

# Interview of Chhoeun Sophal

*A: Interviewer: Kim Meng*

*B: Interviewee: Chhoeun Sophal*

## Summary of the Interview

*Chhoeun Sophal was 36 years old at the time of her interview, and currently resides in Ta Skor village, Kandal province. She has four children, three boys and one girl. In this interview, she describes the many difficulties that she has gone through, specifically focusing on a lack of education in her family, financial problems, and her marital struggles. Despite her troubles, she expresses concern and care for her children and hopes that they will have a brighter future.*

A: To begin, I'd like to say hello! I am representing a university in America called BYU Provo, and I am here to interview people in Cambodia and ask about the kinds of hardships and happy times that you have gone through.

B: Yes.

A: I'd like to ask you for your permission to interview you about your history—do you give me permission?

B: Yes.

A: Thank you so much. Today's date is March 11, 2019. I am the interviewer, my name is Kim Meng. What is your name?

B: My name is Chhoeun Sophal.

A: How old are you this year?

B: I am 36 years old.

A: 36 already?

B: Yes.

A: And for you, where were you born?

B: My mother is from Kandal province, but when she got married to a man near the river, so she moved. We were born by the riverside, and then we came here.

A: I see. And what is this place called—what village and district?

B: Ta Skor village.

A: Oh, Ta Skor village?

B: Yes. Sarikakaev commune, Lvea Aem district, Kandal province.

A: Sarikakaev commune, right?

B: Yes.

A: Okay, I know—I know it well! And what are your parent's names?

B: My mother's name is Sok Soeun.

A: Sok Soeun, and what about your father?

B: My father's name is Nguon Chhoeun.

A: Nguon Chhoeun.

B: Yes.

A: And how old are they?

B: My father passed away, my mother is the only one still alive. She is 56 years old.

A: Right. And you were telling me that your mother is sick—

B: She has cancer.

A: Oh, brain cancer?

B: Yes.

A: Did you take her to the hospital?

B: We took her to Ang Duong Hospital.

A: Oh!

B: When we took her to the hospital, they told us that she needed surgery, and they did some sort of a scan of her head. After they saw the scan, they cut a bit into her head to check to see if the tumor was benign or malignant, you know?

A: Yes.

B: Because if it is malignant, then they can't do the surgery. When they made the incision, they took some flesh from her ear.

A: Right.

B: After that, they saw that the tumor had traveled to her ear. Because of that, they didn't dare to operate on her. They had us do radiation on her at the Russian hospital, but I didn't take her to get radiation. And they don't do it just once, they do the treatment five or six times. We can't manage to do all of that, we have just kept her around until now. Whenever she gets sick, we give her medicine to help reduce the pain. But now, the doctors have stopped giving us medicine.

A: Oh! And what do you think you are going to do now?

B: We don't know what to think. We just took the news as it was, because we didn't know what to do. She was still in a lot of pain, so we gave her some different medications. She got feeling better for a few days, but then the pain would return again. We just barely brought her back from the hospital a few days ago, actually.

A: When they gave her medicine in the village, was it effective?

B: It was at first, but eventually it wasn't as effective at fighting the sickness. We would give her the medicine and it wouldn't do anything. Even if we gave her more, her pain wouldn't go away. We also heard that this sickness could be spread to one of her children—that

scared us a lot. They said that most of the time, it spreads to the oldest child, and I'm one of the oldest. I've been very stressed ever since then.

A: But have you gone to get checked at the doctor?

B: Not yet, I haven't gotten checked or scanned.

A: Is it true that it can be spread?

B: We don't know for sure, but that's what they told us.

A: Yeah, I don't think it can be spread—

B: Apparently the oldest child is the most susceptible.

A: But if—

B: But hey, that leads to the oldest child hating their mother. They say that this sickness—  
[Interviewee starts arguing with relative.] When you have cancer, you gain a lot of fat—  
[Pauses]

A: But when your mother came back from the hospital, did she feel better at all?

B: No, she hasn't gotten better since she came back from the hospital. It's been a year since we took her to the hospital. When we took her to the hospital, and then got her some medicine in our village.

A: Right.

B: She actually takes the medicine at our house. It doesn't really help though. Her cancer is causing her a lot of suffering. Her skin is sagging a lot, too. She also can't eat anything—she can't keep anything down. Whenever she drinks or eats, it just comes back out of her nose.

A: Oh no! That's not good!

B: Her sickness is very extreme, it's hard for her to bear. There are a lot of people who walk by here and run away when they see her.

C: [Relative sitting nearby speaks up.] We don't even know how to help, the doctors can't even do anything, what are we supposed to do?

A: We went to Ang Duong Hospital every day for a week. We didn't even really accomplish anything by going, we just wasted a lot of money. They gave us a little bit of medicine but didn't do much else. Even a single scan cost us a thousand in cash! When the hospital gave us medicine, it didn't really help that much. When we were there, it was a little helpful but once we left Ang Duong and came home, it didn't do her any good anymore.

C: The hospital basically took our money from us—

B: They took about 100–150 in cash from us for the medicine, which lasted two or three days—the medicine that they gave us there.

A: But she would take the medicine and it didn't help at all?

B: No. Their medicine did a little bit, but her condition didn't improve. We cleaned her every night and day, but her surgery wound near her ear kept bleeding. It just kept bleeding and bleeding.

A: Right, it sounds serious! So do you remember the names of your grandparents? What were their names?

B: I don't really remember, no. But I remember my mother referring to them as Sok—was that her name, Sok? Sok was my grandmother's name I never asked her anything else, her parents died during the Khmer Rouge. So I don't really know anything else.

A: So you don't remember their names?

B: No.

A: What's your husband's name?

B: Nai Noeun.

A: Nai Noeun. And how old is he?

B: He's around 38 or 39—uh, is he 39?

C: Yes, he's 39.

B: He's 39 already!

A: Oh, 39.

B: The year of the monkey.

A: Did he already leave for work?

B: Yes, he went to go fishing.

A: Oh.

B: Oh, things are so difficult, I don't even want to talk about it! I can't talk to any of my relatives, neighbors, or children—I don't want to embarrass them. There are more and more problems every day.

A: But what's important is that you get feeling better, right?

B: Right. But another thing is, my health isn't that good either. I don't have the stamina to do anything.

A: Oh, you're feeling sick too?

B: Yes, and I'm having trouble sleeping because I have to check on my mother in the middle of the night. So I don't get enough sleep, and it has made me sick.

A: Right.

B: I just went to get my blood tested, because I used to have high blood pressure. My blood pressure got up to 22 [units] and I thought I was going to die and leave my children behind.

A: Oh, but you're still young—

B: Yeah, I have high blood pressure, all the way up to 22 [units]. My eyesight is going fuzzy, my heart is getting worse, and I used to throw up all the time. They say that if you have high blood pressure, you can die pretty quickly. It's a serious illness. My shoulders are also messed up, it feels like it has a heavy weight on them.

A: Have you gone to the hospital to get checked?

B: Yes, I have. I took my mother for her appointment so I had them do a checkup on me too.

A: Okay. So I want to ask you, when you got to know your husband—what year did you get married to him?

B: We got married in 2001.

A: In 2001. So it's been 18 years already.

B: Yes.

A: And back then how was it that you met him, fell in love, and got married to him?

B: Um, to be honest, I wasn't happy with the marriage, but my mother was content with it. I wanted to run away, but I was lazy and didn't want to displease my parents.

A: Right.

B: By the time I got married, my father had already passed away. But before that, I had heard him tell me that if there were any problems, he didn't want me to marry my husband.

A: Right.

B: My father had a knack for discerning people's character, and all he [my husband] did was play cards. [Yells to someone passing by.] After that, I listened to my father, and I didn't want to marry him. He told me that if I took that man as my husband, it would only lead to sorrow on account of my mother and her daughter. He wasn't content with it, he was convinced that it would only bring sorrow on my mother's end and mine. And he couldn't have been any closer to the truth.

A: Right. But for your mother, she was content?

B: She was content with the marriage.

A: Which means that when you got married it was because—

B: It was because my mother forced me, yes.

A: And back then, did you fight against her decision, or go with it?

B: I fought against it, but my mother went and got someone to soften my heart.

A: Oh!

B: My heart was softened, and I went with what she wanted.

A: And when you got married back then, did he give you much of a dowry, or what?

B: Honestly, we were all very poor, so I only got a little bit. Also, my father didn't want me to marry him, it was only because of my mother that we got married. Back then, he didn't have anything. Mother was poor, and my father had advised me against it.

A: Okay. So you got married in 2001?

B: Yes, 2001.

A: And back then, how much was your money worth, back in 2001?

B: Back at that time, a dollar only gave you 2000 riel.

A: 2000 riel?

B: Maybe more like 2500 riel to a dollar.

A: Wow, that's not very much. And now it's like 4000—

B: But now a dollar is worth 4000 riel or more.

A: So when he gave you that small dowry, was it enough to cover the wedding?

B: No, but I used a little bit of my money. We used some of our money and some of his money.

A: And after you got married, how many children did you have?

B: Four children.

A: Four children total?

B: Yes, one girl and three boys.

A: And what are their names?

B: For my children?

A: Yes, all four of your children. The first one is named—?

B: The first's name is Noeun Sokly. Then Noeun Pannet, Noeun Chamreoun, and Noeun Chantouen.

A: And does your oldest have their own family?

B: No, all my children are single.

A: Are they still in school, or are they all working?

B: They all have stopped going to school! We wanted them to finish schooling, but none of them did. They didn't learn anything! They quit all by themselves, and couldn't force them to go to school at that point—they wouldn't learn anything. As parents, we want our children to learn a lot, but how are we supposed to force them to do that?

A: And your daughter that was just here, did she stop going to school too?

B: She got to sixth grade, and she just stopped learning this year.

A: And you don't have her go back to school?

B: She came to me and said, "Mother, I'm not learning anything, it doesn't stick. Can I stop?" So let her quit.

A: But maybe you should encourage her more, wouldn't that be good for her?

B: Yes, I tried to have her go back. But she told us that she's not learning anything, it doesn't stick. It's like I said, she chose to quit on her own. It's not that I'm afraid to let her go to school, if she'd like to go back to school then I would send her back. She just doesn't retain anything—she can't progress.

A: But maybe you should—

B: I don't want to force my daughter, especially since I—her own mother didn't go to school.

A: Right.

B: I didn't finish my own schooling, I had a hard time learning so I stopped going to school. Our brains aren't developing, so I can't force my children to go.

A: So why is it that they can't retain anything?

B: We're not sure. We haven't really made them work hard, they just eat and learn, eat and learn. But despite their studying, they still can't retain anything. We've never really made them do any hard labor.

A: Did she ever skip school?

B: No! She stayed until she quit. She paid attention in class too. She just doesn't understand. It's not that she skipped days or anything, she went consistently. She would try her best in class until her teacher told her to stop. She never skipped class, no.

A: I wonder why that is.

B: She just can't retain anything. We have no idea why she can't learn.

A: So I'd like to ask you, what does your daughter do now that she stopped studying at school?

B: She doesn't do much. She looks after her grandmother because her father isn't around. She helps cook and boil the water, that's all. She hasn't been to school in a long while.

A: Oh, okay. That is sad to hear, she should go to school because studying would be good for her.

B: Yes, but when she goes, she doesn't learn anything. And her inability to learn makes her embarrassed, she feels embarrassed around everyone else.

A: I see. So, how many siblings do you have?

B: My mother only had two children [including me]. Both of us were girls.

A: Oh, two children, and both are girls.

B: Yes, but honestly, she's better off than me. I'm the poorest of the two.

A: And are you the oldest, or—?

B: I'm the oldest.

A: The oldest. And where does she live?

B: My younger sister?

A: Yes.

B: Here in the same hometown, close to one another.

A: Oh, but is she here now?

B: Yes, at first, she lived in Phnom Penh. But then she moved and bought some land and a

house out here.

A: Yes, oh okay. And what is her name?

B: Her name is Chhoeun Sophea.

A: Chhoeun Sophea.

B: Yes.

A: But now that she lives here, does she come to visit very often?

B: Our houses are next to one another!

A: Oh, your houses are close to each other!

B: Right.

A: And which house is yours?

B: It's about two or three houses down from that one over there.

A: Oh, okay. So that house over there isn't yours then.

B: Mine is close to the school.

A: Oh yes, I saw the school when I came here, but I didn't know the name of the school. So when you were a child, you learned at school a bit, right?

B: I did, I studied up to fifth grade before I quit. I didn't understand anything either, like I told you before. It's why I can't get upset at my child for not learning.

A: Oh, so to fifth grade then.

B: Yes.

A: Do you remember the name of the school that you went to?

B: It was called Sarikakaev Primary School, next to Krasah Pagoda!

A: Right, Sarikakaev Primary School. And now your children know which school you learned! I bet you haven't ever told them that before, right?

B: No, I've never told them that.

A: And now they know!

B: Yes. Back then, our desks were all made of wood, and we had to use our shirts to clean the desks. The schools back then were extremely poor. Students nowadays are so blessed, they all learn at nice modern schools.

A: Yeah, now they have air conditioning and—

B: And clean water and things to eat too!

A: Right!

B: It's because charity organizations have come and helped the schools.

A: Yes.

B: Back then, there were no such things. Back then they had—

A: I've heard that back then, people learned underneath trees and whatnot. Were you born back at that time?

B: I was! Yes, sometimes our school would get flooded when it would rain—we didn't have a good place to study in that generation. I have to praise the children nowadays, they have good schools to learn at. [Pauses] Made of stone and roof tiles— [Trails Off] In my generation—I just have to praise the children of this generation, they have new, modern schools to attend.

A: Yes!

B: They even have tile and whatnot, it's unbelievable!

A: Yeah, they even have air conditioning!

B: [Laughs, interview pauses as interviewee gives some money to a relative and they have some small talk before proceeding.]

A: Okay. So I would ask you a few more things, like, when you went to school, was it far from your house?

B: It was close.

A: It was close by?

B: Yes.

A: Did you have anything to ride to school?

B: No, I walked.

A: You walked?

B: Yes, because the school was nearby. At first, they had a wall blocked around it—

A: Right.

B: So we had to walk around it a little bit, and we were there.

A: Oh, that's easy.

B: Yes.

A: Not so difficult. And were you a good student, or an average student, or a weak student?

B: I studied, but I never learned anything! [Both Laugh]

A: Okay, so maybe just an average student then.

B: Right.

A: And back then, what subjects did you like the most?

B: I liked numbers.

A: Oh, numbers—mathematics?

B: I didn't really understand it, though. I only knew how to count. [Both Laugh]

A: Okay. And when you went to school, did you have any close friends there?

B: I did, all my friends were the children of rich people.

A: Oh!

B: They really liked me a lot. They had some money, and they would always buy food and share it with me. I didn't have anything to give though, because I was poor and they were rich kids. They were all rich and they counted me, a poor kid, as one of their friends.

A: Right, and do they ever come visit you now?

B: Oh, every day! I see them all the time. [Laughs]

A: And how is that?

B: And even though they're rich and they run into me every day, they never forget me. I see them call me over all the time!

A: Yes.

B: I don't ever dare to call out to them, but they call me over first. We meet up and they always ask, "Sophal! What are you up to, where are you heading?" And I'll tell them.

A: And so when you see your old friends, you feel happy?

B: Yes, I feel happy because they never act disgusted or look down on me because I'm poor.

A: Right. Sometimes, rich people can be kind too—

B: Some rich people say, "Oh don't speak with [them]." Sometimes they see us and that we're poor and they won't speak with us. And for me, I know that I'm poor and I don't dare talk with rich people, you know?

A: Yes.

B: But it's no big deal when I see my old friends from school, they always call me over!

A: And so when you meet us with your old friends, do you feel nostalgic about your memories from school with them?

B: Yes, I recall everything from when we were at school together—

A: Did you play any games together, like that rubber band jumping game?

B: Yeah, we played Lot Anteak, or that jump rope game. We would play all kinds of jumping games, really. [Both Laugh]

A: Right, so I'd like to ask you, when you were in school and you decided to drop out, did you not have any desire to continue your education?

B: I wanted to continue, but I just didn't understand anything despite my efforts. I just can't internalize anything!

A: You just didn't understand?

B: I was sad that I couldn't internalize anything I was learning. I remember not being able to learn, and that I couldn't read except very slowly. [Interviewee continues to speak, but her relative starts speaking over her.] It's too late now.

A: Oh, but maybe it's not too late! Even for me, my school—

B: Well, it may not be too late, but the reality is that I don't have time, I have to make food for my husband and children, you know what I mean? And I have to run my shop too, I just don't have time.

C: [Nearby relative speaks up.] How is a housewife ever supposed to have time? And her husband won't even give her permission!

A: [Chuckles Uncomfortably] Uh, right.

B: That's because our husbands have to give us permission to have that opportunity, and he has never given me the chance to do that. Every day is so hard because I got married to an alcoholic. It's hard to live with him, it's hard to understand one another. It's like what they say, whatever situations I don't want to find myself in, I find myself in it anyway. Whatever problems I try to avoid, become problems anyway.

A: Right.

B: So it's so hard to live with a drunkard as a husband.

A: Has he ever done anything abusive to you?

B: If you're talking about cursing, he does that all the time. But he's never actually hit me. I would hit him right back.

A: Oh my! [All Laugh]

B: Yeah, he couldn't ever hit me. He has definitely sworn at all of us, but he's never hit me.

A: Oh!

B: I'll be honest, if he ever hits me and it leaves a mark, I'll never let him sleep comfortably. I'll put it to you straight!

A: Right.

B: Yeah, he doesn't dare do anything to me or my four children, but he'll definitely swear around us. He has never dared to hit me.

A: Right.

B: He's never dared to hit me.

A: Probably because he's afraid of you! Afraid that you'll—

B: Back then, I had a hard time controlling my feelings, back when I had strength, I wouldn't put up with it. He would curse at me and call me all kinds of names. Once, I got so angry that I grabbed a tree branch and hit him on the head so hard that it split it open, and he had to get fifteen stitches. I couldn't hold off my emotions any longer. After I split his head open, he lost his audacity to try anything—to be clear, he had never hit me in the first place, but he certainly didn't dare to mess with me again. Before, he would break anything valuable that I had bought, and it would make me sad until I couldn't contain my emotions any longer.

A: Right.

B: After that, I got so angry that I couldn't contain my feelings anymore, so I took a stick and

hit him over the head. He hasn't dared to break anything again—he doesn't have the guts to do anything anymore.

A: Right.

B: But now, if he ever cusses at me, I just walk away. I'm too lazy to put up with it—I have unmarried children and I don't want to embarrass them. I just endure it because if I continue to argue with him, what good would that do? It wouldn't do any good, it would just embarrass us and everyone else would start gossiping about us, that's it. So I walk away from whatever problems I can avoid. Whatever I can put up with, I endure.

A: So then, ever since the one time you hit him with a stick, he's learned not to— [Laughs]

B: It wasn't just the one time, I hit him twice! At first—

A: Oh, you hit him more than once?

B: At first, it only split his head open a little bit. It was the second time that I hit him and he needed seventeen stitches.

A: Seventeen stitches!

B: So now, he doesn't dare to mess with any of my things. It's been four, five, six, maybe even seven years already and he hasn't dared to mess with my things. I'm the one that buys things for the house. I told him not to throw away anything I bought or to curse at me, but I can put up with—uh, if he messes with anything that I have bought at home, I'll hit him. I'm being honest, this is what I say every day. I can put up with a few things, I told him, "If it's something small, then I'll do whatever I want." That's what I told him! "I've put up with you enough already, if you do anything else, I'll split your head open again!"

[Long Pause, Interviewer Says Something Inaudible]

B: I get so angry! Anything that is too much for me to bear makes me want to kill him.

A: Right.

B: He curses at me too much, and he does it just because I'm a woman, that's not something I can put up with.

A: But at first, when he fell in love with you, it wasn't this way, right?

B: Not at all! It's only been like this since we started having children. He used to refer to me affectionately. He would sometimes use cute pet names until we met with the elders and they asked him, "What did you just call your wife?" [He responded], "I called her Sophal. They responded, "Don't call her by her name! You should refer to her as a young lady instead!" He has referred to me as "young lady" ever since.

A: Oh!

B: He used to talk to me so affectionately when he asked for things! The way he talked to me was so sweet, and he would comfort me too.

A: Oh, he'd comfort you too.

B: Yes! He would console me. Oh, my history is so bitter, this isn't everything going on. It has been bitter since the very beginning, beginning with when I wasn't satisfied with

[marrying] him. I hadn't slept with him yet, I hadn't given myself to him yet. I can't help but remember listening to my father's advice about him, he said that he didn't want me to take him as my husband. If I would have been away from my father, I would have never known [that this could happen]. But because I was warned, all I can do is feel regret. I don't have any interest in giving myself to him, you know? I just go to bed downhearted. I don't want to give myself to him—oh, I've had a bitter history since the beginning! I remember back in the year 2000—that was the year of all the floods! There was nothing to eat and nowhere to work. This was at the time when it was just the three of us, my mother and her children. We had a boat that my father had given to us [before he passed away].

A: Yes.

B: We would go out together and cast the net and tow it along. We would catch shrimp, and then take those and sell them—that's all we did because there was no work to do. Back at that time, when there was all that flooding, the government rationed out things to everyone—

A: Oh, right.

B: Sometimes it was rice, sometimes they gave us fishing nets, sometimes we got money. It wasn't like we got a lot, not even enough to fill our pockets. It was only because nobody was able to make any money. All we could do was go fishing for shrimp and sell what we caught. It was this way for about six months, but I remember that [my husband] had some praiseworthy traits—at the time, he was very loyal and genuinely loved me. For six months, I didn't give myself to him but he didn't go anywhere, he stayed at my home. He didn't go anywhere! At that point, I remember thinking that he genuinely loved and was devoted to me. It was then that I gave myself to him and we had our first child together—the oldest. After that, when our first child was small, we had him go fishing with a drag net, but he wouldn't do it, he would dive right into the water to go fishing! [Starts Laughing]

A: Oh!

B: [Still Laughing] He didn't care, he dove right in! What's more, he dove right in with a small fishing rod! He used a fishing rod back then. I was in the boat because I had gone with him, and we all started laughing at him—the two of us, my mother and me. When I had gone fishing with my father before, we would use fishing poles until the line broke, and then we would cast our nets. But [my husband]—no way! He dove right into the water to go fishing! All I could do was laugh!

A: And would he find fish?

B: He would catch fish, only he could do it that way!

A: Oh, no way!

B: After that, once we had one or two children, he started drinking [alcohol]. He never drank before that, if he did then I never would have married him. I hate people that drink! I was born with an aversion to drunkards. I hate it! I've always hated that kind [of people].

A: It really is hard, especially when you love a—

B: It was after I had two children. He spent all the money on alcohol and stopped going to

work, so we started going into debt. We had to take out some money from an organization to buy materials, and I started looking for a job.

A: Right.

B: We went into debt with the money we received from them. One of our children was only nine days old—nine days old and our family was in over our heads with debt that we owed on our house. We would spend 20,000 to 30,000 riel every day, and every day he would go and get drunk instead of looking for work, while we would be without anything to eat. I was responsible for our everyday expenses, and we had debt to pay off. So I dropped my children off with my mother, and she nursed them with rice porridge. All my children were nursed with rice porridge! My history is so bitter! Sometimes I would drop my children off with my mother who had to nurse them with rice porridge, and I would turn right around and go looking for work. [Interviewee pauses and talks to a customer, then continues.] After that, all I could do was drop my children off and go looking for work— [Inaudible] One of my children—I took one of my children to get vaccinated and they didn't give the shot quite right, and my child started bleeding.

A: Oh!

B: I didn't dare take that child to get vaccinated again. I only had two children—two, three, four of my children are fine to be vaccinated. My fourth child is 12 years old now, and that child is also up to date on vaccinations. My husband doesn't have any desire [to work], so I go with my children to go looking for work, sometimes I have to ride the bicycle on National Road Nine. I get up at three o'clock in the morning and take the oldest child with me and leave. Sometimes we got chased by dogs who would try to bite us, we would also run into metal scraps along the road, I've been through all kinds of things in my life. I've had to cut down trees and banana leaves during the midday heat, I've done that before too. My children were raised on rice porridge as babies—every single one of them. When I got really sick, there wasn't anything we could really do. All our creditors came and took our belongings because we couldn't pay, we had to put off work and everything.

A: Right.

B: Especially when I just had a baby, I couldn't go out and work, and my husband was busy going out and getting drunk. As women, most of us don't go out and do physical labor because we have small veins, but because I have, it has caused a lot of problems with my feet—they've gone numb. If it gets worse, I won't be able to walk anywhere, that will be so difficult. I also haven't been able to sleep, and I'm constantly fighting with my husband. I can't help but remember, I have three sons and I am constantly giving them advice. I tell them, "If you want a wife, get a good job and learn to take care of others. If you can't do that, don't take someone as your wife."

A: Right.

B: "Don't do the things that would embarrass your family. As sons, you need to do everything you can and work to take care of your wife and others. If you can't take care of others, don't get married, you are better off by yourself."

A: Right.

B: That's what I tell them all the time. To my second son who is a construction worker, I've told him, "If you get married, don't take a wife who will be embarrassed by what you do." I don't want him to be mocked by his wife or children, I want him to work hard and take care of his family.

A: Right!

B: And my oldest child doesn't have a lot of strength, that child has frequent seizures—I owe a thousand [dollars] because of that. Evening after evening, we would take them to the hospital over and over again. Every single time, it cost us two or three hundred [dollars]. Every [couple of weeks] or a month, we'd go back to the hospital, over and over again. My child's health isn't good at all! Every single day, that child stays home and does little things around the house, they can't even help with any of the work.

A: So your child must be really sick then, huh?

B: Yes.

A: Oh. So, I'd like to ask you another question—did you ever hear your parents tell any stories or talk about when they endured the Pol Pot era? Did they ever tell you about their stories and—

B: I heard my mother talk about it, but I never heard my father speak of it at all. But my mother told me that in the Pol Pot era, she worked as the head cook.

A: No way! [All Laugh]

B: She worked as the head cook and would make rice in a big pot.

A: Right.

B: She would cook the rice and split it up among four people. She would scoop it out for everyone, one pot would feed four people, another pot would feed four [more] people.

A: Yes.

B: She said things were fine, at first they ate well and were happy. But she was the head cook! She cooked all the food.

A: And where were you?

B: I wasn't born yet!

A: You weren't born yet—

C: [Relative speaks up.] By 1980, Pol Pot was over already!

B: Back then, [my mother] didn't have a husband yet, she was still young and single.

C: [Relative continues to speak, inaudible until the interviewer moves closer.] It was after the Pol Pot era was over! Both of us were born in Phnom Penh, right after the Pol Pot era. It was right after the Vietnamese liberated us—my mother told me that I was born on the side of the road. It was right after Pol Pot was finished, in 1980.

A: [Laughs] Oh, you were born on the side of the road!

C: My father had just gotten married—

B: [Interviewee cuts her off.] To be honest, the father that passed away isn't my birth father. He was my stepfather, but he acted as if he was our biological father. He raised us ever since we were small—

C: Ever since she was tiny!

B: —ever since my younger sister could be in the fields.

A: Right!

B: My birth father just drove by on a moto, he, uh—

C: He has another wife!

B: He had another wife. After my mother had two children with him, he took another wife so my mother took my step-father as her husband. They didn't have any children together though.

A: Oh!

B: But he loved us like we were his own children, he didn't ever swear at us or look down on us as if we weren't his own children—no! He cooked rice, he made soup, washed clothes—ever since I was young, he even washed our clothes for us! [Both laugh, interviewee turns to relative and asks a question.] My father just drove by on his moto, what was he was coming back from watching—?

C: Her father is like my uncle.

A: Oh!

C: No actually, she is my husband's cousin.

B: Her husband's mother and my mother were siblings.

C: Their mothers were siblings, so we're related.

B: [Interviewee begins speaking with some nearby children, then continues.] Her mother is my mother's older sister.

C: We're like siblings, we live under the house—

B: [All start speaking over one another.] Like siblings—

C: Almost like step-siblings! [All continue talking over one another, mostly inaudible.]

A: Okay, I would like to ask you, ever since you were young and up until now, what games do you like to play?

B: I haven't really ever played any games before, and I've never really danced before either.

A: Right. [Laughs]

C: She knows enough to get by!

A: Oh she does?

B: [Laughs] I know just a little bit. I don't drink alcohol either, all I know how to do is work. My husband—uh, he says that all I know how to do is work. I told him that we used to be poor—we used to be so poor, and that I didn't want my children to come without a family. I

didn't want them to come without having a [stable] family, and I wanted to have things that we could share with them and whatnot. What I'm trying to say is that I wanted my children to be part of a family where we could share things with them, even if they were small and not huge. I wanted it to be that we had things that we could share with our children.

A: Right.

B: My husband doesn't think like I do though, he says that all that I and the children think about is work. It's like what I usually say—that this world only counts those who are rich, it doesn't count the poor. When I tell him that though, he gets mad.

A: But honestly, because he's a man, he should be striving to find work and—

B: Yes! To be honest, I do the work of both the man and the woman every day. And my husband doesn't even contribute a little. Every day, he does nothing—if something were to happen to me, it would all be over [for my family.]

A: But maybe you should take some time to do things that are uplifting, so that—

B: How am I supposed to be happy when—it's like what I said before, I can't be happy because my husband is a drunkard, that's just not possible. Look, it's like whenever we go to any of the ceremonies, they try to have me dance. Once we finish eating, they tell us to go and dance and whatnot. I can't dance but they still tell me to go and dance! Because of that, I don't want to go anymore. So whenever there is an activity or a wedding, I have my children go, but I never go. I don't feel comfortable wherever I go, I'm too lazy to go.

A: Right.

B: And wherever they go, I don't follow them, I let them go. I've never followed them even if they say that they are heading to an activity or a wedding, or if they are getting together to eat, I don't go with them. They don't think like I do.

A: Right. That's difficult for sure.

B: It is really difficult.

A: So I would like to ask you one final question, is there anything that you would like to say to the youth of future generations like your children? So that—

B: I would like to tell my children—so, I only have one daughter, and I personally don't have anything, I am poor. And with my family, I have seen a few problems arise already. I have a daughter, and I have seen how [my husband] has hurt her, just like my father hurt me—not physically, but in my heart. I don't want to see it that way.

A: Right!

B: So I would like to advise my children to work hard, so that they can have more things and that life will be easier for us too.

A: Right, that's true!

B: I have given them this advice every day already. I have given them that advice and now that it has been a while, they think their mother is just saying the same thing over and over again.

A: [Chuckles]

B: I don't let my children go out at night! As soon as the sun sets, I call them back. I'm worried that they will start following—look, some people are good and some people are evil. They get each other together to do drugs and that sort of thing, you know what I mean? I'm worried that because they have never done that before, they will want to try it out once. And once that happens, they will—

A: They try it out—

B: They'll follow those kinds of friends, you know what I mean?

A: Yes.

B: And because I'm their mother, every time I go to bed I can't but worry about my three sons. I'm afraid that they'll give themselves to bad things, I'm afraid that the police will catch them— [Audio Corrupted, Inaudible] —and that they won't release them. Then they'll have no money, and the police will just toss them into prison. As a mother, that's difficult [to even think about]!

A: Right.

B: So I am always giving them advice, and I want them to listen.

A: Okay.

B: I'm afraid that they won't listen to their mother. It's why I told my husband, "Look, our children are all grown up now, if you drink alcohol and try to give them advice, it'll do no good, they won't [take it seriously]. If I were their father, I would be a steadfast pillar!" But my children are just scared of us, I give them advice and they think that I'm a nag. Because I'm a woman, and because I'm a mother and a wife, all I can do is worry about them doing bad things.

A: That's right.

B: All I can do is worry about them when I go to sleep, I think about them and worry in bed for them. I can't protect them 24 hours a day, you know.

A: Yes.

B: So I just worry for them. Nowadays, a lot of the youth follow each other in doing bad things while they look for temporal happiness.

A: Right.

B: So, I just worry.

A: I see. Well, thank you today for sharing your experiences! I hope that when your children hear your voice, it will inspire them to be good children and correct any mistakes they have made. But thank you so much, goodbye!

*Originally translated through the collective efforts of Madison Blanchard, Debra Williams, Abby Murri, and Thomas Barrett. Retranslated and edited in April 2024 by Ethan Arkell and Thomas Barrett.*