

Executive Summary

Empowered and Equal futures for girls in Southeast Asia

First Phase Assessment



Note:

The programme “Empowered and Equal Futures for Girls in Southeast Asia”, supported by the Australian Government, focuses on Cambodia and Viet Nam, with a regional component that shares learning and strengthens policies and partnerships for gender-transformative education. The programme’s goal is to ensure that girls can make decisions about their lives and futures within safe, supportive, and gender-equal environments. This means creating education systems that protect girls from violence, promote positive gender norms, and give girls equal opportunities to pursue high-value academic and professional paths. This first phase assessment was conducted to provide a baseline to measure progress of the programme over time.

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Introduction

Girls in Southeast Asia continue to face harmful gender norms and gender-based violence that deprive them of their right to learning and skills development, well-being and equal participation in society. Gender-based violence, physical and sexual violence, bullying and cyber-bullying are widespread in, around, and on the way to schools and online in Southeast Asia. In the education sector, harmful gender norms persist that disempower girls and create barriers to their equal participation in learning, the skilled workforce and society.

The **“Empowered and Equal Futures for Girls in Southeast Asia”** programme seeks to address these issues. The programme currently targets two countries, Cambodia and Viet Nam, with a regional level outcome that aims to amplify the country-level results through knowledge generation and dissemination and creating an enabling environment through strengthened policies and partnerships for gender transformative

education in the region. The broad goal of the programme is that: *“Girls are empowered to make decisions about their lives and futures within a safe and gender-equal enabling environment.”* This requires education systems that actively protect girls from all forms of violence, promote positive gender norms and empower girls to have equal access to high-value academic and professional tracks.

This **first phase assessment** aims to capture data to benchmark the programme’s progress and outcomes which will enable changes to be tracked over time. Data was collected through the following methods: **Key Informant Interviews** with stakeholders (28 participants in Cambodia), **Focus Group Discussions** with children, parents/carers and school staff (345 participants across Cambodia and Viet Nam), and a **quantitative survey** administered to students and school staff (74 school staff and 2,063 students across Cambodia and Viet Nam).

Research questions



Gender-related social norms

- What gender-related social norms perpetuate gender inequality in the target schools?
- What is the prevalence of gender-inequitable views, beliefs and practices in target schools?



Prevention of and responses to gender-based violence

- What gender-related social norms drive gender-based violence (GBV) in the target schools?
- What is the prevalence of gender-related social norms that drive GBV in the target schools?
- What is the coverage and quality of prevention initiatives and responses to GBV in the target schools?



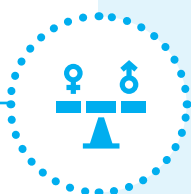
Empowerment of girls / gender equality in schools in practice

- What is the extent of self-reported feelings of empowerment and agency among girls in target schools (in school, in the home and in society)?
- To what extent are girls involved in school decision-making and leadership forums and processes in target schools?



Improved educational outcomes for girls

- What are the educational outcomes and life skills for girls and boys in target schools?



Cross-cutting equity considerations

- How do dominant gender-related social norms, practices and beliefs on GBV and gender inequality intersect with other characteristics, including ethnicity, location (urban, rural), socio-economic situation, disability and sexuality and gender expression / identity?
- How do feelings of empowerment and agency among girls; extent of involvement in decision making and leadership and educational outcomes and life skills differ among girls by: ethnicity; location; socio-economic situation; and disability; and sexuality and gender expression / identity?



Gender equality acceptability and empowerment scores

A range of survey questions were asked to cover key thematic areas relating to gender norms, attitudes and beliefs, where the repondents were asked to to indicate a level of agreement with different statements.

Composite index scores were developed by combining scores for questions under each thematic area, indicating whether a repondent’s level of agreement under each area was **positive** (e.g. norms, attitudes

and beliefs promoting gender equality), or **negative** (e.g. norms attitudes and beliefs promoting gender inequality). Scores were calculated for the five themes relating to gender equality, GBV acceptability and empowerment, detailed in the table below.

The findings summarised below are derived from an analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Percentage of students with positive (norms, attitudes and beliefs promoting gender equality) scores across research themes (by country and gender)

(%)	Cambodia			Viet Nam		
Theme	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Gender equality acceptability in school	36.2	45.2	41.5	62.8	72.6%	67.8
Gender equality acceptability in the community	11.1	21.2	17	48.1	61.1%	54.7
GBV-associated gender norms acceptability	67.5	77.6	73.4	85.3	90.3%	87.8
Empowerment in schools	95.2	97.4	96.5	85.3	86.7%	85.9
Confidence in life skills	93.9	96.5	95.2	92.1	95.4%	93.8



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Gender in(equality) in schools: social norms, attitudes and beliefs

Key findings: gender equality in schools

Several gender-related social norms, attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate gender inequality in schools were identified and found to be widespread amongst student in schools:

- Female students are more likely to hold less discriminatory beliefs about gender equality in the school environment than their male peers; 49.6 percent of male students achieved an equitable score, compared to 56.7 percent of female students.
- Girls are held to higher standards of academic performance and behaviour than boys, who are given greater leniency.
- Gender norms play a key role in determining perceptions of gender differences in education outcomes; girls' achievements are attributed to 'hard work', while boys' achievements are considered to reflect 'natural aptitude'.
- Children, teachers and parents have positive opinions on girls' agency to make decisions about their future career and education.



Country-level differences

Survey findings demonstrated that students and teachers have **more equitable views in Viet Nam compared to Cambodia**; 68.6 per cent of students in Viet Nam reported equitable views on gender equality in schools compared to 41.5 per cent of students in Cambodia. Gender equitable views were particularly low among boys in Cambodia: only 36.2 per cent of boys in Cambodia achieved a gender equitable score.

Key findings: gender equality in the community

Findings from both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that children and adults hold inequitable views regarding gender roles in the community:

- Girls have more equitable beliefs about gender in the community than boys;



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37.5 percent of girls achieved a gender equitable score, compared to only 29.7 percent of boys.

- A high proportion of children and adults have strong traditional beliefs on the roles that men and women should take in the home and community. This is linked to dominant social norms which see men as ‘breadwinners’ and heads of households and women as responsible for caregiving and housekeeping roles, meaning girls are given more household labour tasks. This can also impact girls’ education, with reports that girls miss school more frequently than boys to carry out caregiving roles in the home.
- It was common for parents, teachers and students to report that girls’ mobility outside of the home is more restricted than boys’ due to safety concerns for girls. This can result in girls having less independence and time for socialising. However, it was noted that such divisions do not disrupt girls’ education, as restrictions result in girls having more time to complete homework (despite additional household chores).



Country-level differences

Only 17 per cent of students in Cambodia held community-based gender equitable beliefs compared to 54.7 per cent in Viet Nam. Gender equitable views among boys in Cambodia were particularly low, with only 11.1 per cent of boys reporting gender equitable views, compared to 21.1 per cent of girls in Cambodia. Several issues appeared to be particularly pronounced in Cambodia, including safety concerns for girls travelling to and from school and restrictions on their participation in extra evening classes due to the same safety concerns, as well as stronger adherence to beliefs concerning traditional gender roles in grandparent-headed households.

GBV in schools: social norms, attitudes and beliefs

Key findings:

Findings from both qualitative and quantitative data identified a number of social norms, attitudes and beliefs that can drive GBV in schools, though, in general, survey data indicated highly equitable views which could be protective against GBV.

- Girls were more likely to hold equitable views rejecting harmful norms linked to GBV than boys; 76.4 percent of boys achieved an equitable score, compared to 82.9 percent of girls.
- Qualitative findings reflected an acceptance of male aggression and fighting amongst boy peers, with teachers, parents and students alike reporting this as 'natural' or inevitable.
- Survey data indicate that girls who are subjected to bullying or teasing are more stigmatised than boys.
- Findings suggest that teasing and bullying linked to appearance is common within the target schools, particularly for girls.
- Bullying and exclusion of students who do not conform to traditional gender roles was commonly reported. Boys described as gentle or feminine and LGBTQ+ students were reported to be particularly vulnerable to bullying and exclusion.



Country-level differences

In Cambodia, 73.4 percent of students reported equitable beliefs on GBV-related social norms, compared to 87.8 percent in Viet Nam, indicating a stronger prevalence of equitable attitudes concerning GBV among students in Viet Nam compared to Cambodia.

Key findings: Gender-based violence (GBV) coverage and response initiatives

- The qualitative data indicate a notable gap in robust prevention initiatives and responses to school-related gender-based violence across the target schools.
- Findings demonstrated a somewhat limited understanding of GBV as a concept within school communities.



Country-level differences

In Cambodia, stakeholders reported that the involvement of community councils (e.g. the Commune Council of Women and Children) had helped strengthen the handling of SRGBV cases, facilitating coordination between schools and the wider community. In Viet Nam, there is a district-level board dedicated to handling such cases, though teachers noted that they had never had to use this avenue.



Empowerment of girls in schools: Gender equality in practice

Key findings:

- The majority of students reported positive feelings of empowerment and agency, with 91.7 percent achieving a positive score on the student empowerment index.
- Stakeholders reported that creating an enabling environment and safe space for girls in school, along with encouragement from teachers, parents and peers, plays a vital role in helping girls feel empowered in their abilities and education. Survey data demonstrated that empowerment scores were higher for students who believed that their school is committed to equality and equal opportunity,
- The role of poverty as a structural barrier to agency was raised across stakeholder groups. Teachers and parents noted that while children may be encouraged to plan

for their futures, economic hardship often limits the feasibility of these aspirations, particularly when it comes to progressing to higher education or paying for extra lessons.

- Findings indicate that girls are actively involved in school leadership positions (to a greater extent than boys), though these positions do not always support girl's empowerment.



Country-level differences

A higher proportion of students in Cambodia reported positive feelings of empowerment and agency, with 96.5 percent achieving a positive score, compared to 85.9 percent of students in Viet Nam. Moreover, in Cambodia, a key factor influencing girls' confidence and empowerment was the presence of role models.

Educational outcomes and life skills

Key findings:

- Girls appear to be outperforming boys academically, though gendered beliefs relating to boys' natural aptitude for STEM and sports subjects may limit girls' opportunities in these areas.
- According to survey data, the majority of students (94.7 percent) reported positive confidence in their life skills, with female students reporting slightly higher confidence.
- Findings identified both structured and informal opportunities to develop students' life skills competencies within target schools.
- While the majority of students feel they have access to support when experiencing emotional distress, perceptions of stigmatisation of mental health issues in the community may be a barrier (particularly for boys).



Country-level differences

In Cambodia, FGDs suggest that girls may lack confidence in their academic abilities, and that entrenched gendered beliefs about intelligence continue to influence student perceptions.

Intersecting inequalities

This study sought to assess **intersecting inequalities** by examining the association with findings on norms, attitudes and beliefs relating to gender equality and GBV and gender equality in practice with different criteria and demographic characteristics. It should be noted that disability did not appear to intersect with gender inequitable views or empowerment.

Age: As children get older and progress through school grades, their gender equitable views increase and become more progressive, though their confidence and perceived life skills fluctuate through the years.

Ethnicity: Gender equitable views and perceptions of empowerment appear to vary between ethnic groups in Viet Nam, with H'Mong communities demonstrating more progressive views.

Socio-economic status: Poverty is a barrier to continued access to education; socioeconomic status influences girls' empowerment, agency and educational outcomes; school dropout is a risk for families who are dependent on seasonal agricultural labour; and socioeconomic disadvantage appears to be linked to more traditional gender norms and inequitable views.

Implications for programming

Implications for future programming and programme adaptation and development have been drawn across each of the key findings:

Finding	Implication for Programming
Girls are more likely than boys to hold gender-equitable views	- Consider how to effectively engage boys in the programme - Build on girls’ existing attitudes to support peer-led change
Students’ beliefs often reflect their teachers’ attitudes	Teacher training should include a focus on content on gender equality and inclusive teaching practices
Mental health stigma may be linked to less equitable gender beliefs	Mental health awareness can be integrated into Life Skills programming to support both well-being and gender equity
Students report more equitable views in school than in the community	- Support community social behaviour change initiatives focused on addressing harmful gender norms and beliefs in programme areas - Ensure mutually-reinforcing programming in school and in the community - Consider pathways through which community change can be enacted (e.g. through the CCWC in Cambodia)
Traditional gender roles affect girls’ responsibilities and mobility	- Life skills and community engagement should address restrictive gender norms and their impact on girls’ independence and agency - After school classes in Cambodia should be made more accessible for girls
Girls are active in school leadership but may face challenges being respected	- Programming should support girls’ leadership and address power imbalances that may undermine their roles - Efforts should ensure student leadership positions in schools are meaningful and valued
Teasing and bullying are common and often trivialised, especially for girls and gender non-conforming students	- Programming should include strategies to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and bullying - Awareness raising should be carried out on potential mental health and wellbeing implications of teasing and bullying
Online bullying is an emerging issue (particularly in Viet Nam)	Provide skills development for teachers, parents and students in online harms and staying safe online
Teachers want more support on LGBTQ+ inclusion and GBV	Targeted training and resources should be developed and implemented for teachers on these topics
Poverty and caregiving roles limit girls’ participation in school	Programming should consider the intersecting nature of gender equality and socioeconomic factors as barriers for girls in education
Female role models help girls feel more empowered	Programming can promote visibility of diverse female role models in schools and communities

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