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Words Help KR Survivors Heal Mom Kunthea & Cassandra Yeap May 4, 2012

Before yesterday, widow Pov Synoun, 54, was the only person who knew of the horrors she encountered under the Khmer Rouge regime.

Dressed in a traditional sampot and white blouse, the Pursat province native was stoic in recounting how the horrors she endured under the regime continue to torment her through sleepless nights and distracted days.

“Even till this age, I still could not tell my story to anyone besides myself . . . so every suffering I had I’ve kept in my mind,” she said yesterday at a therapy session organised by the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation, where, for the first time, Pov Synoun’s ordeal was recounted aloud.

As part of the unique initiative, TPO works with survivors of the regime to create “testimonies” of the harm inflicted on them. Testimonies are documented and read aloud in a group environment at the conclusion of the short-term therapy.

In the cool dimness of the Sambour Meas pagoda, in Phnom Penh’s Meanchey district, Pov Synoun’s counsellor read her testimony in front of Khmer Rouge tribunal victims’ support staff, TPO staff and six other women who, like Pov Synoun, are civil parties in the tribunal’s Case 002.

Her composure during the public reading belied the arduous journey from silence to speaking out that began last Thursday, when she first met her counsellor at TPO.

The shock of having to systematically recall and relate her experiences led to strong physical and emotional reactions during the session, TPO technical adviser Mony Sothara said.

Pov Synoun had been fearful, intermittently crying and shouting, he said.

During her second session, he noted improvements.

“She was less emotional, but I noticed sometimes her body shook and her heart beat faster. I would stop her from talking and ask her about something that made her happy, or we’d take a break,” he said.

During the third session, the last before the public reading, she had progressed to the

point of being able to listen to, and approve, a record of her testimony, Mony Sothara said.

That record, which was read yesterday, recounts the teenage Pov Synoun's forced marriage to a man she did not know and the violent threats by a Khmer Rouge soldier for the couple to consummate the union.

In her testimony, Pov Synoun describes how she witnessed her father being shot dead, Khmer Rouge soldiers marching her uncle away to kill him, and being told that her mother and brother had died in a bomb explosion.

The man she was forced to marry was also killed during the brutal regime.

According to TPO project manager Youn Sarath, this form of short-term "testimony Therapy" gives survivors a chance to heal psychologically by transferring their experiences into a written record.

"The clients transfer their feelings and stories of the past into the document, and reading it out helps to recall the past experience, focus on their body sensations," he said.

The counsellors, rather than the victims, read the testimonies as a way to empower the victims, Youn Sarath said.

"The past experience that the client went through is not just about the client having it and keeping it in their own selves, but that there are other people who care about them and support them," he said.

Almost 100 survivors had undergone short-term testimony therapy between 2009 and 2010, but this was the first time it had been conducted since then because of limited resources, Youn Sarath said at the testimonial reading.

In Cambodian culture, dealing with the past often meant avoiding talking about it, which deviated from healing from a psychological perspective, he added.

But in recent years, more people had been requesting psychological support, Youn Sarath said. "This is one of the steps in breaking the silence about discussing psychological [issues] in Cambodia," he said.

Pov Synoun said she felt she had made crucial steps forward in being able to smile and talk to other people about her experiences, but there would still be a limit to how much she could share.

TPO will conduct follow-up sessions with Pov Synoun in the coming weeks to monitor her progress.

“I expect that I can be better, but I cannot cure my mind 100 per cent,” she said. “I think I will keep it with me until I pass away.”