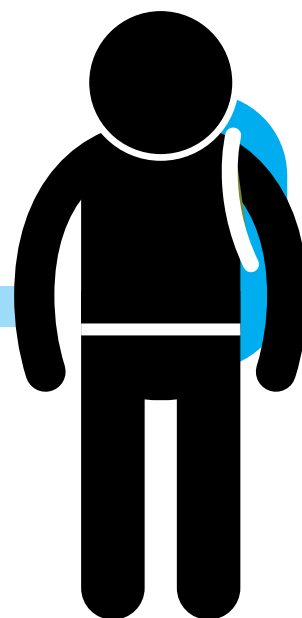
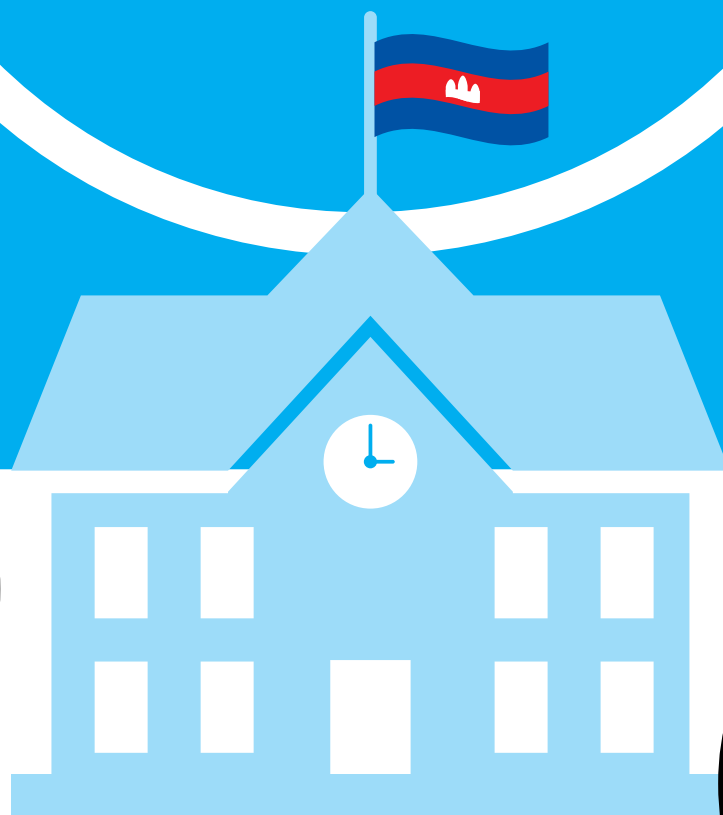
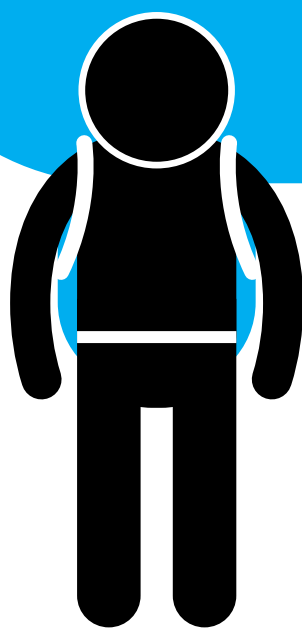




WHY ARE
BOYS LEAVING
LOWER
SECONDARY
SCHOOL
EARLY IN CAMBODIA?



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August 2020

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ACRONYMS

EMIS	Education Management Information System
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
MoLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PISA-D	PISA for Development
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

DEFINITIONS

Dropout

Dropout refers to students leaving school before completing the grade level in which they are enrolled. The report uses ‘dropout rate’ to refer to ‘event dropout rate’, as this is the definition used by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). The event dropout rate measures the percentage of students leaving school over a particular time period, typically one year. The dropout rate in Cambodia is collected by the Department of Education Management Information System (EMIS) early in the school year. ‘Dropped out’ students are those who were enrolled one year but were not enrolled in the same grade or the next highest grade the following year. Students moving from the public to the private system were considered ‘dropped out’ under the data collection process prior to the 2018/19 school year.

Early school leaving

The term dropout has negative connotations for students, and so this report refers to ‘early school leaving’, or uses similar language. The term dropout is only used when quoting others or when statistics are referenced, as it is common to refer to ‘dropout’ figures.

Primary school

Primary school in Cambodia covers Grades 1–6. Children typically enrol in Grade 1 at age 6.

Lower secondary school

Lower secondary school in Cambodia covers Grades 7–9. A lower secondary education combined with a primary school education is also referred to as ‘basic education’.

Upper secondary school

Upper secondary school in Cambodia covers Grades 10–12.



A boy smiles in his classroom in Kratie province. © UNICEF Cambodia/2018/Brown



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As more boys than girls are increasingly leaving lower secondary school early in Cambodia, UNICEF sought to investigate the experiences of adolescent boys that are leading to their education being cut short. This research does not intend to signal a shift away from prioritizing girls' education. Girls in Cambodia and elsewhere continue to face multiple and complex barriers to obtaining an education. However, ensuring equitable access to and success in school is a guiding principle of UNICEF, and there is a significant gap in the literature around understanding the challenges boys face. Patriarchal burdens on boys can often be the flip side of limits placed on girls.

The research was qualitative, and included focus group discussions and individual interviews with 38 adolescent boys and girls who were at risk of leaving lower secondary school, and 18 adolescents who had recently left school early. Additional interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 13 parents, 12 teachers and 10 local educational authorities, including school directors, commune councillors and school management committee members. Four officials from provincial offices of education and five officials from district offices of education were also interviewed.

Field work was conducted in the three provinces of Phnom Penh, Battambang and Kratie. These provinces were selected to highlight differences between the experiences of adolescents living in urban areas and those living in rural areas. Kratie and Battambang have more girls completing lower secondary school than boys. Additionally, Battambang data collection provided further insight into how migration to Thailand affects early school leaving, and Kratie data included perspectives of Indigenous ethnic minority communities.

The study intended to consider what programmatic and policy interventions could assist in combating boys' low completion rates. In pursuit of this, the study conducted a literature review of current Cambodian and international understandings of the issue, and examples of interventions targeted at keeping boys in school.

The main findings of the research covered economic factors, home and social life factors, factors related to play and performance, and how adolescents and their families plan their futures.

Economic Factors

The study found that compared to adolescent girls, adolescent boys between the ages of 14 and 18 have higher expectations placed on them to work. Furthermore, adolescent boys have higher paying and more work opportunities available to them. This is because heavy unskilled labour, work requiring travel, or work at night time is deemed appropriate only for boys and men.

Home and Social Life

Adolescent boys in rural and urban settings tend to spend time with friends after school or on weekends. This experience is shared by adolescent girls in Phnom Penh, whereas girls in rural areas typically socialize only during school hours. It is culturally expected that adolescent girls do not stay out late, and they have obligations in the home, whereas boys can have more independence. Adolescent boys are more likely to be influenced negatively by their friends and classmates, including being encouraged to leave school early by those who have already left. Adolescents living away from their families report feeling stressed and missing their families, which in turn affects their ability to concentrate and learn in school. Adolescents may be separated from their families because their families have migrated for work or because their school is a long way from home.

Play, Performance, Discipline and Drugs

Boys are considered to misbehave more in the classroom and be less compliant than girls. For example, they may forget their books, make noise and disrupt lessons, or harass and fight other students. In turn, they may be disciplined more often by teachers. Some boys feel that they are more harshly punished than girls for similar infractions. Adolescent boys are believed to play more than girls, and this is the primary reason given for their under-performance in school. However, many community members also feel that boys are less academically able because of inherent differences in the sexes. Community members are particularly concerned about the impact of drugs on adolescent boys in their villages and neighbourhoods, and the negative peer influences involved in drug-use.

Future Planning

Though not specific to boys, the study found that if adolescents have autonomy in decision making around staying or leaving school, they are more likely to leave school. Students who were still in school tended to make decisions about staying or leaving school with their parents or guardians, or their parents made the decision for them. The study had a number of other non-gendered findings about the barriers to attending and succeeding in school.

International Research

Internationally, the study found that most Southeast Asian countries experience the same trend. A number of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the Caribbean and parts of East Asia began seeing boys under-performing or leaving secondary school early from the 1980s onwards. Despite this global context, there is a small range of published research on policy interventions and their evaluations.

International programmes attempting to keep adolescent boys in school focus on positive role

models and peer relationships, engaging teaching methodologies and improving boys' confidence. They include adult mentoring in Australia and the US, and buddy systems in the UK pairing boys with older, well-performing adolescent boys. Bridging programmes targeting both boys and girls aim to provide flexible options for adolescents to complete basic education and receive vocational skills training. Gender awareness training for teachers, sometimes attempting to combat negative stereotypes about boys and their academic abilities, is available in a wide range of countries.

Recommended Interventions

The following recommendations are based on original data collected for this study, understanding of current programmes and policies in Cambodia, and best practice lessons from other countries with similar trends. They are primarily relevant to the government, however development partners and schools play an important role. Most of the recommendations specifically target boys. However, these activities are also likely to benefit girls.

1 Improve the learning environment to support all boys and girls to achieve their goals

Boys benefit from learning through play, high academic expectations, and through pedagogical approaches that support their psychological well-being

Example activity: Expand teacher training and professional development activities on attitudes towards boys in the classroom

2 Build and strengthen boys' and girls' relationships with peers and adult role models

Peers and adult role models can build boys' confidence in their academic abilities

Example activity: Introduce or expand peer group and buddy programmes

3 Encourage exploration of career pathways and options for education and training

Expanding boys' understanding of where education can take them and providing opportunities to balance academic learning with practical skills can lift their aspirations

Example activity: Expand career counselling and ensure boys are included

4 Ensure all boys and girls can access schools while living at home with their families

Enabling adolescents to live at home with their families is good for their psychological well-being

Example activity: Focus on building more schools, particularly in remote areas, rather than building dormitories to house adolescents who live far from school

5 Put gender equality at the centre of all educational programme and policy planning

It is important to include boys in all policy planning

Example activity: Ensure that all policies and programmes track boys' progress as much as girls', and activities always consider boys' needs

INTRODUCTION



Despite significant progress in primary school enrolments and completions in Cambodia, secondary schools have yet to see the same rate of participation. A number of provinces in Cambodia have significantly more girls than boys completing secondary school. This research, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal for inclusive and equitable education,¹ seeks to better understand the recent and widening gap between completion rates for boys and girls in lower secondary school. By learning from other nations' experiences of the same trend and through qualitative research in Cambodia, this study seeks to understand the challenges boys face and recommend policy and programme interventions to promote adolescent boys remaining in school.

Education is a fundamental building block of development, which promotes economic participation, strengthens values, improves health outcomes and enriches lives. Investment in education builds people's skills and knowledge, referred to by economists as human capital, and increases a country's level of productivity.² More importantly, education is a basic human right, which lifts children out of deprivation and exclusion.³

Cambodian law affirms free access to education for all citizens from Grade 1 through to the end of lower secondary school in Grade 9.⁴ However, this is not always the reality and keeping children in school during the lower secondary school years remains a challenge. In the 2018/19 school year, the average national dropout rate in Grades 7–9 was over 15 per cent.⁵ At each of the three grade levels, a higher proportion of boys than girls left school early. On average, the boys' dropout rate is 17.5 per cent, nearly three percentage points above girls.⁶ This means almost 6,000 more boys than girls left lower secondary school that year. The national completion rate in the 2018/19 school year was only 45 per cent for lower secondary school.⁷ The gap between male and female gross completion rates in lower secondary schools is gradually widening.⁸ For example, in the 2012/13 school year there were slightly

¹ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: UN General Assembly, 2015).

² World Bank, *The Human Capital Project* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018).

³ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989).

⁴ Kingdom of Cambodia, *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia: Translated* (Phnom Penh: Constitutional Council, 2010).

⁵ Department of EMIS, *Education Management Information System Database* (Phnom Penh: Kingdom of Cambodia, 2019).

⁶ Department of EMIS.

⁷ Department of EMIS.

⁸ Department of EMIS.

more boys than girls completing lower secondary school, with boy completions at 42 per cent and girl completions at 40 per cent.⁹ However, in the 2018/19 school year, boys' lower secondary school completion

rates had actually declined to 40 per cent and girls' completion rates had increased significantly to 50 per cent.¹⁰ Boys' declining completion rates are cause for concern.

Figure 1: National lower secondary school dropout rates in school year 2018/19, by grade and gender.
Source: EMIS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS)

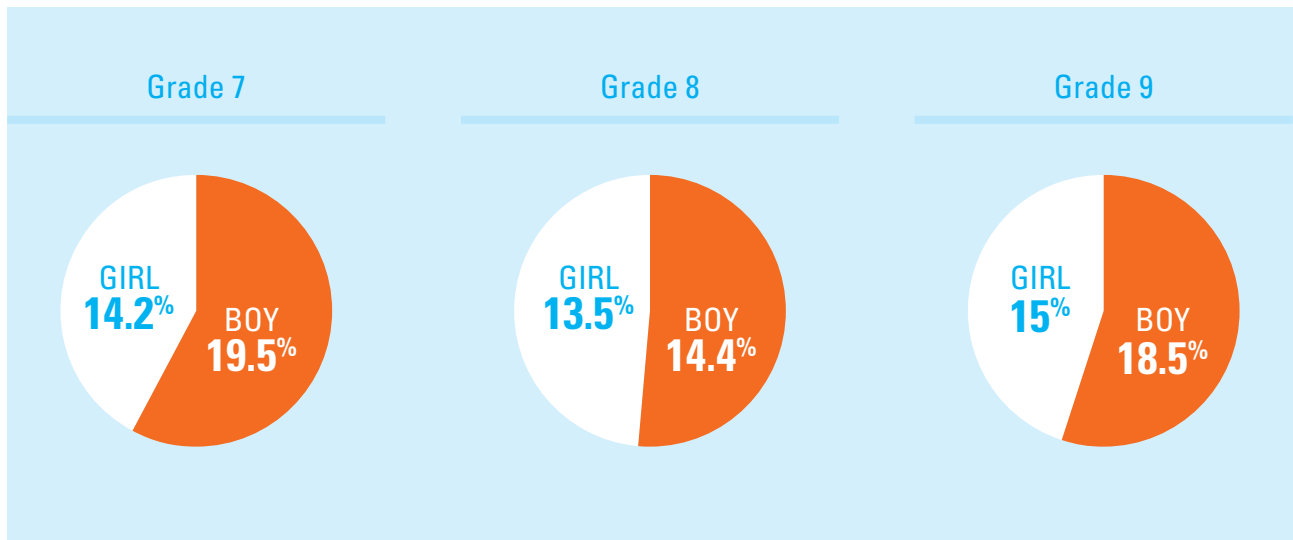
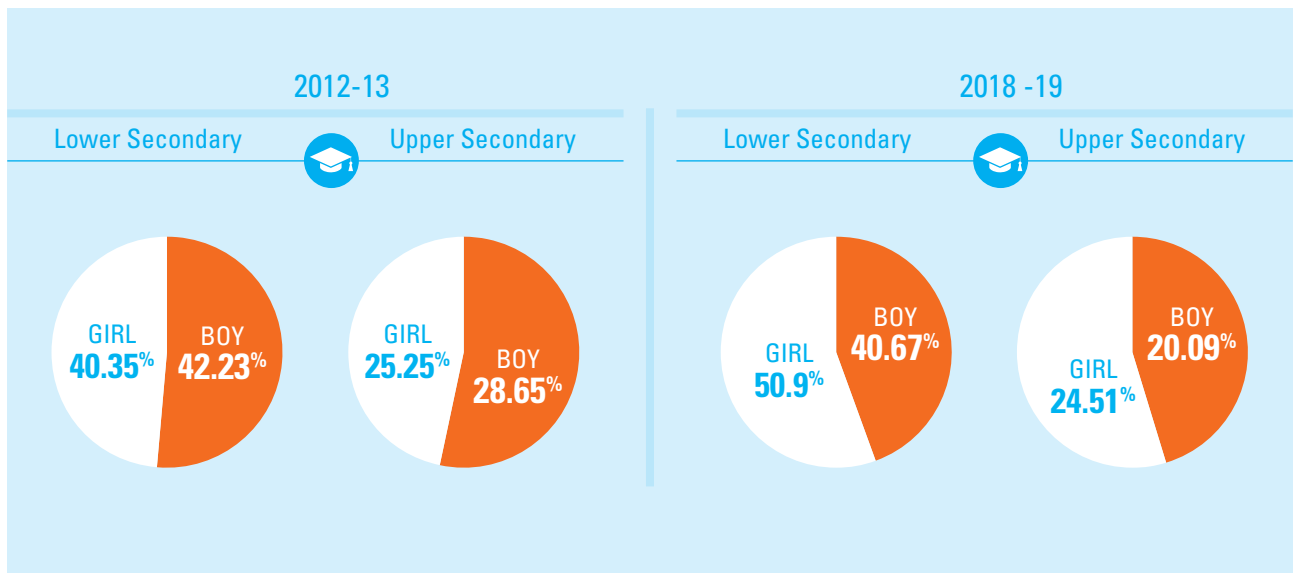


Figure 2: National secondary school (lower and upper) completion rates between 2011/12 and 2018/19.
Source: EMIS, MoEYS



⁹ Department of EMIS, Education Management Information System Database.

¹⁰ Department of EMIS.

Cambodia is not alone in experiencing this trend. Countries in the OECD have experienced it for decades,¹¹ and the World Bank and UNESCO have identified 38 developing countries where girls now complete secondary school in higher numbers than boys,¹² including much of Southeast Asia.¹³ Though a worldwide trend, boys educational underachievement has not garnered as much attention as the disadvantages girls face in gaining an education. This analysis seeks to understand the barriers and challenges boys face, which does not negate the importance of continued efforts in increasing and enhancing girls' education. Education systems should be effective for both boys and girls.

As an emerging issue in Cambodia, boys' early school leaving rates are not yet well understood. This study provides new qualitative data on why adolescent

boys in the three communities involved in the research are leaving lower secondary school. Through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, local education authorities, adolescent boys and girls at risk of leaving school early or who had recently left school, several factors were discovered for boys leaving school early.

Through the implementation of the Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023, Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) is aiming to improve boys' completion rates in lower secondary school by 8 per cent by 2023.¹⁴ This would bring the male completion rate up to 50 per cent.¹⁵ In pursuit of these goals, recommendations are suggested on how policy makers and programme managers may respond to the issue.

Research Questions

1. Why do adolescent boys leave lower secondary school early?
2. What are the differences and/or similarities in the challenges adolescent girls and boys face in staying in school?
3. How has migration affected adolescent boys' lives and early school leaving?
4. What challenges do adolescent boys from ethnic minority communities face in staying in school?
5. What are the differences and similarities between factors that contribute to higher rates of early school leaving for adolescent boys in rural areas compared to Phnom Penh? How do those experiences compare to girls?
6. What policy interventions have other countries in the region and the world undertaken to prevent boys leaving secondary school early, and what impact have they had?
7. What policy interventions could reduce rates of early school leaving for adolescent boys across rural and urban settings in Cambodia?

¹¹ Jyotsna Jha and Sarah Pouezevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years* (North Carolina: United States Agency for International Development, 2016).

¹² World Bank, *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018).

¹³ UNESCO Institute of Statistics, *Lower Secondary Completion Rates, 2017*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.ZS>.

¹⁴ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2019).

¹⁵ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

2

BACKGROUND

The background information is divided into two main sections:



Influences linked to boys leaving school early at the secondary level, and



Policy and programmatic interventions that have been adopted by countries around the world to keep boys in school longer.

The background information was compiled through a comprehensive literature review, including research conducted by NGOs, academics and UN agencies.

2.1 Influences

The main influences identified as being linked to boys leaving school early were economic push and pull factors, migration, social and cultural attitudes and school-based indicators. This section focuses on the Cambodian context and research, with supporting evidence from international experiences.

2.1.1 Economic Push and Pull

Several economic influences contribute to students' and families' decision-making processes for a young person to leave secondary school early. The World Bank¹⁶ found that in Cambodia, 52 per cent of young people not attending lower secondary and two thirds of young people not attending upper secondary reported poverty and the need to earn a living as the main reasons for not attending school. A recent, large-scale MoEYS study highlighted similar reasons for leaving school.¹⁷ In traditional family structures in Cambodia, young people are expected to contribute to the household.¹⁸ These students are likely to seek work in agriculture or the wage economy as unskilled or low-skilled workers.¹⁹ Cambodia's lack of social protection is an additional factor preventing young people leaving the agriculture industry in rural areas.

¹⁶ World Bank, *Matching Aspirations: Skills for Implementing Cambodia's Growth Strategy* (Phnom Penh: The World Bank, 2012).

¹⁷ Ham Kunthea and Kang Sophanna, *The Study on the Low Completion Rate in Primary and Lower Secondary*

Education (Cambodia: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2019).

¹⁸ Maryann Bylander, 'Contested Mobilities: Gendered Migration Pressures among Cambodian Youth', *Gender, Place & Culture* 22, no. 8 (14 September 2015): 1124–40.

¹⁹ Thai Seangmean, Seng Sokheng and Panha Somonich, *Youth Employment in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, 2015).

Families may see the family farm as a form of social insurance and prefer the maintenance of the farm over employment opportunities in other industries that are shrouded by uncertainty.²⁰ Consequently, young people may feel pressure from their families to work on the family farm rather than focus on learning new skills for jobs outside of the agriculture industry.

Regardless of industry choice, working has been associated with leaving school early and negative impacts on learning outcomes.²¹ No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa discuss education as an investment by a family, often with hopes of economic returns in the future.²² However, if returns on investment in education are not expected, or the cost is overwhelming, families may stop investing and instead choose to focus on immediate economic gains by sending their children to available job opportunities.²³ These students are likely to seek work in agriculture or the wage economy as unskilled or low-skilled workers. In Cambodia, more than 47 per cent of adolescents aged 10 to 14 years are economically active;²⁴ these adolescents may be in school or out of school.

Studies in Cambodia and Jamaica have highlighted a lack of information available to many low-socio-economic families regarding the economic returns on education.²⁵ Additionally, researchers question how easily understood available information may be for people living in communities where many children leave school early. Without mentors or examples of community members who have achieved a return on investment in education, understanding the possibilities of economic gains through education and the realistic timeframe required to achieve those gains is difficult.

2.1.2 Migration

Migration within Cambodia and across national borders can have a significant impact on the education and employment prospects of those who migrate and on their families.²⁶ Research by MoEYS in 2016 indicated that half of all Cambodian migrants move to Phnom Penh, while approximately 30 per cent

move outside of Cambodia.²⁷ This migration has been tied to working in the wage economy and late school enrolments, which is in turn linked to increased incidences of leaving school early.²⁸

In 2015, Bylander²⁹ studied gendered migration pressures among Cambodian young people in Chanleas Dai, a rural community in the Kralanh District of Siem Reap province, bordering Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. He found there was significantly more pressure on young boys to migrate than young girls. Expectations on 'dutiful daughters' was changing, as they migrated to work in garment factories, however a less contested space was the stronger expectations parents had for boys to contribute financially. On average, boys were expected to start contributing to the household from an earlier age than girls. Within border communities, many people assumed that earning potential was higher in Thailand, therefore boys faced strong pressure from parents and household members to migrate to Thailand to earn money. Additionally, many families were aware that male migrants earned more than female migrants in nearly every labour industry in Thailand, which could be an additional reason for extra pressure on boys to migrate.³⁰ Bylander noted that parents worried less about the safety of boys during travel to their new destination than they did about girls.

Many of the young boys in the community who stayed reported having parents who did not allow them to migrate.³¹ Regardless of the reason for staying, boys who did not migrate reported feeling judged by others for not migrating. They felt others judged them as being scared, unsupportive of their families, poor, unwise and unwilling to take risks. These boys also reported feeling embarrassed when their peers who had migrated returned home to visit. Girls on the other hand did not face similar judgement for staying in their home communities. The desire to migrate was strong among young boys in the border community studied by Bylander.³² It is therefore plausible that this trend is mirrored throughout other border communities in Cambodia.

²⁰ Asian Development Bank, ed., *Cambodia: Addressing the Skills Gap* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2015).

²¹ Chae-Young Kim, 'Child Labour, Education Policy and Governance in Cambodia', *International Journal of Educational Development* 31, no. 5 (September 2011): 496–504.

²² Fata No, Kyoko Taniguchi and Yukiko Hirakawa, 'School Dropout at the Basic Education Level in Rural Cambodia: Identifying Its Causes through Longitudinal Survival Analysis', *International Journal of Educational Development* 49 (July 2016): 215–24.

²³ No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa.

²⁴ Kim, 'Child Labour, Education Policy and Governance in Cambodia'.

²⁵ Seangmean, Sokheng and Somonich, *Youth Employment in Cambodia*.

²⁶ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education - Building Bridges, Not Walls* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018).

²⁷ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and UNICEF, *Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children: Cambodia Country Study* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and UNICEF, 2016).

²⁸ No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa, 'School Dropout at the Basic Education Level in Rural Cambodia: Identifying Its Causes through Longitudinal Survival Analysis'.

²⁹ Bylander, 'Contested Mobilities: Gendered Migration Pressures among Cambodian Youth'.

³⁰ Bylander.

³¹ Bylander.

³² Bylander.



A boy plowing soil to plant morning glory at his secondary school in Steung Treng province.

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2.1.3 Ethnic Minority Communities

Cambodia is home to an estimated 200,000 people who belong to an Indigenous ethnic minority, representing slightly more than 1 per cent of the population.³³ Indigenous communities, sometimes known as Khmer Leou, speak around 20 different minority languages.³⁴ Indigenous ethnic minorities are largely based in three provinces, Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri and Kratie, which are all in the mountainous north-east of the country.³⁵ Their cultures are strongly linked to forest resources and agriculture and they have retained customary practices and beliefs.³⁶ Many groups are patriarchal but some are also matrilineal, meaning the husband will join the wife's family and home.³⁷

Children from Indigenous ethnic minority communities in the north-east of Cambodia are more likely to be out of school. In 2009, almost 47 per cent of boys and girls aged 12 to 14 years from an ethnic minority were out of school, compared to the national average of 11 per cent.³⁸ More recently, the trend of leaving school early has continued. In Kratie during the 2018/19 school year, for example, 21 per cent of students left lower secondary school early, compared to less than 16 per cent nationally.³⁹ This is the highest dropout rate of any province in the country.

Young Indigenous ethnic minority people face several economic, logistical and cultural challenges when trying to stay in school. The north-east provinces

³³ Ministry of Planning, *General Population Census of Cambodia 2008* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Planning, 2009).

³⁴ David Eberhard, Gary Simons and Charles Fennig, eds., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 22nd ed. (Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2019).

³⁵ Moul Phath and Seng Sovathana, *Indigenous Peoples' Issues* (Phnom Penh: International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2012).

³⁶ Phath and Sovathana.

³⁷ Breogan Research, *Adolescent Fertility and Early Marriage among Indigenous Communities* (Cambodia: Care International, 2018).

³⁸ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and UNICEF, *Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children: Cambodia Country Study*.

³⁹ Department of EMIS, *Education Management Information System Database*.



A 13-year-old boy from an ethnic minority breaks wood to be used in cooking in Kratie province.

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have some of the highest numbers of people living in poverty compared to other provinces. The IDPoor system is a proxy means test that assesses a household's material situation. In 2018, 18 per cent of Kratie households were considered poor, above the national average of 15 per cent.⁴⁰ Therefore, opportunity cost calculations for ethnic minority families are heightened. There are also practical drivers for these statistics, such as high numbers of 'incomplete' schools where not all grades are supported, fewer secondary schools, and large geographical distances between homes and schools.⁴¹ Cultural factors have also influenced low completion rates. Key informants explained that ethnic minority parents are discouraged from sending their children to school if they do not feel their culture and language is respected. Ethnographic research has confirmed that young people often have

independence in spending time with potential partners, and early marriage is valued for cultural and economic reasons by several ethnic minority communities, contributing to young people leaving school early.⁴²

There has been considerable effort by the Cambodian government to provide meaningful education opportunities for Indigenous children. In the early 2000s CARE Cambodia, followed by MoEYS, established Multilingual Education in five north-eastern provinces.⁴³ As of 2018, preschool and the first three years of primary school are offered in five Indigenous languages: Bunong, Kavet, Kreung, Tampuan and Brao.⁴⁴ The Multilingual Education National Action Plan 2015–2018 and subsequent 2019–2023 Action Plan seek to ensure that high quality and culturally relevant education can be accessed by all Indigenous ethnic minority students.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Planning, 'IDPoor Programme', IDPoor, 2019, <https://mop.idpoor.gov.kh/reporting/builder>.

⁴¹ Monica Biradavolu, *Independent Review of Scholarship Programme for Ethnic Minority Students in Grade 11 and*

12 in North-Eastern Provinces of Cambodia (Cambodia: UNICEF Cambodia, 2018).

⁴² Breogan Research, *Adolescent Fertility and Early Marriage among Indigenous Communities*.

⁴³ Interview with CARE International.

⁴⁴ Jessica Ball and Mariam Smith, *Independent Evaluation of the Multilingual Education National Action Plan in Cambodia* (Cambodia: UNICEF Cambodia, 2019).

2.1.4 Social and Cultural Attitudes



Five female students review their lessons in their boarding house near their secondary school in Ratanakiri province.

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Cultural norms can significantly affect attitudes and decision making around education, including around gender, drugs and violence. According to cultural theorists, shared assumptions and values influence individual behaviours and attitudes.⁴⁵ These influences vary across communities in Cambodia.

Socialization of gender roles can influence boys' under-achievement in school by creating expectations of appropriate behaviour for boys and girls.⁴⁶ In many cultures, girls are expected to be nurturing while boys should be strong providers. This view often leads to girls helping with household duties and childcare, and boys being assigned heavy work outdoors.⁴⁷ As explored earlier, traditional gender roles create different experiences of economic pressures in Cambodia, where boys may be expected to work outside of the home from an earlier age than girls.⁴⁸

Boys in many cultures are often given more independence to socialize; they make their decisions based on other boys' influence, particularly at lower secondary school age. In Jamaica and Indonesia, studies have shown boys are given more independence to socialize outside of school and home.⁴⁹ Boys' friendships can influence their behaviours and attitudes, particularly during puberty, when boys enter lower secondary school.⁵⁰ Furthermore, friendship group membership becomes highly valued, and can make masculine performance more critical.⁵¹ In 2010 a rapid ethnographic methodology, first created by the Swedish Agency for International Development, was used in Indonesia. The study found that in poor rural villages children made their own decisions about their education.⁵² Children associated school with "friendship" or "having fun", and decisions to stay or leave school were highly

⁴⁵ Helen Spencer-Oatey, *Culturally Speaking. Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*, Second (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁴⁶ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁴⁷ Christopher Clarke, 'Socialization and Teacher Expectations of Jamaican Boys in Schools: The Need for a Responsive Teacher Preparation Program', *International Journal of Education Policy, Research, & Practice* 5, no. 4 (2005): 3–34.

⁴⁸ Bylander, 'Contested Mobilities: Gendered Migration Pressures among Cambodian Youth'.

⁴⁹ Clarke, 'Socialization and Teacher Expectations of Jamaican Boys in Schools: The Need for a Responsive Teacher Preparation Program'; Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁵⁰ R. W. Connell, 'Growing up Masculine: Rethinking the Significance of Adolescence in the Making of Masculinities', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 2

(December 2005): 11–28; Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁵¹ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁵² Australia Indonesia Partnership (AIP), *Indonesia Reality Check Main Study Findings: Listening to Poor People's Realities about Basic Education* (Canberra: Australian Agency for International Development, 2010).

influenced by peer pressure.⁵³ Zuilkowski, Samanhudi and Indriana found one of the reasons boys in Indonesia reported leaving school early was peer pressure.⁵⁴

Studies from the US and Belgium have shown that peer acceptance, or being cool, becomes more important as boys get older. If the dominant social norms of masculinity see school success as 'uncool', then boys may disengage.⁵⁵ Elmore and Oyserman discovered that boys in the United States will often reject behaviours that are not viewed by themselves and those around them, such as friends and teachers, as part of a masculine identity.⁵⁶ Therefore, if school attendance, academic achievement, particular subjects, or behaving in the classroom are seen as feminine, then boys may not imagine them to be part of their own identity or important to their success as a man. In Indonesia, boys reported misbehaviour as one of the reasons they had left school early.⁵⁷ This may be an example of perceived feminine behaviours.

On the other hand, girls are often perceived as being compliant in the classroom and more academically inclined than boys.⁵⁸ High expectations for girls in the classroom reflect a cultural shift recognizing the importance of girls' education. Historical efforts towards girls' education have improved their access to, and success in, schooling. Despite this shift, it is widely acknowledged that most disadvantaged girls still have difficulty in entering or completing their studies. Furthermore, while women have become more highly educated than men in numerous countries around the world, including OECD nations, they still play a smaller role in the workforce on average compared to men, in terms of a lower employment rate, seniority and pay.⁵⁹ This demonstrates the ongoing importance of girls' education, even in the face of the need to improve education outcomes for boys.

A second cultural norm potentially affecting low attendance at school includes the level of acceptance of violence. A Royal University of Phnom Penh study in Siem Reap showed that in 2016, 85 per cent of boys and 80 per cent of girls in Grades 1 to 3 experienced some form of corporal punishment.⁶⁰ This rate declined in the upper primary school years but was still high, at 50 per cent. It is likely that students suffer corporal punishment at secondary school. Plan International found more than 19 per cent of boys in Cambodia and 12 per cent of girls reported being afraid to attend school.⁶¹ These statistics suggest that corporal punishment from teachers could potentially play a role in poor attendance.

OECD and other global research has also shown that boys are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of bullying, including but not limited to physical violence.⁶² Male peer aggression has been linked with boys practicing traditional masculine norms.⁶³ The Global School Health Survey 2008 found boys in Thailand were more likely to be victims of bullying and that experiences of bullying were associated with physical fighting, psychosocial distress and truancy for boys.⁶⁴ Miles and Varin reported in 2014 on violence against and by children in Cambodia and found 57 per cent of children had witnessed other children being teased or mistreated, while 37 per cent said they had been bullied themselves, with slightly more boys than girls reporting being victims.⁶⁵ A 2014 Cambodian Centre for Human Rights report found that almost 63 per cent of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender students had experienced bullying in Cambodia, and felt they were bullied because of their gender. The research team considered whether parents' growing fears about their sons becoming involved in drug related activities was an aspect of gender that intersected with culture in many communities, and could possibly impact family decision-making processes regarding school completion.

⁵³ Australia Indonesia Partnership (AIP), Indonesia Reality Check Main Study Findings: *Listening to Poor People's Realities about Basic Education*.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski, Udi Samanhudi and Ina Indriana, "There Is No Free Education Nowadays": Youth Explanations for School Dropout in Indonesia', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 49, no. 1 (2017): 16–29.

⁵⁵ J. Staff and D. A. Kreager, 'Too Cool for School? Violence, Peer Status and High School Dropout', *Social Forces* 87, no. 1 (2008): 445–71; W. Vantighem, H. Vermeersch and M. Van Houtte, 'Transcending the Gender Dichotomy in Educational Gender Gap Research: The Association between Gender Identity and Academic Self-Efficacy', *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 39, no. 4 (2014): 369–78.

⁵⁶ Kristen C. Elmore and Daphna Oyserman, 'If "We" Can Succeed, "I" Can Too: Identity-Based Motivation and

Gender in the Classroom', *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 37, no. 3 (2012): 176–85.

⁵⁷ Zuilkowski, Samanhudi and Indriana, "There Is No Free Education Nowadays": Youth Explanations for School Dropout in Indonesia'.

⁵⁸ Susan Jones and Debra Myhill, "Troublesome Boys" and "Compliant Girls": Gender Identity and Perceptions of Achievement and Underachievement', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25, no. 5 (September 2004): 547–61.

⁵⁹ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*; Zuilkowski, Samanhudi and Indriana, "There Is No Free Education Nowadays": Youth Explanations for School Dropout in Indonesia'.

⁶⁰ Royal University of Phnom Penh, *Disciplinary Methods in Cambodian Primary Schools: Towards Violence-Free Schools*, 2016.

⁶¹ Nandita Bhatla et al., *Are Schools Safe and Equal Places for Girls and Boys in Asia?* (Bangkok: Plan International, 2015).

⁶² Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Society at a Glance 2008: OECD Social Indicators* (Paris: OECD, 2009).

⁶³ R.W. Connell, 'Growing up Masculine: Rethinking the Significance of Adolescence in the Making of Masculinities'.

⁶⁴ Ruthaychonnee Sittichai and Peter K. Smith, 'Bullying in South-East Asian Countries: A Review', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 23 (July 2015): 22–35.

⁶⁵ Glenn Miles and Sun Varin, *STOP Violence against Us! Summary Report: A Preliminary National Research Study into the Prevalence and Perceptions of Cambodian Children to Violence against and by Children in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Child Welfare Group, 2004).

2.1.5 School-based Indicators



A 13-year-old boy performs a math equation on the whiteboard in Kratie province. © UNICEF Cambodia/2018/Brown

Attendance and Academic Under-performance

Poor attendance may negatively affect academic achievement, which previous research has linked to the increased likelihood of leaving school early.⁶⁶ Students' frequent absences can be due to the distance between home and school, prioritizing earning money over schooling to assist their family, or low academic performance. Rates of Cambodian children not attending school due to distance decreased significantly, from 9 per cent in 2007 to 2 per cent in 2012; this affects girls more than boys.⁶⁷ However, prioritizing other activities such as agriculture and wage labour remains a significant reason for low attendance. Cambodian children will often help with their families' farming or fishing activities during certain times of the year.

International research has linked boys' academic under-performance, which may be due in part to a large number of absences, to leaving school early.⁶⁸ In Cambodia, the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for Development (PISA-D) study looked at the achievements of 15-year-olds and showed that boys are more likely to be behind in school. Although boys are only slightly behind girls in science, and equal in mathematics, girls outperform boys by 17 points in reading.⁶⁹ This is concerning, as reading is a foundational skill for all other subjects. Parents may have lower expectations for return on investment from children who do not perform well academically. Therefore, these students may face additional pressures from home to leave school early.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa, 'School Dropout at the Basic Education Level in Rural Cambodia: Identifying Its Causes through Longitudinal Survival Analysis'.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and UNICEF, *Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children: Cambodia Country Study*.

⁶⁸ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*; Fang Lai, 'Are Boys Left Behind? The Evolution of the Gender Achievement Gap in Beijing's Middle Schools', *Economics of Education Review* 29, no. 3 (June 2010): 383–99.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Education in Cambodia: Findings from Cambodia's Experience in PISA for Development* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018).

⁷⁰ No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa, 'School Dropout at the Basic Education Level in Rural Cambodia: Identifying Its Causes through Longitudinal Survival Analysis'.

Grade Repetition

When children cannot progress to the next grade academically, they may need to repeat that year. The PISA-D Cambodia report identified that students who repeat a grade are more likely to leave school early, and boys are more likely than girls in Cambodia to repeat a grade.⁷¹ In the 2018/19 school year in Kratie, for example, 3 per cent of boys in lower secondary school were repeating a grade, compared to slightly more than 1 per cent of girls.⁷² The statistics were similar in Battambang and Phnom Penh. No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa's longitudinal study in Cambodia identified repetition as a key reason for leaving school early, as students became disengaged and were old enough to be potentially earning a wage.⁷³

While grade repetition has been linked to the increased likelihood of leaving school early, it is important to note that automatic promotion to the next grade is not necessarily a solution. In India, where automatic promotion was used as a policy initiative to combat high numbers of pupils leaving school early, researchers found this approach may have actually further contributed to placing students at increased risk of leaving early.⁷⁴ This is because academically unprepared students are less likely to receive the support they require to meet academic expectations. These students fall further behind and can have greater levels of academic frustration. Consequently, they may be at higher risk of leaving school early.

2.2 Policy and Programmatic Interventions

The following section presents an overview of a number of different interventions adopted by both developed and developing countries around the world to improve boys' attendance and performance at secondary school, including some examples of interventions already in place in Cambodia.

Most of the policies outlined below are examples of a targeted gender approach developed with boys in mind. However, there are limited examples of policy interventions targeting boys specifically. It is noteworthy that interventions targeting boys tend to benefit both boys and girls.⁷⁵

There is extensive academic literature and data surrounding the issue of boys leaving school early and under-performing around the world, however much of this research is quantitative. Unfortunately, policy and programmatic solutions to this problem have not garnered as much attention, and a major gap in the research exists in evaluating interventions that are currently in place. Many interventions used for several decades and in multiple countries seem to lack published research into the efficacy of these interventions. Judging by the widening gap between boys and girls in some countries actively implementing new policies, the interventions may not have had sufficient impact.⁷⁶ This is a gap that needs to be addressed by future research.

2.2.1 Economic

Scholarships

One of the major interventions in place in Cambodia to reduce students leaving school early and to encourage school completion across all school levels is the MoEYS national scholarship programme. Scholarship recipients, who must be from economically disadvantaged families, receive US\$60 per school year. An independent evaluation found the scholarships were successfully contributing to keeping recipients in school longer, however at the lower secondary level 18 out of 30 scholarships per grade per school are allocated to female students.⁷⁷ While it is possible that this mandate has contributed to the increase in female completion rates in recent years, the latest evaluation of the scholarship programme recommends removing gender-based quotas to better address the current trends showing a decrease in male completion rates.⁷⁸ The new Equity Focused Primary Scholarship Framework does intend to give schools more flexibility in assigning scholarships in the future,⁷⁹ which could potentially give more boys in need access to scholarship funding, and in turn positively impact male completion rates at the lower secondary level. Administration issues such as timely payment, inconsistencies across schools in recipient selection, and a lack of monitoring of recipients' attendance and financial need negatively affect the scholarship's outreach capability.⁸⁰

⁷¹ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Education in Cambodia: Findings from Cambodia's Experience in PISA for Development*.

⁷² Department of EMIS, *Education Management Information System Database*.

⁷³ No, Taniguchi and Hirakawa, 'School Dropout at the Basic Education Level in Rural Cambodia: Identifying Its Causes through Longitudinal Survival Analysis'.

⁷⁴ Lorie Brush, Jennifer Shin and Rajani Shrestha, *Inventory of Policies and Programs Related to Dropouts in India* (Washington DC: USAID, 2011)

⁷⁵ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁷⁶ Jha and Pouzevara.

⁷⁷ Ian MacAuslan et al., *Country-Led Evaluation of the National Education Scholarship Programme of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in Cambodia* (Cambodia: UNICEF Cambodia, 2019).

⁷⁸ MacAuslan et al.

⁷⁹ MacAuslan et al.

⁸⁰ MacAuslan et al.



A young teenage girl at school in Battambang province.
© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Ilona Hamilton

The UNICEF-MoEYS Ethnic Minority Scholarships, as well as funding from NGOs such as CARE Cambodia, have successfully targeted minority students in financial need.⁸¹ Overall, there is gender balance in scholarship allocation within this programme, with one exception being in Preah Vihear province where more than 60 per cent of recipients are girls. This scholarship, similar to the MoEYS national scholarship, has positively affected recipients. Recipients are less likely to leave school early and more likely to have improved academic performance.⁸² Unfortunately, this scholarship only covers approximately half of essential costs, and students who need to travel further to reach school have even greater costs associated with schooling.⁸³

Importantly, these scholarship programmes in Cambodia can function as types of conditional cash transfers within the national social protection framework. Until recently, these scholarships were the only functional part of Cambodia's social protection framework. A 2016 review of over 100 studies into education policies in developing countries found that of those programmes with robust evaluations, the two most effective interventions for increasing children's time in school were conditional cash transfers and building new schools where local access was lacking.⁸⁴ However, one of the few conditional cash transfer programmes with insignificant results targeted older children in the Philippines. Researchers found the opportunity cost for older children was higher, and so the size of the transfer might also need to be higher. In Cambodia, the scholarship programme covers approximately 9 per cent of the total cost of lower secondary education, including direct costs of education and opportunity costs associated with schooling.⁸⁵ While at first glance this number may seem low, and school staff and parents expressed a desire for larger scholarship payments, researchers concluded that an increase in transfer size was not a policy priority.⁸⁶ This was based on families' preferences for increasing the number of available scholarships rather than increasing the amount given to each recipient. Furthermore, many people were not

in favour of a graded scholarship system where the amount would increase from Grades 4 to 9 to reflect the increase in costs as children progress through the grades; the opposition was mostly due to concerns of jealousy towards those who may receive more.⁸⁷

School Calendar

Some interventions require close collaboration between school authorities and national level education authorities. This is particularly true in the decentralization of decision making related to school calendars. A transfer of decision-making power to local authorities allows communities the freedom to adjust their local educational model in a way that is relevant and functional for each community. One example of this comes from India, which has adopted a policy allowing local authorities to adjust the school calendar and timing of school holiday breaks throughout the year.⁸⁸ This allows local authorities to be mindful of local planting and harvesting seasons when planning school breaks. In rural areas specifically this could be very beneficial, as planting, harvesting and fishing seasons may vary from community to community depending on which crop is the staple for the agriculture industry in that region. By adjusting the school calendar to specifically accommodate each community, local authorities are able to minimize the number of days students would miss each year due to responsibilities related to farm work. This could be particularly beneficial for boys because, as outlined above, boys are more likely than girls to be working outside of the home and in the local industry. Consequently, in areas where agriculture is a key industry, boys could potentially be more likely to miss school due to planting and harvesting seasons.

With support from UNICEF and Save the Children Norway, Cambodia has piloted a flexible school calendar. MoEYS reports the results of the pilot programme were positive, however local education authorities need greater support from the national level to be able to build their capacity for such decision-making processes. An example of this support could be guidelines to aid in the implementation of flexible school calendars.⁸⁹

⁸¹ Biradavolu, *Independent Review of Scholarship Program for Ethnic Minority Students in Grade 11 and 12 in North-Eastern Provinces of Cambodia*.

⁸² Biradavolu.

⁸³ Biradavolu.

⁸⁴ Amy Damon et al., *Education in Developing Countries - What Policies and Programmes Affect Learning and Time*

in School? (Stockholm: Expertgruppen för biståndsanalys (EBA), 2016).

⁸⁵ MacAuslan et al., *Country-Led Evaluation of the National Education Scholarship Programme of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in Cambodia*.

⁸⁶ MacAuslan et al.

⁸⁷ MacAuslan et al.

⁸⁸ Brush, Shin and Shrestha, *Inventory of Policies and Programs Related to Dropouts in India*.

⁸⁹ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and UNICEF, *Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children: Cambodia Country Study*.

2.2.2 Home and Social

Buddy System

In addition to adult mentoring, several countries have adopted programmes encouraging peer mentoring. A study on high achieving Afro-Caribbean boys in the UK showed the importance of positive friendships and confidence for boys to be successful at school and reject negative peer influence.⁹⁰ The UK introduced the Raising Boys' Achievement Project in 2000, which involved several strategies including older boys being paired with younger boys to assist with reading. The project found key befriender schemes involving influential students could model positive and non-stereotyping behaviour.⁹¹ Interventions targeting boys in the Caribbean also focused on promoting positive behaviours in youth groups and building a sense of self-worth so that small academic failures would not result in dropout.⁹² Again, there are limited evaluations available demonstrating the impact of these programmes.

2.2.3 Play and Performance

Mentoring

Several high-income countries have implemented mentoring programmes to bring additional positive male role models into boys' lives who assist in setting and achieving academic goals. These programmes emphasize reading improvement, as the literacy gender gap is particularly high in OECD countries. In the Australian state of Victoria, for example, a programme named 'Boys, Blokes, Books and Bytes' promotes adult men as positive role models and reading partners using material interesting to boys.⁹³ An evaluation of the pilot found 30 per cent more Grade 9 boys enjoyed reading after the programme.⁹⁴ In the United States, the White House initiative, My Brother's Keeper, connects boys and young men of colour at key stages in their life, including in Grade 9, to reduce chronic absenteeism.⁹⁵ New York City's Young Men's Initiative includes reading and mathematics classes for young black and Latino men who are not yet ready to take their final high school tests.⁹⁶ Finally, the Raising Boys' Achievement

Project between the years 2000 and 2004 in the UK involved a mixture of strategies, including a mentoring system.⁹⁷ Mentors would help set goals with low performing boys. There were conditions for mentoring to be effective, including the credibility of the mentor to students, and setting realistic but challenging targets.⁹⁸ There are limited evaluations assessing the success of these programmes.

Teacher Training

One of the six dimensions included in the child-friendly schools framework is effective teaching and learning. A key focus within this dimension is improving teachers' professional practice.⁹⁹ This is especially important for students at risk of leaving school early, because teachers can have such a profound effect on children's experiences at school and, as discussed previously, can play a role in boys' decisions to leave school early.¹⁰⁰

The child-friendly schools framework calls for increased promotion of professional development opportunities for in-service teachers. Professional development encourages teachers to improve on all aspects of their teaching practice.

The child-friendly schools framework recognizes the need for more specialized teachers in order to ensure the success of all students. For example, the framework includes recommendations for schools to offer counselling services, career orientation and special education programmes, all of which require teachers to have some specialized training.

The importance of counselling services comes up again under the gender responsiveness dimension of the child-friendly schools framework. This dimension emphasizes the need for an established and functional girls' counselling service available in schools. As noted previously, research has shown that interventions and services that improve access to and quality of education for girls are generally beneficial for boys as well when boys are given access to the same services. Counselling services are one example of an intervention that is likely to benefit both boys and girls.

⁹⁰ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁹¹ Jha and Pouzevara.

⁹² Jha and Pouzevara.

⁹³ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Programme for International Student Assessment, eds., *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence* (Paris: OECD, 2015).

⁹⁴ Paula Kelly, 'Boys, Books, Blokes and Bytes', *Aplis* 20, no. 2 (2007): 72–83.

⁹⁵ My Brother's Keeper, *My Brother's Keeper 2016 Progress Report: Two Years of Expanding Opportunity and Creating Pathways to Success* (Washington DC.: The White House, 2016).

⁹⁶ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Programme for International Student Assessment, *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education*.

⁹⁷ Jha and Pouzevara, *Boys' Underachievement in Education: A Review of the Literature with a Focus on Reading in the Early Years*.

⁹⁸ Mike Younger and Molly Warrington, *Research Report: Raising Boys' Achievement* (Norwich: United Kingdom Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

⁹⁹ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Child Friendly Schools Operational Guidelines for the School Based Management Committee* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Ingrid Harrington, 'The Motivation of Boys Who Leave School Early: Impact of Teachers', *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 7, no. 1 (February 2008): 47–55.



A male teacher writing on a whiteboard in Kratie province. © UNICEF Cambodia/2018/Brown

Another aspect of gender responsiveness that is not included in the child-friendly schools framework but that has garnered international attention is the existence of gender stereotypes in schools. Teachers can often unconsciously perpetuate gender stereotypes in the classroom to the detriment of boys' learning and engagement.¹⁰¹ To combat this, gender awareness training programmes for teachers are offered in Sweden, the United States, the Australian state of Queensland, Brazil and Switzerland.¹⁰² In a Commonwealth initiative that included India, Malaysia, the Seychelles, and Trinidad and Tabago, an action guide to address gender bias, 'The Gender Responsive School', was introduced to teachers. In assisting teachers further, Brazil, Germany, Belgium, the United States and parts of Canada have guidelines to help remove gender stereotypes from school materials, as they have been shown to influence students' views of social norms.¹⁰³

Teachers could also benefit from additional training related to incorporating play-based learning into their classrooms and encouraging play, even for students who are in their teenage years.¹⁰⁴ Conklin's research highlights how the presence of play elements in classroom learning are linked to students' desire to be in the classroom. This researcher describes this fact as especially important when considering strategies to keep adolescents in school longer.¹⁰⁵ Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also describes play as a right for all children.¹⁰⁶

Student-Focused Curriculum

Contemporary pedagogical theory outlines that effective and engaging learning requires a curriculum that places students at its centre.¹⁰⁷ The child-friendly schools framework encourages teachers to use student-centred approaches that follow an inquiry-

¹⁰¹ Clarke, 'Socialization and Teacher Expectations of Jamaican Boys in Schools: The Need for a Responsive Teacher Preparation Program'.

¹⁰² Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Programme for International Student Assessment, *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education*.

¹⁰³ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Programme for International Student Assessment.

¹⁰⁴ Michelle A. Honeyford and Karen Boyd, 'Learning Through Play', *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 59, no. 1 (2015): 63–73.

¹⁰⁵ Hilary Conklin, 'Toward More Joyful Learning: Integrating Play Into Frameworks of Middle Grades Teaching',

American Educational Research Journal 51, no. 6 (2014): 1227–55.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

¹⁰⁷ K. Fulton, *Time for Learning: Top 10 Reasons Why Flipping the Classroom Can Change Education* (Corwin Press, 2014).

based learning model.¹⁰⁸ Inquiry-based learning offers students and teachers greater flexibility in pursuing topics of interest and fosters the development of transferable skills, such as communication, problem solving and collaboration.

Life skills, introduced as a subject in late 2014 by MoEYS in three Cambodian provinces, focuses on the development of transferable skills through local, community-based learning opportunities. Locally relevant topics are identified by schools and their communities and incorporated into the academic curriculum through an inquiry-based learning approach. For example, students in lower secondary school, along with their teachers, may choose a social or livelihood topic important to their lives, such as health, domestic violence, vegetable growing, or small business marketing. Drawing on local guest speakers and experts, and students' own experiences and knowledge, children learn about the topic and propose ideas and solutions. MoEYS is planning to continue to expand the programme from the original 78 schools.¹⁰⁹

Other countries have integrated similar transferable skills development into their curricula. For example, in Canada the 'core competencies' of communication, creative and critical thinking, and personal and social awareness are assessed alongside literacy and numeracy. Students create online portfolios reflecting on and illustrating their understanding and practice of the core competencies.¹¹⁰

2.2.4 Planning

Awareness of Benefits

As highlighted previously, the lack of readily available and easily accessible information regarding the potential economic returns on an investment in education could be a barrier to students making well-informed decisions about leaving school early.¹¹¹ In the Dominican Republic, where dropout rates are similarly high, researchers found boys currently enrolled in lower secondary school overestimated earnings that were achievable with a primary education only and



An interesting learning session at a boarding school in Ratanakiri province

© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Chansereypich Seng

¹⁰⁸ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Child Friendly Schools Operational Guidelines for the School Based Management Committee*.

¹⁰⁹ UNICEF, *Local Life Skills Education Briefing* (Phnom Penh: UNICEF Cambodia, 2018).

¹¹⁰ Province of British Columbia, 'Core Competencies: Building Student Success', British Columbia Curriculum, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>.

¹¹¹ Seangmean, Sokheng and Somonich, *Youth Employment in Cambodia*.

underestimated earnings that were achievable with a secondary education.¹¹² A similar gap between actual and perceived earnings was found in Tanzania, although this study included both boys and girls. In 2011, only 7 per cent of the Tanzanian population had completed lower secondary education. A study a few years later found that individuals underestimated the returns for workers with primary schooling by 74 per cent and workers with secondary schooling by 79 per cent.¹¹³ They discovered that individuals who were older, had a lower income or fewer assets, or had not received an extensive education, were more likely to underestimate the increased earning potential education could bring. The misperceptions in both places were perhaps due to a general lack of knowledge and experience of the realistic returns on investment in education.

In a study from 2016, the MoEYS Department of Policy found a similar lack of knowledge around the possible returns on investment in education among Cambodian youth and parents.¹¹⁴ In some incidences, parents discouraged students from attending school because they believed their children's earning potential would be the same regardless of whether they had completed their education or not.¹¹⁵ Researchers recommend addressing this lack of awareness through outreach programmes both in schools and through Cambodia's National Employment Agency.¹¹⁶

Bridging Programmes

The other interventions highlighted in this literature review aim to keep children in school, however bridging programmes specifically target children who have left school early. Such programmes allow out-of-school children to complete academic courses and gain skills through vocational training or non-formal education. Within Cambodia, bridging programmes are provided through NGOs such as Friends International and Mith Samlanh. These two NGOs work together to provide non-formal schooling opportunities to youth aged under 15 years who needed to leave school. For students older than 15, they have seven different vocational training programmes. Youth who enrol in the vocational programmes can also access literacy and numeracy

learning opportunities while simultaneously learning their trade of choice. These youth are supported throughout their first year of work after completing the training programme.

Other vocational programmes have shown success around the world. A UNICEF programme in Bangladesh delivered by five NGOs provided livelihood and soft skills education to out-of-school youth from 2012. A survey found that participants in the programme improved their involvement in income-generating activities from 28 per cent to 99 per cent, compared to non-participants who improved their involvement from 38 per cent to 61 per cent.¹¹⁷

Cambodia also has a Basic Education Equivalency Programme that has been run as a collaborative effort by MoEYS, UNESCO and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) since 2016. The programme allows students who have left school to complete an online learning programme that is equivalent to Grades 7 to 9. Students in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh can access additional support at learning centres spread out through these two cities. Learning centres are equipped with furniture, technology, and facilitators and volunteers to support students. Students can register for the Basic Education Equivalency Programme online or in person at any learning centre, and there is no payment required to register or enrol.

Distance learning gives students the flexibility to complete school work at any hour of the day, choose how many courses they take, and complete their learning from anywhere in the world. Indonesia introduced the Paket programme to offer a non-formal option for students who leave school early at the primary, lower secondary or upper secondary levels. The National Institute for Open Schooling in India is similar to the Paket programme in that it aims to provide accessible learning opportunities for students who leave school early or who may not be able to succeed in traditional schooling environments.¹¹⁸ The institute provides learning opportunities through the use of self-instructional print, audio and video materials. The National Institute for Open Schooling learning materials are available in seven different languages, creating a more inclusive learning experience.¹¹⁹ In addition to

¹¹² Robert Jensen, 'The (Perceived) Returns to Education and the Demand for Schooling', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125, no. 2 (May 2010): 515–48.

¹¹³ Plamen Nikolov and Nusrat Jimi, 'What Factors Drive Individual Misperceptions of the Returns to Schooling in Tanzania? Some Lessons for Education Policy', *Applied Economics* 50, no. 44 (20 September 2018): 4705–23.

¹¹⁴ Sam Or Angkeroat et al., *Lower Secondary School Student Dropout* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2016).

¹¹⁵ Angkeroat et al.

¹¹⁶ Seangmean, Sokheng and Somonich, *Youth Employment in Cambodia*; Asian Development Bank, Cambodia.

¹¹⁷ Anindita Bhattacharjee and Md Kamruzzaman, *Towards*

Employability and Better Livelihood: An Evaluation of BRAC's Skills Development Initiative (Dhaka: BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, 2016).

¹¹⁸ Brush, Shin and Shrestha, *Inventory of Policies and Programs Related to Dropouts in India*.

¹¹⁹ National Institute of Open Schooling, accessed 9 September 2019, <http://www.niosrben.org/index.php>.

the elementary and secondary level academic courses, students may also enrol in vocational training programmes.¹²⁰

The Accelerated Learning Programme is an additional type of bridging programme that has been implemented in a number of countries such as Malawi, Brazil and Honduras.¹²¹ Such programmes target children who are overage, have left school early, or who are unreached due to their geographical location or economic situation. The goal of the Accelerated Learning Programme is to bring children back into formal schooling. Students enrolled in the programme are able to complete more than one grade level in one year, for example in Malawi students registered in the programme complete five years of primary education over three years. Malawi has experienced success with this programme, with 57 per cent of Malawian children who started it returning to formal schooling.¹²²

2.2.5 Other

Early Warning Dropout System

The Cambodian Early Warning Dropout System, as part of the MoEYS' Child-Friendly Schools Initiative, aims to identify students at risk of leaving school early and intervening before they do. The programme was originally piloted by the United States Agency for International Development and Kampuchea Action to Promote Education in 2014 with selected lower secondary schools. The programme is currently rolling

out guidelines for schools to use existing data on attendance and performance, and to enhance their capacity to address the students' and families' needs. The guidelines do not reference boys as an at-risk group, nor does it have any suggested interventions specific to boys.¹²³

School Transfers

MoEYS reports that restrictive policies are in place for migrant children to transfer between schools during the school year. Transfers are typically only possible at the beginning of a school term. Consequently, children who have migrated with their families part way through the school year may have to wait for lengthy periods of time before enrolling in a new school in their new community. This puts migrant children behind when they do re-enter school, which can negatively impact their likelihood of completing school. Adopting a policy to allow transfers between schools in any district or province at any time during the school year could help reduce learning gaps and keep migrant children in school longer.¹²⁴

Cambodia is currently in the process of piloting a new student tracking system. This system will create a digital database to monitor students' attendance, academic performance and enrolment status. Electronic records could enable easier and more efficient transfers between schools. This project is in the preliminary stages and will be piloted in the 2019/20 school year.

¹²⁰ National Institute of Open Schooling.

¹²¹ Ken Longden, *Global Monitoring Report 2013-2014: Accelerated Learning Programmes - What Can We Learn from Them about Curriculum Reform?* (Education for All, 2013).

¹²² Longden.

¹²³ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Early Warning System to Prevent School Dropout: Guidelines for the School Based Management Committee* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2019).

¹²⁴ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.



A father helps his 13-year-old son with his homework in Kratie province.

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3

METHODOLOGY



This study is a rapid, small-scale, qualitative research project. It is complementary to the recent quantitative study completed by the Department of Policy in MoEYS, in which completion rates for primary and lower secondary school were investigated without a specific focus on gender differences. This project provides gender-specific data needed to further build on the research that was already completed. It is important to note that research focusing on boys is not at the expense of improving education for girls. It is equally important for both boys and girls to have access to quality education. Girls were included in this research for comparison and to ensure their voices were not excluded.

3.1 Scope

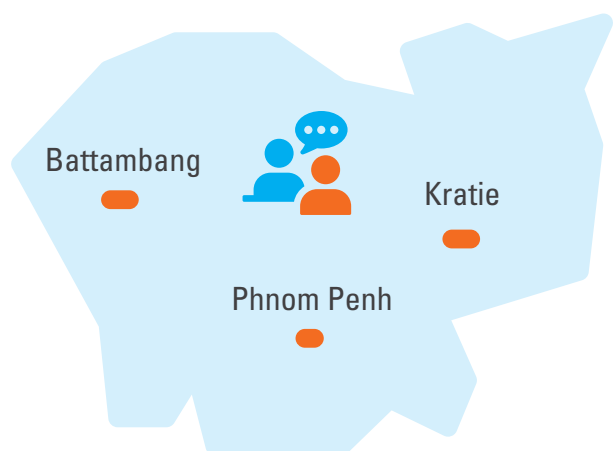
This study focuses on adolescents out of school and at risk of leaving school at the lower secondary level in Cambodia. This is due to the fact that the greatest portion of dropout occurs at the lower secondary level, and this is where the greatest gap in gender equity exists. Current interventions at the upper and lower secondary levels are the same, therefore understanding lower secondary data alone is likely to provide insights useful for creating policy recommendations for improved completion rates in both lower and upper secondary schools.

3.2 Geographical Selection

The data collection phase was separated into three geographical regions after a review of early leaving data and potential factors contributing to dropout in different regions of the country. The selected locations include urban poor areas in Phnom Penh, rural areas in Battambang province and rural areas in Kratie province.

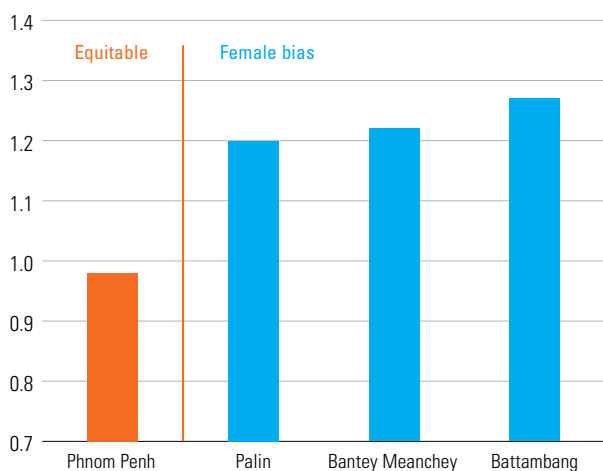
Battambang province was specifically selected for this study because it provides greater insight into the role that cross-border migration plays in early leaving. There is a large portion of Cambodians migrating to Thailand from Battambang province for job opportunities. Additionally, Battambang province has more girls completing than boys. Completion rates for both genders are below the national average.

Figure 3: Map of Cambodia showing target provinces for the study



The community where data was collected was on the Thai border, and nearly everyone in this community was directly affected by migration to Thailand; they had either migrated themselves at some point, or had relatives who had migrated. Many of the residents in this community were poor and were most commonly farmers. Key crops in this area were cassava, corn, mangoes, rice, beans, longan and mangosteen.

Figure 4: Lower secondary Gross Completion Rate (GCR) Gender Parity Index (GPI) SY 2018-19, North-West provinces near Thai border. Source: Analysis by David Quinn based on data from EMIS, MoEYS



Working on a commercial farm or another family’s farm was more common than families working on their own land. In the past, many community members had experienced crop failure, and subsequently families went into debt and lost their land.

Kratie province was chosen based on its large ethnic minority population. As previously outlined, ethnic minority communities are particularly at risk for school dropout¹²⁵ and therefore Kratie provides unique insights into potential barriers faced by ethnic minorities. Like Battambang, it has more girls completing lower secondary school than boys, and both genders complete well below the national average.¹²⁶

The community relies heavily on the farming industry for employment. Key crops in this region include vegetables, rice, cassava, sugarcane and cashew nuts. Unlike Battambang, many of the people in this community owned their own farm land.

Selecting Phnom Penh allows the research to compare experiences in a large urban centre with rural areas in Battambang and Kratie provinces. Phnom Penh generally has higher completion rates than the provinces selected, and an equitable level of completion rates by gender.¹²⁷ More disadvantaged districts within the city limits were included, as these areas are where dropout rates are highest.

An urban-poor area was visited for data collection. The residents in this community were Khmer and Cham people. Fishing is considered an important economic activity in this community, especially for the Cham people.

3.3 Data Collection

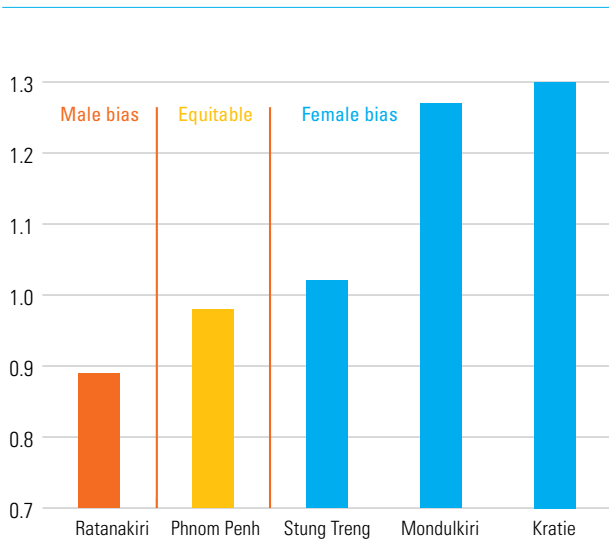
Within each geographical location, a combination of interviews and focus group discussions was used to collect data from participants in September and October 2019. All focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in Khmer with the help of a translator, using a Khmer interview guide. Participants included out-of-school youth, adolescents at risk of leaving early, parents, teachers, officials from district and provincial offices of education and local education teams, including school directors, community leaders such as village chiefs, commune councillors and school management committee members.

¹²⁵ Department of EMIS, Education Management Information System Database.

¹²⁶ Department of EMIS.

¹²⁷ Department of EMIS.

Figure 5: Lower secondary Gross Completion Rate (GCR) Gender Parity Index (GPI) SY 2018-19, North-East provinces. Source: Analysis by David Quinn based on data from EMIS, MoEYS



At-risk students were identified by their teachers and/or school director as being at risk of leaving school early. Criteria for being at risk of early leaving were similar to the Early Warning Dropout System indicators, and included a high rate of absences, coming from particularly poor families or having a large number of siblings. Out-of-school youth were defined as those who had left lower secondary school within the past year; they were contacted through vocational training programmes or with the help of teachers and school directors who kept in touch with students after they left school. The only selection criteria required of parents was they either had a child currently attending lower secondary school or a child who left lower secondary school recently.

Most youth participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years. The perspectives of one 20-year-old and one 23-year-old who had both recently left school early were also included in the study. At-risk focus groups were separated by gender, but out-of-school youth focus groups were mixed. At-risk adolescents and out-of-school youth were invited to stay for one-on-one interviews after focus group discussions in order

Table 1: Total participants of study

Focus groups discussions, and one-on-one interviews		Phnom Penh	Kratie	Battambang	TOTAL
		Urban-poor area, no gender bias	Rural, pro-girl bias, ethnic minorities	Rural, pro-girl bias, migration	
Young people at risk of leaving early	Boys:	15	3	5	23
	Girls:	6	3	6	15
	Boys + Girls:	21	6	11	38
Young people out of school	Boys:	4	2	3	9
	Girls:	2	4	3	9
	Boys + Girls:	6	6	6	18
Parents and guardians		3	4	6	13
Teachers		5	3	4	12
Local education team, officials from provincial and district offices of education		5	5	9	19
TOTAL individuals		40	24	36	100

to delve into more detail and discuss more sensitive topics. The guiding questions used in each focus group discussion and interview are included in the appendix in Section 8.

One goal of this research was to highlight young people's experiences and focus on their perspectives; consequently adolescents represented the largest proportion of participants in this research, making up 56 out of 100 participants. As outlined in the UNICEF Participatory Approaches Brief,¹²⁸ when involving young people in research it is important to ensure the environment is child friendly and uses child-friendly tools. The study used several activities with youth, including a ranking activity that used culturally appropriate pictures of important things in their lives.

We also conducted interviews with key informants working in the area. These included CARE Cambodia, Friends International and UNICEF staff and consultants.

3.4 Analysis Framework

As outlined by previous research, poverty is an underlying issue that impacts the many indicators that lead to adolescents leaving school early. In this project, indicators are defined as the measures that correlate to early school leaving, for example absences, grade repetition, overage enrolment and academic performance. The link between these quantifiable indicators and early school leaving has been well

established by previous research. This qualitative study focuses on the experiences and influences that inform the indicator outcomes, which have been defined as factors. Some examples of factors, which will be discussed in detail in the results section, include home life, peers and role models. All of the factors are informed by poverty. The students' experiences and influences are what they are because of their families' economic situations. In summary, poverty informs factors which in turn inform indicators directly leading to dropout.

Data was reviewed and coded to find emerging patterns and shared experiences between participants across different locations and in different focus groups. These patterns were grouped into related and connected categories, which were then identified as factors.

3.5 Limitations

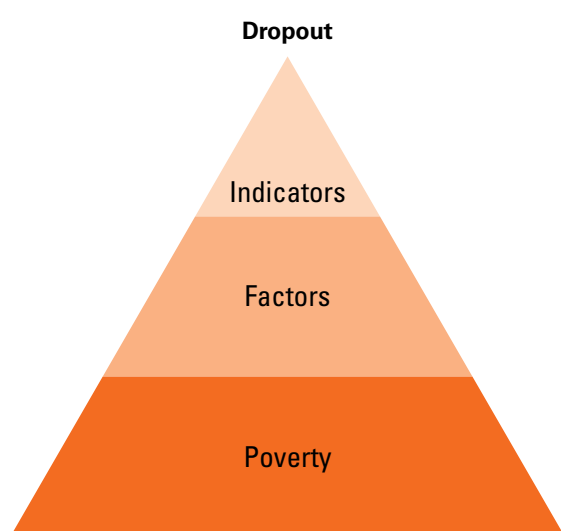
Like all qualitative research, the results of this study are specific to the places and people we spoke to and are not representative of the whole country. The focus groups and interviews were useful in understanding social norms and attitudes, however they did not necessarily give us an accurate representation of behaviour. It is expected that some response bias was present. Additionally, the rapid research nature of this project only represents a moment in time, it does not reflect experiences over a longer period of time or highlight cumulative impacts. Finally, participants included people who had stayed behind in Cambodia rather than those who had migrated to Thailand. The experiences of those who have migrated to Thailand may be unique and different from the people researchers interviewed.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study followed the UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis and the UNICEF Child Protection Code of Conduct.¹²⁹

Of particular consideration for the study was privacy and confidentiality, consent, reciprocity and reporting procedures for instances where child abuse, child labour or illegal activities are observed or shared with

Figure 6: Analysis framework triangle



¹²⁸ Irene Gujit, 'Participatory Approaches', in *Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 5* (Florence: UNICEF Office of Research, 2014).

¹²⁹ Gujit, Irene, 'Participatory Approaches'. In *Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 5* (Florence: UNICEF Office of Research, 2014).

researchers. The researchers did not have anything to report to internal and external authorities. There were two examples of the research team seeking out and sharing the details of further training or social support services to individuals or schools that showed need. The researchers asked for free, prior and informed consent from participants, including written and verbal translations. The data is being stored and reported in an anonymous format.

The research team carefully considered who was to be included in the study. UNICEF procedures recognize

the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups to participate in research, therefore Indigenous peoples and economically and educationally disadvantaged groups, such as urban poor people, were purposefully included. The UNICEF Participatory Approaches Guide notes the importance of including children in research where appropriate. This human rights-based approach recognizes that children's needs and experiences differ from adults. Child-friendly environments and tools should be used in these instances.



Boys and girls laughing outside their lower secondary school in Phnom Penh.

© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Sunjum Jhaj

RESULTS



The factors described below were identified as being linked to adolescents leaving school early. Many of these factors affected both boys and girls equally, and it is important to recognize that girls also face challenges in completing basic education.

4.1 Factors

The factors covered below are poverty, economic factors, major social forces, peer influences, perceptions of play, attitudes towards academic performance, and future planning, including adolescents' decision-making autonomy. The factors are presented in this report in order of influence, with factors that had the strongest influence in early school leaving presented first. The report also presents adjacent findings, which were not found to be a direct reason for boys leaving school early, but certainly had an influence. A summary of gendered factors and noticeable differences in the experiences of urban and rural youth follows at the end of this section.

4.1.1 Poverty



Key Finding 1:

The primary reason for boys and girls leaving lower secondary school early is poverty



Poverty was the major reason most young people gave for leaving or for considering leaving lower secondary school. Poverty was the underlying circumstance in these adolescents' lives that in turn sometimes affected other barriers to completing lower secondary school. This reflected the significant challenges young people and their families faced in affording school expenses. More so than expenses, boys and girls spoke of not being able to forego earning money for their families. The economic factors section examines the push and pull financial factors in more detail.

Of the 18 young people who had left school early, 11 of them noted that not being able to afford school or needing to earn an income was the primary reason for them leaving. When describing their circumstances, school's unaffordability was tied to other barriers. For example, an adolescent boy and girl in a rural village

in Kratie both said their families lacked money for school because it was too far away and they required cash for transport or accommodation closer to the school. A 14-year-old adolescent girl in Phnom Penh explained that her family was poor and needed to work, so she was pulled out of school to look after her younger siblings while the adults were away working. When a girl in Kratie failed an exam, she felt that she did not have the money to repeat the grade. These examples demonstrate how performance, distance and supporting siblings were affected by poverty.

Yet, in many situations children simply said they left school to financially contribute to their family. A 15-year-old boy in Battambang said: *“I wanted to continue to Grade 9. I had to stop because I had to help my family earn money.”* A 14-year-old boy in Battambang said: *“I’m thinking of going back [to school] but need to help my parents earn money.”* A 15-year-old boy from Kratie, explained: *“My parents tried hard to find the money, but when I saw they were so poor I decided I couldn’t afford school.”*



Two teenage boys sit outside their lower secondary school in Battambang province.
© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Ilona Hamilton

Kiri's story

“ My parents tried hard to find the money but when I saw they were so poor I decided I couldn't afford school. ”



Kiri and his father enter their home in a rural area.

© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Sina Sam

To arrive at his lower secondary school, 15-year-old Kiri* would need to travel along bumpy red dirt roads for many kilometres, first through the forest surrounding his village and then across green rice fields. Kiri does not have a motorbike and on foot this trek would take hours each day. Kiri's parents asked another family living closer to the school to allow Kiri to stay with them during the semester. They could not afford to pay rent to this family, so instead Kiri helped around the house and with their cows. However, Kiri explained: *“Especially in Grade 7 you are busy and have to go to school and so I couldn't do as much. They didn't want me to stay.”* Kiri returned to his village and has not gone to school since. *“My parents tried hard to find the money [for transport and accommodation] but when I saw they were so poor I decided I couldn't afford school.”*

Kiri now works on his family's subsistence rice farm and on a nearby commercial farm, where for a few months a year he plants and harvests sugarcane for the equivalent of \$5 a day. Kiri explained that he worked there several months per year but, *“I don't like it because it is difficult work.”* He also spends time looking after his four

young siblings when his parents are working. He cooks their dinner and cleans. His eyes light up when he shows visitors the nearby river and talks about fishing there for his family's meals.

Kiri's family is Pounoung, an Indigenous ethnic minority group who primarily live in the north-east of Cambodia. The primary school Kiri attended is a simple timber building close to his home. It has recently introduced the Pounoung language to its curriculum and Kiri aspires to be a primary school teacher. *“I want to teach in Khmer and the Pounoung language so children can continue their studies,”* Kiri said.

Kiri would like to return to school. *“When I see my friends go to school, I want to join,”* he said. He misses learning his favourite subject, Khmer literature, and playing sports. His family is exploring his options for accommodation and re-entry tests with the school principal, but they continue to feel overwhelmed by the challenges they face in sending Kiri to school.

*Not his real name

4.1.2 Economic Factors



Key Finding 2:

Higher paying and more work opportunities are available to boys compared to girls in lower secondary school in all areas, for example heavy work, night time work or work requiring travel



Key Finding 3:

There are more expectations on boys to earn money, from both themselves and adults



Key Finding 4:

Rural adolescent boys and girls are more likely than their urban peers to be working while at school, contributing to absences and early leaving



Key Finding 5:

Migration for work, especially to Thailand, has geographically split apart many families for years at a time. This has psychological impacts that negatively affect adolescents' ability to stay in school



Adolescents often left lower secondary school early in study sites in Cambodia due to the pressures of working outside of the home. Working on family subsistence farms, or needing to earn an income for the family were common experiences of young Cambodians interviewed. In exploring economic influences, this report examines farming, the wage economy and migration as three factors found to be prominent in affecting the lives of boys and girls.

Farming

Farming, forestry and fishing were raised by adolescent boys and girls in rural locations as important parts of their lives. Unsurprisingly, farming was rarely mentioned in Phnom Penh, however the communities in Kratie and Battambang spoke about how adolescent boys and girls were needed on family subsistence farms or for earning money on commercial farms. Young people were often absent from school due to farming. During the longer vacation between school years, boys and girls worked full-time on farms, and worked more intermittently throughout the school year, depending on the seasonality of various crops. They may have been late or missed days of school, as they had to travel to farms further afield or because they needed to work for several days at a time. Sometimes boys and girls left school for years at a time or even permanently to work on farms. Adolescent boys and

girls who were already out of school considered farming more important to their lives than adolescents who were still in school.

Farm work for Indigenous groups in Kratie tended to be subsistence farming on family rice farms that were further away from their village and school. The whole family would travel out to the farm from May to June for planting, and then again from October to November for harvest. They would live in a small hut close to the farm, returning to their village every few weeks for cleaning and fishing. There was a growing number of commercial farms nearby, such as cassava, cashew nuts and sugar cane, for which adolescents were actively recruited to work. Battambang participants almost exclusively worked on farms for pay. Boys and girls were paid the same on these farms, although cashews and cassava were perceived to be jobs for girls. They were paid the equivalent of \$5–6 for an eight-hour day.

Forestry and fishing were important activities for Indigenous minority families in Kratie. Fishing was always for food, and was almost exclusively a father and son activity. Fishing did not appear to limit time in school for Kratie adolescents. Forestry was a male-dominated enterprise. Forestry included collecting resin, picking orchids, community forestry management, gathering firewood, or cutting trees or bamboo for construction materials or charcoal. Apart from collecting

firewood, which was a chore for girls, the more profitable forestry work was considered male work.

Parents, local authorities and teachers explained that a pair of boys might go to the forest to cut trees to be used as timber for construction. If they felled one cubic metre of wood over three to five days, they could sell it for approximately \$175. This was a large sum for the families in the community, although some noted that there were overheads. Families needed to get a bank loan to buy a car that could carry the wood. Additionally, a family might have to cut down and burn a tree twice per month, which could make approximately 15 bags of charcoal, worth around \$60 in total. However, chopping down trees to burn for charcoal was prohibited in early 2019 and the community expected this practice to cease soon. Once boys reached their young teenage years, they were seen as strong enough to do this type of work, and this was a particular pressure that arose in lower secondary school. All the parents, teachers and community leaders interviewed believed girls were not strong enough to do this type of work, nor could they travel far into the forest to do it. One teacher linked this with girls staying in school longer than boys when he stated that,

“...opportunities for heavy work are only given to boys”

and *“...girls can't do such heavy things, so they can continue their studies.”* Adolescent boys had more opportunities to earn a higher income than adolescent girls in this community.

While forestry and farming did not play a part in school absences or leaving school early in Phnom Penh, fishing was a crucial job for some. The school catchment area is along the Tonle Sap river, and was home to both Khmer and Cham communities. For Khmer adolescents, fishing is a boy activity, but both Cham girls and boys are involved in fishing and processing fishing products. Some adolescents may have missed two to four months of school per year when they travelled further north along the river to catch fish. Family fishing was only raised by a minority of the youth interviewed, which is likely due to young Cham people making up a small number of the participants.

Paid Employment

In addition to paid farming, adolescent boys and girls were often balancing other types of paid work with

school, or were leaving school specifically to be able to earn a full-time wage. As outlined in section 4.1.1 on Poverty, families in poor economic circumstances were weighing the opportunity costs of sending their children to school with the prospect of future gains against their more immediate concerns. This process was described by community members in all locations. For example, local leaders often spoke of families valuing education but finding it *“difficult to prioritize over other things.”* A teacher in Battambang lamented that

“the burden is serious so the parents need the child to work in Thailand to earn money for the family.”

One local leader contemplated: *“If a parent works on a corn farm for 20,000 Riels (\$5) a day, imagine if a child joined them, how much more they could earn.”* And so, many adolescents were working to help support their families.

Adolescent boys often saw earning money as critical, and their families and communities also considered working as important to an adolescent boy's life. For instance, adolescent boys who were still in school ranked 'earning money' as more important to their lives than adolescent girls attending school ranked it. However, both adolescent girls and boys who had already left school ranked earning money as important. In each community, the parents, teachers and local leaders often had the expectation that adolescent boys should work, and framed boys' need to work around their future role as breadwinners. For example, when a Grade 7 teacher was explaining how he encouraged boys at school, he would say to them: *“You are the boy, you will be head of the family.”* A local official in a rural district claimed that

“parents need children to work, especially boys, so they can start earning money.”

A school director thought that, *“in Cambodian culture, if a family has a boy and a girl, and they come into [financial] trouble, they would rather send the boy to work.”*

Higher paying and more work opportunities were available to boys in lower secondary school in all locations. The job opportunities extended to boys included more 'heavy work', night time work or work

requiring travel. The opposite was true for adolescent girls' lives. A 14-year-old girl in a rural area thought that in terms of travel, *"parents are not concerned about boys' safety, but they are very worried about the girls' safety."* An 18-year-old out-of-school boy who had worked in a nightclub in Phnom Penh during school, compared his sister with himself:

"My sister worked part time during the day and had time for study, but boys need to earn money and will work at night and don't have time to study."

Manual unskilled or low skilled labour such as forestry, construction or certain farming tasks, was seen as boys' work, due to the strength required. These jobs, such as the earlier forestry examples, sometimes paid significantly more, arguably adding to the pressure on adolescent boys to be working.

Adolescent boys and girls in rural areas were more likely than adolescents in Phnom Penh to be working and going to school at the same time. Typically, their paid work was related to farming or forestry, although some also worked in small shops, beauty parlours, unloading goods, or alongside mechanics. Young people were often absent from school due to this work. The majority of rural-based adolescent boys and girls who had left school early had been working during school. A local leader in a rural district saw that young people *"...learn they can earn money and then forget about school."* Another local leader recognized that children need to go to school and to work. His advice to young people was to not allow work to make them lose sight of school. An 18-year-old boy who left Grade 7 in 2019 asked that the government recognize that young people *"need support to find a job where they can work and also study."*

Labour Migration

The community in Battambang was the research location with the biggest issue of labour migration. This study did not find any gender divide on the pressures and consequences of migration. Individuals and families moving for work across national borders or within Cambodia have been geographically separated from their families for an extended period of time. Almost every young Cambodian had a story of parents, siblings and friends moving to other areas to seek better job opportunities and higher wages. They ended up working in a range of unskilled occupations, such as

construction, manufacturing or agriculture. Adolescents reported their community members moving to Banteay Meanchey, Pailin or Siem Reap, and especially Thailand. It was explained that in the past Cambodians might commute to Thailand and return to their homes. Now, individuals or whole families moved for several years at a time, sometimes moving from one place to another within Thailand to follow opportunities.

Work in Thailand was perceived by parents, teachers and young people as being better paying and more regular. The community saw examples of people returning from Thailand with cash or sending back remittances. When describing what a 'good' job looked like, parents and teachers said it looked like non-seasonal work, which was the case for work in Thailand and other areas. Some of the youth interviewed, both adolescent boys and girls, were considering moving to Thailand to work themselves. A 14-year-old out-of-school girl said

"I am thinking of coming back to school, but it is important to me to help my father earn money. He does construction in Thailand. I am thinking of joining him in six or seven months".

A 14-year-old boy who was still in school said his moving *"...depends on if my family faces financial problems. I will decide to go to Thailand or other places if this happens."* Many of the adolescent boys and girls expressed a desire not to move, and mentioned family members who also hoped the same thing. A 14-year-old girl said her parents wanted her to stay in school because *"they have seen how hard work in Thailand is."* A 15-year-old boy said:

"My siblings are working in Thailand and they don't want me to be like them, they want me to be special."

Young people were affected by migration if they moved with their family to Thailand, or if they were left behind. Boys and girls who traveled with their families to Thailand were likely to find it difficult to go to school. A teacher said: *"Cambodian children can now also start school in Thailand, but parents don't stay in one place for very long, so it is difficult for Cambodian children to start school."*

Dara's story

“ My parents are in Thailand. I stay with my younger brother at home. No other relatives live with us. ”



Dara standing outside of his home in Battambang province.
© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Sunjum Jhaj

Dara* is currently a student in Grade 7 and is identified by teachers and school administrators as being at risk of leaving school early. He and his younger brother live alone in a village located near the Thai border because the rest of their family is working and living in Thailand. Dara described his home life by saying: *“I must do a lot of housework and take care of my brother. It is difficult for me.”* Dara has not been able to meet his father in two years, but he is able to talk to him on the phone a few times each week. Dara’s mother visits once per year during Pchum Ben, otherwise known as Ancestor Day. He is not able to talk to his mother on the phone because she does not have her own phone. Both parents work and live in different areas in Thailand. Dara also has four older brothers and a younger sister working in Thailand.

Dara’s parents send money for him and his younger brother every two weeks, however he said: *“Sometimes there are delays in the money coming depending on if my parents were able to make money or not.”* To supplement the money he receives from his parents, Dara works on local farms every Saturday and Sunday. He also borrows necessities such as rice from neighbours if needed. *“As long as we have rice, we are ok,”* he said.

Dara is a diligent student and has a record of strong academic achievement. He said his academic performance had declined recently because *“I think a lot about my family and I miss my parents a lot so my concentration is not good.”*

Dara is significantly older than many of his peers at school. *“At the beginning, I didn’t mind being older, but after primary school, I feel shy about being so much older.”* He enrolled in school three years late because his family did not have the identification documents required for school registration. The 17-year-old also spent one year away from school to serve as a monk. Dara’s family did not want him to leave the monkhood after one year, but Dara wanted to leave. *“I thought being a monk would not allow me to study as much as I wanted to, so I re-joined normal life,”* he said. He made the decision to leave the monkhood independently. Dara values education and hopes to continue on to university. His message to other students is: *“Education is important and if we study hard, we can get a better job.”*

*Not his real name

4.1.3 Home Life



Key Finding 6:

Both boys and girls reported emotional difficulties if they lived away from their parents, affecting their ability to stay in school



Key Finding 7:

Adolescents from rural areas are more likely to live far away from their school



Key Finding 8:

Adolescents report doing unpaid work at home regularly. The majority believe this takes time away from studying and most miss school due to responsibilities at home



Key Finding 9:

Domestic violence in the home occurs in all data collection sites. Adolescents report that this negatively affects their ability to learn and stay in school



Adolescents' emotional well-being has a significant impact on their ability to stay in and succeed in school. Stress and responsibilities in the home can come from a variety of sources, such as separation from family and domestic violence.

Psychological Impacts

Students' lives at home could have a significant influence on their ability to succeed and stay in school. One aspect of their home lives was where and with whom they were living. Children living in rural areas reported living away from their parents much more frequently than those living in urban areas. The reasons children were living away from their families were significantly different in Battambang than in Kratie. In Battambang, as discussed previously, many parents migrated to Thailand for work, leaving their children behind. A number of adolescents in villages in Battambang reported living with one parent, with grandparents, or in some cases living on their own. One 17-year-old boy described his village on the Thai border: *"It is not a good area because there are many poor people and many people from this area migrate for work, leaving their children behind."* Numerous boys and girls reported missing their

parents and thinking about them often. Adolescents shared that the stress and emotional difficulty caused by geographically separated families was linked to their ability to stay in school. A 17-year-old boy related this directly to his academic performance by saying that his performance had recently declined because *"I miss my parents a lot so my concentration is not good."* Cambodian adolescents found it especially difficult to be away from their families, as noted by a representative of a district office of education. *"It is Cambodian culture that people want to live with their family and parents."*

Adolescents in Kratie echoed similar sentiments about missing their families when they were living away from them. A 17-year-old adolescent girl who left school in Grade 9 said: *"I was rarely away from home before this so I felt homesick and couldn't manage to continue. I dropped out of school in order to return home."*

Distant Schools

The girl quoted above, like many others in Kratie, was living away from her family because the distance between the school and her home was too great to travel daily. In Kratie, many children reported living away from their families because their own homes

were too far from lower secondary schools. These adolescents often rented accommodation closer to the school. Lower secondary schools seemed to be more reachable for children in Battambang than Kratie, however parents, education officials and students in Battambang all voiced concerns about where adolescents would live or how they would travel to school once they reached upper secondary school, due to greater distances. In Phnom Penh, distance was not much of a concern. Some students who lived far away from schools did so because their families had intentionally chosen a school outside of their own community due to its good reputation.

Some children in Kratie were able to commute to the lower secondary school from their homes despite large distances, however they reported safety concerns particularly for girls. An adolescent boy in Grade 7 stated:

“It is easier for boys to stay in school. Boys can travel far from home to go to school, but it is more difficult for girls when their home is far away.”

An education official from the provincial office of education also noted that:

“For girls, if the school is far away, it is not safe to travel.”

Another official from the provincial office of education stated that there had been rape cases in the past as girls travelled over long distances to school from home.

The distance between home and school was cited as a reason for leaving school early by teachers, education officials, parents and both boys and girls in Kratie. If the distance was too far to travel daily, students would need to pay to live with relatives, other community members, or in boarding houses closer to the schools. One parent explained that her daughter left school in Grade 9 because their house was 60km away from the school and they could not afford to rent a boarding house close to the school. Another adolescent boy who left in Grade 9 also noted that the distance between his home and school was the reason he had to leave. A commune councillor commented: *“Mostly they are boys [leaving lower secondary school]. They*



live far away and there is no accommodation close to school. They have no family nearby. If they come and need to rent, they cannot afford it."

Unfortunately, the difficulties and hardships were not resolved even for those students who were able to secure a place to live closer to the school. One Grade 7 girl discussed the challenges she faced living in a boarding house. She was expected to do housework for the owner of the boarding house every day and if she was not able to complete all of the housework because she was busy with school or other commitments, or if she was not able to pay the full rent on time "the house owner blames" her. When prompted to explain what she meant by blame, she said: "No beating, but makes me unhappy." This same girl later shared:

"If I had money, I would not have to work at the boarding house and it would be easier, I could focus on school."

A similar story was shared by a 15-year-old adolescent boy who left school in Grade 7. He lived with a man he called his uncle, but who was not related to him. In exchange for staying at this man's house, he was expected to do work around the house and assist in taking care of their livestock. However, the boy commented: "Especially in Grade 7 you are busy and have to go to school and so I couldn't do as much. They didn't want me to stay." The boy's father is currently searching for another house that will allow the boy to stay in exchange for work because the family does not have enough money to rent a place for him to stay.

Parents expressed concerns about their children when they were living away from home. Parents noted that they were not able to monitor their children's study habits, and did not know as much about their children's behaviour and routines.

A school director noted that in Kratie, Indigenous adolescents are more likely to live far away from the school and Khmer adolescents tend to live closer to schools. In this way, Indigenous youth faced additional barriers in accessing schools due to the greater distance between their villages and the schools.



A teenage boy in Phnom Penh working on the research project's ranking activity.

A greater distance between home and school was associated with higher costs due to the cost of accommodation near the school or daily transportation to school. A teacher highlighted this point by commenting:

“If they live close to the school, even if they don’t have money, they can still come to school. Money is more important when children live far from school.”

Teachers noted that adolescents who commuted long distances to get to school were frequently late. A school director reported that children who rented accommodation closer to the school often missed school on Monday, as that was their travel day to come back to school after visiting their families.

Responsibilities at Home

Children in all data collection sites reported helping their parents and families by doing unpaid work. Both parents and children included “helping the family” and “respecting parents” as a trait of a good boy or good girl. Interestingly, “doing housework” was more often described as a trait of a good girl, and was excluded from descriptions of a good boy by both parents and adolescents. More adolescent girls than boys described housework as being more important to their lives. Girls identified gender as being a reason to do housework. For example, a Grade 7 girl stated housework was the most important thing “because I was born as a woman.” Another Grade 7 girl said: “I am a girl so I need to know how to do housework.” One boy who reported doing a lot of housework said he did housework because he had no sister. Another out-of-school girl said:

“It is more difficult for girls to stay in school because they are needed to help the family more than boys.”

Despite the gender divide associated with the word ‘housework’, many adolescent boys reported doing housework. Adolescent boys from Kratie and Battambang reported doing more housework than adolescent boys from Phnom Penh. In general, housework was given less importance and mentioned less frequently by adolescents in Phnom Penh than adolescents in rural areas.

The term housework was used to refer to helping siblings, cleaning, cooking and washing dishes in all three locations. In Kratie, children described collecting firewood, collecting water and working in the vegetable garden as housework. Vegetable gardening was described as housework in Battambang as well. Children in Battambang and Phnom Penh included laundry in their definitions of housework.

In all three locations, boys and girls reported missing school or being late because of housework. Both adolescent boys and girls discussed how their responsibilities at home took time away from studying. When asked how much time she spent on homework every day, a 14-year-old girl from Battambang commented: “Three to four hours per day. It depends on housework. If I have lots of housework, then only two hours.” Adolescents from Phnom Penh and Kratie listed “enough time to learn at home” and “help with housework when kids are busy” as what they needed from their parents in order to succeed or stay in school.

Domestic Violence

Definitions of domestic violence vary across different locations and within different studies. In this research project, domestic violence is defined as any abuse that takes place in the home, including abuse directed towards children, adolescents or the elderly. This definition is in line with accepted definitions of the World Health Organization.¹³⁰

This research study did not specifically address domestic violence through any of the questions or topics included in the interview and focus group discussion guides. The decision to exclude questions related to domestic violence was intentional and based on previous research surrounding this topic. Questions specifically related to domestic violence were not essential in investigating the objectives outlined for this research. Furthermore, researchers must be able

¹³⁰ Mary Ellsberg and Lori Heise, *Researching Violence against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists* (Geneva, Switzerland: Washington, DC: World Health Organization; Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), 2005).

to ensure that the research methodology adequately addressed issues of confidentiality and that women and children would not be put at risk because of the research process. The World Health Organization has outlined guidelines for ensuring the safety of participants and addressing ethical issues that may arise when conducting research related to domestic violence.¹³¹ The methodology used in this research does not adequately address all of these guidelines. Additionally, the researchers were not properly trained to deal with the distress and trauma-informed reactions participants may have in response to questions related to violence.

Despite the intentional exclusion of any questions specifically addressing violence in the home, this topic was raised by both adolescent boys and girls in all three locations. Adolescents commented on the negative effects of domestic violence and tensions at home on their ability to learn, concentrate and study. For example, a girl who had been out of school for nearly one year reflected on her reasons for leaving school, and said domestic violence was one reason for her leaving. She stated:

"I rarely had time to study at home. When I would try to work, my mum and grandma would fight and I couldn't concentrate."

Out-of-school children in Kratie shared similar stories.

In both Battambang and Kratie, adolescents specifically described feeling unhappy because of domestic violence in their homes. One teacher linked domestic violence to depression in children, commenting on the noticeable impact this can have on students' abilities to focus and learn. A group of adolescent girls in Phnom Penh stated that they *"need the*

government to address gender violence, especially domestic violence because domestic violence affects studies"

Adolescent boys in Battambang echoed similar sentiments:

"The government should make sure there is no violence in families."

Teachers, school directors and local leaders believed that adolescents of divorced parents may have experienced similar challenges as adolescents from homes with domestic violence. Communities often associated domestic violence and divorce as falling under the same category, which could reflect social stigmas in the community. One school director reported that, based on his observations, children of divorced parents struggled to concentrate on their studies. A teacher further elaborated on this by saying that children of separated or divorced parents regularly had to move between their mother's home and father's home. Both parents may not live in the same neighbourhood, so when adolescents are far away from the school they miss school and fall behind academically. Generally, adults' comments surrounding divorce carried a level of judgement. Adolescents of divorced parents may face additional stress due to the stigma and judgement surrounding divorce. In some divorced families, youths reported not living with either parent, instead they were living with and being raised by grandparents. This separation from their parents could be an additional source of stress for adolescents, similar to youth who live away from their parents due to migration or the distance between their home and school, as discussed previously.

¹³¹ Ellsberg and Heise.

Sophy's story

“ I felt unhappy with my performance compared to my friends' performance. ”

Sophy*, an 18-year-old, left school one month before completing Grade 9, against his parents' wishes. When asked why he decided to leave school, he said: “I felt unhappy with my performance compared to my friends' performance. This is the only factor for my leaving school, money is not an issue.” Sophy reported missing school because he felt bored and did not like the subject. “Then when I came [back to school], I couldn't catch up and the teacher blamed me so I just didn't want to come,” he said.

After leaving school, Sophy found work in a casino in a neighbouring province. He is happy with the work he is doing there and his friends and family visit him regularly. Despite enjoying his new life away from school, Sophy reported that he intended to return to school in the coming school year. He also mentioned that all of his friends were

still in school and he was the only one who had dropped out. Sophy wants to be a policeman in the future. “I want to come back [to school] to be a policeman. I can't make this dream come true without school.”

Sophy is concerned about his academic performance when he returns to school. “Even if my performance is not good, I want to finish,” he said. “I plan to improve my performance by taking extra classes, paying more attention, focusing more and reducing missed time.” Sophy has not yet registered for the new school year. He said he was waiting for his employer to find a new person to hire to replace him, before resigning and moving back home.

*Not his real name

4.1.4 Peer Influences



Key Finding 10:

Rural girls' social lives are predominantly during school hours, while boys and urban girls spend time with friends after school or on weekends



Key Finding 11:

Adolescents' time with friends diminishes after leaving school, which may be a strategy to entice adolescents back to school



Key Finding 12:

Boys are more likely to be influenced negatively by their peers, including leaving school early



Young people highly valued their friendships. They thought their friends were a supportive network and brought enjoyment to their lives. The positive influences young people discussed included help with studying, providing encouragement and having fun together. For example, a 14-year-old girl explained:

"It is difficult to stay in school. It is hard for my parents to earn money. I forget about the difficulty when I laugh with friends at school. It makes me feel better."

Similarly, an 18-year-old out-of-school boy said:

"We all need friends. We cannot live without friends."

Sometimes young people received financial support from their friends. A 15-year-old boy in Battambang did not have money for food at school so "sometimes my friends shared with me. This happened often, my friends supported me when I had no money." They travelled to school together, sharing modes of transport and the cost.

The social life of an adolescent girl living in a rural area was typically confined to school hours, however adolescent boys and adolescent girls in Phnom Penh tended to have more independence in socializing after school or on weekends. The reason given was often due to their various obligations at home. Furthermore, a 'good girl' was depicted as a girl who stayed at home and did not go out late. When an adolescent boy or girl left lower secondary school, their time with friends diminished. Sometimes out-of-school adolescents simply considered friends as an unimportant area of their lives, however others expressed how they missed having friends or felt left out. For instance, a 15-year-old boy in Kratie who had recently left Grade 7 explained that:

"When I see my friends going to school I want to join."

Another 15-year-old boy in Battambang wanted friends, but did not have any now that he had left school.

Despite all of the positive influences of friends, there were a number of damaging peer pressures raised by participants, particularly for boys. Boys felt they had to rebuff more bad influences from their male classmates. For instance, two boys in discussion together, aged 15 and 17, decided:

“There is peer pressure for boys; friends who are not in school and are working already tell them to stop school... we don’t see this type of peer pressure happening with girls.”

More so than the adolescents themselves, parents and teachers raised the issue of negative peer pressure. They strongly felt that boys were influenced by friends to play more, drink alcohol, gamble or be ‘lazy’. A local leader believed that boys were often late to school because they waited for friends to travel to school together.

There were several examples given of conflict between friends and classmates. In Phnom Penh and Battambang in particular, adolescent boys and girls reported arguing during sports, animosity between those that littered and those that picked up litter, not helping others with test answers, and being picked on because they were ‘poor’. Several boys were bullied and intimidated by older boys from nearby schools who hung around outside their school grounds.

Both adolescent boys and girls talked about conflict between friends, however the way they dealt with it sometimes differed. A 15-year-old girl in Grade 8 believed that:

“For boys, when they argue it is always a physical fight.”

A 15-year-old out-of-school boy said that: “When boys fight, it’s a real fight, but with girls it’s play fighting. I tease girls and it’s play fighting.” Adolescent girls’ most common response was to be stoic in the face of provocation. For example, a girl in Kratie said that when she was called names she would “just stay at peace and don’t fight or argue back. I just ignore them”. When a girl in Battambang was insulted she felt “angry, but I pretend I did not hear anything”. Conflict with friends and bullying was stressful to young people, although when asked they said they did not want to leave school because of it.



Three teenage girls writing together at their lower secondary school in Phnom Penh.

4.1.5 Perceptions of Play



Key Finding 13:

Play, particularly for boys, is viewed as something negative by adults and adolescents because it takes time away from studying



In all locations, teachers, parents, local leaders and adolescents communicated the idea of play and learning as two separate and exclusive categories. Play was often viewed as something negative and linked to under-performance, specifically for boys. Students and adults expressed the belief that playing took time away from studying. Adolescents, parents and teachers shared that, “boys play more than girls” therefore it was believed that boys spent less time studying. However, it was notable that adolescent boys and girls reported spending approximately the same amount of time in school and doing school-related work at home.

Interestingly, play was cited by boys and girls as a reason that boys struggled to stay in school. When asked if it was easier for boys or girls to stay in school, an out-of-school adolescent boy from Kratie said:

“Boys face more challenges [in staying in school] because the boys play so much.”



A friendly football match at a secondary school in Steung Treng province.

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Similarly, a Grade 7 girl said:

“It’s easier for girls because girls don’t go out and play like boys do.”

Both adolescent boys and girls in every location reported enjoying play. Play was often cited as one of the things they liked most about school. A number of boys and some girls stated liking the sports play area. One said: *“I like trees and the football playing ground.”* Another adolescent reported: *“I want the football area to be maintained.”* One teacher in Phnom Penh, the only adult who did not describe play as negative, used play as an engagement strategy to keep adolescents in school. Out-of-school youth generally talked about play in the past tense rather than the present tense, while adolescents currently in school used the present tense to discuss play, suggesting adolescents stopped playing after leaving school.

Many adolescent boys and girls in rural areas reported only playing at school, whereas boys and girls in Phnom Penh generally reported playing outside of school, as well as at school. This may be related to the increased workload of adolescents in rural areas compared to urban areas. As discussed previously,

adolescents from rural areas reported doing paid work more often than those from urban areas, and adolescents from rural areas brought up housework much more frequently in conversation. One girl who left school in Grade 7 said:

“Playing and going out with friends can waste your time from earning money.”

The type of play youth engaged in also differed slightly between urban and rural areas. Sports, especially soccer, were popular in all areas among adolescent boys and girls. Schoolyard games were mentioned by adolescents in Phnom Penh and Battambang. However, computer games and playing on phones were only discussed in Phnom Penh. This type of play came up often in Phnom Penh, but was not mentioned by adolescents in any of the rural areas. In Phnom Penh, adults expressed concerns about online gambling games, however adolescents did not mention this in focus groups or interviews. Adults reported that youth, specifically boys, would miss school to spend time gambling online, and that peer pressure played a large role in boys becoming involved in online gambling.

4.1.6 Attitudes Towards Academic Performance



Key Finding 14:

Adolescents and adults believe girls perform better than boys in all locations



Key Finding 15:

Poor academic performance, and in many cases the transparency of test results, can result in negative feelings, such as shame and embarrassment



Key Finding 16:

Adolescents want encouragement and support from adults even if they are not performing well academically



Key Finding 17:

Teachers are often overwhelmed and have inadequate access to teaching resources



Emotional Impact of Poor Academic Performance

Adolescents in all three locations described the significant emotional toll of low academic performance. The emotional impact of low performance ranged from embarrassment and shame to fear of failure. A district office of education official reported:

“Children are shy among their peers for not scoring well and shy about not being able to show good results to their parents.”

Consequently, researchers avoided asking youth directly about their performance in focus groups to avoid exacerbating feelings of shame or embarrassment. Some youth chose to share information about their performance in focus groups without prompts, and adolescents who participated in one-on-one interviews were directly asked about their performance.

In some cases, the emotional aspect of performance was directly linked to leaving school early. When asked about pressures to leave school, one boy who left in Grade 9 shared his experience of being part of an extracurricular club at school:

“When I failed the exam, the principal kicked me out [of the club] ... I felt depressed and did not want to study.”

Youth often compared their results to those of their peers and felt unhappy when they were underperforming, as highlighted by Sophy’s Story’ on page 47. Comparisons between youths’ performance and their peers may be worsened by the public display of test results. In all three locations, education officials discussed the public display of test results as a strategy to motivate students. This was also viewed as a way to keep parents and community members engaged in the school. It is unclear how publicly displaying test results was meant to promote parent and community engagement, however this opinion was expressed by adults in all communities. Unfortunately, it may have had the opposite effect, because it increased some students’ negative feelings about their low test scores. It also had no effect on parent involvement. One mother noted:

“I rarely come to school to see what is happening. Their performance is good so I do not care.”

It is important to note that high-performing adolescents could still be out of school or considered at risk of early leaving.

The public display of results may also have increased students’ fear of failure, because the failure is so public. An out-of-school girl in Kratie reported worrying that she did not have the capacity to succeed in Grade 7. She chose to leave school before starting Grade 7, despite passing the Grade 6 exam, due to her fear of failure. Additionally, failure or low performance may have been accompanied by other consequences such as blame and violence. An official from a district office of education pointed out that sometimes there was violence directed towards children and youth in homes as retribution for poor performance. Adolescent boys and girls in rural and urban locations mentioned feeling blamed for low academic performance.

Support for Adolescents

Adolescent boys and girls in Phnom Penh specifically mentioned that *“parents should encourage kids to work harder when they do not perform well, but don’t blame them.”* Adolescents from Kratie and Battambang shared similar statements. One Grade 7 girl stated:

“I want my family to encourage and motivate me to study even if I don’t perform well. I still want my family to support me.”

This was one of the most important things adolescents wanted from their families: support and encouragement even when they were not performing well in school. This support was not only required from parents, but also teachers. One girl noted:

“Teachers treat higher achievers and good academic performers better.”

Adolescents from all three locations reported wanting more help from their parents with homework. Very few adolescent boys and girls received any help with homework from their parents or other family members. Teachers reported that a majority of students did not finish their homework, and students reported struggling with the homework. One 15-year-old boy who left Grade 7 in early 2019 reflected on doing homework by saying:

“I got no help from my parents. When I couldn’t do the work, I just gave up.”

A number of parents felt they lacked the academic background needed to assist with homework, or were busy with other tasks.

Gendered Beliefs about Performance

Numerous youths, parents, teachers and local leaders commented on their general belief that girls perform better than boys. As discussed previously, this was most often linked to adolescent boys playing more than girls and spending less time studying. In each discussion, there was always one adolescent boy who was quick to note that boys had the ability to perform as well as girls, maybe even better, if they put in the effort. There were also a few instances where parents and teachers believed boys’ under-performance was due to biologically inherent male characteristics. For example, one school director noted:

“Girls are easier to advise and teach, boys are naughty and don’t listen.”

After a long and open discussion about the barriers girls face in obtaining an education, another provincial office of education official found it challenging to explain why boys were beginning to not fare as well in school on average, until considering aloud that schooling can come more naturally to girls. Her first thought, on the spot, was that “Girls’ brains work better than boys’ brains,” as a way to explain why boys were struggling at school. In describing these instances

of boys’ and girls’ behaviour and aptitude, few adults shared reflections, prompted or unprompted, as to how adults’ different reactions to boys and girls may help shape young peoples’ behaviours and attitudes.

Education Delivery

Under-performance in school for all students, including boys, may be significantly impacted by the quality of teaching and learning available to students. Throughout interviews with education officials, school directors and teachers, only two individuals discussed the quality of education as a reason for leaving school early. They discussed the lack of resources and support available to teachers. This was especially significant in situations where teachers were expected to teach subjects outside their area of expertise. Based on discussions with teachers, it was evident that across all three locations, many teachers were teaching a wide range of subjects that they were not specialized in teaching. A district office of education official directly commented that teachers were frequently assigned to teach subjects they were not trained to teach. One teacher specifically addressed the challenges she faced in teaching subjects outside her area of expertise. She reported buying lesson plans for subjects outside her specialization. She noted that the lesson plans she created on her own for subjects she was specialized in were of higher quality than the plans she purchased. She focused on creating high quality lesson plans for her specialized subjects because these were the lessons officials from the provincial office of education wanted to see during inspections. This teacher stated:

“Students perform lower in subjects that are not my specialization.”

A district official noted that the district had more teachers specialized in Khmer Literature than any other subject. Interestingly, adolescents almost always mentioned Khmer Literature as their favourite subject in school, and generally reported performing well academically in this subject. This further suggests the quality of teaching and learning was greatly influenced by teacher training and teacher specialization. Additionally, some students complained of teachers

who did not adequately explain topics or who used rote learning in the classroom. This issue was never brought up in relation to Khmer literature. Students and parents did not raise concerns about the curriculum’s relevance.

Another challenge teachers’ faced in relation to providing quality pedagogy was large class sizes. One official noted there could be up to 70 students in one classroom. This presents challenges for teachers

related to classroom management and student learning assessment, which limits the quality of education they can provide. A district official summarized the impact of low quality education by saying:

“Even if we encourage students to come, they won’t come if the quality is low.”



A blackboard and stack of books in a classroom in Kratie province.
© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Sunjum Jhaj

Panha's story

“ I left [school] because I had bad friends who always asked me to go out and not to focus on studying, so my performance was poor and I left. ”

Panha* is a chatty 17-year-old who dreamed of being a clothes designer, but he left his Phnom Penh school in Grade 9. Panha enjoyed school because he got to spend time with friends, and thought it was less boring than being at home. Yet it was some of these friends that he thinks led to him leaving school. *“I had bad friends who always asked me to go out and not focus on studying,”* Panha said. He was missing a lot of days of school and eventually failed an important exam. The most distressing part of this setback for Panha was that in response to his marks, the school director expelled him from his extracurricular youth club. *“Because of this, I felt depressed and did not want to study,”* Panha said. He soon decided to leave school, against both

of his parents' wishes. His mother had hoped he would one day work for the government. Three of his male friends left school at the same time.

“I wanted to finish a bachelor's degree but I couldn't,” Panha said. *“So I want to gain other skills for work.”* Today Panha has joined a vocational training programme he heard about through his neighbour. His days are spent learning cooking, English and computer skills. He also helps his mother with housework and in her business selling noodles. He goes fishing during the wet season. *“I now want to be a chef,”* Panha said.

*Not his real name

4.1.7 Future Planning



Key Finding 18:

Value for education has increased



Key Finding 19:

Adults and adolescents consider schooling a means to get a job, with little other purpose



Key Finding 20:

Out-of-school youth typically make the decision to leave school independently, while adolescents still in school typically make decisions in conjunction with their family members or have that decision made for them



Key Finding 21:

Adolescents' aspirations were strongly associated with the opportunities they see around them



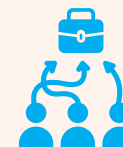
Key Finding 22:

Families do not always trust that any or decent work opportunities will be available to those with a secondary school education



Key Finding 23:

Adolescents and adults do not have a clear understanding of what is involved in many jobs, nor the pathways to reach them



Adolescents and their families make decisions about their future work with pragmatism. Boys', girls' and their families' aspirations were influenced by the opportunities around them, the limited information they had on their career pathways, and their uncertainty on the returns of investing in education.

In planning their futures, if an adolescent boy or girl had left school, it was likely they had made that decision alone. Sometimes they had their parents' support, but sometimes they did not. Meanwhile, the decision to stay in school tended to be made in negotiation with their family members, or their parents or guardians would make that decision for them. Adolescents' autonomy in decision making was not found to be significantly affected by their sex or geographical location. However, an association was found between an adolescent leaving school and the relative level of freedom they had to make their own decisions about school.

Generally, adolescents and their families regarded education as important to their futures. Adolescent boys and girls, even some who had left school, consistently ranked school as important to them. Parents, educators and local authorities reflected that education was held in higher esteem than when they were younger. Although the value of education had increased, it was perceived to have a very particular purpose. Almost all adolescents and parents described the only purpose of school as being a means to get a job. This practical view on education may have contributed to adolescents leaving school earlier to go to work.

Teachers' had a wider range of views on why schooling was worthwhile and relevant to young people's future work lives. Some teachers were unable to answer questions on what knowledge and skills their students were learning. However, a female teacher in Battambang explained that learning

Khmer allowed students to be able to read the news, and *“if people can’t read, it’s like they are blind”*. Teachers made direct links to their subjects and the future work of adolescents. The same teacher also thought mathematics was important because students needed knowledge for selling things and doing business. Meanwhile, a male teacher in Battambang thought communication and interpersonal skills, like showing respect, were important for success in jobs.

Many participants thought education could bring better job opportunities. A school director in Battambang said:

“Education is a long-term investment with ‘fruits’ better than working in Thailand.”

When parents discussed their hopes for their children’s future, they almost all wanted them to have a ‘good job’. A good job was described as different to the type of work the parents were doing. Such jobs were “easier”; did not require physical labour, were safe, non-seasonal, stable and secure, had a salary when the weather was harsh or when the worker was sick, were for a big organization, and might even provide a pension. Parents often liked the idea of a job that kept their children close to them, such as a teacher, so they could care for them in their old age. Several adolescent boys described education as giving them the opportunity to be a ‘manager’, whereas if they did not finish secondary school they could only be an ‘employee’.

Adolescents’ career goals reflected examples in their family, role models, or others they saw in their communities. Aspirations of both adolescent boys and girls were dominated by teaching, joining a range of small family businesses, and police or military roles. Phnom Penh-based children had a wider range of aspirations. There were three examples across different locations of wanting to be a health worker of some kind. In two of these instances the adolescents had been seriously ill or had had a sick relative, and so had observed health care in action. Seeing examples of work in Thailand could also affect adolescents’ career pathways.

Although teaching was adolescent boys’ and girls’ most common ambition, it was sometimes seen as a risky plan. Teaching, along with other government posts such as joining the police force or civil service, were known to be competitive. A student can apply for these jobs only on certain days per year, and only a few are chosen out of thousands of applicants. This makes families fear that investing in their child’s education will not pay off. For example, an officer from a local authority said that in pursuit of a government job he had seen a family sell its cows to pay for their child’s education, but despite achieving secondary school the child did not get a civil service job. Now this young person feels they were trailing behind their peers who left school early and had started working in low skilled jobs to build their livelihoods. Researchers were not able to fact check this story. While it was typically seen as a decent job in terms of salary, some students felt there were better paying opportunities than teaching. A rural school director said:

“Sometimes I tell young people to study for a better job and they say, ‘Why? You studied and are still not rich’.”

This reflects how families do not always trust that finishing secondary school guarantees young people a better job.

Parents and their children often did not have a clear idea about what different jobs entailed, or the pathways to reach them. Parents could not imagine what was involved in particular professions or ‘good jobs’. A number of parents reported not being able to guide their sons and daughters in future planning. For instance, a mother who was a farmer thought that parents *“are not clever, we are illiterate. Children know a lot about scholarships and training for themselves. Me, I know nothing”*. Yet adolescents struggled to describe what their family members’ and role models’ jobs entailed, and often could not describe training or education opportunities available to them, although many were aware of university as an option. School directors and local authorities spoke only of informal vocational training, such as a mechanic workshop taking on a young boy as an informal apprentice.

Maya's story

“ We need her to help take care of the siblings and house. ”
– Maya's grandmother.



The back streets of Maya's Phnom Penh neighbourhood.
© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Ilona Hamilton

Maya* lives with her grandmother, mother and five siblings in a small home in the narrow, concrete back streets of Phnom Penh. The neighbourhood, near the Tonle Sap river, often floods and timber planks intricately form pathways over puddles of brown water most of the year. The residents rely on fishing, especially the minority Cham Muslim community, to which Maya belongs. The 14-year-old spends her days looking after her brothers and sisters, cooking and cleaning the house, while her mother works at a fish processing company.

Her family proudly noted that she had been doing well academically before leaving school. The lower secondary school was close by, with transport costing 12 cents one way on a tuk tuk. However, her parents recently pulled her out of school because they felt they could not afford the costs of travel and learning materials. *"We need her to help take care of the siblings and the house,"* Maya's

grandmother said. Her mother explained that it was a joint decision. *"It was a difficult time for the family so we negotiated together to persuade her to stop school."* Maya's grandmother was worried about taking the children fishing with her because of the dangers of drowning, and wanted Maya to care for them instead.

Maya was upset about leaving school as she hoped to one day be a police officer. Maya's grandmother was bemused at this aspiration. *"Our family are fishermen, but she is different. She doesn't like fishing."* Instead, Maya looks up to a female family friend who has just received a scholarship to study at university. However, Maya thinks that one of the most important things in her life is to help her family, and believes that girls need to care for their families.

*Not her real name

4.2 Adjacent Findings

Adjacent findings relate to areas of the research that could potentially influence boys leaving school early, but that could not be claimed as direct reasons, based on the limitations of the research.

4.2.1 Child Marriage



Key Finding 24:

Adults believed child marriage could contribute to early leaving, particularly for girls



Child marriage was explored by the research but did not have strong enough conclusions for it to be defined as a factor for boys leaving school early. Child marriage is defined as a marriage where one or both of the partners is younger than 18 years. The only instance of potential early marriage directly shared with researchers was from an adolescent girl. A 17-year-old girl had recently received a marriage proposal from an older boy she knew through friends. She was hoping to marry when she was 25 years old, but admitted that if the boy was not willing to wait, she would accept his proposal. Adolescent boys and girls were

consistently not interested in marriage and considered it something that would be important much later in life, such as in their 20s. However, the above girl's decision-making process may have represented the complex considerations adolescents will experience before the age they would prefer to marry. Teachers, parents and community members, particularly in Kratie, believed that child marriage played a role in early leaving at the lower secondary level. For adolescent boys, it was expected that they would need to work and have some money before marriage, perhaps contributing to the pressures for a boy to be working.

4.2.2 Concerns about Drugs



Key Finding 25:

Drugs are a serious concern for adults, but not adolescents



Key Finding 26:

Drugs are considered to be an issue mainly for boys, not girls



Although the research did not directly link drugs to early school leaving, it was a notable fear in the community, specifically related to boys. In all three locations, drug-use by adolescents was a concern of parents, teachers and local leaders. Adolescents were generally not concerned about drugs, but were aware of the significant negative impact drug use could have

on individuals, families and communities. Battambang, near the Thai border, was the only location where some adolescents reported observing drug use in their communities. Interestingly, parents, teachers and authorities in all locations established a link between drugs and Thailand. For example, drugs were noted as being more of a concern in communities near the

Thai border, and Phnom Penh parents used Thai words to name drugs.

Parents, teachers and local leaders generally considered drugs to be more of a problem linked to boys. One parent commented:

“Drugs only happen to boys as far as I see, so I’m afraid for boys.”

Parents, teachers and authorities cited peer pressure as a reason that adolescent boys started

using drugs, and noted that there could be conflict between teachers and adolescent boys who use drugs. None of the adolescents reported drug use in their peer groups. Another parent noted that *if she could only send either her son or daughter to school, she would send her daughter because if her son was in school “the boy will have more chances to do drugs.”*

Adolescents in Battambang reported that the school should share information about drug use and prevent drug use among youth. In Phnom Penh, one school director created a drug prevention training programme for his school on his own initiative. This director also believed schools needed to take initiative in preventing drug use.

4.2.3 Discipline



Key Finding 27:

Boys are considered to misbehave more than girls



Key Finding 28:

Boys may be punished more than girls



The research did not find direct causation between corporal punishment and boys leaving school early, however it was a worthwhile exploration into the gendered behaviour dynamics in the classroom. Adolescent boys were reported to misbehave in school more than girls. Actions considered to be misbehaviour on the part of boys, as reported by teachers and young people, were forgetting books, being late to class, chasing other students, physically fighting with other students, and being disruptive or noisy in class. These examples mostly came from interviews in Phnom Penh and Battambang. In contrast, adolescent girls were described by teachers, parents and community members as being more compliant. For instance, it was consistently said that adolescent girls listened and followed instructions and advice. Adolescent girls sometimes spoke of being involved in verbal arguments with friends, but generally they had no self-reports of ‘being naughty’.

In turn, due to this misbehaviour, adolescent boys were sometimes punished by teachers. Punishments adolescents directly experienced or observed happening to others usually did not include hitting. However, there were forms of corporal punishment shared with researchers. The most common example of corporal punishment was being sent outside to stand on one leg in view of their peers. Other examples of punishments included being made to run around the school, or copy out writing. Some adolescent boys in Phnom Penh who had been fighting were asked to sign a written guarantee of their future good behaviour.

There were a handful of examples given by students and parents of teachers using corporal punishment against adolescent boys for misbehaving or having difficulties in learning a subject. There were few reports of teachers using corporal punishment against adolescent girls. In fact, both an adolescent

boy from Phnom Penh and a rural-based adolescent boy believed boys were disciplined more frequently and/or more harshly than girls. An adolescent girl in Phnom Penh said:

“Teachers are harsher with boys and more gentle with girls. Boys are disobedient. Girls are treated softly because they listen to the teachers.”

The boys and girls reported their punishments in a matter of fact way and expressed no fear. It was not expressed as being a deciding factor in leaving school. However, there may have been some response bias due to sensitivity towards the topic or normalization occurring in these answers. For example, one adolescent girl reported her punishment without emotion in a focus group discussion, however her mother separately reported that her daughter had complained bitterly about it and said that it was a harsher punishment than what she received at home. Her mother agreed with the punishment being appropriate. Sometimes parents were aware of the above examples, and sometimes they did not know the details of what common forms of punishments were used in their child’s school. However, in both instances, parents supported the teachers in punishing their children. They said this was because they either trusted the teacher, saw the punishments as less harsh than in the past, or believed that it made their sons and daughters study harder.

Boys’ misbehaviour was seen as a challenge for teachers by a local authority. For instance, at the district level, some representatives felt boys’ bad behaviour was a failure of school rules and leadership. However, they also thought that if schools were stricter, many of the students would leave.

4.3 Urban/Rural Summary

Adolescents from rural and urban areas shared many similarities in their experiences and their reasons for leaving school, however there were some additional challenges and experiences faced by rural youth that were not raised in urban settings. First, adolescents in rural areas were more likely to be working while

they were attending school. Rural youth cited work as a reason for being absent from school, and absences were directly linked to early school leaving by previous research, as discussed in the literature review. Second, distances between school and home were more likely to be greater in rural areas, therefore presenting an additional challenge for rural adolescents in accessing education. It is common in Kratie for adolescents to live 20km or more away from their school. Comparatively, most youth in Phnom Penh reported living only a short walk or bicycle ride away from their school.

Adolescents in urban areas reported a wider range of role models in terms of the jobs of these role models. As previously noted, adolescents’ goals and aspirations were associated with what they were able to see around them. In rural areas, youth expressed limited aspirations. The research suggests this was because there were fewer examples for rural adolescents of role models who were successfully employed outside of the agriculture or construction industries.

Finally, adolescent boys from urban areas had to deal with peer pressure to spend time gambling online. This may pull their attention away from school, lead to numerous absences, and contribute to early school leaving. Online gambling was not raised as an issue in rural areas, but was raised specifically by boys in Phnom Penh.

4.4 Gendered Summary

The findings of this study suggest both adolescent boys and girls face significant challenges in completing basic education. While the intention of this research was not to promote boys’ education at the expense of girls’ education, it did specifically focus on boys more than girls in order to address the specific research questions and to respond to the equity dimensions, as the current data shows boys are worse off. Consequently, the data analysis stage placed greater emphasis on boys than girls. The boy-specific challenges presented below are not intended to suggest that boys face more challenges than girls. It is very possible and highly likely that adolescent girls face additional challenges that boys do not experience, such as a limited social life, safety concerns during travel and extensive responsibilities at home.



A busy secondary school classroom in Ratanakiri province.
© UNICEF Cambodia/2019/Chansereypich Seng

In school, adolescents' behaviour and treatment was perceived to be different. Adolescent boys were considered to misbehave more than adolescent girls, adolescent boys may be punished more than adolescent girls, and adolescent boys are believed to under-perform academically compared to adolescent girls. All three of these behaviours, beliefs and stereotypes could influence boys' confidence and actual academic performance in school, contributing to early leaving.

Numerous parents, educators, local leaders and adolescent boys themselves noted that adolescent boys faced more negative peer pressure than adolescent girls. An example of negative peer pressure highlighted by adolescents and adults was out-of-school boys encouraging other boys to leave school. Peer pressure was linked by teachers to some types of play, such as online gaming in Phnom Penh. All categories of participants believed adolescent boys played more than adolescent girls. Play was generally discussed in a negative way because it was viewed as taking time away from studying. Adults also felt that boys faced peer pressure to use drugs. Drugs were primarily considered to affect adolescent boys, but not adolescent girls, in part because of peer pressure and in part because of gendered societal norms.

In addition to peer pressure related to early leaving, adolescent boys faced work pressures that pulled them away from school. Adolescent boys seemed

to set more expectations for themselves to earn money than girls did. Adolescent girls did not have additional expectations of boys, but parents, teachers and authorities frequently shared comments about adolescent boys needing to earn money because they were to be breadwinners. These expectations may have resulted in boys leaving school early to earn money. These expectations may also have stemmed from the fact that adolescent boys were able to earn more money than adolescent girls. In all three locations, it was noted that adolescent boys were presented with more work opportunities than girls, and boys were able to secure higher paying jobs than girls. Work opportunities available to adolescent boys and not girls included jobs that were largely unskilled, required travel, heavy work, or night time work.

While both adolescent boys' and girls' social lives were limited by the work they did, both paid and unpaid, boys' social lives were generally more active than girls. In rural areas, adolescent girls reported spending time with friends only at school, while adolescent boys reported spending time socializing on weekends and after school, as well as at school. In urban areas, this gender divide was not as clear. Adolescent girls in urban areas reported socializing with their friends outside of school. In this way, girls from rural areas faced more restrictions compared to other adolescents.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The following recommendations are intended to be practical and realistic, drawing on existing efforts from schools, government and education sector development partners. They are provided for the consideration of schools and government, and propose actions that can support adolescents to reduce early school leaving.

There are five overarching areas for improvement. Most of the recommendations specifically target boys by addressing factors that were found to be directly associated with boys leaving school early. However, these activities are also likely to benefit girls. In some instances, recommendations have been included that are clearly aimed at all young people.

5.1 Improve the learning environment to support all boys and girls to achieve their goals



Boys benefit from learning through play, with high academic expectations, and through pedagogical approaches that support their psychological well-being

5.1.1 Introduce or expand sports programmes and incorporate movement into learning

Sports attract some students to school, especially boys. The physical education curriculum in Cambodia mandates two hours of learning time devoted to sports, games and physical fitness activities each week. School administrators and teachers should ensure this time allotment is met each week. Adolescents would also benefit from organized sports and encouragement to play out of school, such as during lunch breaks or after school. Incorporating more movement into regular classroom learning activities may also assist students to be more engaged in learning processes, and may help keep adolescents in school. The importance of physical education in student learning is backed up by international research and this study's finding about negative views on play and learning.

5.1.2 Expand teacher training and professional development activities

Additional teacher training on the following topics could promote more equity-based and student-focused learning. The following training programmes should be implemented by MoEYS as in-service training, and by Cambodian teacher training institutions as part of their pre-service teacher education curricula.

a. Address male gender stereotypical attitudes in the classroom

Teachers may unknowingly be reinforcing gender stereotypes in the classroom, including attitudes towards boys and the perception they are not academically minded. International research and this report have found that to be the case.

b. Encourage daily movement through sports and other activities

Teachers in this study often viewed play as something negative, when in fact it is something adolescents enjoy, especially boys. It is also beneficial for their physical and emotional well-being, and focus in the classroom. More encouragement to play, and greater focus on movement in learning could help engage students. This study's findings and international research support this recommendation.

c. Continue positive discipline programmes with a focus on boys' behaviour issues

Boys report being disciplined more than girls, with some reports of corporal punishment. It is important that schools are a safe and welcoming space for all students. The provision of positive discipline programmes in schools can help create that safe environment.

d. Continue to develop engaging teaching methodologies that do not depend on rote learning

Both boys and girls benefit from student-centred approaches to learning. However, teachers need

training and support to successfully use student-centred approaches in their classrooms. This particularly engages boys, according to international research. Teacher training institutions can model student-centred approaches for pre-service teachers to help them develop a better understanding of how to implement inquiry-based learning in their classrooms.

5.1.3 Continue to fund and support teachers to follow up with students at risk of early leaving

Teachers need support in order to follow up with adolescents who are at risk of leaving or have recently left school. Some schools interviewed explained that they already had short-term funding from external organizations, which enabled teachers to conduct home visits and make phone calls home to check on students and encourage school attendance, with some success. MoEYS piloted an early warning dropout system, which would benefit students if it was expanded and had additional financial support for follow up. Schools should allocate funding each year for teachers to conduct home visits and follow-up phone calls related to student absences and at-risk behaviours.

5.1.4 Review the practice of publicly reporting student assessment results

The practice of publicly reporting results should be scrutinized more critically by MoEYS, as this research found that this practice negatively impacted adolescents' emotional well-being and contributed to early leaving for boys and girls. Alternative practices to promote the participation of community members and parents in schools should be investigated. Schools could instead publicly display aggregate assessment data for parents and community members to view, without singling out any one child. International research supports the idea of building boys' confidence in their academic abilities. This recommendation is a policy approach that MoEYS should review.

5.2 Build and strengthen boys' and girls' relationships with peers and adult role models



Peers and adult role models can build boys' confidence in their academic abilities.

5.2.1 Trial mentoring programmes for boys and girls

Adult role models can help adolescents better understand the variety of jobs that are available to them after completing an education, and to learn more about the steps they need to take in order to achieve their goals. Adolescents would benefit from the encouragement and academic target setting and support that adult mentors could provide. Adult mentoring programmes should be available to both boys and girls, but some of the programmes should target boys specifically and separately to ensure they have positive, relevant and relatable role models. This recommendation was inspired by international programmes. It is an individual approach for schools, development partners and MoEYS to consider developing.

5.2.2 Introduce or expand peer group and buddy programmes

Peer groups have the potential to build on the support children already give each other, provide a space for positive peer role models, and build confidence. A buddy programme could pair a boy who was performing or behaving well in school with a boy who was finding classes more challenging or who was experiencing negative peer pressure. Extracurricular social groups should be encouraged wherever possible. These programmes have been used internationally as ways to keep boys in school. This approach should be implemented by MoEYS, in partnership with development partners and schools.

5.3 Encourage exploration of career pathways and options for education and training



Expanding boys' understanding of where education can take them and providing opportunities to balance academic learning with practical skills can lift their aspirations

5.3.1 Increase awareness of different career pathways, including university and training information and opportunities

a. Expand career counselling and ensure that boys are included

Career counselling can include finding mentors to help students learn more about careers they are interested in, and helping students understand the steps they must take in working towards a particular career. Career counselling has been successfully used internationally and there are currently small-scale projects in Cambodia, sometimes with only girls in mind, such as the MoEYS work with CARE's Know & Grow project, Finn Church Aid's Career Guidance and New Generation School Initiative, and UNICEF's Life Skills programme, all of which could be built upon.¹³² Career counselling should be widely implemented by MoEYS in partnership with schools and development partners.

b. Provide students with opportunities to explore a variety of career pathways

Schools can organize career fairs and community visits to allow adolescents to explore different types of job opportunities that are available to them. Career awareness media campaigns can highlight what different jobs look like and provide information on next steps. This recommendation is promoted due to the research findings about the lack of awareness boys and girls have about their career options.

¹³² CARE Cambodia, Project Profile: Know & Grow; Finn Church Aid, Cambodia; UNICEF, Local Life Skills Education Briefing.

5.3.2 Raise awareness of and expand alternative learning pathways after leaving early

Many students are not aware of alternative learning pathways available to them after leaving school early, including vocational training or online learning to complete basic education. The programmes currently in place for adolescents who leave school early need to expand their outreach to ensure more teachers and students are aware of the options available. The programmes could also be expanded to include more choices in vocational streams available to adolescents. International research shows this is often useful for boys. This recommendation is to be implemented by schools, MoEYS and MoLVT.

5.3.3 Improve adolescents' and adults' awareness of returns to education

Adolescents and their families need more information on the realistic returns on education. This information would be effective if it was shared by community members who had completed their schooling and who were currently employed in stable jobs. These individuals would be an example of the opportunities that education can provide. Broader communication campaigns to promote education within communities, undertaken in Cambodia by UNICEF in partnership with CARE and MoEYS, have also proven to be effective and should be expanded.¹³³ This recommendation should be implemented by MoEYS with development partners.

5.3.4 Introduce a work/study programme

A work/study programme recognizes the pressure on young people to work, particularly boys, and would integrate students' work life with their schooling. It could take many forms, but may coordinate the school timetable and work shifts, align their on-the-job skills learning with classroom lessons, or provide more oversight over young people's employment. This recommendation was first suggested by a young male participant in the study. This is a policy-level approach that MoEYS and MoLVT should consider.

5.4 Ensure all boys and girls can access schools while living at home with their families



Enabling adolescents to live at home with their families is good for their psychological well-being.

5.4.1 Focus on building more schools, particularly in remote areas, rather than building dormitories to house adolescents who live far from school.

Both boys and girls reported significant emotional challenges associated with living in boarding houses or dormitories far from their homes. In light of this finding, MoEYS should be building more schools in remote areas, rather than building dormitories, so adolescents can continue to live at home with their families while attending school.

5.4.2 Investigate costs for transport options to assist adolescents who live far from school

Considering the emotional challenges this study found adolescent boys and girls face when living apart from their families, providing students with more schools or transport subsidies may be a better option than building more boarding houses or dormitories. Consistently providing bicycles, buses or other transport options to get children safely to and from school should be explored. The provision of public transport would benefit rural children in particular. This is a policy-level approach for MoEYS to consider pivoting towards.

¹³³ Lork and Bredenberg, *Endline Report: Communication for Education and Improved School Governance (C4E)*.

5.5 Put gender equality at the centre of all educational programme and policy planning



It is important to include boys in all policy planning

5.5.1 Adjust gender quotas of scholarships

There were recently gender quotas on government scholarships, providing female students with 18 out of the 30 lower secondary scholarships each school receives. In light of the recent declining trends in boys' completion rates, MoEYS has given local level flexibility in providing scholarships to boys and girls as needed in their communities. MoEYS and development partners should continue to support provinces to implement this policy change.

5.5.2 Ensure that all policies and programmes track boys' progress as much as girls', and that activities always consider boys' needs

In recent years, girls' education has been a global focus. This recommendation is not suggesting that the attention of MoEYS be taken away from girls' education, which is still a relevant and important issue. Based on the need for this research and the findings, it will be important to include boys' perspectives and data on their progress in policy making.



FUTURE RESEARCH



Boys' school experiences in various countries and in Cambodia should receive more attention. This research opens up questions and avenues for further discovery.

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- Longitudinal studies can build on this research to learn more about long-term trends contributing to early leaving
 - Surveys or quantitative methodologies to determine how much money families need in order for youth to complete lower secondary (or upper secondary) in particular
 - Ethnographic research to better understand actual behaviours of boys and girls in relation to their schooling
 - Investigate teacher gender biases in school and how these may or may not affect adolescents
 - Further research into drug use among adolescent boys and girls in Cambodia
 - Research into discrimination against students from ethnic minorities
 - Use appropriate methodologies and ethical guidelines to investigate the impact of domestic violence on adolescents' schooling.
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APPENDICES

8.1 Interview questions

8.1.1 At-Risk Students Focus Group Questions

Education questions – At-risk students

1. What do you like or dislike about school?
2. How important is school to you?
 - prompt: compared to other things in your life
3. How do you go to school? How long does it take you to travel to your school?
 - clarify: for example, do you walk, ride a bicycle, drive a motorbike
4. Do you spend time with friends at school? Do you spend time with friends outside of school?
5. Do you ever miss school? If so, how many days per week do you miss school?
Why do you miss school?
6. Do you ever come to school late? How many days per week are you late to school or need to leave early from school? Why are you late?
7. Have you ever been in trouble or seen other students in trouble at school?
 - clarify: with peers, teachers, bullying - physical/verbal/cyber, etc.
 - prompt: how would you feel if you experienced the types of trouble you mentioned
8. Have you thought about leaving school? If yes, what would be your reasons for leaving school?
9. Do you feel pressure to leave school or stay in school? Who is this pressure from?
10. How many more years do you want to stay in school? Why do you want to stay in school?

Work questions – At-risk students

11. Who are your role models and why are they your role models? What do they do for work?
12. What type of work do you hope to do after school?
13. What type of work do the people living in your household do (parents, siblings, etc.)? Which town and country do they work in?
14. Do you work right now while you are in school? This can include work outside of the home, in the home and in the family fields. If yes, what type of work do you do and how many hours per week do you spend working?

Home and family life questions – At-risk students

15. Do you make decisions about school alone or with your parents?
16. How much time per week do you spend on school work outside of school (i.e. homework)? Do your parents help you with homework?

Reflections on gender – At-risk students

17. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently at home? (by parents, grandparents, siblings, etc.) Why and how?
18. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently in school? (by teachers, etc.) Why and how?
19. What makes a good girl? What makes a good boy?
 - clarify: personality traits, characteristics, actions, etc.
20. Do you think it is easier or more difficult for girls or boys to stay in school? Why and how?

Activities - At risk students

Rankings: to give an idea of the values and competing factors.

- Place cards where they list and then rank important things: help the family at home, help the family by earning a wage, working on the family farm, doing well in school, doing what my friends are doing, finding a husband/wife.

Free Listing: To learn about needs and possibly inform policy interventions.

- What do you need from different people in order to be able to stay in school and succeed in school? (different people referring to government, teachers, family, friends, etc.)

Activities - At risk students

Rankings: to give an idea of the values and competing factors.

- Place cards where they list and then rank important things: help the family at home, help the family by earning a wage, working on the family farm, doing well in school, doing what my friends are doing, finding a husband/wife.

Free Listing: To learn about needs and possibly inform policy interventions.

- What do you need from different people in order to be able to stay in school and succeed in school? (different people referring to government, teachers, family, friends, etc.)

8.1.2 At-Risk Student Interview Questions

If anyone would like to stay and talk more about their experiences with us by themselves, you are welcome to. We are happy to listen to anything you would like to share about your experiences or ideas.

1. How well did your teachers think you performed in school?
2. How many meals a day do you eat?
3. Have you been concerned about drugs in your community? Have your parents been concerned about drugs in your community?
4. Have you ever felt afraid to go to school because of violence or problems with peers?

8.1.3 Out-of-School Youth Focus Group Questions

Education questions - Out-of-school students

1. What did you like and dislike about school before leaving?
2. How important is school to you?
 - prompt: compared to other things in your life
3. How did you get to school? How long did it take you to travel to your school?
 - clarify: for example, did you walk, ride a bicycle, drive a motorbike
4. Did you ever miss school? How many days per week did you miss school? Why did you miss school?
5. Did you ever come to school late? How many days per week were you late to school? Why were you late to school?
6. Have you ever been in trouble or seen other students in trouble at school?
 - clarify: with peers, teachers, bullying - physical/verbal/cyber, etc.
 - prompt: how would you feel if you experienced the types of trouble you mentioned?
7. Did you spend time with friends in school? Did you spend time with friends outside of school?
8. What are your friends from school doing now?
9. Have you thought about going back to school?
 - If yes, what would be your reasons for going back to school?
10. What options do you know of for returning to school, or gaining further training?

Dropout questions - Out-of-school students

11. What were the reasons you left school?
12. Who decided that you would leave school?
 - Prompt: This could have been you, or your parents, or both of you together
13. Did you feel pressure to leave school or stay in school?
Who was this pressure from, what was it like?
14. Did you work while you were in school? What type of work did you do?

Work questions – Out-of-school students

15. Who are your role models and why are they your role models? What do they do for work?
16. What do you do now?
17. What are your goals for the future? What type of work do you want to do in the future?
18. What type of work do the people living in your household do (ie. Parents, siblings, etc.)?
Which town and country do they work in?

Home and family life questions – Out-of-school students

19. How much time each week did you spend on schoolwork outside of school (homework)?
Did your parents help with homework?

Reflections on gender – Out-of-school students

20. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently at home? (by parents, grandparents, siblings, etc.)
Why and how?
21. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently in school? (by teachers, etc.) Why and how?
22. What makes a good girl? What makes a good boy?
 - clarify: personality traits, characteristics, actions, etc.
23. Do you think it is easier or more difficult for girls or boys to stay in school? Why and how?

Activities - Out-of-school students

Rankings: to give an idea of the values in decision making

- Place cards where they list and then rank important things: help the family at home, help the family by earning a wage, working on the family farm, doing well in school, doing what my friends are doing, finding a husband/wife.

Free Listing: To learn about needs and possibly inform policy interventions.

- What do you need from different people in order to be able to stay in school and succeed in school? (different people referring to government, teachers, family, friends, etc.)

8.1.4 Out-of-School Youth Interview Questions

If anyone would like to stay and talk more about their experiences with us by themselves, you are welcome to. We are happy to listen to anything you would like to share about your experiences or ideas.

1. How well did your teachers think you performed in school?
2. How many meals a day do you eat?
3. Have you been concerned about drugs in your community? Have your parents been concerned about drugs in your community?
4. Did you ever feel afraid to go to school because of violence or trouble with peers?

8.1.5 Parents Focus Group Questions

Education questions - Parents

1. Is your child in school right now? If not, when did your child leave school?
 - prompt: what was the reason your child left school?
2. Who makes the decision for your child to stay in school? OR Who made the decision for your child to leave school?
3. How satisfied are you with the education your child received/is receiving?
 - prompt: are the teachers good at their job? Are the subjects relevant for their future? Are the facilities good enough quality?
4. How satisfied are you with the disciplinary structures in school?
 - clarify: punishments for misbehaviour, school regulations

Work questions - Parents

5. How do you support your family?
 - clarify: housework, farming, salaried job
6. What are your hopes for your child's future?

Home and family life questions - Parents

7. What help do you need from your children?
 - prompt if needed: around the house, income, farm

Reflections on gender - Parents

8. Why do you think more boys are dropping out than girls?
9. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently in schools? (by teachers)
10. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently in society?
 - prompt: if they say equal, ask what equal looks like. Is it more important for girls or boys to have an education? If you had a girl and a boy and fell on economic difficulties and could only afford to send one child to school, which would you send?
11. What makes a good girl? What makes a good boy?
 - clarify: personality traits, characteristics, actions, etc.

8.1.6 Teachers Focus Group Questions

Education questions - Teachers

1. Why do you think students leave lower secondary school?
2. How much time each week do students need to spend doing schoolwork outside of school (homework) in order to succeed in school?
3. How many of your students miss school or arrive late each week? What are the problems that arise when students miss school or arrive late?
4. What knowledge and skills do you think are most important for your students to learn? Do you think they are learning those things?

Family questions - Teachers

5. Do families in this community value education?
6. How important is education to your students?
7. How do you see students' home lives affecting their studies?

Work questions - Teachers

- 8 Do you have a strategy to identify students who are at-risk of dropping out?
- 9 Is there anything specific you are doing to try to keep these at-risk students in school?

Reflections on gender - Teachers

10. Why do you think more boys are leaving school than girls?
11. Do you notice any differences between boys and girls in how they respond to school
 - prompt: engagement, participation, motivation, etc.
12. How are boys with disabilities represented in dropout rates?

8.1.7 Administrators Focus Group Questions

Local Education Team (School Director, Local Authority/Commune Councillor, School Support Committee Member)

Education questions - Administrators

1. Why do you think students leave lower secondary school?
2. How many of your students miss school or arrive late each week?
What are the problems that arise when students miss school or arrive late?
3. Do you have a strategy to identify students who are at risk of dropping out?
4. Is there anything specific you are doing to try to keep students in school?
 - prompt: are any of these actions targeting boys specifically?

Work questions – Administrators

5. Where are the children going to work while they are in school?
6. Where are the children going to work after they dropout of school?

Family questions – Administrators

7. Do families in this community value education?
8. How important is education to your students?
9. How do you see students' home lives affecting their studies?

Reflections on gender – Administrators

10. Why do you think more boys are leaving school than girls?
11. Do you notice any differences between boys and girls in how they respond to school?
 - prompt: engagement, participation, motivation, etc.
12. How are boys with disabilities represented in dropout rates?

8.1.8 Provincial and District Education Officers Interview Questions

Education questions - Provincial and District Education Officers

1. Why do you think students leave lower secondary school?
2. Is there anything specific you are doing to try to keep students in school?
 - Are any of these actions targeting boys specifically?

Family questions - Provincial and District Education Officers

3. Do families in this community value education?
4. How important is education to students?

Reflections on gender - Provincial and District Education Officers

5. Why do you think more boys are leaving school than girls?

