‘lovers’ left alive.”

after the Khmer Rouge, as she is very happily renewing her vows. It seems as if she grew to love her husband over time, and has now found her partner for life.

However, it must be taken into perspective that Sok Ran's marriage is quite a rare story. Through a survey done by the TPO, 75% of couples were forced to marry by verbal threat, 18% by fear of punishment, and 6% by physical violence.<sup>56</sup> According to this survey, little to no forced marriages started in a place of happiness or love, but mostly out of threats, fear, and punishment. It has been seen throughout this paper that there are high levels of abuse, rape, and mistreatment of spouses during marriages, and the same survey has shown that at least 46.3% of the couples forced to marry under the Khmer Rouge separated after the Khmer Rouge ended.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, couples who stayed together after the Khmer Rouge, 44% stated that they stayed together due to having children with their spouse, familial pressure, or tradition — but not out of love for their significant other.<sup>58</sup> It seems as if through every stage of marriage, from how the couples met to the last stage of their relationships, whether staying together or separating, includes a lot of unhappiness, or at least discontentedness. So, though there are some forced marriages that did end up quite well, these should not be considered as very common, or in general, how many forced marriages have ended up.

### **VIII. Current Trials**

Starting in October of 2016, survivors of forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge were finally given an opportunity to seek redemption on the leaders of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>59</sup> The United Nations backed Khmer Rouge tribunal has begun to hear testimony regarding the experience of forced marriage survivors in Case 002/02, the latest case against the Khmer Rouge.<sup>60</sup> Evidence and testimony from both survivors and Khmer Rouge leaders will be used and analyzed by the tribunal to decide whether the party committed crimes against humanity through their actions of forcing couples to marry during the regime.<sup>61</sup> Article seven of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines crimes against humanity as “any of the following acts when

---

<sup>56</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 53.

<sup>57</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 58.

<sup>58</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 58.

<sup>59</sup> Nina Teggarty, “Forced Marriage and Rape: The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge on Trial,” *NewsDeeply*, (2016).

<sup>60</sup> Teggarty, “Forced Marriage and Rape: The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge on Trial.”

<sup>61</sup> Teggarty, “Forced Marriage and Rape: The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge on Trial.”



committed as a part of a widespread of systemic attack directed against any civilian population... [including] rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy...or any other form of sexual violence.”<sup>62</sup>

Forced marriage is just one of the crimes that the Khmer Rouge is being tried for in this series of cases, and the expected judgement on Case 002/02 will most likely be decided in late 2017.<sup>63</sup>

## IX. Conclusion

The Khmer Rouge drastically changed Cambodia and has affected many Cambodian civilians, both during the time of their regime and in the years following up until the present. The Khmer Rouge’s effort to grow their workforce and cut all ties of kinships and demonstrations of emotion led to the practice of forced marriages.<sup>64</sup> It has been seen that these forced marriages can lead to abnormal and abusive relationships, as seen by the statements of survivors who seemed to be ambivalent about their spouse, and by the statements of survivors who had to endure violence from their spouse.<sup>65</sup> Statistics show that a large amount of spouses, especially women, endured either physical, verbal, or sexual abuse, which leads to the topic of rape.<sup>66</sup> The Khmer Rouge wanted to grow its workforce by forcing married couples to consummate their marriage and produce as many children as possible — this led to spies making sure couples slept together, and in many cases the rape of wives by their husband.<sup>67</sup> Statistics and interviews show that many did not want to have sex, but felt forced to due to threats or fear of punishment, or were scared that officials would deem them disloyal to Angkar.<sup>68</sup> Many survivors today are dealing with mental health issues, the most common being PTSD.<sup>69</sup> Though there has not been much research done directly on the link between forced marriages and PTSD or other mental health issues, specific aspects of forced marriages such as domestic violence or abuse have been shown to lead to PTSD.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, because forced marriages did not undergo many of the traditional

---

<sup>62</sup> “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” *International Criminal Court*, (1998): 3.

<sup>63</sup> Teggarty, “Forced Marriage and Rape: The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge on Trial.”

<sup>64</sup> Heuveline and Poch, “Do marriages forget their past? Marital stability in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.”

<sup>65</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>66</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 56.

<sup>67</sup> Lobato, “Forced pregnancy during the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging forced pregnancy as a distinct crime in the ECCC proceedings,” 12.

<sup>68</sup> De Langis, “Like Ghost Changes Body Interviews of on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 38.

<sup>69</sup> Theresa De Langis, “Like Ghost Changes Body Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Transcultural Psychosocial Organization*, (2015): 74.

<sup>70</sup> Loring Jones, Margaret Hughes, and Ulrike Unterstaller, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Victims of Domestic Violence : A Review of the Research,” *San Diego State University*, (2001): 100.

Cambodian rituals, such as the approval of parents or a multi-day wedding ceremony, many forced marriages were looked upon as inferior to traditional marriages, bringing shame to many victims of forced marriages.<sup>71</sup> However, due to Cambodian gender ideals, shaped by the Chbap srey, women partaking in more than one marriage is deemed “too many,” so many women are stuck in between an inferior marriage, or being considered as having partaken in too many marriages.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, though some forced marriages have ended up happily, and with the couples falling in love, this is not a common case.<sup>73</sup> Many forced marriages have included fear and unhappiness on many levels since the day of the couple’s wedding ceremony, and continue to cause the victims distress or discontentedness, even if the couples may have remained together.<sup>74</sup>

Forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge have led to abnormal and abusive dynamics between husband and wife, forced pregnancy and rape, mental health issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and shame or the inability to remarry. The Khmer Rouge, in an attempt to strip society of relationships and emotions as well as increase its own labor force through forced marriages, also consequently stripped Cambodian women of the ability to become “srey krup leakh,” what is regarded in traditional Cambodian society as the perfectly virtuous woman, what every woman should aspire to become.<sup>75</sup> Against their will, Cambodian women could no longer fulfill the obligations of a srey krup leakh, as they were brutally transformed by their forced marriages into “srey kat leakh” — women missing or lacking virtue.<sup>76</sup> Forced marriages, pregnancies, and other horrific torture that the Khmer Rouge forced onto victims during their regime can no longer be taken back. The opportunity to become a srey krup leakh is gone, and haunts the victims of the time, who feel shame from not being able to be a virtuous woman.<sup>77</sup> However, at the very least, survivors of these forced marriages have finally

---

<sup>71</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>72</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

<sup>73</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 53.

<sup>74</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 58.

<sup>75</sup> Anushka Derks, “Khmer Women on the Move,” *University of Hawaii Press*, (2008): 93.

<sup>76</sup> Derks, “Khmer Women on the Move,” 93.

<sup>77</sup> De Langis, Kim, Strasser, and Tang, “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” 97.

been given the ability to seek their redemption through United Nations Case 002/02, trying the Khmer Rouge leaders for having committed crimes against humanity due to their forced marriage policy — one chance to put those responsible in their place.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Teggarty, “Forced Marriage and Rape: The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge on Trial.”

## Glossary

**Angkar** – A Cambodian Communist movement that was active as a guerrilla force from 1970 to the late 1990s and held power under the leadership of Pol Pot from 1975 to 1979.

**Chbap srey** – The Cambodian code of conduct for women.

**Crime Against Humanity** – Certain acts that are deliberately committed as a part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population or an identifiable part of a population.

**Document Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)** – Non-profit international NGO in association with Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program to document Cambodia's "killing fields."

**Democratic Kampuchea** – The name of the Khmer Rouge (KR)-controlled state that, between 1975 and 1979, existed in present-day Cambodia.

**Forced Marriage** – A marriage in which one or both of the parties is married without his or her consent or against his or her will.

**Forced Pregnancy** – The practice of forcing a woman to become pregnant, often as part of a forced marriage, or as part of a programme of breeding slaves.

**Khmer Rouge** – The name given to the followers of the Communist Party of Kampuchea in Cambodia.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** – A condition of persistent mental and emotional stress occurring as a result of injury or severe psychological shock, typically involving disturbance of sleep and constant vivid recall of the experience, with dulled responses to others and to the outside world.

**Re-Education Facility** – Prison camps operated by the communist party to indoctrinate and punish civilians.

**Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO)** – An organization that aims to provide a comprehensive range of mental health care and support options for Cambodians.

**Tribunal** – A court of justice.

**United Nations (U.N.)** – An intergovernmental organization to promote international co-operation.

### *Works Cited*

- “A letter to... my mother, who forced me into marriage,” *The Guardian*, 2015,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015>.
- Chen, Dene-Hern. “Only ‘Lovers’ Left Alive.” Cambodia: Al Jazeera, 2016.
- Cougill, Wynne et al. “Stilled Lives.” Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2004.
- De Langis, Theresa. “Like Ghost Changes Body, Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage during the Khmer Rouge Regime.” Cambodia: Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, 2015.
- De Langis, Theresa, Thida Kim, Judith Strasser, and Sopheap Tang. “Like Ghost Changes Body, A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime.” Cambodia: Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, 2014.
- “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5.” Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.
- “Khmer Rouge History,” *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor*, 2013,  
[www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history](http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history).
- Kijewski, Leonie. “The Effect of Forced Marriage on Couples and Families.” Netherlands: Maastricht University, 2016.
- Heuveline, Patrick and Bunnak Poch. “Do Marriages Forget Their Past? Marital Stability in Post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.” Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2006.
- Jones, Loring, Margaret Hughes, and Ulrike Unterstaller, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Victims of Domestic Violence: A Review of the Research.” San Diego State University, 2001.
- LeVine, Peg. “Love and Dread in Cambodia.” Singapore: NUS Press, 2010.
- Lobato, Maria. “Forced Pregnancy During the Khmer Rouge Regime, Acknowledging Forced Pregnancy as a Distinct Crime in the ECCC Proceedings.” Phnom Penh: Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition, 2016.
- Marriage Under the Khmer Rouge Series. Online video. Directed by Koan Chanrasmey and Griff Tapper. 2016. Phnom Penh: Phnom Penh Post, 2016. Video.
- Mony, Keo. “Cambodian Marriage,” EthnoMed, 2008,  
[www.ethnomed.org/culture/cambodian/cambodian-marriage](http://www.ethnomed.org/culture/cambodian/cambodian-marriage).

Nicarthy, Ginny. "Getting Free: A Handbook for Women in Abusive Relationships." Berkeley: Seal Press, 1982.

Red Wedding: Women Under the Khmer Rouge. Film. Directed by Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon. 2012. Cambodia: Bophana Production, Bophana Center, Tipasa Production, 2012. DVD.

"Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court." *International Criminal Court*, 1998.

Teggarty, Nina. "Forced Marriage and Rape: The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge on Trial," *NewsDeeply*, (2016).

Tuol Sleng Image Database, Yale University, 1995.

*Works Consulted*

Jacobsen, Trude. "Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History." NIAS Press, 2008.

Kiernan, Ben. "The Pol Pot Regime." New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Pahn, Rithy. *One Evening After the War*. 1998. France: Compagnie Méditerranéenne de Cinéma, 1998. DVD.

Yimsut, Ronnie. "Facing the Khmer Rouge: a Cambodian journey." New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011.