

DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA

A REPORT ON  
**Women in  
Anlong Veng**



LY SOK-KHEANG, DIRECTOR OF ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER



*Bun Sokol, a former Khmer Rouge medic, standing next to her father Phoeuk Bunthoeun, a former teacher during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report on the daily life and work assignments taken up by women in Anlong Veng in the course of Khmer Rouge's guerrilla warfare between 1979 and 1998 would not be possible with an extraordinary support and cooperation of those women who have gone through the period. My thanks go to all the women in Anlong Veng district as many of them joined our monthly forums on women's rights.

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*Kim Sry at Veal Dangtung in 1988.*

# INTRODUCTION

During the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime (1975-1979), war and genocide placed Cambodian women in an equal position with men. Both men and women had to fight, provide support on the battlefields, and struggle to survive. Many women were placed in positions of significant responsibility. By contrast, women's roles and activities are generally diminished during peacetime. Today, some women continue to be marginalized from decision-making processes within the home and in politics at the local and national levels. This is despite the fact that many women possess the skills and knowledge to hold positions of authority and exercise responsibility in governing and corporate bodies.

During the genocidal era, men and women had the same roles and sacrificed their lives for the sake of the revolution. Anlong Veng, which was the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge and held by the group until 1998, is a good example of women's active roles in conflict. Women were the backbone of the KR's long armed struggle in Anlong Veng from 1979 to 1998. They were staunch supporters that struck the balance of forces on the battlefield and behind the frontlines. Women were actively involved in operating medical and transportation units. Most bore the burden of ensuring their family's survival. Their responsibilities included producing annual yields for food supply, rearing and educating children, securing a robust community, being sensitive and alert to military attacks, and making spikes to defend the battlefields and community.

Years of fierce battles came to a complete end when the last remaining KR forces in Anlong Veng were reintegrated by the government in 1998. In the 21st century, the community is back to normal and makes an extraordinary effort to turn the old KR stronghold into a bustling city of peace. Preserving KR history and the memory of former KR revolutionaries and members is the key to starting this transformation. Out of the approximately 80 percent of former KR members in Anlong Veng, women account for about 20 percent. These women bolstered the ranks of KR guerrillas and actively participated in warfare. Most joined the KR revolution at a very young age and subsequently endured indescribable struggles and hopelessness before and during the KR ruling period (1975-1979).

The post-KR period led many women to either volunteer to join the KR forces' armed struggle against the Cambodian government or to be forced into situations where they could not return to their normal life even after the KR regime fell and the genocide was over.

As KR history shows, the regime's brutality inflicted enormous suffering on women and on the entire Cambodian population generally. Indeed, women have been an undeniably essential part of socio-political developments in Cambodia's recent history of genocide, war, recovery and peace. Often, given historical discrimination in how society is structured and the varying roles of the two sexes, women have been subordinated into supporting roles that often overlook their potential to contribute equally to society, even in the present day.

With these points in mind, this research examines women's early participation in the revolution, their irreversible entry into KR rule (1975-1979), and their activities behind the frontlines. This discussion is used to better understand women's roles within the household and in local government positions. The last part of this research attempts to provide some recommendations on how to improve their rights, opportunities and socio-political status.



Yy Thea

# THE EARLY PATH TOWARD KR REVOLUTION



Khuy Kea

Women interviewed in Anlong Veng district found themselves struggling when the KR plunged the country into a state of war in early 1970s. As with poor and uneducated adolescent girls in other sections of rural Cambodia, they were ill-prepared for conscription into the Khmer Rouge forces following the coup deposing Sihanouk's Popular Socialist Community or Sangkum Reastr Niyum on March 18, 1970. Most left their parents and were forced to sacrifice their teenage years to serve the revolution. Sanh Sokun, 63, Chhem Lai, 57, and Khuy Kea, 60, said, separately, that they joined the KR at the age of around ten as most Cambodians saw the comet

descending in the sky and, thus, believed that the country would plunge into social turbulence or – to put it precisely – a war.<sup>1</sup> Kea said immediately after the coup, that she and two of her brothers began their service in the KR(?) army.<sup>2</sup> In comparison to Kea, Lai and her entire family of 17 members entered the forest and started their lives there.<sup>3</sup>

Sanh Sokun volunteered to serve as a KR soldier at a similar age in 1974. The KR enticed her and others through artistic performances. Later, she trained to be an arts performance trainer. After six months, her career changed and she was required to serve as a soldier, medic, and also a military trainer to hundreds of newly recruited men and women. She was even sent to the frontline at Phnom Baset in January 1975 in the KR's last attempt to occupy Phnom Penh. Sokun, Lai, and Kea all experienced and overcame stages of fear, panic and anxiety to survive those years, levels of mental stress that adolescent girls simply are not equipped to process and handle.<sup>4</sup>



Sanh Sokun

These woman's early involvement in the KR revolution made significant contributions to the KR victory on April 17, 1975. Their service during their early teens challenged the Cambodian expectation that young women remain close to home and their parents. Nevertheless, the KR's triumph did not mean they were free to do as they wished. This early stage was just the beginning of what led to one of the darkest periods in Cambodian history.

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with Sanh Sokun, Chhem Lai and Khuy Kea, Anlong Veng district.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Kea.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Lai.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Sokun.



# THE IRREVERSIBLE ENTRY INTO GENOCIDE



Uon Nam

These women began their service being indoctrinated to believe that they were jubilant liberators. They then were further indoctrinated to endorse the new world order that would follow from the KR's victory. In truth, their young lives suffered severe deprivation and isolation; no family reunions were allowed, people were evacuated en masse, starvation affected nearly everyone, summary executions were systematically carried out, and all fundamental human rights and freedoms were stripped from the population. To these women and the rest of the country, it became an irreversible journey into the depths of hell.

Sokun was among the KR's forces that entered Phnom Penh. She heard many city dwellers say: "the KR are in the jungle, but they are pretty and have a good hair style right above the shoulder." She also remembered that many dared not to come out of their homes as they feared that the KR would cut their throats with

palm tree branches. While she and her 25-member team cleared up the city, she witnessed the crowded influx of people being evacuated. Her kind advice to some evacuees was to tell them to pack food and salt as all the KR-controlled zones did not use any currency. As more KR forces moved in, she thought those evacuees might think that KR cadres, like her, would be luckier.<sup>5</sup> However, this was not the case as KR forces, and these women in particular, also faced their own insurmountable challenges during the years of the regime. As for Sokun, she was sent to from one place to another to serve the KR's revolutionary task force. Like others, her work included building dikes, producing palm sugar, planting rice, and other tasks. She was later assigned to work on airport construction in Koh Nhek district, Mondul Kiri province. All of this work left her and others starving, weary and emotionally exhausted.<sup>6</sup>

Summary executions of many individuals, including KR cadres, became widespread. Chhem Lai, a village chief, was not hesitant to acknowledge that indiscriminate killing that occurred during the regime. Lai said: "I witnessed the killings. Victims were brought in by trucks and pits were already dug. Each victim was hit by hoes at the back of their head and fell into the pits. I felt an extreme fear. There was no chance for us to help or save each other; otherwise, we would be killed as well."<sup>7</sup> Kim Ly, 65 years old, was among millions who experienced the death of their loved ones. After she delivered her baby in 1976, her husband was taken away to be executed on charges of being a capitalist and a feudalist. She added that one of her in-laws was responsible for her husband's death. Her newborn baby later died of starvation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these tragic experiences, the KR managed to strategically retreat and bring many revolutionaries and people with them after the Vietnamese army removed them from power in January 1979. According to Khuy Kea, one of the many reasons that people fled with the KR was their fear of the Vietnamese. There was a rumor that the Vietnamese would kill everyone as they in attempting to defeat the KR.<sup>9</sup> The KR was able to regroup and carry out its guerrilla warfare for an additional two decades. While its forces were dispatched to operate deep inside the rural countryside, women bore a huge burden of assisting on the battlefields and working behind the frontlines during those two decades of war. It is worth examining their roles at the rear, which secured the endurance of the frontline.

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<sup>5</sup> *Interview with Sokun*

<sup>6</sup> *Interview with Sokun*

<sup>7</sup> *Interview with Lai*

<sup>8</sup> *Interview with Kim Ly, Anlong Veng district.*

<sup>9</sup> *Interview with Kea*

# SECURING BEHIND THE FRONTLINES

Women in KR-controlled villages or areas along the border with Thailand were responsible for securing the battlefields. When the KR regime was removed from power and its rank and file fled to the border, many women were among the influx of evacuees; they moved through indescribably dangerous jungles where they risked being attacked, and camped in sporadically in unsecured and dangerous places. 65-year-old Khuy Kea, 66-year-old Chin Seng, In Khom and Uon Nam were among women interviewed; they reported that there were rumors swirling that they would be exterminated by the approaching Vietnamese army.<sup>10</sup> These women ended up settling down in the KR bases. Their shared fears of the Vietnamese united and motivated them to work together behind the frontlines for years to come.



Yim Phal

As commonly stated in the “Women Rights Forum,” which is held monthly in Anlong Veng district, women carried out three main duties: producing spikes to entrap any encroaching enemy, transporting ammunition to the battlefields, and serving as medics, which involved carrying and treating casualties from the frontline. In particular, they grew their own food instead of relying solely on the food, which was provided by Chhit Choeun, aka Ta Mok, the local warlord. With this, the KR forces could ensure that its guerrilla warfare could continue unabated for years.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Kea, Chin Seng, In Khom and Uon Nam, Anlong Veng district.

# WOMEN IN SPIKE-PRODUCING AND TRANSPORTATION UNITS



Yan Ran (R)

Kea and her amputated husband moved to live in Anlong Veng in 1993. She later worked for the spike-producing unit.<sup>11</sup> Seng added that making the spikes did not take the entire day. After a woman in each household produced 100 spikes per day, they were done for the day. They then took care of their children, worked in the rice fields to sustain their own families, and cut down bamboo atop the Dangrek mountain to fulfill their daily work assignments.<sup>12</sup> However, some woman, such as Seng, were exceptional cases and were required to work far away from home on some of the frontlines.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Kea

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Seng

Asked if the spikes were truly effective in deterring the enemy from encroaching on their bases, In Khom commented that they were not, but that they did slow down enemy encroachment as the spikes could cause terrible bleeding and were covered in poisonous substances. Digging holes and planting those spikes at the bottom could kill anyone who fell in, said Khom, whose unit consisted of 30 members. However, she added that injuring, maiming, and killing enemies with spikes was not as effective as bullets.<sup>13</sup> Women's work in creating spikes was highly valued and appreciated as demonstrated by a statue of women carrying spikes atop their heads placed near the top of Dangrek mountain. The site of this statue is a place of worship to pray for the safety and good fortune under these difficult circumstances.

Khom worked with a transportation unit that required her to travel as far as 40 to 50 kilometers from the current district town in Anlong Veng.<sup>14</sup> Her experiences resonated with Khom, Yy Thea, 66, and Huy Yean, 62, who had direct experiences with the transportation unit. Both reiterated that transporting ammunition and other war equipment to the battlefields took place four to five times per month. They spent days walking through mountains and jungles to reach each destination. All these women made similar remarks insofar that while they could be under military attack they also feared being sexually assaulted or violently beaten at that time. However, they all remained vigilant about this and never risked leaving the KR unit.<sup>15</sup> Sokun said she desperately wished to return home. But she was afraid of getting lost in the jungle and being sexually abused by men. Like others, she fought for survival throughout those years.<sup>16</sup>

Women in the transportation unit faced many challenges to their health, even to this day. Each was required to carry heavy ammunition (for example, seven B-40), rice, food, cookers, and clothing to the frontlines. It took many days to reach each destination. Yim Phal, 69, admitted that she lives with many chronic illnesses, both physical and mental, as a result of that work. Her health also deteriorated because she drank water that was poisoned by the Vietnamese army.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Khom

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Khom

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Yy Thea and Huy Yean, Anlong Veng district.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Sokun

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Yim Phal

# MEDICS



Huy Yean and her husband

“Treating each patient was not entirely borne out of a political struggle. As a medic, our top priority was to save human life,”

*65-year-old Vong Vien, a KR medic in Anlong Veng*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Vong Vien

Serving as a medic posed a tremendous challenge to many women who only received short medical training and started using their medical skills immediately. However, some women who were interviewed obtained medical education from China, using this training both during and after the KR regime. Given the very small number of these professionals and the increasing number of people that were sick and injured from the battlefields, medics with minimal training were heavily relied on.

Min Lun, 58, Yan Ran, 49, and Chea Phal, 52, made a very similar remark concerning their limited medical training before being assigned to treat patients.<sup>19</sup> Lun said the training lasted about two to three months. She began treating those who were injured on the battlefield as the number of injuries dramatically increased as a result of fierce fighting with Vietnam along the border during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979).<sup>20</sup> Phal and Ran acknowledged that they were not properly medically trained and administered medical care in a haphazard manner, guessing when it came to providing relief and handling all manner of injuries. Phal herself was merely serving as a commune messenger before her involvement in medical unit.<sup>21</sup>

Being a member of a 27-strong medical team of whom 17 were women, Phal remembered that there were a few skilled medical doctors who could perform surgery or cut limbs to save people's lives. What she remembered most was that so many people died between 1976 and 1979.<sup>22</sup> Vien, now living in Anlong Veng district, was one of those experienced in surgery, having spent 5 years in China studying medicine, with a specialization in surgery. She and her husband, who was also a surgeon, said in an interview that:

We save the lives of so many soldiers and people, but one patient that we both never forget about him. One of his legs was badly hit by mines that may need a cut. However, I and my husband decided not to do so. We cleaned and sterile the wound every day. We removed the wound's serious parts and replaced it with a flesh from his thigh. He survives and he can walk as normal, these days.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews with Min Lun, Yan Ran, and Chea Phal, Anlong Veng district.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Lun

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Ran and Phal

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Phal

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Vien

Vien, who is still practicing medicine in Anlong Veng, said the medics were faced with many difficulties and challenges during those years. However, she worked because of her heartfelt pity and duty to save people's lives in the name of one single ethnicity, Khmer. She and her husband worked even harder in Mount 1003 under Ta Mok and continued to treat the increasing number of sick people and the injured in the battlefields. Both never charged fees to any patients at Peung Preah camp where Cambodians escaped the occupying Vietnamese forces in 1979. They said they provided their service out of a sense of empathy and pity for the sick and injured. Such a huge burden showed her that more people should have been trained to assist in the deteriorating situation. Vien said many women who lived behind the frontlines were accompanied by their children, while their husbands were sent to the frontline. Vien conducted two rounds of training for 60 women in total. Although, she still acknowledges that there was an extreme shortage of medical practitioners and nurses. That is why trained medical practitioners were needed, despite sometimes being ineffective.<sup>24</sup>

Ran and her husband were trained medical practitioners. They also said in an interview that they both followed the KR and worked with the movement in the jungle. In many cases, women took charge of carrying the dead and injured from the frontlines and treating them. She recounted an experience of treating patients in Mount 1001. She remembered that Son Sen, former Minister of Defense of Democratic Kampuchea, paid frequent visits to those injured. By the early 1980s, the medical team was equipped with surgical tools and other necessities to deal more adequately with severe injuries caused by bullets or mine explosions.<sup>25</sup>



Kim Ly

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Vien

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Ran



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The women who were interviewed touched on a series of recommendations in a bid to improve their current social status. Although they have been undeniably involved in the revolutionary causes and continued sacrifice for the post-genocide warfare, many still feel inferior to men. As a result, they are vulnerable to gender-based violence and abuse. Some recommendations to fix this:

First, most women valued the forum as a form of exercising their rights. It empowers and encourages them to be active in the historical narrative and, also, in the socio-political sphere. Allowing them to engage in these ways serves to challenge an old cliché that women cannot do anything but family chores.

Second, education for women should be a solution to elevate women's status. The women who attended the forum stressed the importance of women's resilience, strength, and ability to be independent.

Third, some women also emphasized that establishing a women's association would contribute greatly to efforts to advocate their rights and health. As outlined above, women in this former final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge have endured many hardships and deserve better privilege and care. This could further inspire them to actively participate and work for their community.

# CONCLUSION

Large portions of women who participated in the women's rights forum chose to narrate their experiences beginning with the period before the Khmer Rouge. They elaborated on the various reasons each joined and sacrificed their lives for the Revolution. They were later sent from place to place, often far away from their native villages. Many women admitted that they had to overcome anxiety and fear every day. However, many focused themselves on the hope that soon after the war was over, they could return home. Unfortunately, this desire was never fulfilled, as the KR's rise to power created a worse situation. Their health suffered greatly from overwork and starvation. Kim Ly is one of the many examples of women whose husband was executed and whose children died of malnutrition. Women made the same commitments and sacrifices as men, if not more so, during the genocide and later during the war. The post-1979 period marked a critical moment for women as they were tasked to assist in the frontlines and to secure the rear. They were assigned to carry out physically and emotionally difficult jobs. Many were assigned to carry ammunitions to the frontlines as far as Siem Reap province from Anlong Veng. They were also assigned to produce spikes to entrap enemy forces in addition to their family chores such as growing food and taking care of children. They continue to face many challenges, ranging the need for education to assistance with chronic and acute health conditions, in addition to a proper platform for the advocacy of their rights in the socio-political spectrum.



(From right to left):  
Dom Smey (holding her  
nephew's hand) and a  
Khmer Rouge soldier  
in a location known as  
"40" (Dom Kang village  
or Dom Kang hospital  
in 1986.



Kang Mi is making Khmer noodle in Chup Mlou,  
Thailand, 1988.



(From left to right): Bun Sokol, Khieu Samphan's  
daughter in white shirt and messenger in uniform  
taking this photo in Koh Kong province.

Sao (the groom) and Rom  
(the bride) married at  
locations nearby Ta Mok's  
former salt warehouse  
and O-Chik lake (currently,  
O-Chik village, Anlong Veng  
commune, Anlong Veng  
district) in 1992.





Pich Snet with his wife Hoeun Han and children.



(From left to right): Chhun Hong Seng, former chief of Division 3, and Bun Sokol taking this photo in 1990 in Anlong Veng district.



Aom Kunthea in Thailand in 1987.



Khoem Eung (third from left) discussing and reading a map at Mum-Bei in 1995.



People of Village 800  
(now Tuol Sala village)  
in Anlong Veng district.



(From left to right):  
Bun Sokol, Pol Pot's  
daughter and wife,  
and Pheng Srei Moch  
taking this photo on  
Ta Mok's dam in 1990s.

(From left to right): Rom and Kin  
Nha took photo at Ta Mok's dam  
or the dam of O-Chik lake while  
the construction was still going  
on in 1993. Nha said at that time  
many of Anlong Veng people  
including them participated  
and carried earth and rocks at  
Ta Mok's construction site. We  
worked so hard and were so tired.  
But this photo showed a sense of  
joy and modernity as the Khmer  
New Year was approaching.



## Interviews :

Sanh Sokun, Chhem Lai, Khuy Kea, Chin Seng, In Khom, Uon Nam, Yy Thea, Kim Ly, Huy Yean, Yim Phal, Vong Vien, Min Lun, Yan Ran and Chea Phal in Anlong Veng district, in 2019.

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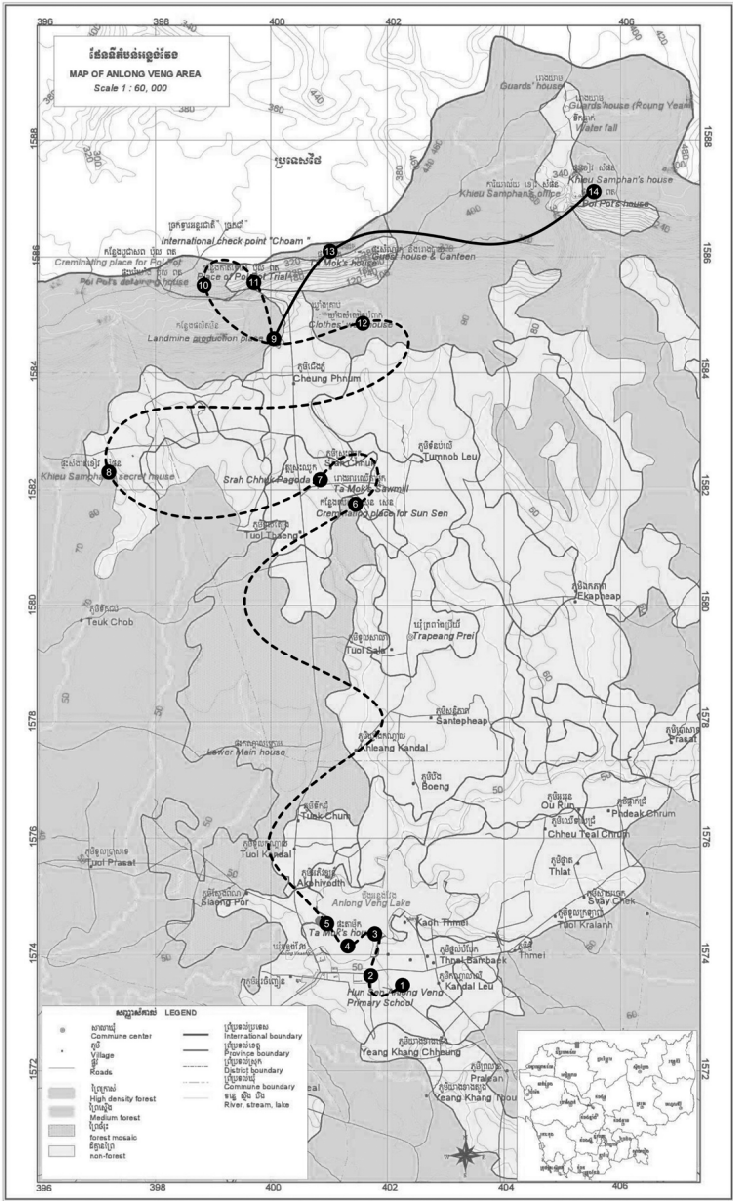
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The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) was founded and constituted in 1995 after the U.S. Congress passed the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act in April 1994, which was signed into law by President Clinton. The Royal Government of Cambodia also formally supported DC-Cam. DC-Cam has received numerous accolades and awards for its work in support of memory and justice for victims of the Cambodian genocide. In 2017 alone, DC-Cam was the honored recipients of the Judith Lee Stronach Human Rights Award from the Center for Justice and Accountability, and his Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni made Youk Chhang a Commander of the Royal Order of Cambodia in recognition of Chhang's distinguished services to the Kingdom of Cambodia. In 2018, DC-Cam also was a winner of the Ramon Magsaysay Awards, which is regarded as 'Asia's Nobel' prize, for preserving historical memory for healing and justice.



ផែនទីតំបន់ព្រំដែនអន្តរជាតិ The delineation of international boundaries should not be considered authoritative. Map prepared by Geography Department, 20.08.02.

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