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Victim of Khmer Rouge sexual abuse seeks justice

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A Cambodian transgender woman filed a complaint Wednesday with the Khmer Rouge genocide tribunal alleging that she suffered repeated sexual abuse at the hands of the communist group when it held power three decades ago.

Sou Sotheavy, 68, said she is the first Cambodian to pursue legal action for alleged sexual violence under Khmer Rouge rule. She claims Khmer Rouge soldiers repeatedly raped her as punishment for "moral offenses." She was born male but has been living as a female since her teenage years.

The Khmer Rouge, whose radical policies between 1975-79 led to the death of about 1.7 million Cambodians, espoused a puritanical morality and imposed strict rules against sexual misconduct.

Silke Studzinsky, the plaintiff's lawyer, said she hoped her client's action would inspire other victims of sexual abuse by the Khmer Rouge to do the same.

"This step would encourage other victims of such crimes to come forward and demand acknowledgment and justice for their suffering, which has largely been ignored until now," the lawyer said.

In Sou Sotheavy's case, soldiers made her cut her long hair — a rule they applied to all men and women — and wear men's clothing, she said.

They also forced her to marry a woman and ordered them to perform sexual intercourse to produce a child, she said.

Sou Sotheavy said she had a daughter with the woman she was forced to marry but left the relationship after the Khmer Rouge was ousted from power by a Vietnamese invasion in 1979.

The radical communist group banned romance, forced many men and women into mass marriages and tortured or killed those who engaged in unsanctioned sexual relations.

But genocide researchers have also found many instances of rape and sexual violence committed by Khmer Rouge operatives.