

ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY IN AND THROUGH EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

*Unpacking the Disparity in learning outcomes
between urban and rural girl students*



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I. INTRODUCTION

This policy brief aims to provide evidence for policies that promote equitable access to quality education for rural and urban girl students in Cambodia. It encourages the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MOEYS) and education stakeholders to take concrete action towards gender equality¹ and inclusion enhancement in the education system. It will highlight the achievements, existing disparities in education access, quality, and gender-inclusiveness between rural and urban schools, and the key factors contributing to these disparities such as culture, attitudes, poverty, teachers' training, school environment, and resources availability. It will also study the effectiveness of current policies and identify gaps in promoting equality and inclusion in education. Policy options will be provided to address the gap of learning outcomes for girl students in urban and rural areas to promote educational outcomes.

Through this policy brief, we are finding the solutions to address the persistent gender gap in education in Cambodia, particularly between girl students in urban and rural areas. This highlights the progress made in Cambodia toward gender equality and emphasizes access, quality, and inclusivity as well as remaining disparities. This policy brief also focusing on the key factors that contribute to these disparities such as socio-economic status, attitudes and social norms, and teacher training and resources allocation. It highlights the government's effort and achievements towards the full realization SDG4 and its adherence to international legal frameworks, and the need for further actions. The policy options and recommendations are provided to address the challenges and to engage all the key stakeholders seeking to accelerate reform and promote a more equitable and inclusive education system for Cambodian students, regardless of gender or location.

The RGC adopted the Agenda for the SDGs 2016–2030 with United Nations member states in the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015. The RGC has localized the SDGs in the Cambodian context through the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs). CSDGs consist of 18 goals, 88 targets, and 148 indicators, with 96 being national indicators. Goal4 aims to *“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”*. With Target 4a stating to *Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.*²

¹ Gender equality: The concept that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is, therefore, the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community and society. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female.

² The RGC, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2016–2030

Since then, Cambodia has made significant progress in promoting gender equality and inclusion in its education system. Within a total population of 15.6 million (51.3% female) in 2019, Cambodia has started resolving the problem of gender disparity in education, with a 99.6% enrolment rate for primary school-age children and 284,599 students (52.27% female) in higher education for the 2023–2024 school year.³ However, school materials and teaching methods continue to promote ideals of the ‘virtuous Khmer woman’ while government policies like the National Childcare Policy reinforces gender norms, women responsible for care of children and the household. Social expectations in workplaces and communities are frequently cited as barriers to women taking leadership roles due to the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and traditions to unpaid care and household works. To change gender restrictive norms, national and multi stakeholder strategies must involve multiple stakeholders at all levels including households, communities, institutions, and governments. Working with conventional and social media can promote egalitarian gender norms and reduce harmful content. With pandemic disruptions to education and the importance of strengthening human capital, there is an opportunity to work with the educational system to eradicate restrictive gender norms through changes in curricula, teacher training’s content and teaching methods, and school operations.⁴

The barriers for students with disabilities remain a key challenge to achieve inclusive education in Cambodia. The government has established Inclusive Education Action Plan 2024–2028⁵ as well as special school initiatives in several provinces to provide education and vocational training for children and young people with disabilities such as in Siem Reap province.⁶ However, the national formal educational system still needs to be examined and reformed to adopt an inclusive education mechanism and practices that will facilitate and reflect the different levels of learning needs for different types of disabilities among children with disabilities (physical, mental, visual and speech impairment, deaf, and others) in Cambodia.

Secondary education enrollment has grown globally, including Cambodia, but from PISA-D 2022, only 36% of 15-year-olds are enrolled in school (coverage of education systems) compared to the total population of 15-year-olds enrolled in lower or upper secondary school.⁷ Enhancing primary education quality and fairness remains a significant challenge. Achieving success requires more strategic, participatory and systematic interventions. Good national planning, addressing the barriers and challenges of the bureaucracy at all levels, and strategic government investment are the key.

³ 2022–2023 Annual Congress report, MOEYS, April 2024

⁴ [Gender Equality Deep-Dive for Cambodia, page 5, United Nation Cambodia](#)

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/press-releases/cambodia-starts-five-year-inclusive-education-plan-ensure-quality-education-all>

⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/stories/inclusive-education-cambodia-successes-and-challenges>

⁷ OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

Support to and engagement with teachers, school principals, parents, communities, and private education businesses are essential. A national champion of reforming policies, and national action plan the urgency and transformative leaders at all bureaucratic levels are required and these will help speed up the successful reform toward gender equality and inclusive education system in Cambodia.⁸

II. INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

A. UN conventions that Cambodia has ratified⁹

May 2015, The Incheon Declaration, endorsed the Incheon Declaration–Education 2030, emphasizing the importance of gender equality in achieving the right to education for all. SDG4 includes a target to 'Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

In 2015, the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted by 189 UN Member States, highlighting violence as one of their 12 critical areas of concern. The Executive Board of UNESCO, comprising 58-member states, adopted the Learning without Fear decision to commit to designing and implementing national policies and action plans to support safe, inclusive and effective quality learning environments for all children. This first-ever UN decision on SRGBV acknowledges its negative consequences on children's health, learning, school attendance and school completion.

In 2014, A Global Working Group to End SRGBV was established under the leadership of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative and UNESCO to bring together a wide range of partners committed to ending Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in and around schools. Under the leadership of UNESCO, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Inter-Agency Task Team (IATT) on Education and School Health and UN Women, together with an advisory group of key stakeholders drawn from the Working Group, this global guidance was commissioned to provide a crucial SRGBV resource aimed specifically at ministries of education and education stakeholders.

UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, adopted in 1960, Signatories agree to the principle of non-discrimination and the right to education. It also emphasizes the importance of a safe and violence-free learning environment.

The Dakar Framework for Action Education for All was established in 2000 to achieve the six internationally agreed Education for All (EFA) goals.

⁸ Education Budget Brief 2022, UNICEF 2023

⁹ GLOBAL GUIDANCE ON ADDRESSING SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, UNESCO and UN Women, 2016

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1990, requiring states to ensure children are properly cared for and protected from violence, abuse and neglect without discrimination.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979, required states to take positive measures to prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish any incidents of gender-based violence (GBV).

B. Cambodia Policy's Commitments and Achievements

The RGC and MOEYS's development strategy have seen significant progress across various sectors. The 7th legislature of the National Assembly launched the "Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I for Growth, Employment, Equity, Efficiency, and Sustainability" focusing on performance efficiency through good governance practices and the Dynamics of Stakeholder System. The strategy adopts five key priorities: People, Road, Water, Electricity, and Technology, with digital technology being crucial for addressing the 4th Industrial Revolution. The core objectives remain; maintain peace, economic growth, and development while accelerating development through resilience in five priority sectors: public sector, economic sector, financial sector, human and social capital sector, and environmental sector and climate change response.¹⁰ The RGC has strong commitment to gender equality principles through integration into national policy frameworks, sector strategies and action plans and Cambodian women have made significant progress along many dimensions of human development.¹¹ The RGC has defined its long-term vision for the development of the social protection system: *"the construction of a social protection system based on inclusiveness, effectiveness and financial sustainability as a tool to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability and inequality and which will contribute to the development and protection of human resources and stimulate economic growth"*.¹² The RGC has issued multiple regulatory frameworks to promote social inclusion and protect women and marginalized groups through the national-level frameworks and it also states in the Cambodian Constitution.

CSDGs prioritize the principle of "Leave No One Behind", to address inequalities and ensure that everyone has access to a better life. The framework focuses on two key areas: Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG Goal4) and Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG Goal5). MOEYS Annual Congress, April 2024, schools at all levels have significantly increased in all

¹⁰ Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I, The Royal Government of Cambodia, August 2023

¹¹ Cambodia Report to the General Assembly resolution A/Res/72/234 on "Women in Development", MoWA, May 2019

¹² National Social Protection Policy Framework 2026-2026, Approved by Council Ministers, on March 2017

targets in response to the policy of bringing schools closer to people's residences. The education sector has achieved great achievements through a number of interventions, such as the enrollment campaign, school buildings, and provision of teachers, school operations, and scholarships to students from poor families, creating opportunities for students to have greater access to education at all levels. School year 2022–2023, there were 19,341 general education schools and preschools. Primary education net enrollment has reached an impressive 99.6% (99.7% boys and 99.6% girls); 3.8% increase compared to the previous school year. This data demonstrates a near-parity between boys' and girls' access to education, a remarkable achievement for Cambodia.¹³

In February 2019, Cambodia launched the Education 2030 Roadmap. This initiative aligns the country's goals with the international agenda outlined in the Incheon Declaration. The MOEYS plays a leading role in implementing the Education 2030 Roadmap. Through its Educational Strategic Planning, MOEYS is continuously working towards ensuring all Cambodian children and youth have equal opportunities to access quality education. This aligns perfectly with the RGC commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. To improve learning outcomes for all children, MOEYS currently promotes two overarching policies: 1). Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This policy prioritizes providing a quality education for every child, regardless of background or ability; and 2). Ensure effective leadership and management of education officials at all levels. Strong leadership is recognized as crucial for creating a supportive and effective educational environment.¹⁴ This comprehensive roadmap outlines specific strategies and targets to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all Cambodians.

In 2016, all line ministries reviewed key indicators on gender mainstreaming to fully integrate in CSDGs Goal5 into their work. MoWA led a series of consultative workshops that resulted in a comprehensive monitoring framework including key gender targets and indicators linked with the responsible ministries, data sources, and data cycles. This information has been integrated into respective line ministries' Gender Mainstreaming Action Plans (GMAP) and strategic plans. MoWA has implemented Neary Rattanak V 2019–2023 and continues to implement the Neary Rattanak VI 2024–2028, which was launched in April this year. This position MoWA plays a role as a leader and coordinator to reverse the entrenched discrimination against women ensuring that women can enjoy equal civic and legal protections. The policy focuses on gender mainstreaming and behavioral change across

¹³ 2022–2023 Annual Congress report, MOEYS, April 2024

¹⁴ [Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023](#)

sectors, facilitated by research analysis, law and policy design. It seeks to advance women's participation in entrepreneurship and STEM fields while providing them with legal protection, healthcare, and resilient institutions.¹⁵

MOEYS has mainstreamed gender issues into various educational policies, including the Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023 and the Teacher Policy Action Plan. These efforts push each educational entity to implement specific measures that promote gender equality through planning, educational programs, service delivery, and management.¹⁶

MOEYS initiated the Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan in Education Sector 2016–2020 and continue for 2021–2025, and Gender-Responsive STEM Education to ensure that children and adults of all genders can access educational services equitably and inclusively so that they can attain desired learning outcomes through promote gender equality, equitable and inclusive access to education and quality learning outcomes; increase women's participation in educational services; and establish a gender-sensitive school environment and norms around appropriate social behavior. Cambodia's interventions to promote gender equality in education are multifaceted. They range from building infrastructure like separate toilets and dorms for girls to providing scholarships specifically for them. The focus extends to curriculum development, ensuring materials are free from gender bias and include positive representations of women and girls. Teacher training is another key area, with programs on gender sensitivity and mainstreaming gender equality into teaching practices. Additionally, life skills training is offered to prepare girls for future opportunities. These comprehensive interventions address various barriers girls face in accessing and succeeding in education.¹⁷ This plan outlines specific measures to address gender disparities within the education system, ensuring girls have equal access to education and opportunities.¹⁸

Teacher policy and professional development: MOEYS recognizes that a highly qualified and motivated teacher workforce is a crucial factor in improving the quality of teaching and learning. To operationalize these priorities, MOEYS has put in place numerous policies to increase the quantity and quality of teachers in Cambodia. The key policies include Teacher Policy, Teacher Policy Action Plan (TPAP), Framework for Teacher Continuous Professional Development (CPD), Teacher Career Pathway Framework, and Teacher Professional Standards. MOEYS supports leadership training in early 2023. The course includes an optional module on gender equality and the environment. Leadership courses are given to the leaders of the capital and provincial

¹⁵ GENDER & INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT ANALYSIS, USAID Cambodia, 2020

¹⁶ Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023, Chapter IV: Education, Youth and Sport Strategy Reforms, p61, MOEYS, 2019

¹⁷ Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan in Education Sector 2021–2022

¹⁸ **Gender disparities:** Statistical differences (often referred to as "gaps") between men and women, boys and girls that reflect an inequality in some quantity. UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia November 2017

departments, especially focusing on women leaders. Moreover, the ministry developed the textbook of Basic Leadership Development, Effective Leadership Decision Making, Regular Professional Development in the Workplace, Presentation and Public Speaking Skills, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion and counseling at workplace.¹⁹

To increase girls' enrolment is prioritizing girls in scholarship programs. This initiative began in 2003 as part of the government's efforts to improve equitable access to education, student retention, and secondary school completion. The RGC has developed and implemented a comprehensive Social Protection Policy Framework 2016–2025, in response to national development priorities and including restructuring of the management institutions. Specifically, the government is implementing the food reserve program, school feeding program, scholarship program for poor students with 60 percent for girls, and cash support for pregnant women and children of poor families as part of the social assistance program.²⁰ MOEYS Annual Congress 2024 reported that 102,164 poor lower secondary students, 60,740 girls received scholarships for 2022–2023 school year equal to 59.45%. For upper secondary students 6,727 girl students out of 11,092 students equal to 60.61% received the scholarship.²¹

Child-Friendly School Policy: on Child-Friendly School Program, School Safety Framework 2023 indicated on the strategy and responsibility of the key stakeholders to carry out all risk assessments focus on children for school safety at the national, sub-national, and school levels by ensuring that gender and inclusion perspectives are taken into account and promote the inclusive and equity for indigenous peoples to ensure accessing to quality basic education, addressing gender, disability and social inclusion.

The Policy on Inclusive Education (IE) was developed in 2018 by MOEYS to educate all persons with special needs to contribute to society's development. The Policy aims to ensure early identification, assessment and timely intervention; to provide access to inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning opportunities; to build capacity and enhance professional development for all teachers as well as school management; and to raise awareness and promote participation.²² In the 2022–2023 school year, IE programs were implemented in 921 schools (public & community) for pre-school education, with training provided for teachers on IE and individual support plans for children with special needs. Additionally, 232 children (130 girls) were identified and referred to rehabilitation centers. For Primary Education, Multilingual education program for indigenous children and CWDs in 96 schools

¹⁹ 2022–2023 Annual Congress report, MOEYS, April 2024

²⁰ Cambodia Report to the General Assembly resolution, A/Res/72/234 on "Women in Development" Prepared by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Royal Government of Cambodia, May 2019, Phnom Penh

²¹ 2022–2023 Annual Congress report, MOEYS, April 2024

²² Policy on Inclusive Education, MoEYS, June 2018

across 18 districts²³. This program involved improving indigenous language textbooks and storybook production; curriculum and textbook reviews and improvements for indigenous languages; training teachers on multilingual education; and production and dissemination of digital education resources in indigenous languages. For Secondary and Technical Education: 5,644 CWD enrolled (3,278 female) across secondary levels; Capacity building for teachers on special curriculum design; Special education high schools programs in 5 special schools for 831 CWD (347 female);²⁴ and Support for highly intelligent students and initiatives like ear checks and hearing aid distribution for students in special schools.²⁵

III. GENDER AND INCLUSION GAPS IN EDUCATION

One of the key factors influencing learning outcomes is location. Students in urban schools consistently outperform their rural counterparts in all three domains assessed by SEA-PLM. This urban advantage is substantial, with a 15-point score gap in Reading, 13 points in Writing and 15 points in Mathematics. This data reflects a persistent learning inequality between urban and rural areas in Cambodia. Cambodian Grade5 urban outperformed Grade5 rural students in Reading, Writing and Mathematics. Geographic zone was divided into four parts; Plains, Tonle Sap, Plateau and Coastal. The results of Grade 5 students among the four zones showed that students from Plains and Tonle Sap performed better than students from Plateau and Coastal in all subjects. This reflects inequality in learning between these four zones.²⁶

Being a girl, attending pre-primary school, and attending a school in an urban area were all characteristics linked with higher reading outcomes. Students who were over-age for their current grade were linked with lower reading outcomes. More exploration of this last trend (i.e., 24% of students interviewed were over-age for their current grade), including an investigation of the factors that may protect against these negative impacts, is warranted.²⁷

I. Socio-Economic Status (SES)

Studies like The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) and Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D) highlight the link between family SES and student performance in reading, writing and mathematics. It is important to mention that such socioeconomic gaps in educational achievement are well-known in sociology of education, so, Cambodian Grade 5 students who were more advantaged outperformed disadvantaged students.²⁸ Regarding the SES, a new

²³ CARE international report, MLE program 2023

²⁴ [Dashboard of children with disability in five special schools, school year 2023-2024](#)

²⁵ 2022-2023 Annual Congress report, MOEYS, April 2024

²⁶ SEA-PLM 2019 National Snapshot Report Grade 5 Students' Learning in Cambodia, MOEYS 2021

²⁷ IPEA Student Performance Evaluation to Inform the Scaling of EGR Quantitative Research Report, January 2024

²⁸ SEA-PLM 2019 National Snapshot Report Grade 5 Students' Learning in Cambodia, MOEYS 2021

question about food insecurity was included in the student questionnaire in PISA 2022. Shockingly, results show that in all PISA-participating countries there are 15-year-old students who suffer from food insecurity, i.e. who had to skip one or more meals a week in the month prior to PISA because they did not have enough money to buy food. The research shows that food insecurity impairs children's learning and educational progress (Argaw et al., 2023). In 18 countries/economies, more than 20% of students reported not eating at least once a week due to lack of money. In Baku (Azerbaijan), Jamaica* and in the Philippines, more than a third of students reported this but only in Cambodia is this the case for more than half of students (67.8%).²⁹

2. Teacher Training and Quality on Gender and Inclusion

The lack of teacher skills and motivation, along with learner preparation, school inputs, and school management, have been found to be the main causes of the learning crisis worldwide (World Bank, 2018). Within the variety of best practices in teaching and learning, Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) is found to have a positive impact on learning for both boys and girls. Yet, little is known about the government's commitment to GRP and its practice on the ground in Cambodia. The World Bank reports that poorly trained teachers, lack of resources, and outdated teaching methods lead to disengagement and higher dropout rates among girls (World Bank, Education in Cambodia, 2020). Poor learning outcomes in primary school can largely be attributed to a shortage of effective teachers, a challenge compounded by an uneven distribution of teachers across the country. In addition, teachers in Cambodia are inadequately prepared to do their job well, with only a small proportion of teachers holding bachelor's degrees or higher qualifications. Crowded and poorly maintained schools are another issue, with many schools operating in double shifts and lacking basic infrastructure such as electricity and bathrooms. Weak governance of the school system exacerbates these problems. The lack of solid educational foundations is having negative knock-on effects, impacting enrollment, and learning outcomes at higher levels of education and in adult training. Progression to secondary school remains low, and dropout rates remain high due to past poor performance and financial and gender barriers. (World Bank, 2023)³⁰

A survey on gender responsive education found that 52.9% were observed and classified as not gender responsive while 47.1% classified as being gender responsive; 119 teachers from 21 target schools were involved in this survey. When asked about gender stereotypes, 16.81% of teachers were found at low level and 47.89% of teachers at medium level in using lesson examples and language that do not stereotype any gender. Regarding gender discrimination, 10.28% of teachers at low level and 20.56% at medium level did not discriminate, discourage or assign tasks to students based on their gender. For gender responsive language, 49.28% of teachers always use

²⁹ OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

³⁰ From Recovery to Reform, Cambodia Economic Update 2023, The World Bank

positive words and expressions in class to instill confidence in students, and another 48.74% does not emotionally abuse students, whether the child has misbehaved or not. In collaborative learning and teacher–student feedback, 21.85% of teachers at low level and 53.30% at medium level facilitate group activities, active learning and mixed–gender team work to promote collaborative learning. 18.49% of teachers at low level and 37.82% at medium level provide constructive feedback and do not criticize or compare students’ performance. However, it’s found that 13.44% of girls and boys at low level and 44.53% support and interact with each other in learning and class activities without hesitation. (UWS, 2024)

3. Negative Gender Stereotypes

Despite progress in gender equality, gaps persist in education completion, health outcomes, employment, and leadership in decision making. Discrimination and gender norms hinder women’s full participation in society including women face discrimination in hiring and compensation, and face additional barriers entering into certain sectors which are male dominated.³¹ Cultural norms and beliefs also significantly influence gender equality and inclusive development. Female enrollment rates have increased, but they are still short of targets set for female students in remote areas and higher education. Parents’ awareness and limited perception of girls’ education are key factors. School protection and safety are limited, and remote areas have schools far from home, making it difficult for girls to travel. Family and society also influence women’s skills and job choices, leading to a low number of women with the skills demanded in the job market.³²

Social norms regarding female roles and marriage, [April 2021](#), “Everyone has their own story to tell but I believe almost all women will at least once in their life have a story of gender issues and discrimination,” says Bo Chankoulka, Policy Department Director, MOEYS. Unfortunately, “gender stereotyping in society results in an inability to acknowledge gender inequalities at all levels of social systems and a failure to notice the different impact that policies have on women and men.” In traditional Cambodian society, there is a deeply rooted belief that prioritizes providing educational opportunities for men and boys over women. This societal norm has made it challenging to establish inclusive education in Cambodia. According to UNICEF, *Girls Education and Gender Equity in 2021*, girls are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over formal education. These responsibilities include managing household chores, taking care of younger siblings, and assisting with family businesses. Consequently, these societal expectations significantly hinder girls’ ability to fully participate in and succeed within the educational system. Furthermore, certain regions of Cambodia have a longstanding tradition of early marriage, which often leads young girls to forgo their education in

³¹ ADB’s Work in Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment

³² Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan in Education Sector 2021–2022

order to assume the roles of wives and mothers at a young age. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA, 2022) has emphasized that early marriage is deeply ingrained in cultural norms that prioritize marriage over girls' education, perpetuating this practice. Thus, this severely limits girls' access to educational opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of limited prospects and exacerbating gender disparities. Many families cannot afford to send all their children to school and often prioritize boys over girls' education. The World Bank in 2020 also reported that economic constraints lead families to invest in boys' education, if boys will provide a better economic return in the future. This economic decision-making process marginalizes girls and limits their educational opportunities. Additionally, while primary school is officially free, there are additional costs such as uniforms, books, transportation, and unofficial school fees which are shouldered by the families. UNICEF also highlights that these costs can be prohibitive for poor families, preventing girls from attending school. As a result, boys were given preference over girls when it came to obtaining an education because of poverty.

4. Infrastructure

Infrastructure limitations like a lack of standard toilets and internet access, and limited access to dormitories further restrict educational opportunities. The standard accessibility for students with disabilities remains unmet, which leaves them behind in education opportunities that leads to lifelong impact on skill, job, and income generation in the future. Institutional Barriers have also been the challenges for females in accessing education. Many rural schools in Cambodia still lack the basic facilities, such as separate toilets for girls. This lack of infrastructure can be a significant deterrent for adolescent girls, especially during menstruation. According to UNICEF, inadequate school facilities contribute to higher dropout rates among girls.³³ Even when girls attend school, the quality of education can be low.

The gender disparities in Cambodia education represent a complex and deeply issue that has persisted for generations. These long-standing barriers are not isolated incidents but it is the systemic problems that originated at the grassroots level. It stills in the society and continues to exist in traditional gender roles, economics constraints, and inadequate infrastructure. To address these challenges, it needs a comprehensive and long-term approach that overcomes the root cause of the problem rather than merely treating the symptoms. To achieve substantial progress in gender equality in education, it is essential to recognize that this is not a short-term endeavor. The effects of these barriers have been cumulative, and their eradication requires sustained efforts and investment. Short-term interventions may provide temporary relief but will not address the underlying issues. By carefully investing in long-term solutions, such as gender-sensitive curriculum development and teacher training, infrastructure

³³ UNICEF, Girl Education and Gender Equity, 2021

improvement, improvement of monitoring and evaluation system, Cambodia can create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment to improve learning outcomes, and address the gaps for all its citizens.

IV. POLICY AND PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enact and implementation laws and frameworks at school level

- 1.1 Enact a Gender Equality Law: Currently, The RGC has established the law of protection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities, and a national strategic plan on gender equality. The RGC needs to enact a Gender Equality Law to enforce more gender equality policies and regulation at all levels.
- 1.2 Establish independent monitoring bodies and strengthen existing ones: There is a need to establish independent monitoring bodies or existing ones should be empowered to oversee the progress and hold schools accountable. These maybe named as Gender and Inclusion Oversight Committees whose role is to ensure the implementation of relevant gender and inclusion policies. In addition, the Children Council and Youth Council roles must be strengthened in monitoring gender and inclusion implementation. Furthermore, the gender and inclusion indicators should be included in the missions of DOE's inspection. The Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) CCWC and Women's and Children's Consultative Committee (WCCC) should be strengthened to monitor the implementation of gender and inclusion activities in school. The CCWC reports on school-aged girls in their commune who are not in school and urges parents to send their children to school.
- 1.3 The RGC should create a specific scholarship program for girls from poor families to ensure that they remain in schools. This program can be run under the National Social Security Fund via a cash transfer program.
- 1.4 MOEYS would monitor and maintain focusing on gender and inclusive education, analyze the factors that cause girls to stay behind, the interventions that can provide advantages to inform the revision and formulation of future gender-responsive policies and action plans. Through regular monitoring, the data and information will be updated which will facilitate analysis of student learning outcomes disaggregated by gender, age, and school types to inform policy maker decisions, program development, and resource allocation.

2. Provide regular training on Gender and Inclusion

- 2.1 Trainings on gender mainstreaming and inclusion should be provided to local authorities, educational staff and pre-service teachers.
- 2.2 Public awareness campaigns can further these efforts by educating the population through partnerships with media outlets for educational programming.

- 2.3 Gender and Inclusion themes should be integrated into school curriculums at all levels.
- 2.4 The MOEYS, in collaboration with NGOs and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs), could create standardized Gender Responsive Principles (GRP) into existing pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. A mechanism to monitor GRP implementation and collect feedback from teachers, students, and parents should be established to research to assess the current state of GRP implementation in Cambodian schools and identify gaps.
- 2.5 Teacher training: The successful implementation of Teaching for Improved Gender Equality and Responsiveness (TIGER) projects of MoEYS with support of VVOB, an international NGO, should be expanded in all Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs).³⁴ MoEYS should encourage in-service teachers to enroll in gender and inclusion which are part of Continuous Professional Development (CPD).
- 2.6 The MOEYS should enhance teacher quality by strengthening the in-service teachers' training programs in rural school areas. A yearly training plan should be established by schools and approved by the DOE at the provincial level and the refresher training should be conducted by Teacher Education Colleges (TECs) in the province or at Regional Teacher Training Center (RTTC) during school holidays. In addition, DoE should encourage the teachers in rural areas to upgrade their qualification through TEC. The necessary budget should be ensured to send the teachers from rural schools to attend the refresher training at TECs or RTTCs.
- 2.7 Training institute needs to train teachers on strategies to effectively address the needs of diverse classrooms and identify learning barriers faced by disadvantaged students while the MOEYS could develop training modules focusing on differentiated instruction, social-emotional learning approaches, and identifying and addressing learning gaps specific to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 2.8 MoEYS should reinforce and strengthen the mechanism of professional learning communities within the cluster schools that enable the teachers of all types to exchange and learn from each other. This platform will allow experienced and well-trained teachers to share expertise and help support the ones in need of capacity building.

3. Strengthening School Programs

- 3.1 The schools should conduct a school needs assessment (including Gender Equality, Disability, Social Inclusion (GEDSI) analysis) in rural areas to identify the need in terms of infrastructure, learning/teaching materials, additional teachers,

³⁴ <https://www.vvob.org/en/programmes/cambodia-tiger>

- and technology gaps in school activities such as ICT, STEM, children and youth councils, sport, and other activities in school.
- 3.2 The monitoring and evaluation need to be conducted regularly to assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies and adjust them as needed based on data and feedback. The data collection on student achievement disaggregated by SES background to track progress needs to be conducted to find the achievement gap and identify areas requiring further intervention. In addition, it also needs to strengthen a school inspection mechanism conducted by DoE, this mechanism has reinforced the monitoring of school performance and addressed schools needs on a timely and regular basis.
 - 3.3 Strengthen and support slow learners and disadvantaged students by implementing extra-school tutoring programs with qualified instructors, focusing on core subjects such as Khmer and Math, and 21st century skills development. This could include establishing mentorship programs and organizing re-entry and remedial programs to prevent learning loss.
 - 3.4 Continue and expand the school feeding program to ensure all students have access to healthy meals and essential school supplies. This reduced the cost for parents from low-income families.
 - 3.5 MOEYS needs to strengthen the implementation strategy on reducing late enrolment and repetition students by conducting the campaign to raise the awareness to community on early childhood education and age of school enrolment. At the school level, schools need to identify and address factors that lead to late enrolment and work with local authorities to help over-aged students to enroll and catch up to ensure the effective implementation of age-proper learning material development and pedagogies utilization.
 - 3.6 Schools should strengthen existing regulations and policies to promote gender and inclusive education, address cultural norms and ensure safe, well-being for vulnerable groups, and increase funding for rural areas schools.³⁵ Schools should invest in sanitation to ensure the continuity of girls' education. Counseling should be also implemented at schools to support girls when necessary. Transportation should be provided for girls who live far away from school. There is a best practice project from Plan International and SovannPhuom organization. The project supports students whose home/village is far from school, 5 to 10Km, the road is difficult and bumpy, quiet, and bushy, that make it difficult for students to come to school regularly. Parents/caregivers keep sending children to school but come to school not regularly when their parents/caregivers are busy with other work especially with their farm. Two cart transportation were supported by EQUAL-phase II (1) Kamphon primary school, Sasan district (2) Sam Ang primary school, Thanlabrivath. The purpose of cart transportation is to provide the

³⁵ PRESS RELEASE, New UNESCO report warns social media affects girls' well-being, learning and career choices, Paris, 25 April 2024

students who have challenges from far distances of going from their home to school and it can help them to go to school regularly to attend the class and reduce absence as well as reduce school dropout. To work on this, the project and school identify students who lack the transportation to school (5 to 10 Km). After identification, school principals make a proposal for this intervention and establish the structure to implement the transportation program. The school and the project also conduct child risk assessment and prepare child risk mitigation planning to ensure safe traveling for children. A meeting to discuss the shared roles and responsibilities together with parents, caregivers, teachers, school principals and School Management Committee (SMC) was conducted. SMC hires a driver to provide package transposition. The selected drivers are also oriented in children's risks and ask them to sign and implement Child Protection Policy to ensure all students, particularly girls are safe from all forms of discrimination, violence and other punishment and they are used to their potential to attend school activities before starting the service. The Monitoring and reflecting on transportation program with all stakeholders are conducted regularly among students, parents, teachers, school principals, and SMC. The result show that all students attend school regularly and 84% students who enrolled in transportation passed school exam and promoted

- 3.7 Schools should foster inclusive spaces and implement anti-bullying policies that address discrimination on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE). School uniforms should be reviewed to ensure inclusivity for student's gender expression while the training and workshop to promote understanding and acceptance should be provided to teachers, parents, and community leaders. Regular data collection on LGBTIQ+ students' experiences is crucial to inform policymakers to use and push for legal change and anti-discrimination to promote inclusive and SOGIE protection. It may include advocating for laws that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and create a safe space in schools. All kinds of these support need to be integrated into the School Improvement Plan and regular reflection by quarterly, semester and annual.
- 3.8 Adapt a National Inclusive Learning System and School Operations into the public and private school (if possible) to ensure children with different types of disabilities remain fully access to educational opportunities including early learning programs and adult learning programs. Standard Sign language (for children with deaf), Albra text or screen reading material, or equipment for students/children with disabilities (visual impairment) needs to fully access education must be available in their communities. Speech therapists and special training for teachers for students with speech impairment or children with learning disabilities must be available for children in their communities. Without

this adapted national inclusive learning system and school operation will not achieve the national inclusive educational strategies or policies, which is the commitment that the government aimed to achieve.

4. Education Financing

The MOEYS absorbed a 3.38 percent share of GDP in 2020 before losing its traction at 2.62% in 2022—Caused by the intensified impact of Covid19 pandemic. According the budget plan of MOEYS in 2024, the projection budget is 2.67% of GDP. The RGC has projected a strong commitment to offering high-quality education services to all Cambodian citizens. Since bold reform in 2014, notable progress has been made, along with rapid increases in funding. If the country is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for Education (SDG 4), a benchmark public education expenditure of 4% of GDP should be the aim.³⁶ So, the government should increase the education budget up to 20% of the public expenditure.

³⁶ Education Budget Brief 2022, UNICEF

LIST OF MEMBERS WHO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS POLICY BRIEF

No.	Name of Organization	No.	Name of Organization
1	Aide et Action	25	Krousar Thmey Organization
2	Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR Japan)	26	Mith Samlanh
3	Aziza's Place	27	Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) organization
4	Bandos Komar Association	28	Phnom Neang Kangrei Association (PNKA)
5	Buddhist Library Cambodia Project (BLCP)	29	Plan International Cambodia
6	Cambodian Children's Advocacy Foundation Organization	30	Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (PSE)
7	Cambodian Children's Fund	31	Rabbit School Organization
8	Cambodian Organization for Children and Development (COCD)	32	Research Triangle Institute (IECD)
9	CARE International Cambodia	33	Research Triangle Institute (IPEA)
10	ChildFund Cambodia	34	Room to Read Cambodia
11	Chumkriel Language School	35	Rural Aid Organization
12	Community Training Organization For Development (CTOD)	36	SALASUSU
13	Community Council for Development Organization	37	Samaky Organization
14	DDSP	38	Save the Children International Cambodia
15	Deaf Development Programme	39	Save Vulnerable Cambodians (SVC)
16	DVVI	40	Seed for Cambodia organization
17	Empowering Youth in Cambodia	41	Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA)
18	Food for the Hungry Cambodia (FH Cambodia)	42	Sipar
19	forumZFD	43	The Orphanage for Cambodian Children Organization (OCCO)
20	Good Neighbors Cambodia	44	UWS Cambodia (UWS)
21	Hope for Cambodian Children Foundation	45	World Education
22	Humanity & Inclusion (HI)	46	សមាគមអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ស្ត្រីកម្ពុជា
23	Indochina Starfish Foundation (ISF Cambodia)	47	Occupation of Rural Economic Development and Agriculture
24	KHEMARA Organization		

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