

WHY ARE
BOYS LEAVING
LOWER
SECONDARY
SCHOOL
EARLY IN CAMBODIA?



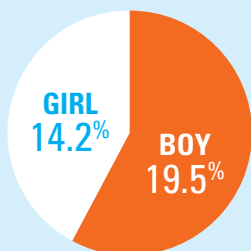
UNICEF Cambodia
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Introduction

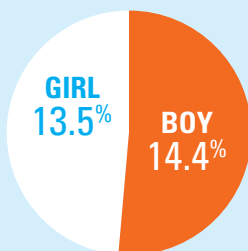
The Issue

Despite significant progress in primary school enrolments and completions in Cambodia, secondary schools have yet to see the same rate of participation. Furthermore, more boys than girls are leaving lower secondary school early.

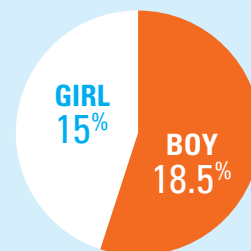
Grade 7



Grade 8



Grade 9



National lower secondary school drop-out rate in school year 2018/2019,

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

Why is this important?

All children should have an opportunity to develop and reach their full potential. 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 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.

How did we investigate?

This qualitative research was designed to understand why adolescent boys are leaving school early in Cambodia. This project considers past research on boys leaving school early, international examples of programme responses, and presents policy recommendations.

We interviewed: 56 young people



 **38**
adolescent boys
and girls who are
at risk of leaving
lower secondary
school

 **18**
adolescents
who have recently
left school early

 **13** parents
 **12** teachers
 **19** administrators
and local
educational
authorities

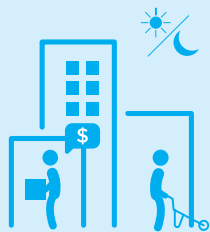
Learning from international examples

Internationally, the study found that most Southeast Asian countries have begun experiencing 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 that do exist to keep adolescent boys in school focus on positive role models and peer relationships, engaging teaching methodologies, and improving boys' confidence in their academic abilities.

Gender Equality



Key Findings



- The primary reason for boys and girls leaving lower secondary school early is poverty
- Rural adolescent boys and girls are more likely than their urban peers to be working while at school, contributing to absences and early leaving
- 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
- There are more expectations on boys (from both themselves and adults) to earn money
- Out-of-school youth typically made the decision to leave school independently, while adolescents still in school typically made the decision in conjunction with their family members or had the decision made for them.

Recommendation

Put gender equality at the centre of all educational programmes and policy planning.



It is important to include both boys and girls 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.

Boys' Learning



Key Findings



- Play, particularly for boys, is viewed as something negative by adults and adolescents because it takes time away from studying
- Adolescents and adults believe girls perform better than boys in all locations
- Teachers are often overwhelmed and have inadequate access to teaching resources
- Boys are considered to misbehave more than girls.

It [school work] is easier for girls because girls don't go out and play like boys do

Grade 7 girl

Girls are easier to advise and teach, boys are naughty and don't listen

School director

Girls' brains work better than boys' brains

School director, who had a strong understanding of barriers faced by girls but when put on the spot found it challenging to answer why boys were now struggling

Recommendation



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.

Boys' Friendships



Key Findings



- Rural girls socialize predominantly during school hours, while boys and urban girls spend time with friends after school or on weekends
- Adolescents' time with friends diminishes after leaving school, which may be a strategy to entice adolescents back to school
- Boys are more likely to be influenced negatively by their peers, including leaving school early.

"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."

14-year-old girl in school

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

15-year-old boy
who recently left Grade 7

"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."

Two boys aged 15 and 17 in discussion together

Recommendation



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.

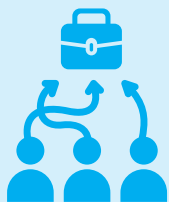
Example activity:

Introduce or expand peer group and buddy programmes.

Boys' Careers



Key Findings



- Adolescents' aspirations were strongly associated with the opportunities they saw around them
- Families do not always trust that any or decent work opportunities will be available to those with a secondary school education
- Adolescents and adults do not have a clear understanding of what is involved in many jobs, nor the pathway to reach them.

"I want to be police-military, but I'm not sure how to achieve that."

15-year-old boy

"I want to compare how much money I can earn working and how much I spend studying, then I will decide if I should come back [to school]."

18-year-old boy who recently left school in Grade 9

Recommendation



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 that boys are included

Access To School



Key Findings



- Both boys and girls reported emotional difficulties if they lived away from their parents, affecting their ability to stay in school
- Adolescents from rural areas are more likely to live far away from their school

"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."

17-year-old girl who left school in Grade 9

They [students] 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."

Commune councillor

"If they [students] 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."

Teacher

Recommendation



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.

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August 2020

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