

Genocide

HPHI5029

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Evaluate the impact of gender on experiences of genocide, with reference to one of the following case studies: Cambodian genocide (3000 words)

Introduction:

The 1948 UN Convention defines genocide as the intent **‘to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group’** (United Nations 1948). However, genocide is rarely experienced in a gender-neutral way. Before any violence begins, individuals of different gender identities already perform distinct labour, uphold specific moral codes, and sustain different kinship responsibilities (Jones 2010, pp. 42–44). When regimes such as the Khmer Rouge rise to power, these patterns of gendered expectation shape not only the methods of violence but also the lived experiences of suffering.

Recent gender-focused scholarship has moved beyond simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries to reveal how authoritarian regimes weaponise cultural roles. Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979) offers profound insights into how gender shaped every layer of genocidal violence. Before 1975, rural Cambodian households operated as interdependent units centered around rice cultivation. Men ploughed fields or temporarily ordained as monks, while women oversaw domestic finances, produced textiles, and upheld familial and spiritual responsibilities within the framework of Theravada Buddhist ethics (Chandler 2008, pp. 121–125; Ledgerwood 1995, p. 81). As Ledgerwood notes, **“women’s economic and spiritual**

contributions were vital for keeping kin-based household systems intact” (1995, p. 89).

Kobayashi similarly highlights how **“female merit-making practices reinforced local cosmological order and gendered moral hierarchies”** (2022, p. 181).

The Khmer Rouge revolution shattered this order. Motivated by Maoist principles and a desire to cleanse society of capitalist, religious, and familial ties, the regime dismantled longstanding social structures. Kiernan writes that the Khmer Rouge **“launched a radical assault on traditional Cambodian society, dismantling the institutions that had structured rural life for centuries”** (2004, p. 262). Collectivisation, ideological surveillance, and state-orchestrated marriages redefined gender roles, often exacerbating women’s vulnerability while militarising and isolating men.

Jones argues that the regime’s rhetoric of equality was “deeply gendered” and resulted in reproductive coercion for women and forced combat or labour for men (2010, p. 49).

Chandler notes that Khmer Rouge leaders worked to “obliterate pre-revolutionary identities,” including those rooted in spiritual traditions and gendered family obligations (2008, p. 246).

Men connected to the previous social order were denounced or executed. Women, on the other hand, were forced into marriages and coerced into motherhood for the revolution.

Many endured sexual trauma in silence, knowing that reporting rape often resulted in further punishment or disbelief (Hidden Scars 2011, p. 38).

In Cambodia, gender was not a side effect of genocidal violence—it was a defining axis.

Women endured forced marriages, sexual abuse, and the emotional labour of keeping families alive during famine. Men lost their social authority, were forcibly conscripted or executed, and often left their families behind. Children, too, were conscripted as agents of the regime. These gender-specific experiences continue to shape Cambodian society, impacting trauma transmission, social roles, and the cultural processes of remembrance and recovery.

I. Gender Roles in Cambodia before April 1975

A. Patriarchal but Complementary Household Economy

In 1960s Cambodia, most rural families operated as interdependent kin groups—typically three or four related families living together on raised earthen mounds (Chandler, 2008, pp. 122–123). Men worked in the fields, cleared land, hunted, and earned social prestige through temporary ordination as monks. Women managed household finances, produced and sold textiles, and determined when to sell rice or livestock (Ledgerwood 1995, pp. 88–90). These roles were not merely functional; they expressed a cultural ideal of interdependence.

Patriarchal codes like *chbab srey* (“rules for women”) prescribed modesty and submission for women. Yet, Cambodian elders often invoked a proverb—“the husband is the roof, the wife is the pillar”—to convey mutual reliance within households (Ledgerwood 1995, p. 92).

Gender roles, while unequal in public prestige, worked in tandem to maintain domestic harmony. Families functioned as semi-autonomous economic cells, integrating production, consumption, and ritual activity. Women’s control over finances was vital and balanced the male-dominated spheres of religion and legal authority.

Kinship networks expanded this household economy into broader clan structures, which reinforced not just social unity but gendered expectations. Negotiations over marriage arrangements, land disputes, and elder care operated along lines of gendered seniority and intergenerational roles.

B. Religion and Gendered Merit

Theravada Buddhism embedded gender into spiritual practice. Men earned religious status through monkhood, while women accrued merit by supporting monks—donating robes, cooking, and sponsoring rituals (Kobayashi 2022, pp. 180–182). Women’s devotional labour was indispensable for sustaining religious institutions. Rituals like *Pchum Ben*, where wives prepared rice cakes and husbands chanted scripture, illustrate the fusion of gender, religion, and kinship.

These practices reinforced moral duties across generations. Daughters were expected to care for elderly parents as an act of spiritual devotion; sons were obligated to ordain, even briefly, to honour the family. As Ledgerwood observes, “gender roles in Cambodia are deeply

embedded in Buddhist cosmology and moral obligations” (1995, p. 90). These roles were not just domestic—they formed a moral and cosmological framework.

C. Implications for Genocide

This tightly woven web of economic, familial, and religious gender roles became a direct target of the Khmer Rouge. A regime intent on erasing “old society” had to dismantle men’s spiritual authority and women’s subsistence and reproductive power, along with the kinship system binding them. The revolution disbanded families, banned religious practices, and enforced uniformity in gender roles.

Men were disrobed, executed, or forced into military and agricultural labour. Women were uprooted from their traditional roles, coerced into state-arranged marriages, and subjected to collective labour—often under surveillance. The very systems that once brought rural stability—spiritual life, economic interdependence, and kinship ties—were weaponised. This amplified both male and female suffering in distinctly gendered ways.

II. Khmer Rouge Ideology and Gendered Social Engineering

A. Collectivisation and the Attack on Private Domesticity

The 1976 *Four-year plan* ordered that ‘individualistic family mentalities must be smashed’ (Kiernan 2004, p. 262). Children ate in separate huts under teenage monitoring; Kitchens were replaced by communal mess-halls; What once was an economic domain and social space for women, was now being abolished to diminish their authority (Maguire 2005, p. 103). Men, once offered protection and decision making within the household, now redeployed to distant canals and dams, fracturing paternal roles. This attack on private domesticity was central to the Khmer Rouge who sought to rid the old way of life. The home had been a place of spiritual, cultural and intergenerational continuity, particularly for women, as their identities were shaped by domestic stewardship and kin-based authority. Dismantling this structure was the regime demonstrating that not only will they target the

need for material independence, but also gender roles that sustained moral and emotional life.

B. Forced Marriage as Population Policy

Pol Pot's team believed that rapid population growth would speed agrarian production. The local committees would order mass weddings, often pairing thirty to fifty couples at once, where strangers pledged to "love Angkar before spouse" (Wright 2014, para. 9). An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people were coerced into such unions between 1975 and 1978 (GBV Archive 2024, para. 2). Women were told to consummate the marriage, whilst being threatened with execution; midwives monitored pregnancies to ensure compliance.

Scholars debate whether forced marriage counts as genocidal rape. The (ECCC) Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia ruled in 2016 that it constituted "other inhumane acts" and a form of sexual violence (ECCC 2016, §991). Whatever the legal label, this practice weaponised women's reproductive capacities to serve state goals, whilst men, too, were coerced, sometimes forced to divorce earlier wives, which created psychological distress and guilt (Hidden Scars 2011, p. 38). Additionally, to state violence, the emotional and psychological trauma of forced intimacy and childbearing within a framework of ideological coercion created a deep post-war legacy. Many survivors report shame, alienation from their spouses, or the burden of raising children conceived through terror rather than love.

C. Gendered Division of Labour and Exposure to Death

1. Men

Men around the age of 15-50 were assigned to heavy construction: digging canals, building dykes, or serving as porters on the Thai Border. All in which involved extreme calorie deficits; mortality in male workers reached 30 percent in some zones (Kiernan 2004, p. 269).

Moreover, men with prior military or administrative experience were singled out as "new people" (urbanites) or "17 April people" and executed early in the revolution (Becker 1986, pp. 230–231). Beyond physical labour, the male identities as protectors and providers were destabilised. Torn from families and stripped of social function, many were afflicted with psychological collapse.

2. Women

The women's labour concentrated on rice transplantation, arduous, but closer to food sources. Female survival rates at times exceeded male rates, but they also had to face sexual abuse by local commanders who exploited their authority over rations (Maguire 2005, p. 158). Pregnant women were ordered back to the paddies within days of childbirth, which led to high maternal and infant mortality. Even in these gruelling roles, women were expected to perform ideological work to demonstrate loyalty to Angkar, whilst disciplining each other and forging compliance. Female cadres enforced work targets, arranged marriages, and participated in purges, highlighting the complex and sometimes contradictory positions women occupied within the regime.

D. Children as Instruments of Surveillance

Children around the ages of 7 to 15 joined the Khmer Rouge's Children's Unit. Training manuals declared: 'Children belong to the revolution, not to their parents' (World's Children's Prize 2021, para. 4). Girls served as mess-hall servers and informants; boys were taught to use small-arms and served as camp guards. Gender roles thus persisted within indoctrination: girls performed caregiving surveillance, boys armed surveillance. This manipulation from childhood formed a new generational wedge, whereby children monitored parents and siblings. This reinforces the regime's gendered social engineering.

III. Gender-Specific Violence and Violation

A. *Sexual Violence and Reproductive Control*

Although the Khmer Rouge officially banned "sexual misconduct," the prohibition served more as a mechanism of state control than protection. In practice, cadres acted with impunity. Women who were raped risked being accused of "immoral behavior" and executed without trial (Becker, 1986, p. 337). The regime enforced sexual violence not only through abuse by individuals but through its systemic policy of forced marriage. These state-arranged unions had to be consummated immediately—guards conducted nightly checks, turning

sexual intimacy into a coerced act of ideological compliance. As one survivor put it, she was “raped by [her] husband because Angkar ordered it” (Hidden Scars 2011, p. 39).

Reproduction became a tool of state policy. Women were expected to produce children for the revolution. Their pregnancies were monitored by midwives and cadres to ensure they aligned with the regime’s expectations. If a woman became pregnant outside an authorised union, coerced abortions were often imposed (GBV Archive 2024, para. 5). Fertility, once a sacred and personal matter, was weaponised—female bodies became instruments for political regeneration, stripped of agency and autonomy.

The emotional aftermath was just as harrowing. Many women report enduring shame, isolation from their spouses, and the pain of raising children conceived through coercion rather than love. The silence surrounding these experiences has prolonged their suffering, with survivors carrying invisible scars long after the violence ended.

B. Masculinity, Execution and Militarisation

Men suffered under a different, but no less destructive, logic of gendered violence. They were disproportionately subjected to torture, forced confessions, brutal labour, and execution. Facilities like S-21 became death factories, where men—especially former monks, civil servants, and intellectuals—were imprisoned and killed (Chhim 2020, p. 57).

Traditional notions of masculine strength and protection were inverted. Torn from their families and unable to provide or defend, men were branded as remnants of the “old society” and disposed of accordingly. Expressions of grief or hesitation were viewed as political betrayal. Cadres manipulated emotion as a political tool—labeling sorrow as cowardice. In the harsh environment of labour camps, even mourning a loved one could result in punishment.

As Chhim (2020, p. 57) notes, many male survivors carried deep shame for failing to protect their families. The regime’s ideological message was clear: vulnerability equaled treason. Masculinity was no longer defined by kinship or care, but by unwavering submission to the revolution.

C. Targeting of Monks and Nuns

The Khmer Rouge's assault on Buddhism was also deeply gendered. Over 60,000 monks—almost all male—were defrocked, imprisoned, forced into labour, or executed, branded as “leeches on the people” (Kiernan 2004, p. 270). Their removal severed a critical link between generations and extinguished a primary source of moral guidance and cultural continuity.

Elderly female nuns, known as *don chee*, were not spared. Though their roles were different, their suffering was profound. Once responsible for maintaining temple grounds and offering ritual support, they were relocated to labour camps despite their age and fragility. The destruction of pagodas did more than repress religion—it dismantled the gendered structures that offered women spiritual refuge and communal connection.

The Khmer Rouge's gender-specific violence was both systematic and symbolic. It transformed roles that once conferred meaning—husbands as protectors, wives as caregivers, monks as moral guides—into vulnerabilities to be exploited. To this day, survivors grapple with the trauma of those betrayals, where identity, kinship, and belief were turned against them in service of a genocidal state.

IV. Post-Genocide Gendered Legacies

A. Widows and Female-Headed Households

By the 1980s, one in five Cambodian households was led by a widow (Chhim 2020, p. 65). The genocide had not only decimated the male population but also destroyed the social fabric that once defined a woman's identity through marriage. With farmland often mined and plough animals gone, widows had to adopt roles previously reserved for men—ploughing, bargaining in markets, and petitioning for land rights.

This shift brought both empowerment and stigma. Some women found new autonomy and emerged as community leaders, advocating for reconstruction and support. Others faced suspicion and social isolation, as their public presence challenged long-held expectations of

female modesty and domesticity. In a culture where honour had once been defined through fidelity and family service, becoming the economic and moral pillar of a household required a complete renegotiation of identity.

Widows stood at a crossroads of loss and resilience—symbols of survival, yet often burdened with navigating a world that no longer fit its old rules.

B. Trauma Transmission and Gender

The psychological aftermath of the genocide was deeply gendered. Research indicates that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affected 57% of female survivors compared to 44% of males, with higher rates attributed to sexual violence, forced marriage, and caregiving burdens (Hidden Scars 2011, p. 66).

Within families, daughters often became the emotional caretakers of their traumatised mothers, absorbing stories of loss and fear at a young age. Sons, in contrast, were more likely to confront silence—especially around the disappearance or execution of fathers. This shaped the way second-generation Cambodians understood their history. Daughters internalised trauma as a duty of empathy; sons struggled with absent role models, at times idealising lost fathers or rejecting inherited notions of masculinity altogether.

These patterns complicate narratives of national resilience. Healing was neither linear nor equal. Silence, in many cases, became just as powerful as speech in shaping memory, identity, and intergenerational understanding of the genocide.

C. Cultural Revival and Gender Negotiation

Despite the devastation, post-genocide Cambodia witnessed cultural revival shaped by gender. In the 1990s, classical dance—long a domain of female expression—was revived by women in diaspora communities in Minnesota and Paris. Teaching almost-lost *apsara* choreography became a way to preserve memory and transmit resilience (Khan 2025, para. 5).

Monks began to be re-ordained, and pagodas reopened, restoring religious life. Yet these restorations also reintroduced traditional gender hierarchies. At the same time, some women

began assuming lay leadership roles in Buddhist organisations, and widows who had once lost their societal standing regained moral prestige through merit-making and community ritual.

In the diaspora, younger women reimagined traditional performance—merging *apsara* motifs with contemporary dance to express memory, hybridity, and self-determination. These acts not only preserved heritage but challenged fixed gender roles, positioning women as artists, leaders, and storytellers of survival.

Cambodia's gender landscape after genocide is not just a story of destruction—it is one of transformation and negotiation. Women have taken on unfamiliar roles under impossible circumstances. Men, too, are redefining masculinity in the absence of patriarchal continuity. Through memory, ritual, and creative expression, survivors continue to rebuild meaning after loss.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Cambodian genocide was not simply a class-based revolution or an instance of mass killing; it was a reordering of social life that weaponised gender roles to further its ideological goals. Through examining how the Khmer rouge systematically dismantled the family, reconstructed labour, and controlled sexuality, we can see that gender was not a side effect of the violence, it was central to its logic. Women were targeted through forced marriage, coerced reproduction, and sexual violence, their identities now reshaped as tools for state survival. Men, on the other hand, were often stripped of their authority, and subjected to gruelling labour whilst also being eliminated as perceived threats to the regime. Children as well were pulled into the control of the regime, with their roles shaped by assumptions about gender and ideological purity.

But the violence did not end with the regime's collapse in 1979. Its legacy continues to reverberate through Cambodian society in the form of demographic imbalances, intergenerational trauma, and reconfigured gender roles. Widows bore both the burden and

the stigma of survival. Female survivors of sexual violence navigated shame and silence, often becoming reluctant custodians of their families' emotional recovery. Sons and daughters inherited fragmented identities—some absorbing the trauma, others responding with silence or reinterpretation.

Yet amid this suffering, there emerged resilience. Women stepped into community leadership roles, preserving memory through storytelling, ritual, and art. Cultural revival—especially through classical dance and Buddhist practice—allowed survivors to negotiate gender anew, blending tradition with transformation.

Analysing gender allows us to see genocide not only as the destruction of life, but also as an assault on identity, meaning, and relationality. It helps explain how violence was justified, how it was experienced, and how it is remembered. In Cambodia—as in other genocides—gender is not simply a lens for analysis, but a structural axis of harm and survival.

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