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Lifting barriers

Boys' disengagement from education

Cambodia case study

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SHORT SUMMARY

Understanding boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development makes the promise to leave no one behind. To leave no child behind, this case study explores the underlying causes of boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia to understand how the individual, family, school, community and structural factors interact to shape boys' educational experiences and trajectories. It draws on explanatory discussions and participatory activities with students, caregivers, teachers, school leaders, civil society and government officials.

This research work is part of a wider three-year project, 'Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality', under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) programme, which includes the development and piloting of a school-based intervention model and work with curriculum and teaching and learning material developers with a focus on masculinities, working closely with research partners and Ministries of Education in Cambodia, Lesotho and Malawi to understand capacity and scaling needs.

17%
of boys
dropped out at the lower secondary education level in 2022–2023 in Cambodia

This study shows that while progress towards gender parity in education access has been made in Cambodia, emerging patterns of boys' disengagement point to the need for a more holistic and context-sensitive approach to education reform.

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

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Cambodia case study

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This report reflects a collective effort to deepen our understanding of gender and education in Cambodia and to work towards more inclusive and equitable solutions for all learners.

'Educating a child is like planting a tree –
the care you give today shapes the shade they offer tomorrow.'

– Cambodian Proverb

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Acronyms

BEEP	Basic Education Equivalency Programme
CSO	Civil society organization
DoE	District Office of Education
DP	Development Partner
EGLP	Early Grade Learning Package
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESP	Education Strategic Plan
EWS	Early Warning System/Early Dropout Warning System
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEIP	General Education Improvement Project
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
GPI	Gender Parity Index
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
KAPE	Kampuchea Action to Promote Education
KII	Key Informant Interview
KHR	Cambodian Riel
KIX	Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
LLC	Lifelong Learning Centre
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
MLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PISA-D	Programme for International Student Assessment for Development
PoE	Provincial Office of Education
SEA-PLM	Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SNM	Social Network Mapping
STS	Student Tracking System
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

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Key concepts

Boys' disengagement from education is understood as a gendered phenomenon partly rooted in societal norms and concepts of masculinity, which can lead boys and young men consciously or unconsciously to withdraw from education. Additional social, economic and cultural factors, in families, communities and schools, may also lead to boys' low engagement with education and contribute to school leaving/dropout. Disengagement from education can manifest in different forms such as lack of interest, poor participation, absenteeism, neglecting homework or exam preparation and ultimately, dropping out (UNESCO, 2022a).

Drop-out or school leaving refers to leaving school before the completion of a given stage of education or leaving at some intermediate or non-terminal point in a cycle of schooling. It can be temporary or definitive and can be the result of an active decision made by the learner or the result of push and/or pull factors (based on UNESCO-IIEP, n.d.)

Gender refers to the culturally defined roles, attributes, behaviours, identities and expectations associated with being male or female in a given context. It shapes how individuals act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in relationships and society. Gender can be expressed through male, female, and non-binary identities and may or may not be congruent with the sex assigned to an individual at their time of birth (based on UNESCO, 2022b).

Gender equality in education means that the right to education of all learners is respected equally regardless of gender. Learners of all genders are given equal access to learning opportunities, resources and protections, and learners of all genders benefit from and are treated in education equally (based on UNESCO, 2019a).

Gender equality through education refers to education's key role in addressing the wider issue of gender equality. Educational institutions can promote equitable attitudes, changing the way people think about traditional gender roles and helping to build long-term sustainable change. And achieving equal outcomes for female, male and non-binary learners can help to empower all people to create better lives (UNESCO, 2019a).

Gender norms are understood as ideas about how men and women should behave: the expectations and standards that are set for each gender in different societies, cultures and communities. They are both context- and time-specific. People internalize these 'rules' at an early age in the beginning of a cycle of gender socialization and stereotyping that continues for the rest of their lives. Gender norms thus not only become individuals' expectations of others, but also of themselves. Gender norms can be harmful, such as those that limit individuals' behaviours, opportunities, aspirations or relationships based on their gender, or that reinforce unequal power relations between genders (see also 'harmful and restrictive masculinities'). They can also be positive, when they promote equity, inclusion and shared power, for example, by encouraging people of all genders to pursue a full range of roles, express themselves freely, and share responsibilities (see also 'positive and healthy masculinities'). The socialization process happening within educational institutions often replicates that of broader society and can contribute to the reproduction of social and gender norms (Marcus et al. 2024; UNICEF et al., 2019; Cookson et al., 2023; Stromquist, 2007).

Gender parity in education is an indicator of the ratio of girls to boys, women to men. Gender parity is reached when there is equal representation and participation of male and female learners in education. It is a useful indicator, but by itself does not measure gender equality (UNESCO, 2022b).

Gender-responsive means that strategies include evidence-based gender analysis which identifies and acknowledges existing gender differences, needs and inequalities. Activities at this level include specific policies and actions that address inequalities. Gender-responsive strategies, such as training in gender-responsive pedagogy, can be used as part of a system-wide, gender-transformative approach to education.

A **gender-transformative approach** entails addressing the underlying causes of gender inequalities. It includes implementing policies and initiatives which not only address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of girls, boys, women, men and non-binary people, but also challenge existing and discriminatory policies and practices, creating radical change. A **gender-transformative approach to education** is one that encompasses policy, programming and interventions to create opportunities to actively challenge gender norms and wider inequalities. This includes promoting gender equality through curricular and teaching reforms (UNESCO, 2022a).

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Harmful and restrictive masculinities are linked to hegemonic gender norms which suggest that boys and men should conform to a 'right' or 'ideal' way to be a man or a boy (see 'hegemonic masculinity'). This 'ideal' places pressure on boys and men to conform to certain expectations, which often include being self-sufficient, acting tough and using aggression to solve conflict. It is constructed in opposition to femininities and/or marginalized masculinities. Such ideas and practices of masculinity are harmful to girls, women and non-binary people as they uphold men's privilege over women and non-binary people. They are also harmful to boys and men, who are regulated by rigid expectations of manhood that restrict their freedom to express emotions, seek help, or deviate from dominant masculine norms. Harmful and restrictive masculinities can undermine boys' motivation and learning, because they often position academic effort and aspiration as incompatible with being a 'real' boy or man, affecting boys' motivation to learn (Heilman et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2022a; UNESCO-IBE, 2025; WHO, 2019).

Low performance or low performing students refers to students who fail to meet the expected academic standards or curriculum objectives for their age and grade level.

Masculinities or men's identities are socially constructed, produced and reproduced. Masculinities can refer to identities, social norms and power dynamics. Examples of hegemonic masculinity can include being a 'provider' or 'protector' (identities), being aggressive or not showing emotion (social norms) or the subordination of women and girls and men who do not conform to dominant gender norms (power dynamics). Yet, masculinities are plural and at times contradictory, they are variable and can change across time and space, within societies and through life. Often, we come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women (Connell, 2000; UNESCO, 2022a; Ragonese et al., 2019).

Positive and healthy masculinities (also referred to as 'positive and inclusive masculinities' in the literature) emphasize the constructive aspects of masculine identities. They serve as a counterpoint to harmful and restrictive gender norms that portray men and boys as potential perpetrators or aggressors and focus solely on the harm they cause to themselves and others. It emphasises that all boys and men should be free to express diverse expressions of positive masculinities without fear of exclusion, ridicule or violence. Positive and healthy masculinities refer to alternative expressions of 'hegemonic masculinity' (see above) that align with egalitarian values and promote health and well-being. Examples include committed fatherhood and partnership, caring and intimacy, and help-seeking behaviour. The use of the plural term 'masculinities' underscores that there are many positive ways to be a boy or man. It also recognizes that masculine (and feminine) gender norms differ across cultures and contexts and change over time. Promoting positive and healthy masculinities is central in efforts to shift gender norms that harm boys and men and the people around them (based on UNESCO-IBE, 2025; UN Women, 2016).

Scaling includes many activities that are focused on deepening or expanding an impact of an intervention, programme, or policy. Scaling can be horizontal, vertical or compound. Horizontal scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on increasing the breadth of coverage of an intervention, expanding from one geographic area to another or to additional beneficiaries. Also called scaling out, replication, or diffusion. Vertical scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on integrating key aspects of an initiative into broader government systems at national or subnational levels and mainstreaming delivery into normal operations. Also called scaling up or mainstreaming. Compound scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on diversifying and expanding the types of activities or areas of engagement undertaken in an innovation or by an organization. Also called grafting or functional scaling (Brookings, 2024).

Sex: Refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish males, females and intersex individuals (UNESCO, 2022b).

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Executive summary

While Cambodia has made substantial gains in educational access and gender parity at the primary level, emerging trends at the secondary level reveal that boys are increasingly falling behind. Enrolment and completion rates for boys in lower secondary education lag behind those of girls. For example, in the 2022/23 school year, boys' dropout rates were significantly higher across most provinces, with rural boys particularly at risk. Learning assessments including the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show consistent underperformance by boys, especially in reading and science.

This case study explores the underlying causes of boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia. Commissioned by UNESCO and supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE-KIX), it draws on explanatory mixed methods research, combining administrative data, stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions and participatory activities with students, caregivers, teachers, school leaders, civil society and government officials. The study applies Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to understand how the individual, family, school, community and structural factors interact to shape boys' educational experiences and trajectories.

Key findings

- **Individual-level factors:** Boys with low performance or who have dropped out of school often lacked structured academic routines and study habits, spending significant time on other activities such as online gaming, social media, informal labour and peer socialization. Many exhibited poor self-regulation and limited help- or advice-seeking behaviours, contributing to gradual disengagement from school. In contrast, high-performing boys demonstrated goal-oriented learning behaviours, often supported by family routines and encouragement.
- **Family-level dynamics:** Economic hardship, household instability and the recent trend of having boys engaged in caregiving responsibilities pressured boys to drop out and contribute to the family income. Families also often held traditional beliefs about masculinity, expecting boys to be self-reliant, resilient and economically productive, expectations that can hinder boys from continuing their schooling, especially when they struggle academically.
- **School-level factors:** Emotional and academic support is lacking at the school level. Teachers and administrators acknowledged that dropout prevention policies and academic interventions tend to prioritize girls, resulting in boys receiving less targeted support. Poor classroom conditions, teacher shortages, bullying, private tutoring and inconsistent implementation of school policies further weakened boys' motivation to stay engaged.
- **Social and cultural norms:** Expectations on boys to be the breadwinners, protectors and risk-takers contributed to early withdrawal from school, particularly when community role models reinforced the idea that work was more honourable or practical than education. A lack of community engagement towards educational participation, particularly among men, also played a role in weakening accountability and encouragement for boys' schooling.
- **Policy and structural issues:** National policies such as automatic promotion and girls-focused programmes, while well-intended and needed, have inadvertently lessened attention to boys' growing vulnerabilities. Weak law enforcement regarding compulsory education and child labour, coupled with inadequate infrastructure in rural areas, also contributed to school dropouts.

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Recommendations

1. **Strengthen the foundation** – Improve boys' early-grade literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional learning; provide structured transition support from primary to lower secondary.
2. **Put boys on the policy agenda** – Ensure national policies explicitly track and respond to boys' emerging vulnerabilities through sex-disaggregated data and gender-transformative information or messaging.
3. **Support boys to succeed** – Offer remedial classes, mentoring and flexible learning options for students with weak study routines or who are under pressure to work.
4. **Build inclusive learning spaces** – Upgrade rural school facilities, improve teacher recruitment and training, and expand supervised extracurricular activities that foster belonging and motivation.
5. **Address social and emotional barriers** – Provide counselling, mental health services and positive masculinity programmes that help boys manage stress, identity pressures and peer dynamics.
6. **Engage fathers, families and communities** – Strengthen school–community partnerships, deliver parent-focused campaigns challenging harmful gender norms, and pilot father-centred mentoring initiatives.
7. **Enforce education laws locally** – Strengthen monitoring of compulsory schooling and child labour laws and equip local authorities to detect and respond to early disengagement.
8. **Expand flexible learning pathways** – Scale up non-formal education, catch-up programmes and quality technical and vocational education and training (TVET) options so that alternative routes remain credible and lead to further learning or livelihoods.
9. **Advance gender equality for all learners** – Apply gender-transformative approaches across curricular, teacher training and school culture, ensuring interventions support both boys and girls and avoid zero-sum framing.

This study underscores that while progress towards gender parity in access has been achieved in Cambodia, emerging patterns of boys' disengagement point to the need for a more holistic and context-sensitive approach to education reform. Addressing boys' needs should not be seen as a zero-sum game that detracts from efforts to empower girls. Instead, it reinforces the broader goal of achieving inclusive, equitable and quality education for all learners.

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Pre-publication version

Background and country context

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Background

Globally, educational attainment has shifted notably, with boys increasingly falling behind girls in various key indicators. As evidenced by the 2022 UNESCO global report on boys' disengagement from education, although girls are less likely to enter education in the first place, in many countries boys are at greater risk than girls of repeating grades, having poor learning outcomes, and failing to complete their education. In 2019 boys were more likely to repeat primary grades in 130 countries and lack upper secondary education in 73 countries. At the tertiary level, globally, only 88 men were enrolled for every 100 women (UNESCO, 2022a).

Since the early 2000s, boys' disengagement has been a concern in high- or upper-middle-income contexts, or in regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean. And new patterns are emerging.

Gender gaps in some low and lower-middle income countries – where historically girls were less likely to be in school - are narrowing and several countries are facing a change in the situation, with fewer boys progressing and completing their education (UNESCO, 2018a). Across all countries, evidence of boys' disengagement is most prevalent at the secondary level. Globally, 139 million boys were out of school in 2023 compared to 133 million girls (UIS, 2025).

Disengagement from education is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by an interplay of individual, social and institutional factors. Emerging evidence underscores the influence of societal expectations, gender norms, school environments and personal circumstances on students' academic trajectories. Gendered socialization processes, for example, often fosters higher levels of behavioural and cognitive engagement among girls, while encouraging independence and risk-taking among boys, traits that may not align with the demands of formal education systems (de Carvalho et al., 2025).

These expectations contribute to distinct patterns of engagement and underperformance, often to the detriment of boys.

Although much of the global discourse on gender and education has rightly emphasized barriers faced by girls, there is growing recognition that traditional gender roles can also constrain boys' educational aspirations and emotional expression, leading to early disengagement from education (Chaplin, 2014; Dicke et al., 2019; Jewkes et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2022a; Welmond and Gregory, 2021).

Educational institutions can also unintentionally reinforce these disparities, where boys are at elevated risk of repeating grades, underachieving in reading and leaving school early. This is partly linked to school cultures and curricula perceived as misaligned with boys' lived realities and norms of masculinity (UNESCO, 2022a). Teachers' expectations and grading practices can also encode stereotypes. Studies from multiple countries find systematic gaps between teacher-assigned and externally graded assessments, often favouring boys in mathematics and girls in reading or writing, which have measurable downstream effects on course-taking and attainment (Olczyk et al., 2023; Terrier, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Pressure to conform to dominant masculine norms, such as emotional suppression, risk-taking and avoiding help-seeking, are associated with lower engagement and academic ambition during adolescence (Bennet et al., 2025). These gendered dynamics are reinforced early in childhood through media, play and classroom interactions, which together shape children's self-perceptions and future aspirations (Spangsdorf et al., 2023). Addressing disengagement therefore requires a nuanced understanding of gender as a cross-cutting factor in education systems and targeted strategies that challenge harmful and restrictive gender norms while supporting diverse learning needs for both boys and girls.

Country context

Cambodia, situated in the south of Southeast Asia, shares land borders with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Thailand and Viet Nam. It comprises 25 provinces, with Phnom Penh serving as its capital. According to the 2019 census, Cambodia's population stood at 15.55 million, with a sex distribution of 51 percent female and 49 percent male. Notably, 29.4 percent of the population is under the age of 15 and three quarters reside in rural areas. Additionally, around 1.5 million Cambodians were working abroad as of 2020 (NIS, 2020). Economically, Cambodia achieved lower-middle-income status in 2015 (World Bank, 2019), with a gross domestic product (GDP)

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per capita of roughly US$1,700 in 2019 (NIS, 2020). Between 1998 and 2018, Cambodia achieved an average annual GDP growth rate of around 7 percent, driven by agriculture, services and manufacturing (Yok et al., 2019). Garment manufacturing, in particular, has been a major source of employment growth (ADB, 2022). More recently, growth rebounded to 5.8 percent in 2024 from 5 percent in 2023, supported by export recovery (ADB, 2024). However, rising US tariffs on key exports are expected to slow growth to 4 percent in 2025, highlighting the risks of external dependence and the need for greater economic diversification (World Bank, 2025).

Cambodia's education system has both made progress and experienced significant disruption. Historically, education was rooted in Buddhist monasteries (Wats), primarily accessible to boys and men and focused on basic literacy, religious instruction and practical skills. The French colonial era (1863–1953) introduced a Western-style formal education system, which continued to develop alongside the traditional monastic system through the independence period of the 1960s. However, the civil wars of the late 20th century led to a near-total collapse under the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. The subsequent rebuilding efforts after 1979 have profoundly shaped the current educational landscape, impacting infrastructure, teacher training capacity and overall educational quality.

Cambodia's formal education system, restructured in 1996, follows a 6+3+3 model comprising 6 years of primary education (Grades 1 to 6), 3 years of lower secondary education (Grades 7 to 9) and 3 years of upper secondary education (Grades 10 to 12), typically enrolling students from ages 6 to 17. This structure is preceded by at least one year of pre-primary education for children aged 3 to 5 and is complemented by tertiary education opportunities requiring an additional four years of study. The education system also integrates non-formal education pathways to promote literacy and life skills among out-of-school youth, adults and learners with disabilities. The academic year runs from October to July.

Recent reforms under the Strategic Plan for Teacher Education Reform 2024–2030 mark a critical shift in Cambodia's efforts to enhance educational quality. A key reform is the discontinuation of the two-year teacher training programme starting in 2025, requiring all new intakes for primary and lower secondary teacher education to complete a four-year pre-service programme. While previous pathways allowed Grade 12 graduates to become teachers after two years of training, this change reflects a significant move to professionalize teaching and elevate entry-level qualifications. Currently, Teacher Education Colleges in Phnom Penh and Battambang have already transitioned to four-year programmes, with nationwide implementation underway. These reforms aim to strengthen pedagogical skills, improve subject-matter mastery, and address long-standing disparities in teacher qualifications, particularly at the primary and lower secondary levels.

Understanding this evolving educational framework, particularly the changes in teacher recruitment and training, is needed for analysing patterns of student enrolment, progression and dropout, and for formulating responsive and inclusive education policies.

In recent years, Cambodia has undertaken a series of ambitious educational reforms aimed at strengthening the quality, equity and relevance of its education system. Guided by successive Education Strategic Plans (ESPs) for 2019–2023 and 2024–2028, policy priorities include expanding access to education, enhancing teaching and learning quality, upgrading school infrastructure and improving teacher training systems. A landmark reform in 2014 addressed systemic corruption in national examinations at the end of Grades 9 and 12, enhancing transparency and academic integrity. More recent initiatives have focused on curriculum modernization to better equip learners with a balanced mix of technical, cognitive and socioemotional skills relevant to the demands of a changing economy. Central to these reforms is the Strategic Plan for Teacher Education Reform 2024–2030, which aims to professionalize the teaching workforce through extended pre-service training, improved qualification standards and ongoing in-service professional development. In parallel, the integration of digital education and the promotion of lifelong learning are gaining traction, reflecting broader efforts to make education more inclusive and future oriented. While these reforms reflect strong political will and institutional commitment to improving the system, their differential impacts on vulnerable groups, particularly boys at risk of disengagement, remain an area requiring sustained research and policy attention.

Cambodia has achieved significant progress in educational access, retention and completion, particularly at the primary level, with net enrolment rising from 82 percent in 1997 to 95.8 percent in 2022–2023. The dropout rate at primary level also decreased from 10.5 percent in 2013 to 5.4 percent in 2023 (MoEYS, 2025a). However, noticeable gender disparities exist to boys' disadvantage in both enrolment and academic performance. Since 2014, girls have consistently outnumbered boys at all general education levels and shown stronger academic results (Chea et al., 2023). For instance, data from the 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) show that girls significantly outperformed boys in Grade 5 writing proficiency in Cambodia and across the region

Working version

(UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020). Similarly, results from the PISA for Development (PISA-D) assessment reveal that Cambodian girls scored higher than boys in both reading and science, although gender differences in mathematics performances were not significant (OECD, 2019). Complementing these findings, Grade 6 national assessment data from 2022 show girls outperforming boys in Khmer language and mathematics in nearly all provinces (MoEYS and UNICEF, 2022).

At the lower secondary level, the average national dropout rate for Grades 7 to 9 exceeded 15 percent in the 2018/19 school year, with boys dropping out at higher rates across all grades, averaging 17.5 percent or nearly three percentage points above girls. This translated into nearly 6,000 more boys than girls leaving lower secondary school that year. The national completion rate for lower secondary education was only 45 percent. Notably, the gender gap in gross completion rates at this level has widened over time: in 2012/13, slightly more boys than girls completed lower secondary school (42 percent vs 40 percent), but by 2018/19, boys' completion had declined to 40 percent, while girls' completion had risen to 50 percent. These trends continue at upper secondary and higher education levels. Girls now account for the majority of enrolments and graduates at both levels; the gender gap favouring females has widened over the last decade (MoEYS, 2024). While the COVID-19 pandemic led to school closures and related disruptions that further produced complex effects on enrolment and completion worldwide, recent Cambodian education statistics (MoEYS, 2024) indicate that these gendered patterns of higher dropout and lower completion among boys have persisted beyond the pandemic period, underscoring a systemic and growing equity concern, particularly evident at the lower secondary level, which is the focus of this study.

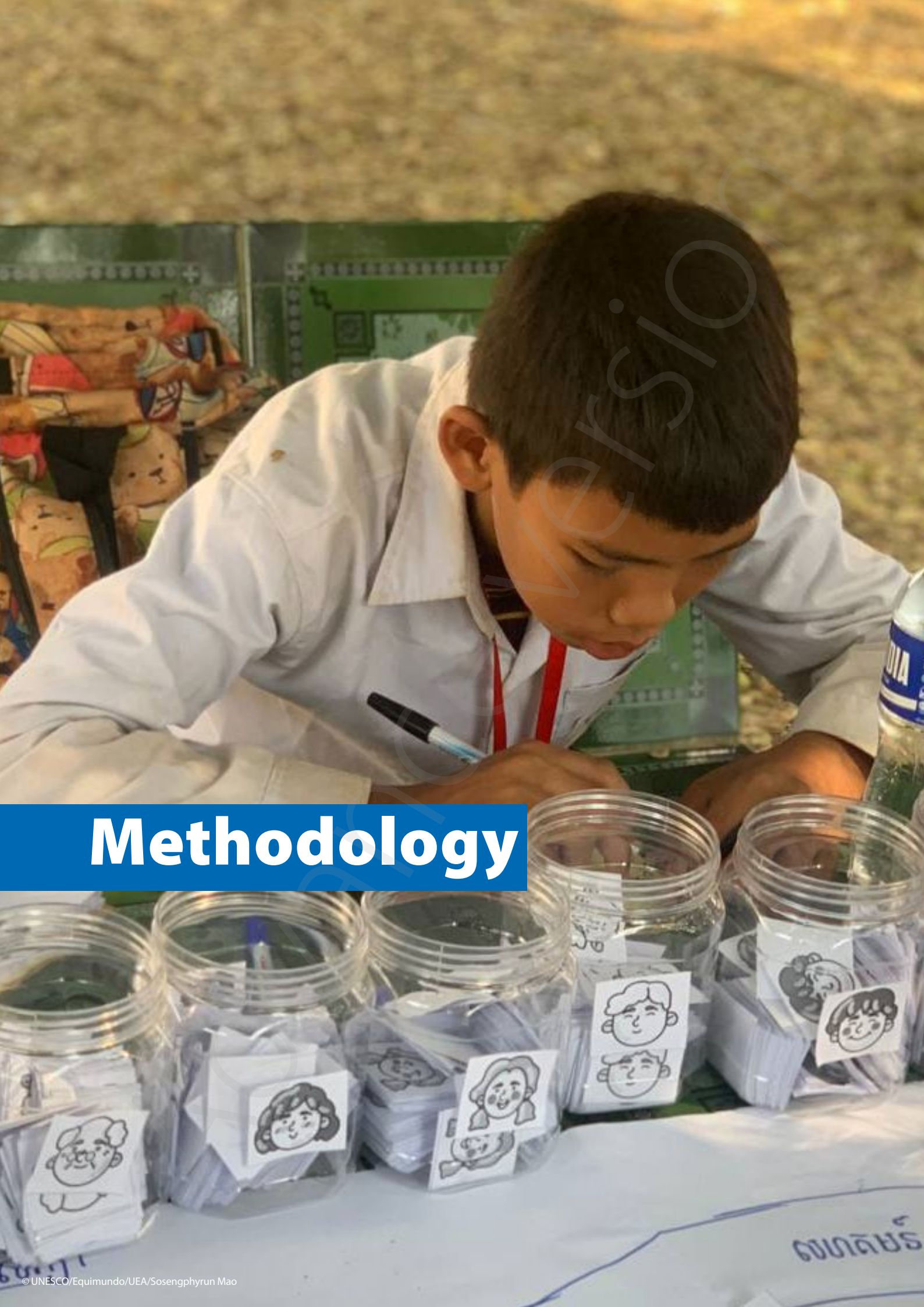
The trend of boys' educational underperformance is not unique to Cambodia; it reflects a broader global phenomenon. For decades, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have reported persistent gender gaps in education, with boys lagging girls in reading performance, school engagement and completion rates (OECD, 2015). More recently, UNESCO and the World Bank have highlighted that in at least 38 developing countries, including many in Southeast Asia, girls now surpass boys in secondary school completion (UNESCO, 2022a; World Bank, 2024b). In these contexts, boys are more likely to repeat grades, drop out and underperform academically. While considerable progress has been made in improving girls' access to education, particularly in contexts where they have been historically disadvantaged, emerging evidence calls for equal attention to the distinct barriers that boys face. Advancing gender equality in education therefore requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the unique needs and vulnerabilities of both girls and boys across different social and educational settings.

Study objectives

This study is undertaken as part of the project, 'Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality', which investigates how harmful and restrictive masculine gender norms impact boys' educational motivation and desire to learn. By means of research and practice, the project will identify the conditions that facilitate the development, successful implementation and scaling-up of strategies to advance positive and healthy masculinities in and through education and keep boys engaged in education. It includes a pilot of a school-based intervention model in Malawi and preparing the ground for interventions in Cambodia and Lesotho. The project is led by UNESCO and implemented in partnership with Equimundo and the University of East Anglia. This work is supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE-KIX), through a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.

This country case study for Cambodia has three main objectives, which align with the overarching study framework of UNESCO's work on gender equality in and through education to better understand boys' disengagement in lower secondary education:

1. Review the current situation related to boys' educational participation, learning performance and completion, with an emphasis on national and subnational contexts and overlapping disadvantages or intersectionality of characteristics.
2. Identify the structural and gender-related factors that hinder or facilitate boys' educational participation, learning performance and completion at the level of the individual, family and peers, community, school and broader society and how these may differ depending on intersections.
3. Document promising policy and programmatic initiatives (by government and to the extent possible community- or NGO-led interventions), assessing what makes certain strategies work in particular contexts and potential implications for other settings.



Methodology

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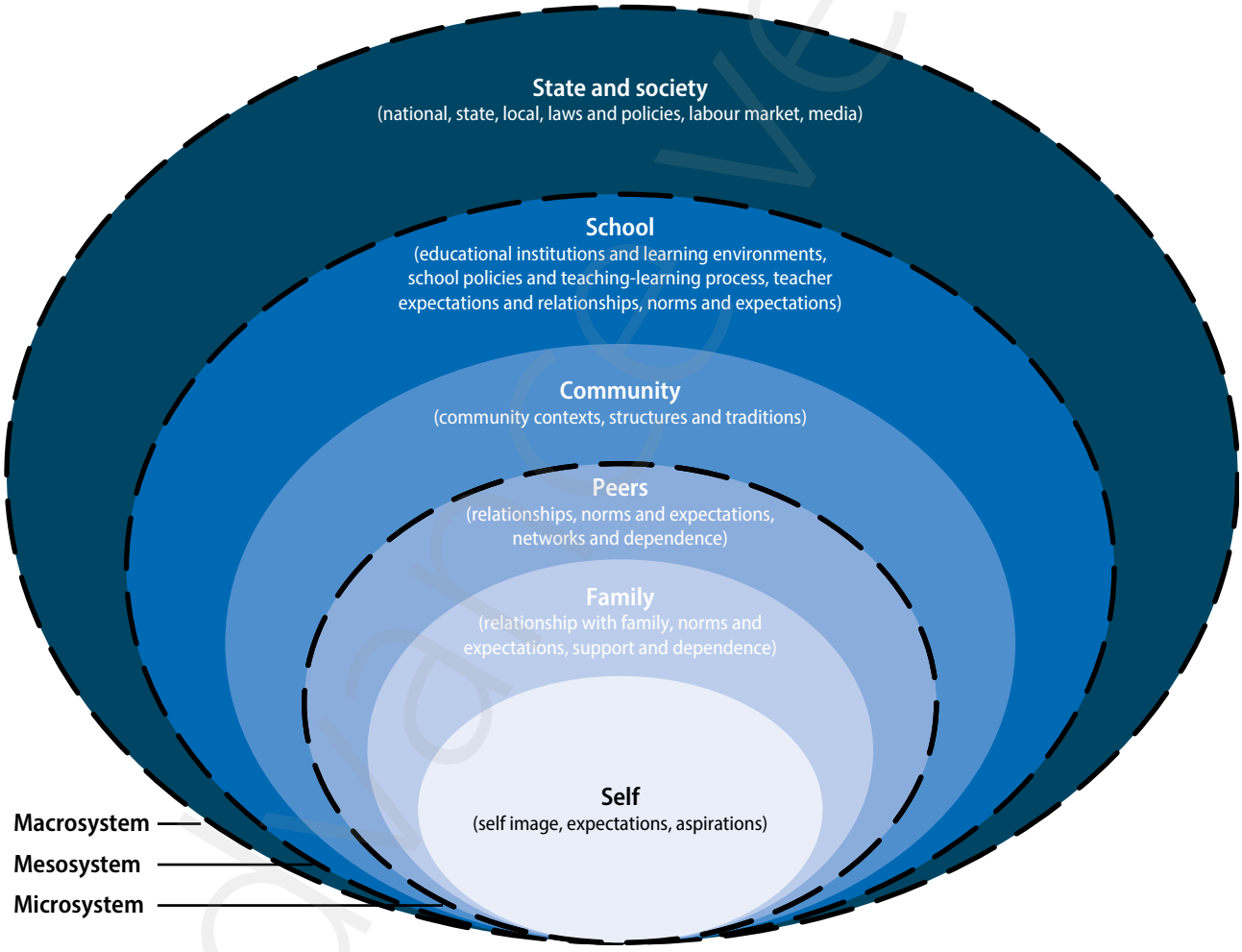
Theoretical framework

This country case study employed the framework suggested by UNESCO, which draws upon Bronfenbrenner's (1995, 2000) ecological systems theory. This theoretical lens posits that a child's development is shaped by a complex interplay of interconnected factors across multiple levels. Widely applied in behaviour change interventions within education and health contexts, this approach considers both risk and protective factors operating at the individual, familial/peer, community, school and broader environmental levels.

While the study's design acknowledges the systemic and interconnected nature of these influences, it adapts Bronfenbrenner's original model for its specific research framework (**Figure 1**). This adaptation focuses on the individual, the microsystem (comprising immediate influences such as family and peers), the mesosystem (encompassing the individual's immediate environmental systems, specifically educational institutions in this context) and the macrosystem (representing the overarching societal context, including policies, state functions and culture).

Figure 1. Ecological model



Source: Adapted from UNESCO (2019, p. 6 unpublished).

Advance version

Research design

Disengagement from education is conceptualized as a gendered phenomenon, partially rooted in prevailing social norms and constructions of masculinity that may consciously or unconsciously influence boys and young men to undervalue or distance themselves from formal education (UNESCO, 2022a). These gendered expectations intersect with a range of social, cultural and economic factors within families, communities and schools, shaping boys' experiences and contributing to diminished engagement or eventual dropout. Disengagement from education can take different forms, such as general disinterest in education, not participating in classroom activities, being absent from school, not learning for exams, not doing homework or dropping out of school.

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to investigate boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia. This design involved first collecting and analysing quantitative data, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to help explain or elaborate the quantitative findings (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The collection and analysis of quantitative data informed the selection of study locations where dropout rates or other traits of education disengagement among boys were most concentrated. This phase provided a broad understanding of patterns and trends related to boys' disengagement from education. Subsequently, qualitative methods were employed to explain and enrich the statistical findings through an in-depth exploration of stakeholder perspectives, including those of students, parents, teachers and subnational, national and other development partners. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was considered essential, as neither could independently capture the complexity of the issue. By integrating both strands of data, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted and gendered nature of boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia.

Data collection

Scoping review

A scoping review was conducted to document and map the existing literature on policy and programmatic initiatives addressing boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia. This type of review systematically identifies, appraises and summarizes existing literature to map out the current knowledge landscape, including identifying gaps and inconsistencies (Levac et al., 2010). This review was guided by the scoping review framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), encompassing five key stages: (i) identifying the research question, (ii) identifying relevant studies, (iii) study selection, (iv) charting the data, and (v) collating, summarizing and reporting the results.

To ensure comprehensive coverage, a broad literature search was conducted, utilizing a combination of keywords related to 'boys' education', 'education disengagement', 'Cambodia' and other factors associated with boys' experience in education, such as structural factors, family and peer support mechanisms, community factors, school experience and influence, relevant policies, the labour market, media and programmatic areas implemented by local and international non-governmental organizations and development partners. The search encompassed a diverse range of sources, including academic databases (e.g. Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO and Google Scholar), grey literature repositories (e.g. ResearchGate) and official websites of relevant government agencies, international organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Cambodia. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to ensure the relevance and quality of included studies (**Table 1**).

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Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for scoping review

Inclusion	Exclusion
Document published between 2012 and 2024	Document published before 2012
Full text available in English	Full text not available and not in English
Available via Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, ResearchGate and official websites of relevant government agencies, international organizations and CSOs	Not available in these databases
Policy document, programme and research report, book chapter (where PDF available), journal article	Book review, editorial, commentary
Focus and/or including Cambodia	Not specific to Cambodia
Focus on boys' disengagement from education and factors associated with the issue: Family, school, peers and community	Not specific to this focus

Source: Authors.

Quantitative strand

The quantitative component of this study utilized multiple data sources to examine gender disparities in education in Cambodia. Administrative data sets from 2012 to 2024, including those from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and Cambodia's Education Management Information System (EMIS), were used to analyse long-term trends in boys' enrolment, learning outcomes and completion rates. EMIS data also enabled a deeper examination of gender disparities at regional and provincial levels. In addition, learning assessment data from the 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) and the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were analysed to further explore the learning gaps between boys and girls. Subgroup analyses were carried out to examine whether gender disparities varied by location (rural vs urban), income quintile, age group and school type, applying statistical tests to assess significance. SEA-PLM, conducted in 2019 in six Southeast Asian countries including Cambodia, involved a two-stage sampling method to assess 5,396 Grade 5 students from 177 primary schools. Cambodia's participation in the 2022 PISA marked its first involvement in the OECD's global assessment programme, with 5,279 15-year-old students from 183 secondary schools taking part. Both assessments employed item response theory and plausible values to estimate student learning outcomes. These insights also helped inform the selection of provinces with high levels of boys' disengagement, guiding the qualitative data collection.

Qualitative strand

This study collected qualitative data from multiple sources, including social network mapping (SNM), focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders. SNM is a participatory research method that visually represents the relationships and interactions within a social group. In the context of social norms measurement, this tool can identify and capture key social influencers across four different levels, including individual, family, school and peers, and community members; understand the flow of information and influence; and uncover underlying social norms and values (Sood et al., 2020). This tool is also closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which was applied as the conceptual framework in the 2022 UNESCO case studies on boys' disengagement from education (see UNESCO, 2022a).

In parallel, the research team implemented a participatory exercise called 'A Day in a Student's Life' with all student groups. This activity aimed to understand how boys and girls across different academic performance levels allocate their time during a typical school day. Using a flip chart segmented by time blocks (e.g. 5am to 6pm), students were invited to place sticky notes with activities to represent their typical daily routines, including waking up, helping parents, reviewing lessons, attending school, private tutoring, playing football and using digital devices. This tool helped the research team identify variations in time use, study habits and competing demands between students with different schooling experiences. These visual narratives also enriched understanding how structural and personal factors influence boys' learning engagement and routine.

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Next, FGDs were conducted with four groups of stakeholders: (i) boys who dropped out of school, (ii) low-performing boys, (iii) the parents of both groups (i and ii), and (iv) high-performing boys and girls. Additionally, KIIs were conducted with Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) officials in relevant departments, key relevant development and other civil society partners, representatives from the Provincial Offices of Education (PoEs) and District Offices of Education (DoEs) as well as school directors and teachers in the sampled schools.

Participant recruitment

Preliminary analysis of the MoEYS's EMIS data from 2012 to 2023 reveals that boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia is most pronounced at the lower-secondary level, specifically in grades 7 to 9 (**Annex 1**). This stage marks a critical transition in the education system where students face new academic demands, increased mobility, and growing exposure to external pressures such as household responsibilities, income-generating activities and peer influence. These factors contribute to higher vulnerability to dropout and disengagement, particularly among boys. This trend is consistent with the 2022 UNESCO global report on boys' disengagement from education, which identified lower secondary as a pivotal point where gender disparities in participation and performance often widen. The quantitative data further highlight concerning patterns of male student dropout, absenteeism and poor academic performance in five provinces: Battambang, Kampong Speu, Mondul Kiri, Pursat and Tboung Khmum. Informed by these findings, the study has prioritized lower-secondary education (Grades 7 to 9) as its central focus. These provinces were selected for qualitative fieldwork based on a combination of criteria: geographic and socioeconomic diversity (including lowland and highland regions), varying levels of education system performance, and practical feasibility for field research. This purposive sampling enabled the research team to capture a range of contexts in which boys' disengagement manifests, from rural poverty to ethnic minority settings.

This study employed a top-down participant recruitment strategy. Based on administrative data, each of the five PoEs identified two districts within their province, one urban and one rural, exhibiting high male student dropout rates at the lower secondary level. This process resulted in the selection of 10 districts. Subsequently, the DoE of these selected districts recommended two secondary schools within their jurisdiction that are significantly impacted by boys' education disengagement. A total of 10 secondary schools, 2 from each province, were purposefully sampled, ensuring a balance between urban and rural contexts (5 schools from each context).

Preliminary analysis from 2022–2023 EMIS data pinpointed higher male dropout rates in rural areas; and due to resource and time constraints, among the 10 schools, only 5 (2 urban and 3 rural) were selected to conduct SNM and FGDs with three types of student groups. The three types of student groups were: (i) boys who dropped out, (ii) boys at risk (low-performing, high absenteeism or disadvantaged students) and (iii) high-performing students (boys and girls). The students were identified by the schools, and the research team contacted them and their parents accordingly to invite them to participate in the study. Each SNM and FGD (both single-sex and mixed-gender) consisted of five to six people, facilitated by one female researcher and one male research assistant (see **Table 2** for a summary).

Table 2. Overview of collected data and methodology

Categories	Location						
	Battambang	Kampong Speu	Mondul Kiri	Phnom Penh	Pursat	Tboung Khmum	Total
Social Network Mapping (SNM) and A Day of Student's Life							**10 groups (52 people, 46 male, 6 female)**
Boys who dropped out	1	1	1	-	1	-	4 groups (14 people, 14 male)
Low-performing boys	1	1	1	-	-	1	4 groups (26 people, 26 male)

Advance version

Categories	Location						
	Battambang	Kampong Speu	Mondul Kiri	Phnom Penh	Pursat	Tboung Khmum	Total
High-performing boys and girls	-	-	-	-	1	1	2 groups (12 people, 6 male and 6 female)
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)							**15 groups (68 people: 52 male, 16 female)**
Boys who dropped out	1	1	1	-	1	-	4 groups (14 people, 14 male)
Low-performing boys	1	1	1	-	-	1	4 groups (26 people, 26 male)
High-performing boys and girls	-	-	-	-	1	1	2 groups (12 people, 6 male and 6 female)
Parents of dropped-out and low-performing boys	1	1	1	-	2	-	5 groups (16 people, 6 male and 10 female)
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)							**49 KIIs / (49 people: 40 male, 9 female)**
School Directors	2	2	2	-	2	2	10 (9 male, 1 female)
Teachers	1	5	1	-	1	1	9 (6 male and 3 female)
District Office of Education (DoE) staff	2	2	2	-	2	2	10 (10 male)
Provincial Office of Education (PoE) staff	1	1	1	-	1	1	5 (5 male)
Relevant departments in MoEYS	-	-	-	9	-	-	9 (7 male, 2 female)
Development Partners (DPs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) staff	-	-	-	6	-	-	6 (3 male, 3 female)
Total sample							**169 (138 male, 31 female)**

Source: Authors.

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In total, 169 people, of which 138 were male and 31 were female, participated in the qualitative data collection. Despite efforts to recruit participants from all targeted student groups, the research team was unable to conduct the full set of SNMs and FGDs. Only four out of the expected five SNM and FGDs were completed with boys who had dropped out, due to low turnout stemming from their work and family responsibilities, as well as a general lack of interest in engaging with education-related activities. Similarly, only four sessions were held with low-performing boys and two with high-performing students (boys and girls), as data collection coincided with the school exam period. Many students and their families expressed concern that participating in research activities during this time could negatively impact their academic performance, particularly for those already struggling or aiming to maintain high scores. However, while not all sessions were completed as planned, some SNM and FGD groups had higher-than-expected turnout, which helped to balance the overall sample size and partially compensate for the missing data. There were similar situations in the FGDs with parents of low-performing and already dropped-out boys.

Data analysis

Quantitative strand

The research team used STATA to conduct descriptive statistics with cross-tabulation and data visualization to examine the current situation and trends related to boys' educational participation, learning performance and completion. In addition, the study used the Cambodian Socio-Economic Survey 2019 data (NIS, 2020) to examine the factors related to dropout using logistic regression analysis.

Qualitative strand

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1995, 2000) was adapted as a theoretical framework to guide the qualitative data analysis. The model posits that multifaceted and interrelated factors influence a child's development. It considers six levels within three systems: the individual, family and peers within the microsystem (those closest to the individual), community and school within the mesosystem (the system in the individual's environment, in this case, educational institutions) and state and society, considered as one entity, as the macrosystem (the larger system including norms at the level of state and society). The analysis process for this study involved importing the systematic field notes and transcripts into NVivo software to deductively identify patterns and themes corresponding to the theoretical framework.

Triangulation

Both quantitative and qualitative strands were connected during sample selection and the development of SNM and interview protocols, while the results of these two strands were integrated during the discussion of the findings of the second research question, which examined the factors impacting boys' education disengagement. In this study, priority (Cresswell et al., 2003) was given to the qualitative approach because (i) it focused on in-depth explanations of the results obtained in the first, quantitative phase, and (ii) involved extensive data collection from multiple sources in order to help answer the rest of the research questions as well as provide a different lens to better understand the issues. Nevertheless, to enhance the validity and meaning of the study findings, some qualitative data were also transformed to substantiate or compare with the quantitative data strand. Creswell and Clark (2017) identified two approaches to enhancing both data strands: data comparison and data transformation. Data comparison largely gives equal priority to both quantitative and qualitative strands, while data transformation prioritizes a certain data strand by transforming qualitative data into quantitative data or vice versa. In this study, the research team employed both approaches to ensure comprehensive findings and to identify points of confirmation, disconfirmation or expansion. The integrated results were presented through side-by-side comparison, narrative discussions and joint displays, each accompanied by detailed descriptions and interpretations.

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Ethical considerations

Endorsement and formal permission to conduct the study were obtained from the MoEYS prior to the commencement of any data collection activities. All participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to refuse participation or withdraw at any point without any adverse consequences. To ensure transparency and uphold ethical standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. This consent included agreement to participate in interviews, discussions or participatory activities, as well as permission for voice recordings and, where applicable, photographs. For participants under the age of 16, additional verbal consent was sought from their parents or guardians, who were briefed on the purpose, nature and use of the research data.

Measures were implemented to ensure the protection of participant data and identities, robust confidentiality and data security. All digital recordings, transcripts and field notes were stored in encrypted files accessible only to the core research team. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription and participant names were replaced with anonymized codes. Any identifying information related to individuals, schools or communities was altered or omitted in the reporting phase to safeguard anonymity. During data analysis, these anonymized data sets were used exclusively to maintain confidentiality and avoid any potential harm to participants.

The study also accounted for the possibility of psychological, social or reputational harm – especially for boys who had already dropped out of school or were labelled as low-performing. Recognizing the potential risk of further stigmatization or discouragement, the research team employed a respectful, strengths-based approach during data collection. Facilitators received training in ethical interviewing techniques, including how to ask sensitive questions, use inclusive and non-judgemental language, and foster trust. Boys who had dropped out were engaged with empathy and were reassured that their stories would be used to support future interventions and not to judge or penalize them. FGDs and participatory activities such as SNM were conducted in neutral or private spaces to promote participant comfort and psychological safety.

Risks and mitigation strategies

Risks and mitigation strategies were actively considered throughout the study. Three primary risks were identified: (i) the potential of sampling bias, (ii) the potential difficulty in recruiting and maintaining participation from school dropouts and their parents, and (iii) scheduling conflicts with other stakeholders such as teachers, local officials or community members. Regarding sample validity and potential bias, the research team acknowledges that the qualitative sample is not statistically representative of all provinces or school contexts across Cambodia. However, steps were taken to maximize the credibility and contextual relevance of the findings. The selection of provinces and schools was informed by national EMIS data trends and included varied geographic, ethnic and socioeconomic conditions to support analytical generalization. Within each site, triangulation was applied across stakeholder groups (students, parents, teachers and local authorities) to validate key patterns and themes. While participant recruitment relied in part on school referrals, which may introduce selection bias, efforts were made to ensure diversity in performance, gender and background within each group. These strategies enhance the trustworthiness of the findings while acknowledging the limits to broader generalizability. The second and third risk were addressed through open communication, clear articulation of the study's purpose, and reassurances about voluntary participation and confidentiality. To increase participation, the research team offered flexible interview times and locations to accommodate participants' availability, including evenings and weekends. Follow-up contacts and coordination with school staff and local education authorities also helped ensure ongoing engagement and logistical feasibility.

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Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- **The documents for the scoping review are only in English:** This scoping review was limited to English-language policy documents, as most of Cambodia's key education strategies and policies are officially translated into English. However, this approach excluded some Khmer-language policies and locally driven initiatives not available in English. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher triangulated findings with qualitative interviews from key stakeholders, especially NGOs, to capture additional insights into community-based initiatives and policy practices not reflected in the reviewed documents.
- **Limited systematic review of programmatic non-governmental programmes:** A systematic review of programmes by DPs, NGOs and CSOs was beyond the scope of this study. However, information on non-governmental programmes was collected from participants of the study to the extent possible.
- **Limited participation of boys who had already dropped out:** Recruiting boys who had already dropped out of school and their families posed a challenge due to their mobility, limited availability or reluctance to participate. While efforts were made to reach this group through flexible scheduling and local referrals, their perspectives may be under-represented, particularly among those who are no longer in contact with schools or communities.
- **Limited comparison with girls:** This study focused primarily on boys' disengagement from lower secondary education. It is not a comparative study of boys and girls. Although some female students were included in the research sample, they were not the focus of analysis. Therefore, direct comparisons between boys' and girls' experiences are limited, and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind.
- **Self-reported data and potential bias:** Much of the qualitative data rely on self-reported information from students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders. Responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias or recall limitations, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as family conflict, substance use or academic struggles.
- **Scope of geographic coverage:** The qualitative data were collected from only five provinces – Battambang, Kampong Speu, Mondul Kiri, Pursat and Tboung Khmum – selected based on high male dropout rates identified in the EMIS and learning assessment data. Although the sample included both urban and rural contexts, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of boys in other provinces or border communities with different socioeconomic or cultural dynamics.

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Online version

Research findings and discussion

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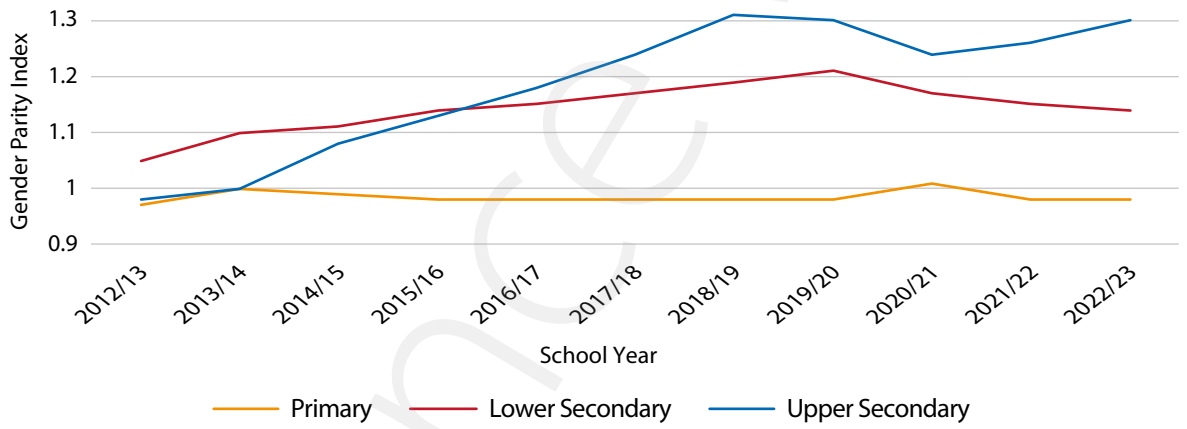
Situation of boys' education engagement

This section presents an overview of the current situation regarding boys' participation, progression, retention and learning performance in Cambodia's general education system. Drawing primarily on national administrative data and key learning assessments, the analysis highlights emerging patterns between 2012 and 2023 in enrolment, learning outcomes, completion and dropout rates, with particular attention to gender disparities and rural–urban differences. These trends provide important context for understanding when and where boys begin to disengage from education, laying the foundation for examining the contributing factors explored in later sections.

Enrolment

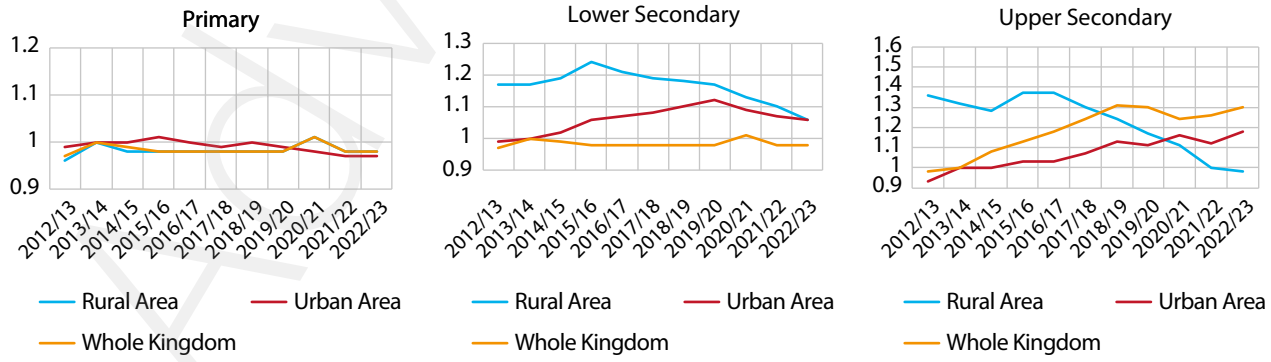
The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level has remained relatively stable at 0.98 in recent years, indicating near parity in school participation between girls and boys (**Figure 2**). However, disparities become more pronounced at the secondary level. The GPI has shown a steady upward trajectory since 2012–2013, peaking in 2019–2020 before settling at a level exceeding 1.1 in the most recent year. This gender gap widens further at the upper secondary level, where the current GPI stands at approximately 1.3, reflecting significantly higher female participation compared to male students. Notably, GPI values tend to be higher in rural areas than in urban settings, especially in secondary education (**Figure 3**), suggesting that boys in rural areas face greater barriers to school enrolment and retention.

Figure 2. Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) over time (2012/13 to 2022/23)



Sources: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2012/13 and 2023/24 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Figure 3. GPI by area and education level over time (2012/13 to 2022/23)



Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports from 2012/13 to 2023/24 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

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Between 2012 and 2023, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for the primary level (**Figure 4**) has consistently been high (over 100 percent), reflecting the combined effects of grade repetition and late enrolment. The data show that male students have a slightly higher rate compared to female students in some years. However, when comparing the GER with the net enrolment ratio (NER), the apparent male advantage at the primary level largely disappears, suggesting that higher GER rates for boys are linked to over-age or repeating male students rather than higher levels of participation (**Figure 4** – lower panel). At the lower secondary level, both the GER and NER show a clear decline in enrolment for both genders. Importantly, gender disparities become more visible from this stage onwards, with enrolment gaps emerging more towards boys. These gaps widen further at the upper secondary level, where boys are increasingly less likely than girls to remain in school.

Disaggregated by province, the gender gap in the NER remains relatively small at the primary level but widens substantially at the lower secondary level and persists into upper secondary education (**Table 3**). Provinces such as Siem Reap report the highest gender disparities at both lower and upper secondary levels, while Pailin records the largest gap specifically at the upper secondary level, highlighting regional variations in boys' disengagement from education. Similar trends are also reflected in the GER across levels of education.

Figure 4. Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) and Net Enrolment Rate (NER) by sex over time (2012/13 to 2022/23)

Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2012/13 and 2023/24 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

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Table 3. GER and NER for the 2022/23 school year by sex and province

Gross Enrolment Rate for the School Year 2022/23 by Sex and Province									
Province	Primary School			Lower Secondary School			Upper Secondary School		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Banteay Meanchey	102.90	102.30	0.60	54.00	64.90	(10.90)	32.30	45.10	(12.80)
Battambang	122.60	119.70	2.90	60.50	54.20	6.30	38.50	46.30	(7.80)
Kampong Cham	117.70	112.60	5.10	61.30	71.50	(10.20)	42.40	52.00	(9.60)
Kampong Chhnang	110.30	108.70	1.60	61.30	71.40	(10.10)	37.60	47.80	(10.20)
Kampong Speu	107.80	106.20	1.60	57.40	64.60	(7.20)	29.90	33.60	(3.70)
Kampong Thom	114.10	115.80	(1.70)	51.90	63.80	(11.90)	33.10	40.20	(7.10)
Kampot	121.50	119.30	2.20	65.20	69.90	(4.70)	37.70	43.90	(6.20)
Kandal	127.80	122.40	5.40	68.50	78.50	(10.00)	49.30	63.40	(14.10)
Kep	117.00	113.80	3.20	52.90	55.40	(2.50)	29.70	35.80	(6.10)
Koh Kong	124.00	125.00	(1.00)	63.80	69.60	(5.80)	41.60	55.40	(13.80)
Kratie	121.40	120.80	0.60	48.90	56.00	(7.10)	30.00	36.50	(6.50)
Mondul Kiri	121.80	121.80	-	52.70	63.40	(10.70)	33.00	42.00	(9.00)
Oddar Meanchey	98.20	96.70	1.50	44.70	53.70	(9.00)	27.50	35.90	(8.40)
Pailin	119.40	117.60	1.80	55.90	67.30	(11.40)	33.60	54.40	(20.80)
Phnom Penh	104.80	102.50	2.30	73.40	76.30	(2.90)	57.90	60.30	(2.40)
Preah Sihanouk	131.60	126.40	5.20	62.40	66.80	(4.40)	39.60	44.00	(4.40)
Preah Vihear	115.50	121.90	(6.40)	48.00	62.20	(14.20)	31.90	42.00	(10.10)
Prey Veng	101.10	95.80	5.30	59.70	65.80	(6.10)	42.00	54.60	(12.60)
Pursat	120.70	119.70	1.00	58.30	68.10	(9.80)	37.10	53.10	(16.00)
Ratanak Kiri	118.10	111.10	7.00	55.80	66.90	(11.10)	32.30	38.40	(6.10)
Siem Reap	125.30	121.30	4.00	64.20	77.50	(13.30)	45.30	62.50	(17.20)
Stung Treng	128.10	127.70	0.40	50.90	58.50	(7.60)	28.70	36.60	(7.90)
Svay Rieng	116.20	112.00	4.20	75.10	78.30	(3.20)	47.20	58.60	(11.40)
Takeo	113.00	109.40	3.60	48.60	76.30	(27.70)	48.30	59.10	(10.80)
Tboung Khmum	103.60	101.10	2.50	52.20	62.50	(10.30)	31.10	44.30	(13.20)

Notes: Gap data presented in parentheses indicate disadvantages for boys. Gap data without parentheses indicate disadvantages for girls.
Source: Table by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Report 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Advance version

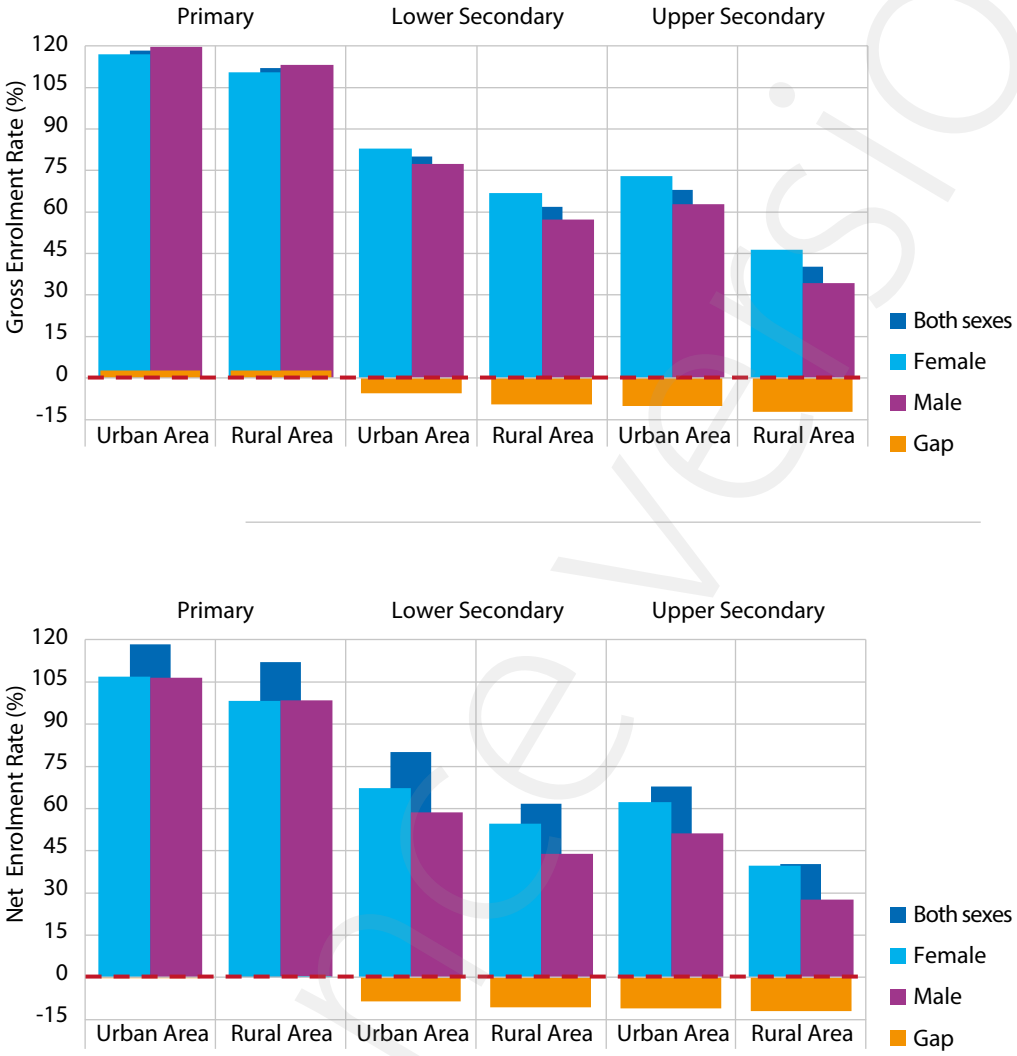
Net Enrolment Rate for the School Year 2022/23 by Sex and Province									
Province	Primary School			Lower Secondary School			Upper Secondary School		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Banteay Meanchey	90.60	92.60	(2.00)	42.30	53.90	(11.60)	26.60	39.00	(12.40)
Battambang	103.10	103.00	0.10	46.00	59.30	(13.30)	30.90	46.00	(15.10)
Kampong Cham	102.00	99.40	2.60	48.20	59.70	(11.50)	35.10	51.90	(16.80)
Kampong Chhnang	99.60	100.60	(1.00)	50.00	60.90	(10.90)	31.50	47.70	(16.20)
Kampong Speu	97.50	97.60	(0.10)	45.20	53.10	(7.90)	24.20	33.50	(9.30)
Kampong Thom	101.70	102.00	(0.30)	39.70	51.40	(11.70)	26.30	40.10	(13.80)
Kampot	104.60	104.80	(0.20)	51.30	58.70	(7.40)	30.70	43.40	(12.70)
Kandal	116.20	114.00	2.20	51.40	63.90	(12.50)	40.40	54.70	(14.30)
Kep	100.10	98.80	1.30	42.70	48.50	(5.80)	24.60	35.80	(11.20)
Koh Kong	104.40	108.80	(4.40)	40.00	48.50	(8.50)	24.20	35.00	(10.80)
Kratie	98.20	100.80	(2.60)	37.40	45.00	(7.60)	23.60	32.40	(8.80)
Mondul Kiri	96.40	100.20	(3.80)	35.20	47.40	(12.20)	23.90	33.00	(9.10)
Oddar Meanchey	83.50	84.90	(1.40)	34.00	44.90	(10.90)	21.60	30.00	(8.40)
Pailin	102.10	103.20	(1.10)	42.20	54.60	(12.40)	26.40	44.40	(18.00)
Phnom Penh	97.10	96.60	0.50	57.30	62.60	(5.30)	48.00	51.70	(3.70)
Preah Sihanouk	113.20	112.00	1.20	48.00	55.30	(7.30)	34.20	40.80	(6.60)
Preah Vihear	89.00	93.90	(4.90)	33.90	48.30	(14.40)	24.20	34.50	(10.30)
Prey Veng	92.70	89.40	3.30	47.60	55.30	(7.70)	35.10	47.40	(12.30)
Pursat	100.90	101.00	(0.10)	42.50	53.90	(11.40)	30.40	43.80	(13.40)
Ratanak Kiri	94.40	91.90	2.50	33.10	45.10	(12.00)	19.50	27.70	(8.20)
Siem Reap	102.20	103.20	(1.00)	46.00	61.60	(15.60)	36.30	53.60	(17.30)
Stung Treng	100.70	100.80	(0.10)	33.50	42.60	(9.10)	19.00	26.60	(7.60)
Svay Rieng	100.10	98.30	1.80	63.70	68.90	(5.20)	41.90	53.20	(11.30)
Takeo	102.30	101.60	0.70	60.70	61.00	(0.30)	38.30	49.40	(11.10)
Tboung Khmum	92.70	92.90	(0.20)	38.50	50.40	(11.90)	23.70	35.80	(12.10)

Notes: Gap data presented in parentheses indicate disadvantages for boys. Gap data without parentheses indicate disadvantages for girls.
Source: Table by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Report 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Advance Version

When analysed by area, both boys and girls generally have a lower GER in rural areas compared to urban areas, with a more significant gap for rural areas starting from the lower secondary level (**Figure 5** – upper panel). Rural boys have the lowest NER at the upper secondary level, underscoring the compounded challenges they face in accessing and sustaining their education.

Figure 5. GER and NER for the 2022/23 school year by sex and area



Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Report 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Advance version

Learning outcomes

According to the SEA-PLM's learning assessment of Grade 5 students, girls consistently outperformed boys in all three subjects: reading, writing and mathematics (**Table 4**). The learning gap is less pronounced in mathematics performance than in writing and reading. These findings are in line with what was found in the national learning assessment in Grade 6 conducted by the MoEYS in 2021. The learning disparities in favour of girls are also consistent across socioeconomic status and geographical location. There are no significant differences in the gender gaps across socioeconomic status (SES), although the gender gaps in reading and writing were found to be significant in large cities.

Table 4. Learning performance in primary education by sex, socioeconomic status and school location

	Reading				Writing				Math			
	Male	Female	Gap		Male	Female	Gap		Male	Female	Gap	
Social Economic Status												
Q1 (Low)	299.4	306.2	(6.8)	***	289.9	301.5	(11.6)	***	299.7	303.7	(4.0)	***
Q2	286.8	295.2	(8.4)	***	279.0	292.6	(13.6)	***	287.9	292.0	(4.1)	***
Q3	282.4	290.0	(7.6)	***	275.3	288.5	(13.2)	***	283.7	287.9	(4.2)	***
Q4 (High)	279.2	285.7	(6.5)	***	271.7	283.5	(11.8)	***	280.7	283.8	(3.1)	***
School Location												
Village	281.4	288.3	(6.9)	***	273.3	286.1	(12.8)	***	282.6	286.7	(4.2)	***
Small town	287.1	293.2	(6.1)	***	280.2	291.7	(11.4)	***	287.8	289.2	(1.5)	*
Town	294.7	302.4	(7.8)	***	284.2	297.5	(13.2)	***	294.4	298.5	(4.0)	***
City	305.2	312.4	(7.1)	***	301.2	307.2	(6.0)	**	310.9	317.1	(6.3)	***
Large City	316.2	327.3	(11.1)	***	302.3	319.2	(16.9)	***	320.9	325.9	(5.0)	**

Notes: * = significant at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$); ** = significant at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$); *** = significant at the 0.001 level ($p < 0.001$). Gap data presented in parentheses indicate disadvantages for boys. Gap data without parentheses indicate disadvantages for girls.
Source: Table by authors. Data from SEA-PLM 2019 (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020). Accessed online November 2025.

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Working version

The PISA 2022 results reinforce and deepen the learning performance trends observed in the 2019 SEA-PLM data, showing consistent and widening gender disparities in reading, science and mathematics among 15-year-old students in Cambodia (**Table 5**). In all three domains, boys significantly underperform compared to girls, with the gaps particularly stark in reading and science. In reading, boys scored between 14.1 and 27.3 points lower than girls across all socioeconomic quartiles, with the widest gap appearing in the highest SES group (Q4). This represents a noticeable increase from the SEA-PLM 2019 reading gap, which ranged from 6.5 to 8.4 points. Similarly, in science, boys scored 2.9 to 15.1 points lower than girls, with disparities again more pronounced among students from higher-income households. In mathematics, the picture is more mixed: boys in the lowest SES group (Q1) slightly outperformed girls by 2.8 points, but as SES increases, girls begin to outperform boys, with the largest gender gap (-13.4 points) observed in Q4. This reversal suggests that higher socioeconomic advantage disproportionately benefits girls in mathematics achievement.

Table 5. Learning performance in secondary education by sex, socioeconomic status and school location

	Reading				Writing				Math			
	Male	Female	Gap		Male	Female	Gap		Male	Female	Gap	
Social Economic Status												
Q1 (Low)	310.2	324.3	(14.1)	***	339.0	341.9	(2.9)		324.1	321.3	(2.8)	
Q2	312.8	332.6	(19.8)	***	336.5	344.5	(7.9)	***	324.1	329.3	(5.3)	
Q3	306.0	330.8	(24.8)	***	332.4	343.2	(10.8)	***	318.6	326.4	(7.8)	**
Q4 (High)	311.1	338.4	(27.3)	***	338.2	353.3	(15.1)	***	331.8	345.1	(13.4)	***
School Location												
Village	293.0	315.0	(22.0)	***	321.4	331.9	(10.5)	***	303.0	311.0	(8.0)	**
Small town	301.3	323.0	(21.7)	***	328.7	338.7	(10.0)	***	311.2	318.3	(7.1)	**
Town	319.9	340.8	(20.9)	***	346.8	353.7	(6.9)	***	337.5	340.9	(3.4)	
City	335.6	356.1	(20.5)	***	356.9	365.3	(8.4)	**	363.2	364.0	(0.8)	

Notes: * = significant at the 0.05 level (p < 0.05); ** = significant at the 0.01 level (p < 0.01); *** = significant at the 0.001 level (p < 0.001). Gap data presented in parentheses indicate disadvantages for boys. Gap data without parentheses indicate disadvantages for girls.
Source: Table by authors. Data from OECD (2022). Accessed online November 2025.

Geographic disaggregation by school location shows that the gender gap is evident and consistent across settings. In reading, boys scored between 20.5 and 22 points lower than girls across all school locations, echoing patterns observed in SEA-PLM 2019, though with even wider margins. Science results show a similar disadvantage for boys, with gaps ranging from 6.9 to 10.5 points. The learning gaps in mathematics are less robust in secondary education. There are no significant differences in mathematics performance among 15-year-old students from the lower quintiles (Q1 and Q2) and students residing in towns and cities.

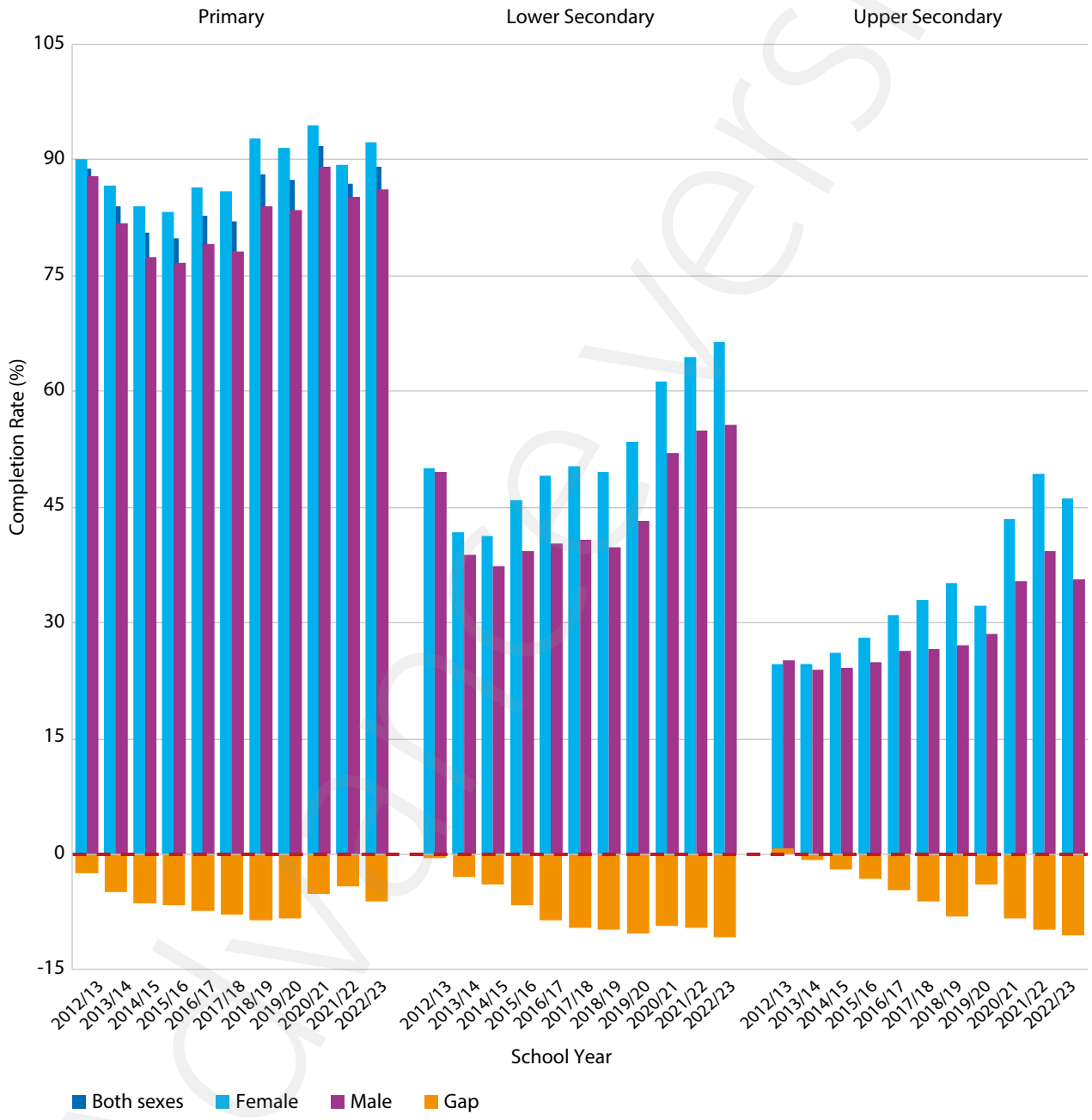
The consistency and breadth of these findings across two major international assessments point to a systemic challenge in Cambodia's education system: boys are falling behind girls in nearly every domain and across diverse backgrounds. This underperformance is most acute in literacy-based domains, suggesting gender-specific learning barriers that are not being adequately addressed through current pedagogical, social or policy interventions. This underscores the need for more nuanced, context-specific interventions that address both gender and geographic disparities, with particular attention to literacy and mathematics learning for rural boys.

Advance version

Completion

As of 2023, the completion rate for the primary level is 86 percent. However, female students consistently have higher completion rates than male students starting from the primary level (**Figure 6**). Completion rates for both genders drop noticeably at the lower and upper secondary levels. This trend continues as students advance to higher grade levels within general education, where lower completion rates for male students persist. This indicates that female students generally have higher retention rates across all general education levels compared to their male counterparts.

Figure 6. Completion rate by sex over time (2012/13 to 2022/23)



Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2012/13 and 2023/24 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Advance version

In the 2022–2023 school year, several provinces showed the widest negative gaps in education completion between males and females: Preah Vihear at the primary level, Siem Reap at the lower secondary level, and Pailin at the upper secondary level (**Table 6**). When analysed by area, the findings align with previous indicators, where rural areas generally have lower completion rates for both genders, with wider gaps emerging starting from the lower secondary level.

Table 6. Completion rate for the school year 2022/23 by sex and province

Province	Primary School			Lower Secondary School			Upper Secondary School		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Banteay Meanchey	80.29	86.10	(5.81)	47.28	58.55	(11.27)	26.39	39.46	(13.07)
Battambang	92.13	99.45	(7.32)	52.63	65.42	(12.79)	33.77	48.51	(14.74)
Kampong Cham	90.26	94.73	(4.47)	52.90	67.35	(14.45)	38.89	55.84	(16.95)
Kampong Chhnang	84.02	94.16	(10.14)	56.58	70.31	(13.73)	33.24	47.22	(13.98)
Kampong Speu	81.81	84.54	(2.73)	52.08	60.72	(8.64)	24.97	31.99	(7.02)
Kampong Thom	81.32	95.01	(13.69)	45.16	57.65	(12.49)	31.09	46.25	(15.16)
Kampot	92.84	97.68	(4.84)	56.23	64.88	(8.65)	36.01	46.95	(10.94)
Kandal	89.81	96.79	(6.98)	65.08	78.37	(13.29)	41.25	54.62	(13.37)
Kep	84.02	83.83	0.19	34.06	48.02	(13.96)	24.05	39.61	(15.56)
Koh Kong	86.94	92.47	(5.53)	54.72	65.33	(10.61)	37.28	44.85	(7.57)
Kratie	86.02	95.58	(9.56)	40.25	49.42	(9.17)	23.37	33.40	(10.03)
Mondul Kiri	94.70	108.13	(13.43)	44.75	50.82	(6.07)	29.04	33.81	(4.77)
Oddar Meanchey	69.56	72.34	(2.78)	38.51	47.49	(8.98)	24.93	29.25	(4.32)
Pailin	83.32	92.50	(9.18)	43.42	58.14	(14.72)	26.78	45.68	(18.90)
Phnom Penh	84.03	90.17	(6.14)	74.46	78.37	(3.91)	48.41	51.17	(2.76)
Preah Sihanouk	93.84	97.99	(4.15)	55.15	66.46	(11.31)	30.46	33.39	(2.93)
Preah Vihear	74.61	97.40	(22.79)	42.42	52.66	(10.24)	24.39	36.05	(11.66)
Prey Veng	83.64	83.60	0.04	58.16	65.09	(6.93)	37.83	50.11	(12.28)
Pursat	89.60	99.34	(9.74)	47.24	60.99	(13.75)	31.40	46.87	(15.47)
Ratanak Kiri	95.22	91.47	3.75	50.18	55.01	(4.83)	28.37	31.26	(2.89)
Siem Reap	89.23	94.01	(4.78)	53.84	74.38	(20.54)	40.48	53.08	(12.60)
Stung Treng	84.70	102.54	(17.84)	43.84	53.04	(9.20)	24.22	28.63	(4.41)
Svay Rieng	100.23	96.04	4.19	73.70	76.79	(3.09)	38.42	49.59	(11.17)
Takeo	88.94	91.93	(2.99)	65.01	73.15	(8.14)	43.60	52.41	(8.81)
Tboung Khmum	79.37	89.78	(10.41)	43.76	57.93	(14.17)	27.98	39.67	(11.69)

Notes: Gap data presented in parentheses indicate disadvantages for boys. Gap data without parentheses indicate disadvantages for girls.
Source: Table by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

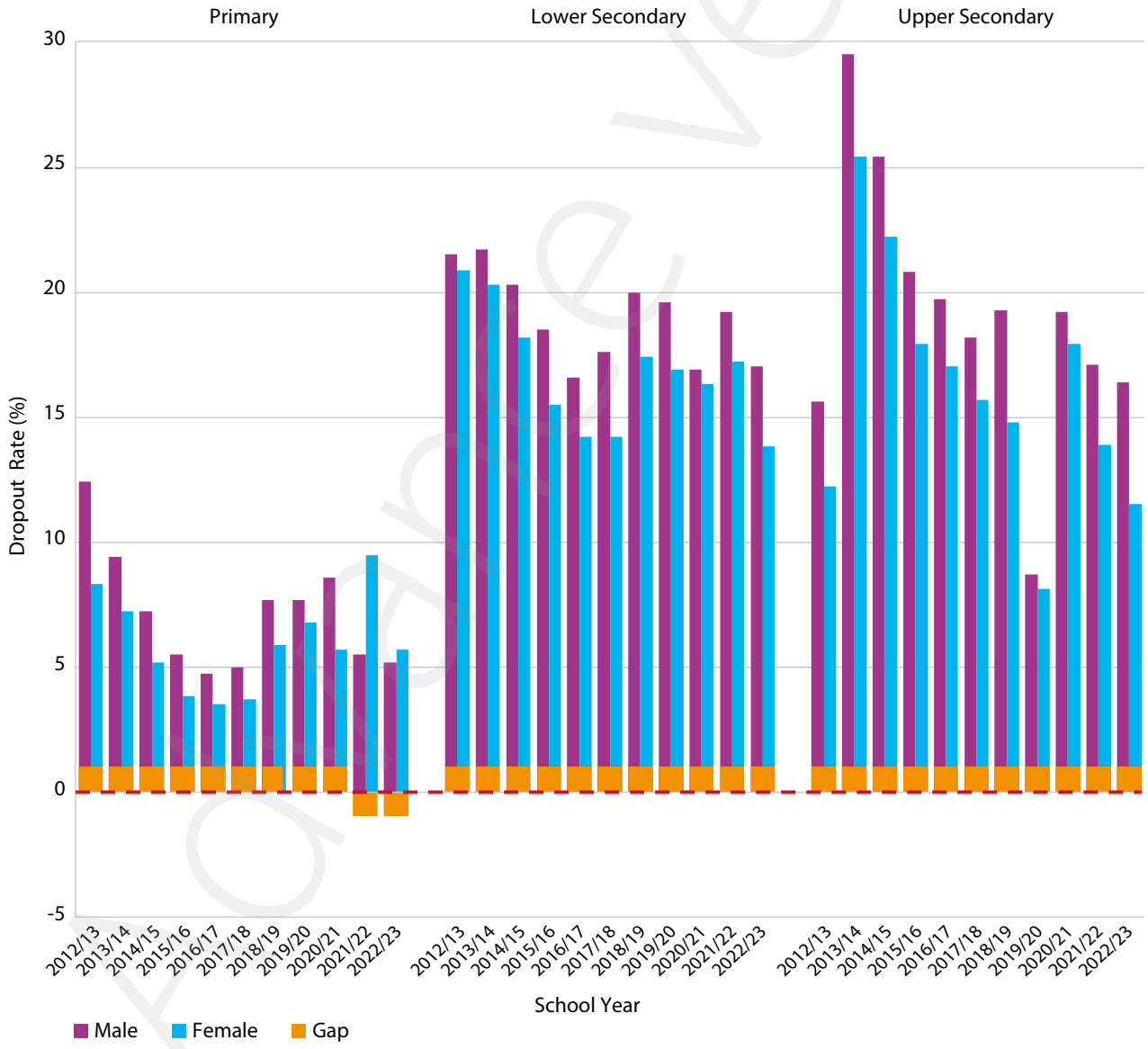
Advance version

Dropout

Dropout rates show an increasing trend for both genders at upper education levels, with generally lower rates for female students compared to male students (**Figure 7**). However, an exception is observed at the primary level, where girls have recorded slightly higher dropout rates than boys since the 2021/22 academic year, a trend that continued into 2023/24, as confirmed by the 2024/25 MoEYS Congress Report (MoEYS, 2015a). While this reversal may be partly due to post-pandemic disruptions, such as increased caregiving responsibilities, early marriage or economic hardship affecting girls, it requires further investigation to determine whether it reflects a temporary anomaly or a growing structural concern.

At the lower secondary level, a clearer gender gap re-emerges, with boys significantly more likely to drop out than girls, particularly in the 2022/23 academic year. This aligns with findings from national and international studies highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected boys' educational participation at this stage. Prolonged school closures, limited access to digital learning and heightened economic pressures contributed to increased dropout among boys, especially in rural areas where they are often expected to work or support their households. Reports from MoEYS (2020, 2025) and UNICEF (2022) confirm substantial learning loss and rising dropout rates among vulnerable students during this period in Cambodia.

Figure 7. Dropout rate by sex over time (2012/13 to 2022/23)



Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2012/13 and 2023/24 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025. Accessed online November 2025.

Report version

When analysing the 2022/23 data by province, the dropout rates are considerably low across provinces at the primary level, with boys having lower dropout rates than girls. Provinces such as Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Speu, Kratie, Mondul Kiri, Pursat, Siem Reap and Tboung Khmum have the highest gaps in dropout rates at the lower secondary level (**Table 7**).

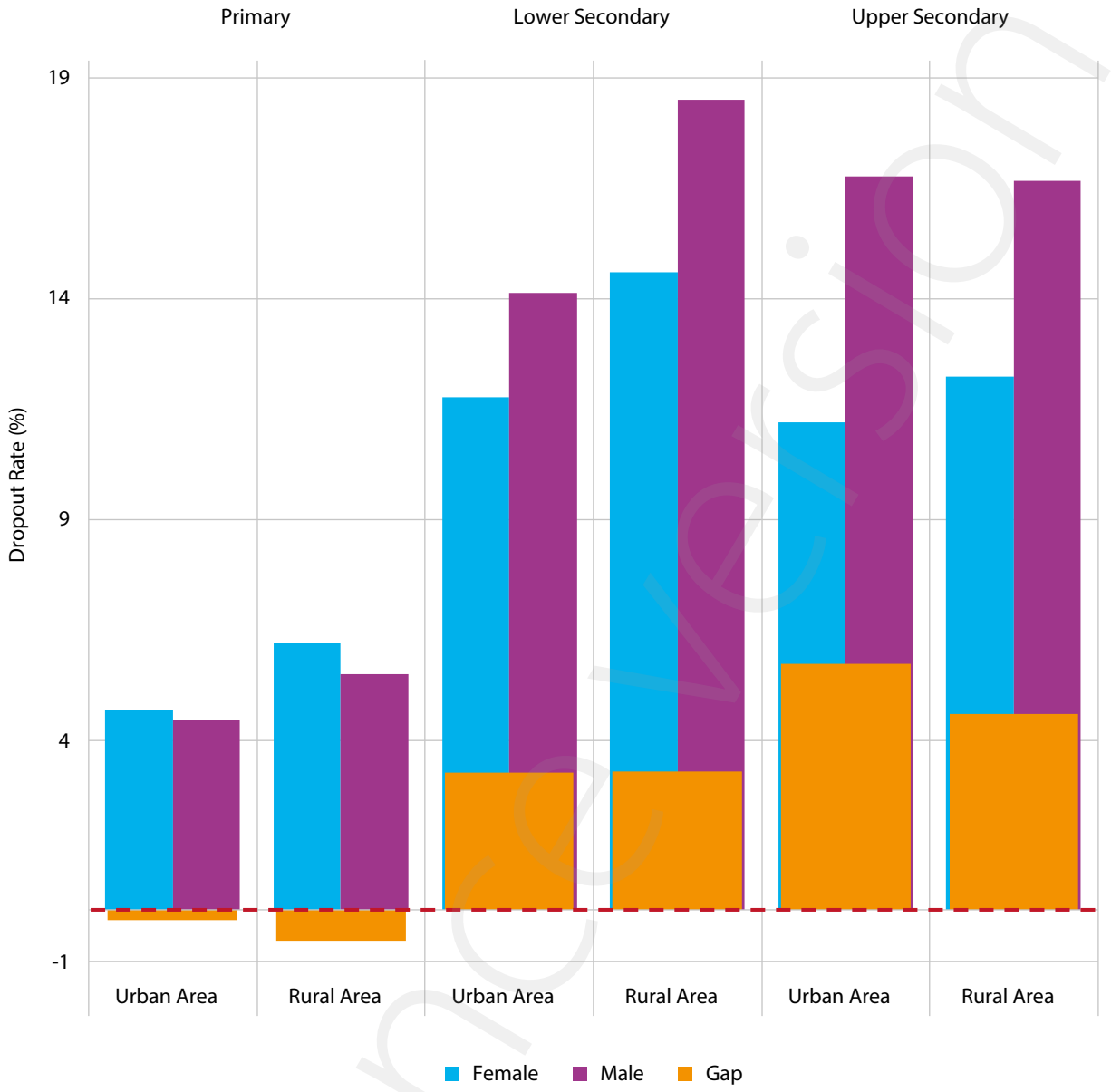
Table 7. Dropout rate for the 2022/23 school year by sex and province

Province	Primary School			Lower Secondary School			Upper Secondary School		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Banteay Meanchey	5.30	6.00	(0.70)	19.10	13.50	5.60	20.30	13.20	7.10
Battambang	6.10	6.20	(0.10)	19.10	13.70	5.40	20.50	16.50	4.00
Kampong Cham	5.30	5.80	(0.50)	19.60	17.10	2.50	17.00	12.20	4.80
Kampong Chhnang	3.30	3.00	0.30	13.60	11.90	1.70	20.80	12.70	8.10
Kampong Speu	3.30	3.90	(0.60)	19.80	12.00	7.80	16.00	9.10	6.90
Kampong Thom	6.70	6.60	0.10	24.00	18.90	5.10	15.50	10.30	5.20
Kampot	5.80	6.60	(0.80)	19.90	15.90	4.00	18.10	13.30	4.80
Kandal	3.00	3.70	(0.70)	12.50	9.20	3.30	14.90	10.40	4.50
Kep	4.20	5.70	(1.50)	19.50	14.30	5.20	13.50	7.60	5.90
Koh Kong	7.10	7.80	(0.70)	21.00	22.40	(1.40)	12.40	14.20	(1.80)
Kratie	7.60	7.60	-	17.90	17.10	0.80	15.20	11.40	3.80
Mondul Kiri	6.00	8.00	(2.00)	15.00	9.60	5.40	12.70	6.30	6.40
Oddar Meanchey	8.30	8.60	(0.30)	23.20	20.00	3.20	17.30	12.40	4.90
Pailin	5.40	6.20	(0.80)	13.10	18.60	(5.50)	19.70	13.60	6.10
Phnom Penh	3.80	3.90	(0.10)	14.90	11.90	3.00	15.60	10.70	4.90
Preah Sihanouk	5.10	5.40	(0.30)	16.60	15.50	1.10	12.50	9.40	3.10
Preah Vihear	7.40	7.30	0.10	16.30	15.50	0.80	12.60	10.60	2.00
Prey Veng	2.70	3.80	(1.10)	11.70	10.20	1.50	14.00	8.60	5.40
Pursat	5.40	6.10	(0.70)	19.20	16.60	2.60	20.50	14.90	5.60
Ratanak Kiri	8.10	11.10	(3.00)	18.30	16.80	1.50	17.20	10.60	6.60
Siem Reap	7.60	7.70	(0.10)	16.10	13.70	2.40	15.30	11.30	4.00
Stung Treng	9.00	9.20	(0.20)	17.30	17.20	0.10	9.80	10.70	(0.90)
Svay Rieng	3.60	4.30	(0.70)	17.20	15.60	1.60	17.40	11.40	6.00
Takeo	3.40	4.30	(0.90)	15.10	11.60	3.50	15.60	11.20	4.40
Tboung Khmum	6.60	6.60	-	20.00	15.90	4.10	14.70	11.30	3.40

Notes: Gap data presented in parentheses indicate disadvantages for boys. Gap data without parentheses indicate disadvantages for girls.
Source: Table by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Advance version

Figure 8. Dropout rate for the 2022/23 school year by sex and area

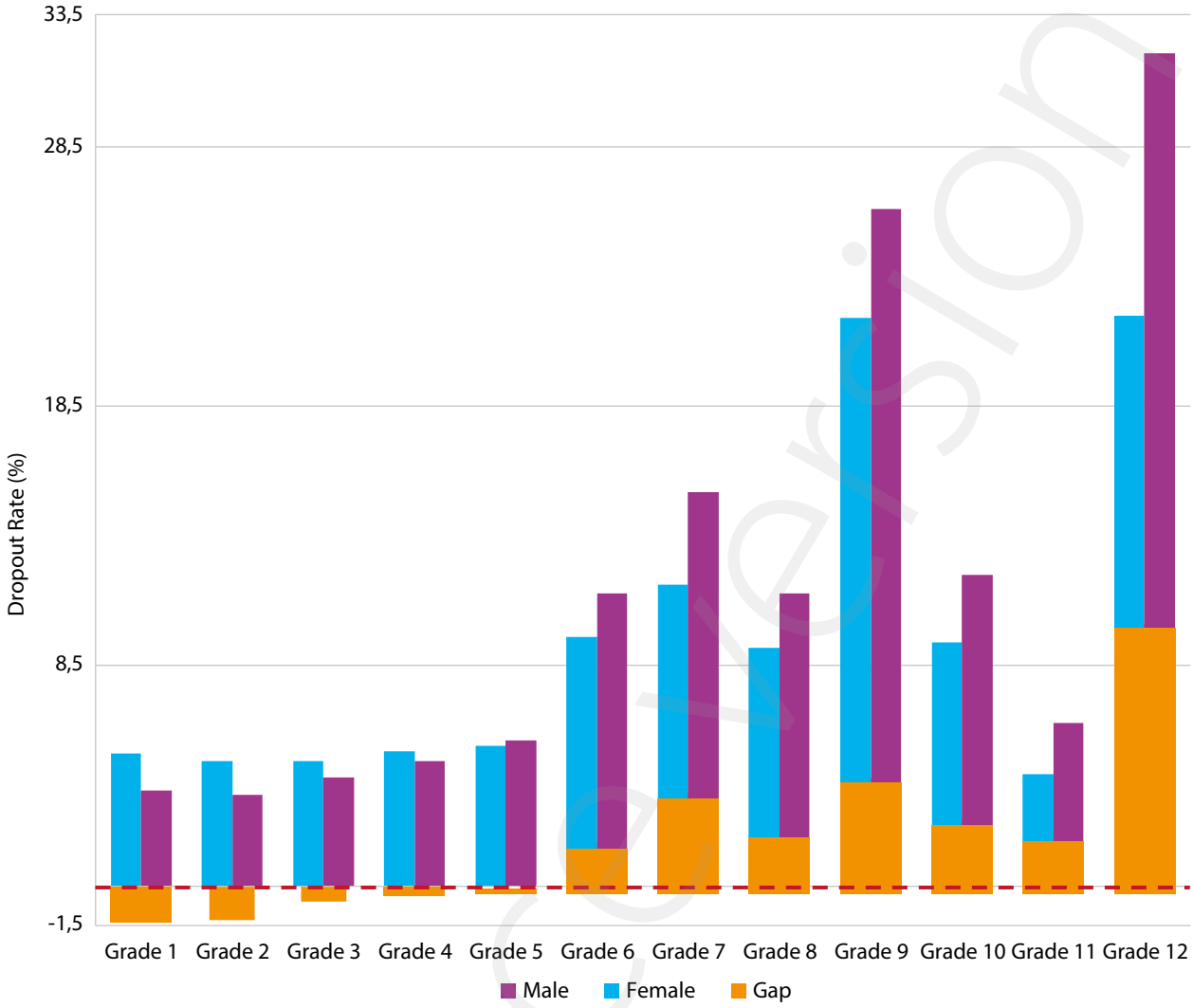


Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

An interesting pattern emerges when analysing recent dropout rates based on area. The highest dropout rates exist among rural male students in lower secondary education (**Figure 8**), compared to rural males in upper secondary education. This signals that boys' disengagement is more prevalent at this level, particularly for those from rural areas. Based on grade, dropout rates are relatively low in the primary level of education but increase considerably starting from Grade 6 (**Figure 9**). The dropout rates start rising at Grade 7, with boys showing considerably higher dropout rates than girls. This indicates a critical point where male students are likely to disengage from school.

Advance version

Figure 9. Dropout rate by sex across grades for the 2022/23 school year



Source: Figure by authors. Data from MoEYS EMIS Reports 2022/23 (MoEYS, 2025b). Accessed online November 2025.

Advance version

Factors affecting boys' disengagement from education

This section examines the key factors driving boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia, with a specific focus on the lower secondary level. This focus is informed by the quantitative analysis, which indicates that boys' disengagement begins at the lower secondary stage, making this a critical transition point in their educational trajectories. The analysis is structured around the core layers of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory: the microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem. The section uses these levels to organize the empirical evidence and highlight the complex interplay of individual, relational, institutional and structural factors. These include personal attitudes and behaviours, household dynamics, school and peer influences, and broader policy and sociocultural conditions. While the primary emphasis in this section is on boys, it is important to acknowledge that many of the factors identified also affect girls in similar or different ways. However, this study concentrates on boys to better understand the risks and vulnerabilities that shape their educational experiences.

Microsystem

At the microsystem, all participants, including the male students themselves, indicated that individual factors were the most pressing contributors to education disengagement. However, it is important to recognize that these factors do not operate in isolation. The experiences and challenges faced by boys at the individual level are often deeply intertwined with their family circumstances and the influence of their peer groups. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding requires an examination of each of these aspects and the complex ways in which they interact to shape boys' engagement in lower secondary education in Cambodia.

Individual factors

A multitude of boys' individual characteristics, experiences and challenges were identified as significant contributors to their disengagement from lower secondary education. The following synthesized themes reflect the most frequently reported factors, presented in order of prominence.

Foundational skills and academic performance challenges

Many study participants from schools and NGOs reported that boys enter lower secondary education already burdened by poor foundational skills from primary school. These deficits make it difficult for students to cope with the academic demands of the new level, leading to chronic underperformance and lowered self-confidence. Such challenges are consistent with previous research findings, which show that gaps in early literacy and numeracy among Cambodian boys hinder their progression and engagement at higher levels of education (UNICEF 2020; Hirakawa and Taniguchi, 2021).

> *"Many of the boys could not read or write fluently or even did basic math when they arrived in Grade 7. They fell behind from the very beginning, and then it was difficult for them to stay motivated and keep up with the rest of the other subjects.*
>
> *– Rural lower secondary school director in Pursat*

Poor study habits further exacerbate academic difficulties and significantly contribute to a general lack of academic success, fostering a stronger sense of disengagement from education. Many participants emphasized that effective study habits, consistent academic dedication and regular attendance are critical determinants of academic performance.

> *"Some boys did not know how to study. They rarely reviewed their lessons or made time for further self-study. They did not complete their homework, came late or skipped classes from time to time. There was no discipline at home, and they carried that into the classroom.*
>
> *– Head teacher in Kampong Speu province*

Boys themselves echoed these sentiments. One low-performing Grade 8 male student in Kampong Speu explained:

> *"I usually play football or go out to the field after school. I do not really study unless there is a test. I get bored quickly when I try to read, but mostly I cannot understand or remember the lesson contents and formulas.*

Advance version

The transition to lower secondary school, with its new learning environment, increased academic demands and different organizational structure, was reported as difficult for some boys, who were slow to catch up and adapt. This difficulty in adjusting can foster feelings of inadequacy and ultimately contribute to disengagement. The transition from primary to secondary school is often marked by a decline in students' enthusiasm and overall engagement with their education, often accompanied by increased anxiety, uncertainty about the new environment, and doubts about their ability to cope. Grade transitions in general can bring about significant social adjustments, physical changes associated with puberty and increased academic stress, due to a greater workload and more challenging material (Anderson et al., 2000). Moreover, the increased direct costs of education, such as school fees and the necessity of paying for supplementary tutoring to succeed in key tests in lower secondary school can also present significant barriers to students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020).

Lack of motivation, persistence and educational aspirations

Lack of interest or attention in education was also frequently reported by many participants, including boys themselves, as a significant factor contributing to boys' disengagement from education. Both early school-leavers and low-performing boys admitted that this lack of interest can stem from various underlying reasons, including low educational aspirations and expectations held by themselves and their parents. While broader societal norms may still place greater pressure on boys to achieve life success and become future breadwinners, these expectations do not always translate into strong support or encouragement for formal education. In fact, many school-level, subnational and national stakeholders noticed the trend that families and communities are increasingly placing higher educational expectations on girls, seeing them as more disciplined and academically committed. For boys, in contrast, the emphasis often shifts towards future income generation or responsibilities outside school, leading to lower investment, both emotional and practical, in their academic success. This finding is also corroborated by some parents in the study, where they admitted that their daughters are performing better and are more serious in their study; hence, it is wiser to invest more in them. They would hope that their daughter could get a good job in the city after they graduate.

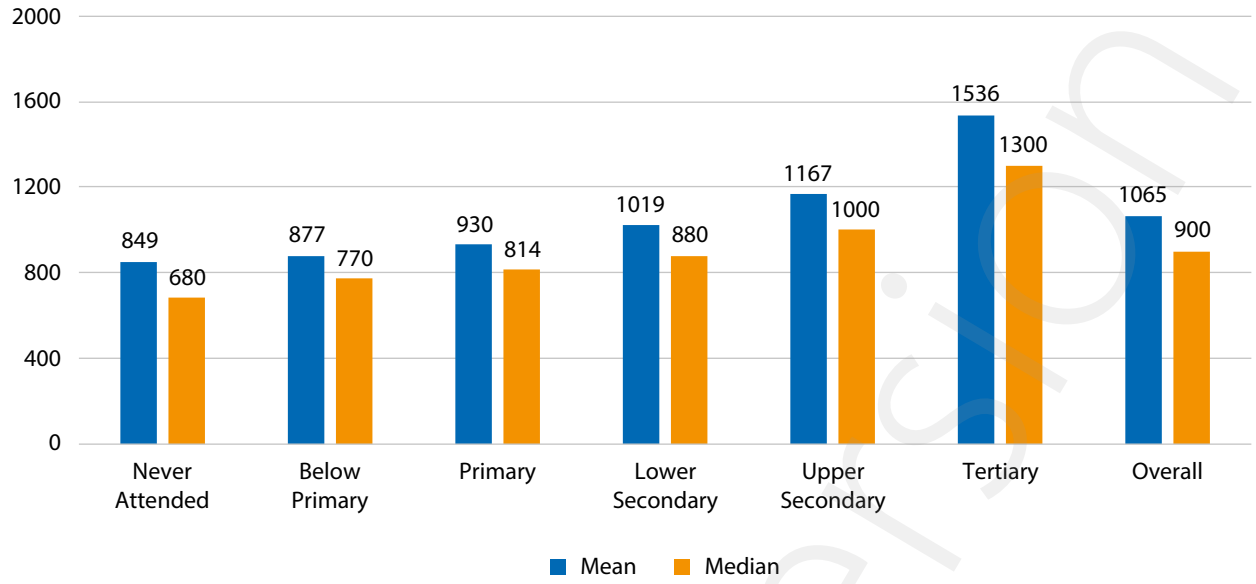
Educational aspirations also emerged as an important dimension. While high-performing boys expressed hopes of continuing to upper secondary or tertiary education, low-performing boys and those who dropped out of school early, often reported more limited or short-term goals, such as leaving school early to work, migrate or support their families or just simply have no idea what they want to or could do in the future with their current education level. For example, in focus group discussion with low-performing boys in Tboung Khmum province, some boys shared that 'finishing Grade 9 is enough to get a job'. Teachers similarly remarked that many boys seemed disengaged not because of lack of ability, but because of a 'limited vision' about the benefits of completing education.

> *"When we ask them [boys] what they want to be in the future, many boys just say, 'I do not know', 'depends on my parents' advice', or they joke about being a driver, farmer or shoes sewer in Thailand. It shows they have no clear plan or ambition for their education or work.*
>
> *– Male head teacher in Battambang*

An unclear plan for the future and goals can diminish the perceived relevance and importance of education, leading to a lack of motivation and subsequent disengagement. Research consistently shows that goal setting for students improves their outcomes and motivation (Hudig et al., 2023, Moeller et al., 2012, Sides and Cuevas, 2020). Setting and working towards goals helps guide decisions and motivates individuals. When boys lack a clear vision for their future and fail to see how education can help them achieve those goals, they may struggle to find the motivation to invest time and effort in their studies.

Advance version

Figure 10. Mean and median monthly wage (KHR, in thousands) by education level, 2019



Source: Figure by authors. Data from World Bank (2024a).

A prevailing perception of the low return on investment of pursuing education in their specific local context can also significantly undermine boys' overall motivation to stay engaged in school. Contrary to earlier underestimations, research has revealed that the annualized university premium in Cambodia is quite high (Chantol, 2021; Humphreys, 2016; Lall and Sakellariou, 2010). Wage returns for each additional year of schooling in Cambodia indicate a tangible economic benefit. Labour market data in Cambodia also clearly demonstrates a strong correlation between higher educational attainment and increased earnings (World Bank, 2024a). Individuals with less than a primary education earn a lower average monthly wage than those who have completed high school and those who have completed tertiary education (**Figure 10**).

However, if boys and their families perceive limited future job opportunities or low wages even with higher education, their motivation to remain engaged in school will likely be considerably low.

> *"Even when boys finished school, they saw others in their village with diplomas or bachelor's degree still unemployed or [who] did not get good jobs. So, they questioned back to us, 'What is the use of staying in school for long?' It is difficult to argue when their reality shows something different.*
>
> *– Lower secondary school director in Kampong Speu*

Moreover, poverty and the availability of unskilled and informal jobs in sectors including construction, agro-industry and delivery can lead to a perceived lack of value in pursuing further education, if boys are prioritizing immediate income generation. Such views reflect broader societal narratives that may devalue formal education in favour of short-term income generation, particularly in rural communities, indigenous ethnic minority areas and households experiencing multidimensional poverty. In these contexts, education is often seen as less attainable or less directly relevant to boys' future livelihoods, reinforcing patterns of early education disengagement.

Low self-image, confidence and emotional well-being

The SNM activity and FGDs with early school leavers and low-performing boys revealed a recurring theme of a low self-image and academic confidence. These boys often described themselves in disparaging terms and expressed a belief that they were inherently incapable of succeeding in school. A Grade 9 male student who had left school in Tboung Khmum almost two years ago shared:

> *"Others in the class, especially girls, were better than me. I did not dare to raise my hand to ask teachers when I could not catch up on the lesson. I was afraid of being wrong and scolded by the teachers and seen as stupid by my classmates. I could not remember the formulas and performed badly in the monthly exams. I think I was probably born that way, and there might be no way I can perform better even if I stay longer. It's better for me to just leave school, help my parents or work elsewhere.*

Advance version

These perceptions were not isolated; rather, they reflected a broader psychological struggle rooted in academic failure and low self-worth. This negative perception of oneself and one's academic abilities can create a substantial psychological barrier to educational engagement. When students believe they lack the ability to succeed, they are less likely to invest effort, more likely to disengage, and prone to giving up when faced with academic obstacles. This aligns with existing research showing that low academic self-concept and self-esteem are closely linked to poor academic performance, creating a negative feedback loop that reinforces disengagement (Baumeister et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2022). In mathematics, for instance, students' self-belief has been positively correlated with performance, highlighting the critical role of confidence in academic achievement (Onoshakpokaiye, 2021; Widlund et al., 2021). Moreover, low self-esteem is frequently associated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, which further impede concentration and school participation (Huttunen et al., 2024; Orth and Robins, 2014). The emotional consequences of low self-worth can manifest in behaviours such as reluctance to speak in class, pretending not to care about grades, or avoiding school altogether. Interventions aimed at building self-efficacy and providing positive reinforcement are crucial.

Compounding these challenges is reported limited communication between boys and their families regarding educational matters. Many participants across all targeted groups in this study described a general lack of parental involvement or emotional support for sons. One Grade 7 male student in Battambang shared:

> *"At home, we rarely talked about school. No one asked if I passed or failed nor if I had discussed this with my parents. Well, I hardly saw my parents throughout the day. They always go to the border early in morning and return home really late. By the time they came home, I was either asleep, or they were too tired to discuss something like that [school matters]. I also did not think they can help me with my schoolwork anyway because neither of them finished primary school.*

This absence of dialogue diminishes both accountability and encouragement, leaving boys feeling isolated in their academic journey. Poor family communication has been shown to predict negative emotional outcomes, including loneliness and depressive symptoms, which can further undermine school engagement. Conversely, open and supportive communication has been associated with stronger emotional regulation, better school outcomes and increased persistence (Bai et al., 2025; Mo and Singh, 2008). Establishing strong communication channels within families can thus play a vital role in promoting boys' educational resilience.

Distractions and competing interests

Another recurring theme across SNM, FGDs and interviews was the significant impact of digital distractions, particularly smartphone usage, on boys' ability to concentrate on their studies. Many participants, including teachers and parents, observed that boys often prioritize gaming and social media over schoolwork. Instead of setting up study groups, male students frequently set up live online gaming groups. A lower secondary school director in Pursat explained:

> *"They (male students) brought their phones to school, hid them under the desks, and played games even during class. I felt like my teachers might have to compete with the screen for their attention. Sometimes they [boys] just skipped classes and gathered their peers to play the online games PUBG, Mobile Legend, etc. together at a café or a mart with free Wi-Fi. With a situation at school like that, you can imagine how much worse it might be at home. Do they even care about reviewing their lessons or working on their homework?*

Insights from FGDs with boys also revealed several factors explaining this pattern. For them, smartphones offer immediate entertainment and social connection that can feel more rewarding than studying. Online gaming provides a sense of competition, achievement and peer belonging, which boys find missing or restricted in classroom settings. Some teachers also noted that weak parental monitoring or limited digital literacy in families often mean that boys' screen use goes unchecked. A Grade 8 male student in Tboung Khmum shared:

> *"When I came home, I started playing online video games with my friends or just scrolling Facebook and TikTok. Studying feels boring and I can't remember all of the long content for all subjects … I always think 'Just one more level' and then it was already midnight or even very early morning.*

The findings reflect broader trends identified in recent research on changing gender disparities in learning. Chea et al. (2024) argued that Cambodian boys are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of smartphone dependency due to their greater use for entertainment, lower self-discipline, and increased exposure to peer pressure and risky behaviours. This not only undermines study routines and increases exposure to addictive behaviours like gaming but also contributes to poorer academic outcomes. Prolonged screen time has been linked to academic burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, detachment from school and reduced academic motivation (Adelantado-Renau et al., 2019; Paulich et al., 2021).

Moreover, sports emerged as a double-edged sword. While participation in sports provided social and physical benefits, some students described becoming overly immersed or using sports as a means to earn extra income through betting.

> *"Football is indeed fun and good for health. Although I do not play it every day, I also sometimes play it with my classmates on the weekend. However, some of my male friends do not play just for fun and health, but they play for other people in the village for some money. They can get a good extra money if they win a tournament.*
>
> *– Low-performing Grade 8 male student in Kampong Speu*

Similarly, research (Fox et al., 2010; Fredricks, 2012; King et al., 2021) has also indicated that while sports can provide structure and cognitive benefits, over-involvement without balance may crowd out academic obligations. Excessive commitment can resemble behavioural addiction, disrupt academic routines and reduce time spent on homework or revisions. A female teacher at a lower secondary school and a high-performing Grade 9 male student in Tboung Khmum observed:

> *"Our school has a huge space for football and other sports. The boys always like to come and play whether it is during weekdays or the weekend. However, when they play all day during weekdays, before class time or during the break for too long under the hot sun, they seem to have no more energy or lose interest in studying for the rest of the day.*

Another contributing factor was the influence of materialism. Several boys, parents and study participants at the school and subnational level voiced the same observation that some male students have a desire to pursue quick ways to earn more money or own fashionable items, suggesting that their focus was on immediate gratification rather than long-term educational goals. However, this focus on immediate gratification over long-term educational goals cannot be understood in isolation. It could also be shaped by broader social expectations and peer influences that encourage boys to value visible status markers. A mother of a Grade 8 male student who recently dropped out in Pursat commented:

> *"My son says school was too slow. He wanted a motorbike and iPhone like his cousin. Working at the solar panel factory or marble-making companies around the mountain sites look fun and he can earn an adequate amount of money to accommodate his expenses. He wanted to join his cousin riding or driving a car.*

The emergence of materialistic tendencies among boys also aligns with existing research showing that adolescents who prioritize material wealth often exhibit lower academic motivation and well-being (Chaplin and John, 2010). Materialism has been associated with reduced intrinsic motivation for academic achievement, particularly in settings where consumerism is valorized over education (Zhen et al., 2017). Finally, irregular attendance, particularly lateness and unauthorized absences, was a visible marker of disengagement. Teachers noted that boys who were often absent tended to fall further behind, both academically and socially. A school director in Mondul Kiri remarked:

> *"When boys started skipping school or class, even just once or twice a week, it became easier for them to disappear completely. However, we also acknowledged that there could also be many reasons for their absence beyond skipping classes without authorization. While some really needed to help their parents in the farm or rice field or take care of domestic animals, others just simply skipped as a game or for killing time around the village or rice field.*

Advance version

These findings reinforce the evidence showing truancy and chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year) continue to be significant predictors of school dropout (Gottfried, 2014). Truancy is also closely linked to broader mental health issues, peer pressure and household instability (Maynard et al., 2015). Cambodian studies suggest that socioeconomic hardship, low parental involvement and negative peer influence further compound this problem (UNICEF, 2020; Yem, 2024).

Health, nutrition and substance use

Poor health and nutrition emerged as recurring themes across interviews and FGDs and contributed to boys' irregular attendance and poor concentration in class. Teachers and school directors frequently described instances of fatigue, drowsiness, hunger and illness that limited boys' ability to participate meaningfully in learning.

> *"Some days, they (male students) came to school without breakfast and just sat there looking tired or slept on the table. They could not focus or answer any questions. They were working at the rubber plantation from evening until very early in the morning, not enough time to rest or sleep properly. Some also helped their parents to sell food at nighttime.*
>
> *– Teacher from secondary school in Mondul Kiri*

Such health-related barriers were particularly acute in poorer households, where boys often skipped meals or consumed highly processed foods due to their affordability and convenience. Chronic malnutrition and low-quality diets are strongly associated with reduced cognitive capacity, poor memory and lower academic achievement (Cohen et al., 2021; Florence et al., 2008; Haapala et al., 2017).

Similarly, participants identified a serious gap in educational provision for boys with disabilities and other learning difficulties. Several boys were reportedly suspended or excluded due to behavioural issues stemming from undiagnosed or unsupported conditions. According to parents, MoEYS and development partners, a lack of specialized teachers, inclusive pedagogies and school-wide understanding of learning difficulties left many boys feeling alienated or treated as troublemakers. A Grade 11 male student in Tboung Khmum noted that:

> *"My twin brothers have been put on temporary school suspension. This happened after one of them brought a big knife to his class and was accused of using it to threaten other students. They were both born with learning difficulties. They could not comprehend or remember the lessons well. They were also very easily manipulated and made angry by other students. If they are asked to hit or stab someone, they would do so without knowing that such action is wrong.*

Substance use, particularly vaping and drug consumption, was also raised as a growing concern by both school personnel and parents. Almost all parents across the five selected provinces noticed the widespread availability and usage of vape electronic cigarettes around school areas. Students can also afford to buy them easily.

> *"At breaktime, they sneaked out to vape behind the big bushes or trees around the rice field. The sellers may be just somewhere across the street.*
>
> *– Mother from Pursat*

Substance use among adolescents, including vaping and drug consumption, has been consistently linked to reduced academic motivation, attention difficulties and an elevated risk of school dropout (Augenstein et al., 2024; Kinnunen et al., 2018). Participation in high-contact sports may increase the likelihood of substance use, particularly among boys seeking peer approval or coping with stress (Veliz et al., 2014).

Family-related factors

Family-related factors at the microsystem level significantly influence boys' engagement with lower secondary education in Cambodia. Multiple interrelated household dimensions, from economic pressures and parental support to family stability and home environment, affect boys' ability and motivation to remain in school.

Economic pressures and livelihood demand

A recurring theme among respondents was the impact of poverty on boys' ability to stay in school. In Cambodia, many boys were reportedly required to contribute to household income through agricultural work, labour, caregiving or small-scale family businesses. Compared to girls, several respondents noted that boys are perceived to have greater access to better-paying and more physically demanding job opportunities, such as construction or other forms of manual labour, which increases the pressure to leave school in order to earn an income. While the garment industry, a major sector in Cambodia's economy, draws large numbers of female workers, it was not cited as a

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significant pull factor for boys. Instead, the availability of informal or low-skilled work more accessible to boys contributes to the perception that formal education is less necessary for male economic participation. In households experiencing rising debt or economic instability, boys may be expected to provide additional financial support, reinforcing a cycle where immediate livelihood needs take precedence over continued education.

> *"We have our own farms – rubber plants, pepper, cashew nuts, durian. From time to time, I'd ask my sons to help. If they are lazy or do not want to study, they can just quit to help me with the farm.*
>
> *– Father of a Grade 9 male student in Mondul Kiri who recently left school*

> *"During and after COVID-19, my family fell into a lot of debt. I decided to ask my boy [Grade 9] here to stop studying for a while to work – finding and selling lake shells or cutting chicken to help clear some debts. He cried almost every day after informing the school director that he would quit school. He really likes to study and wants to continue, but our family condition would not allow for that.*
>
> *– Widow with 13 children in Kampong Speu province*

In some rural regions, particularly where people depend on agriculture, families perceive limited long-term value in formal education, especially when few employment opportunities exist outside of traditional work. In such cases, education may be seen as not a practical investment, and boys are often encouraged to prioritize practical labour over academic performance.
When families struggle to cover schooling expenses, including fees, uniforms, transportation or extra classes, boys may be taken out of school, especially when there are competing priorities in the household.

> *"Frankly, I could no longer afford the school expenses. School uniforms, sport uniforms, fees for different private tutoring classes, class sanitation, school infrastructure, etc. I really could not afford it anymore by just selling fish at the market. I decided to transfer him to the Islamic school instead, as everything is free, and they helped discipline the boy.*
>
> *– Mother of a Grade 8 male student in Pursat*

> *"Some friends [boys] dropped out because they thought working now is better than learning for many years without knowing if they would find a proper job afterwards.*
>
> *– High-performing Grade 9 male student in Kampong Speu*

These findings align with broader evidence on how poverty and economic insecurity disrupt educational participation among adolescents, particularly boys. In contexts like Cambodia, the opportunity cost of education can be especially high when boys are seen as economic contributors. Studies have also shown that adolescents from low-income households are more likely to drop out when immediate labour opportunities are available (Keng, 2009; Phay and Tong, 2014; UIS and the Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016).

The gendered nature of livelihood expectations compounds this issue. Boys tend to face more external pressure to pursue paid work, often because their labour is considered more valuable in agricultural or manual sectors (Harris and Wood, 2013; Morris, 2011; Wilson et al., 2022). In rural Cambodia, where the perceived return on education may be low, particularly in subsistence-farming communities, parents may deprioritize schooling in favour of short-term survival strategies (No et al., 2016; UNESCO-IIEP, 2011; Yem, 2024). When school-related costs such as fees, uniforms, transport or extra classes become prohibitive, boys are often the first to be pulled out, especially in households where other siblings also require support.

Low parental engagement and educational values

The degree and quality of parental involvement was repeatedly identified by teachers, school leaders and subnational officials as a significant factor influencing boys' educational engagement. Boys whose parents actively monitored their learning, checked homework or maintained communication with teachers were described as more motivated and better able to cope with academic expectations. In contrast, boys from households where educational support was minimal or absent were often perceived as demotivated and lacking direction. These boys frequently lacked guidance at home and were more vulnerable to external distractions or peer influence.

> *"When no one at home asked about homework or how they were doing in school, some boys just lose interest entirely.*
>
> *– Male teacher in Tboung Khmum,*

Advance Version

The attitudes parents held about the value of education also shaped boys' outlook. In families where school achievement was not emphasized or where material success through work was seen as more attainable, boys were more likely to adopt disengaged or indifferent attitudes towards education. Several educators shared stories of boys being actively encouraged to leave school and earn money instead, particularly in families facing financial hardship.

> *"One boy told me his father said there is no point studying when you can make $10 a day doing construction.*
>
> *– School director in Mondul Kiri*

These findings align with existing research that underscores the critical influence of parental involvement on students' academic outcomes. Numerous studies confirm that active and supportive parental engagement improves children's academic achievement, motivation and classroom behaviour (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Yang et al., 2023). Boys often benefit significantly from close parental supervision and encouragement, especially in environments where other sources of academic motivation are lacking (Castro et al., 2015; Goodall, 2013; Sengonul, 2022). Low parental expectations and lack of engagement are strongly associated with student disengagement, especially among boys who may already face pressures to assume adult responsibilities or prioritize immediate income (UNESCO, 2017). In contexts like Cambodia, where intergenerational educational attainment remains uneven, the absence of parental role models with formal education can further reduce the perceived value of schooling. Moreover, when families prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term investment in education, boys are more likely to internalize the belief that school is irrelevant to their future (Hanushek and Wößmann, 2007; Permani, 2009). These dynamics reflect broader sociocultural and economic forces that shape family decision-making around schooling, especially in rural and low-income contexts.

Family structure and household instability

Disruptions to the family structure were frequently identified as barriers to boys' consistent engagement with education. In particular, the migration of parents for work, common in rural Cambodia, was said to weaken support systems at home. Boys left in the care of grandparents or extended relatives were described as receiving less consistent supervision, encouragement and emotional support. '*It is hard for the grandparents to help with school*,' one PoE officer explained. '*They are very old, or they never went to school themselves.*' This lack of guidance and connection often translates into declining attendance and reduced academic effort. A low-performing Grade 9 male student in Battambang shared:

> *"Both of my parents already migrated to Thailand. I've been living with my aunt. We do not have much interaction at home. Generally, she just goes to sell snacks or food at the market from early morning until late evening. She also only got to finish primary Grade 2. She just simply tells me once in a while that 'I cannot help much with your schoolwork. I do not know how to read and write. If you think, you can continue your study, just continue. Otherwise, it is also okay to stop. I do not think your parents have a different say from me.'*

Moreover, family separation, divorce and other forms of household instability were reported to have negative psychological effects on boys. Teachers described students who became withdrawn or exhibited behavioural problems following parental conflict or abandonment. In some instances, boys had to take on adult responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings, sick relatives or managing household tasks, which directly impacted their ability to engage meaningfully with schooling. While caregiving responsibilities are more commonly associated with girls and have been widely documented as a barrier to their education, it is notable that some boys in this study also reported being affected the same way. For these boys, the combination of household responsibilities and emotional strain appeared to erode academic performance and weaken school engagement over time.

> *"Throughout the years, I used to see our male students started skipping class often after their parent[s] left the family to go to the border or were divorced. They [boys] needed to take care of their younger siblings, work on the farm or rice field, but some have no motivation to come and socialize at the school. You could just see clearly on their faces and how more reserved they were becoming. You rarely see the cheery and active boys you used to see.*
>
> *– Grade 9 male head teacher in Battambang*

Advance version

Findings from the SNM activity provided additional insight into the emotional and motivational drivers behind boys' educational engagement. When asked to identify family members involved in their schooling, boys most frequently referenced their mothers, grandparents and siblings. Fathers were the least mentioned in terms of current involvement. However, when asked about who they wished would be more engaged in their educational journey, fathers were the most frequently cited. This finding suggests that while fathers may currently be absent or emotionally distant in educational matters, boys place significant value on paternal recognition and support. Their desire for increased engagement by fathers underscores a gendered expectation of validation and aspiration that is not being fulfilled.

> *"My parents are divorced, and I am living with my grandparents on my mom's side. I miss my dad, but I think he already remarried. We rarely meet. My mom mostly goes out to the rubber plantation to tap rubber, so I need to take care of my younger siblings and a sick grandmother at home. I do not have much time to review the lessons.*
>
> *– Grade 7 male student in Tboung Khmum*

> *"My dad does not ask about school much. If he did, I think I would try harder. He is always busy and out of the house most of the time. My mom is only involved in household chores and cannot help much with my schoolwork.*
>
> *– Grade 8 male student in Kampong Speu*

These findings are consistent with a growing body of research showing how household instability, including parental migration, divorce or caregiving burdens, undermines children's educational outcomes. In Cambodia, labour migration often results in diminished parental oversight and a breakdown in daily educational routines (Madhur, 2014). Scholarly studies across Southeast Asia have found that parental absence is linked to reduced school attendance, lower test scores and increased behavioural problems among boys, who may struggle more than girls with self-regulation in unsupervised settings (Ahmad and Qureshi, 2014; Lam and Yeoh, 2019; Petcharamesree, 2017). Grandparents, while well-meaning, may lack the literacy, energy or authority to support boys academically, especially when dealing with adolescents (Modin et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2022).

The absence of fathers in boys' educational narratives is a critical gap. Studies show that fathers' involvement, even in small ways such as expressing interest in school progress or attending school events, is positively associated with higher academic achievement, self-esteem and persistence, particularly for boys (Fan and Chen, 2001; Lundberg, 2022; Sosu et al., 2021). In contexts like Cambodia, where traditional gender norms often cast fathers as breadwinners rather than caregivers, this role may be underutilized or socially devalued. However, the emotional need for paternal support, as revealed in this study, points to an opportunity for intervention. Programmes that encourage dialogue around education between fathers and sons or include fathers in engagement strategies between schools and parents could have a transformative impact.

Parenting style and psychosocial climate

Parenting style emerged as another important factor shaping educational outcomes. Participants across all levels, including students, noted that boys who received emotional support and positive reinforcement at home were more likely to remain motivated and resilient in the face of academic difficulties. In contrast, boys raised in homes characterized by criticism, harsh discipline or emotional neglect were seen to struggle with self-esteem, confidence and focus. Teachers and NGO staff described how authoritarian or overly punitive parenting styles could suppress boys' intrinsic motivation and create an environment of fear rather than encouragement.

> *"Some boys stopped trying because they were afraid of making mistakes – not just at home, but even in class.*
>
> *– School director in Mondul Kiri*

In homes where encouragement was absent, boys were described as internalizing low expectations and disengaging from learning as a form of self-protection. Several respondents also reflected on the psychosocial toll of family violence and abuse. While gender-based violence remains a significant issue disproportionately affecting women and girls in Cambodia, school-level participants also highlighted how certain forms of family violence, particularly harsh discipline and emotionally unsupportive environments, can uniquely affect boys' engagement with schooling. Boys exposed to such environments often displayed signs of emotional withdrawal, irritability or disruptive behaviour at school. Teachers across the studied provinces shared that these children were difficult to reach academically, not due to ability, but because of the emotional burdens they carried.

These findings resonate with extensive literature linking parenting style to educational outcomes, particularly among adolescent boys. According to Baumrind's typology, authoritative parenting, marked by warmth and firm but reasonable expectations, is most strongly associated with positive academic and psychological outcomes (Baumrind, 1999). In contrast, authoritarian (controlling and punitive) and neglectful (emotionally disengaged) styles correlate with poor academic motivation, externalizing behaviours and low self-regulation. In low- and middle-income contexts, such as Cambodia, socioeconomic stress and intergenerational norms may reinforce harsh or punitive parenting approaches. Yet these approaches can be particularly detrimental for boys, who may be socialized to suppress emotions and exhibit toughness. Without positive reinforcement or emotional scaffolding, boys may adopt avoidant coping strategies, masking vulnerability with indifference or aggression (WHO, 2022).

Boys' academic success is not simply a matter of ability but is deeply shaped by how they are treated and supported at home. The data suggest a need for parenting education programmes that emphasize positive discipline, socioemotional skills and non-violent conflict resolution, especially targeting households with adolescent boys.

Gendered perceptions and unequal expectations

Across field sites in Cambodia, many respondents observed a notable shift in household and community attitudes towards educational investment by gender. Traditionally, boys were seen as the primary beneficiaries of education, with parents believing that sons had better employment prospects and would carry forward the family name. However, participants across all 5 provinces consistently observed that this trend has changed in the past 5 to 10 years, with growing attention, resources and programmes now directed towards girls' education.

Teachers, parents and local education officials reported that families are increasingly prioritizing girls' schooling, partly influenced by government and NGO programmes explicitly targeting female learners. A male school director in Battambang observed:

> *"In the past, parents would say, 'let the son study; the girl will stay at home and get married.' Now it is almost the opposite. They believe girls are more serious and do not go out to play, and there are more scholarships and support for them. Extracurricular activities and some other NGO programmes have also been targeting girls.*

This perceived external support for girls' education has been perceived to produce unintended consequences for some boys, who now feel comparatively less supported.

> *"My younger sister got help from an NGO. She gets money, books, uniforms, a bicycle and extra computer classes. I and other male classmates did not get anything, nor could we participate in those extra class activities. We could only observe what they were doing from the class window. I did not understand why those programmes and support are only for girls. I felt it a bit unfair. We are students, the same.*
>
> *– Low-performing Grade 8 male student in Kampong Speu*

School-level and local education officials noted that while this shift has been positive in correcting past gender disparities, it has also created a sense of among some boys of being left out, particularly those from low-income or rural families. Several teachers emphasized that when boys perceive their education as less valued or supported, they are more likely to become disengaged, withdraw emotionally or drop out altogether.

Scholars caution against framing gender equality efforts as a zero-sum game and that advancing the rights or opportunities of one gender does not have to come at the expense of the other. Yet while girls' improved participation is a critical success, a nuanced approach is needed to ensure that boys are not left behind in the process (Aikman and Rao, 2012; Dingo, 2018; Lwamba et al., 2022). This suggests a need for gender-transformative, not gender-exclusive programming that recognizes the evolving gender dynamics in education. It also reinforces the value of listening to boys' voices to identify their specific vulnerabilities and support needs, which may be overlooked due to assumptions about male advantage.

Early transitions and material aspirations

Although less common, early marriage was cited in several interviews, particularly among the Bunong ethnic minority in northeastern Cambodia, as a reason for boys leaving school. Once married, boys were expected to take on adult responsibilities such as farming, wage labour or caring for dependents, which left little time or energy for schooling. One female head teacher in Mondul Kiri shared,

> *"When a boy gets married at 16 or 17, it's finished. He must work like a man, and school is no longer possible.*

Advance version

These early transitions into adulthood reflect long-standing cultural norms around masculinity, adulthood and economic contribution. While much of the discourse around early marriage focuses on girls, evidence increasingly shows that it also impacts boys' education, especially in marginalized and rural communities (Jordana, 2016; Morrow et al., 2023).

In parallel, the pursuit of material goods and financial independence was seen to compete with educational aspirations. Boys from families that emphasized income generation over academic achievement were more likely to drop out in favour of short-term work.

> *"These boys did not see school as useful when they could earn money by helping in the forest or finding work in the informal factory or in the city,*

noted a female NGO staff member. This aligns with findings that boys are more likely to disengage when they internalize messages equating masculinity with earning capacity (Whitehead, 2003; William et al., 2010). In contexts of economic hardship, particularly in ethnic minority areas, education is often perceived as a luxury rather than a necessity, especially when formal employment opportunities remain limited (UNESCO, 2018b).

Negative peer influence

Peer relationships were consistently identified by participants as a critical factor shaping boys' educational engagement at the lower secondary level. Across interviews, negative peer influence emerged as a recurrent theme, particularly during early adolescence, when boys are increasingly vulnerable to social pressures and the desire for peer acceptance.

Participants frequently observed that boys often face peer pressure to engage in behaviours that counter academic success. These included unauthorized absence, substance use and various forms of risk-taking behaviours. School directors and head teachers reported that some boys began skipping classes or arriving late due to peer-influenced involvement in drinking, smoking or loitering in the community. One teacher in Kampong Speu explained,

> *"We saw some boys who used to do well, but then their friends changed, and suddenly they were always late or skipping school. It was difficult to pull them back once they went down that path.*

For many boys, academic disengagement was not simply a personal choice but a social negotiation within their peer groups. Several educators noted that high academic performance could sometimes be perceived as undesirable or even ridiculed within certain male peer circles. Boys who excelled in class or showed dedication to their studies were occasionally teased or isolated, pushing them to downplay their academic abilities to fit in.

> *"There is a kind of culture among some boys where doing well in school makes you different, and different is not always safe.*
>
> *– Low-performing Grade 8 male student in Mondul Kiri*

This social dynamic was particularly pronounced in environments where peer groups valued leisure, entertainment or street-based social activities more than academic success. Participants described how boys were drawn into peer networks that prioritized informal sports, gambling or hanging out at internet cafés, often at the cost of attending school or completing assignments. These groups reinforced behaviours that normalized absenteeism and undermined educational goals. As one male head teacher in Battambang remarked,

> *"When the boys saw their friends skipping school and still having fun, they began to question the value of staying in the classroom.*

Materialism and status are also interwoven into peer influence. Some respondents reported that boys often felt pressure to acquire and display fashionable clothing, gadgets or other consumer items to assert social belonging. In cases where families could not afford these items, boys were more likely to seek quick ways to earn income, including informal work, which further detracted from their focus on school.

> *"They wanted to look good in front of their friends, and sometimes that means choosing work over class,' a male school director in Pursat noted.*

Though peer influence is not inherently negative, the accounts gathered in this study suggest that when boys are embedded in peer groups that devalue academic effort or promote alternative priorities, the effect on educational engagement can be profound. For some, peer relationships provided more validation and identity than the school environment, making disengagement a more socially rewarding choice than academic persistence.

Advance version

Mesosystem

Moving beyond the immediate micro-level, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model highlights the mesosystem, which encompasses the interactions and connections between different microsystems in an individual's life. In the context of boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia, the mesosystem primarily involves the relationships between the school and the community, as well as the interactions within the school environment itself. The quality and nature of these connections and interactions significantly influence a boy's engagement and persistence in education.

School level

The school environment emerged as a significant site influencing boys' educational engagement. Across contexts, respondents consistently pointed to various school-level factors that contribute to boys' disengagement from lower secondary education, with teacher-related issues most frequently cited.

Teacher quality and engagement gaps

Teacher-related challenges emerged as one of the most frequently cited barriers to boys' engagement in education, particularly in rural Cambodian contexts. A chronic shortage of qualified teachers, especially in remote areas, was consistently raised across school- and provincial-level interviews. This shortage often leads to overcrowded classrooms, increased workload for existing teachers, and the hiring of underqualified or untrained individuals. Respondents described how this affected classroom dynamics and students' learning experiences, particularly for boys who were already struggling. One male school director in Mondul Kiri shared:

> *"Our class normally has over 60 students, and not enough trained teachers. The boys in the back rows do not pay attention or cannot hear well. They feel neglected.*

Such structural deficiencies hinder effective teaching and disproportionately affect boys, particularly those who already struggle with motivation or concentration. This effect may be more pronounced for boys due to gendered behavioural expectations and classroom dynamics; studies in Cambodia and similar contexts have shown that boys are more likely to be disciplined for disruptive behaviour and disengage when lessons are not interactive or practically oriented. Research has also shown that high pupil/teacher ratios and under-resourced classrooms reduce opportunities for individualized support and are linked to increased dropout rates (Glewwe et al., 2020; McAleavy et al., 2018; OECD, 2025). In the absence of skilled teachers who can employ differentiated instruction and classroom management strategies, these challenges are exacerbated for boys, leading to higher rates of disengagement and dropout.

Participants also expressed concern over the quality of instruction and the lack of engaging pedagogical methods. Boys were described as particularly vulnerable to disengagement when teaching was passive or relied too much on rote learning. A male DoE officer explained:

> *"Some of our boys were very active, but they got bored easily. If the lesson is only listening and recording lessons from the whiteboard, they switch off.*

This issue was compounded by reports of teacher absenteeism and being 'lightning bugs' – a term used by respondents to describe teachers holding multiple jobs due to low salaries. When teachers are juggling multiple jobs to make ends meet, their lesson preparations and overall classroom effectiveness may suffer, potentially affecting boys who need additional support or a more engaging learning experience.

> *"When teachers miss classes regularly, students lose faith. Especially boys, they started thinking and coming to tell us, 'If the teacher does not care, why should I?'.*
>
> *– Mother of a Grade 8 male student in Pursat province*

Other research has also shown that teacher absenteeism significantly weakens student engagement and academic outcomes (Asevedo, 2020; Suryahadi and Sambodho, 2013; Carrizosa and De Witte, 2024).

Other concerns included unequal distribution of workload among teachers and a lack of emotional connections between teachers and students. Participants emphasized the importance of strong teacher–student relationships in fostering motivation and resilience. Boys were more likely to become disengaged when these relationships were absent or strained. '*Boys need encouragement,*' said one female NGO staff. '*If teachers only scold or ignore them, they shut down or just skip that particular class.*' Positive teacher–student relationships are central to fostering resilience and engagement, especially for students at risk of dropout (Pianta et al., 2012).

Pre-publication version

School infrastructure and environment

The condition of school facilities was also seen as a major barrier. Across interviews and FGDs, participants frequently cited the poor condition of school infrastructure, especially in rural Cambodian schools, as detrimental to boys' motivation and concentration. Reports highlighted issues such as overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation, insufficient lighting, damaged facilities and a shortage of basic learning materials such as textbooks, teaching aids and sports equipment.

> *"Sometimes it was too hot or noisy in class. I could not focus or listen to the teacher clearly. I would rather be outside playing with my friends or going home helping my father.*
>
> *– Grade 7 male student in Tboung Khmum*

These findings align with broader research that links inadequate school infrastructure to diminished student performance, low attendance and eventual disengagement, particularly among disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2021a; Yangambi, 2023).

Geographical accessibility further complicated attendance, especially in rural communities. Several respondents pointed out that many secondary schools are located far from villages, requiring long and costly commutes. For families lacking transportation or experiencing economic hardship, these distances present both logistical and financial barriers. In such contexts, boys are often expected to weigh the opportunity cost of education against immediate household needs.

> *"Some of my male friends just stopped coming to school. It was too far, and they did not have a motorbike. Their families also said it is better for them to work in their family farm than spend hours traveling every day.*
>
> *– Grade 9 male student in Mondul Kiri*

Research confirms that distance to school is a critical determinant of dropout risk, particularly for boys in agrarian communities who may be drawn into labour to support family livelihoods (Hirakawa and Taniguchi, 2021; South et al., 2007). In the Cambodian context, where infrastructure and transportation remain unevenly distributed, these factors disproportionately affect rural and marginalized populations.

Support services and policies

School-level strategies to prevent and reduce early school dropout were reported in all five provinces studied. These include monthly monitoring of attendance, remedial classes, re-examinations, letters and calls to parents, home visits, scholarships and other forms of material or financial support. However, according to school-level participants' and male students' parents' observations, these strategies were often implemented more rigorously for female students.

> *"When a girl cannot regularly attend school, teachers often do a home visit with her parents to understand the root causes and provided financial support, scholarships or even transportation. For boys, the school might have assumed they are working or just not interested.*
>
> *– Father of a Grade 7 male student who dropped out of school in Mondul Kiri*

This reflects underlying assumptions about risk and resilience. Girls were viewed as more vulnerable to dropping out due to early marriage, safety concerns or domestic responsibilities, while boys were seen as more autonomous or responsible for earning income. As a male school director in Tboung Khmum put it, '*We are told that the programme that NGOs support is mainly focused on girls. Boys are left alone unless they cause trouble.*' This aligns with broader critiques that interventions disproportionately target girls while overlooking the unique challenges boys face, including mental health, peer pressure and economic responsibilities.

The absence of crucial support services like counselling and career guidance can leave boys feeling lost and unsupported in navigating their academic and future pathways.

> *"Some of our boys felt lost. They did not know why they were studying or what comes next. But there was no one to guide them.*
>
> *– MoEYS official*

The lack of accurate school-level data and high rates of student transfers between schools were seen as additional factors that disrupted continuity and hindered targeted interventions. Participants at the school, subnational and NGO levels highlighted issues with the accuracy of student data, particularly in tracking students who transferred or dropped out. This made it difficult for schools to identify patterns of disengagement early, especially among boys because existing data systems tend to track girls more explicitly due to gender equity

Advance version

priorities. As a result, boys' dropout or transfer is often only visible indirectly, for example by calculating total enrolment minus the number of girls. A female head teacher in Tboung Khmum observed,

> *"We do not always know why the boys leave or where they go. Our database does not capture these details well.*

Private tutoring and the reinforcement of educational inequities

Students and NGO and development partner stakeholders identified private tutoring as a critical yet contested feature of the education landscape. Many students acknowledged that private tutoring provided additional academic support, particularly in preparing for monthly and year-end exams. Students reported that tutors offered more in-depth explanations, extra practice exercises and content aligned with assessments. As one Grade 9 male student in Battambang explained:

> *"In class, we just listen and write. But in private tutoring classes, teachers show us different step-by-step strategies to solve learning exercises. I have also noticed that the material in the private tutoring classes is similar to what appeared during our class exams. So, taking private tutoring classes can help us to better prepare for the exam and can get us good scores.*

However, the benefits of tutoring were not equally accessible. Boys from low-income households often lacked the financial means to participate in these sessions, which were reported to cost up to US$2 per subject per hour. For families engaged in subsistence farming or informal labour, this expense was prohibitive. A female NGO programme officer in Phnom Penh shared,

> *"If a family cannot pay for tutoring, the boy falls behind, feels embarrassed and then stops trying.*

These sentiments were echoed by parents, who described a widening achievement gap between students who could afford private tuition and those who could not.

The dependence on private tutoring has been linked to broader concerns about the quality and inclusiveness of Cambodia's public education system. Research suggests that when supplementary tutoring becomes a de facto requirement for academic success, it reinforces socioeconomic inequalities and undermines public trust in formal schooling (Brehm and Silova, 2014; UNESCO IIEP, 2007; Zhang and Bray, 2020). Moreover, private tutoring may create a two-tiered system, where learning outcomes are increasingly determined by household wealth rather than by classroom instruction. This dynamic can contribute to disengagement among boys who experience academic failure, social exclusion or feelings of inferiority within a stratified learning environment.

School climate and safety

In some provinces, respondents described how experiences or fears of bullying and discrimination affected boys' engagement with school. Students, parents and teachers reported that boys who felt targeted by bullying and discrimination due to poverty, academic struggles, ethnicity or perceived differences in behaviour were more likely to disengage. A Grade 8 male student in Pursat shared:

> *"Some boys got teased every day because they wore old uniforms or were slow to answer in class. After a while, they just stopped coming. There were also some gangster groups from other schools. Me and my friends also felt worried and scared every time we travelled home. We tried to cover our faces and clothes so that they did not recognize us as men and target us for bullying or hitting us without any reason.*

In several cases, bullying was described as persistent and unaddressed, leading to absenteeism and social withdrawal. Teachers and school directors acknowledged that while some mechanisms were in place to report incidents, enforcement was inconsistent, and not all students trusted the system.

> *"There are rules against bullying, but the boys did not always report it. They thought it would make things worse.*
>
> *– Male Grade 9 head teacher in Kampong Speu*

This issue was particularly noted among boys from ethnic minority backgrounds and low-income families. One male school director in Mondul Kiri observed that Bunong boys were sometimes excluded from peer groups or mocked for their accent and clothing. These experiences contributed to a reduced sense of belonging, which research has linked to increased risk of early school leaving and academic disengagement (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Evidence from global studies confirms that bullying and discrimination create unsafe learning environments

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and can impair students' psychological well-being, school attachment and academic performance. Boys, who may be socialized to suppress vulnerability, may not always articulate their distress but may instead withdraw from school or engage in disruptive behaviour as a coping response (UNESCO, 2022a).

Academic demands and transition challenges

The sudden increase in the number of study subjects when entering lower secondary school can be overwhelming for some boys, particularly those who are already struggling academically or have difficulty adapting to new learning environments. This increased academic load can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed and less likely to succeed, contributing to their disengagement. Teachers described how boys who had previously managed in primary school began to fall behind rapidly in Grade 7:

> *"We introduced many subjects all at once: physics, biology, history. Some boys did not understand what was going on, and they were not prepared for the irregular full-day schedules or occasional extended school hours. These changes, which differ from the consistent half-day structure in earlier grades, could be confusing or disruptive. As a result, some boys lost motivation, and they gave up.*
>
> *– Male science head teacher in Pursat*

Research supports these observations, showing that academic overload and low preparedness can negatively affect students' motivation and engagement, particularly during transition years (Anderson et al., 2000; Bagnall and Jindal-Snape, 2023). The increased subject specialization in lower secondary education requires not only cognitive adjustment but also greater autonomy, which may disadvantage students, often boys, who enter with weaker study skills or without consistent parental involvement. Without tailored support or scaffolding during this transition, these students are more likely to experience academic failure, leading to withdrawal or early dropout.

Community-level

The broader community context in which schools operate emerged as a key influence on boys' educational trajectories. Participants frequently pointed to how the norms, resources and opportunities present within the community shaped boys' motivation, access and ability to remain engaged in school. In many of the communities represented in this study, systemic challenges at the mesosystem level compounded school-level barriers, posing further difficulties for boys' engagement in formal education.

Limited community involvement in education

A recurring theme across interviews with all stakeholder groups was the limited community engagement in promoting education. In several study sites, respondents described how schooling was not integrated into broader local development priorities. Education was often seen as the exclusive domain of the household or the state, rather than a collective responsibility. One DoE officer in Battambang remarked:

> *"People in the village rarely came to attend school meetings. They worried more about roads and farming. Education felt like a private matter or the sole responsibility of the government, not something we solved together.*

This broader neglect translated into minimal encouragement for boys to persist in school, particularly when their academic performance began slipping or they expressed doubts about its relevance. Community attitudes often reinforced the idea that school attendance was optional or secondary to immediate livelihood needs. A father in Tboung Khmum shared,

> *"When a boy wanted to stop studying, no one stopped him. They just said, "Go find work. It is okay to drop out. School is not for everyone.*

These narratives suggest that in the absence of strong community norms valuing education, boys at risk of disengagement receive few interventions or messages encouraging persistence.

Studies in similar contexts have shown that collective community support, including active parent–teacher associations, local education committees and culturally grounded outreach programmes, can significantly influence learners' retention and performance (Epstein, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2021). In Cambodia, however, community involvement in school governance and student support remains uneven, particularly in rural and marginalized areas (Keo, 2010; Neak and Suwithida, 2021; Nelson-Peterman et al., 2023). Without this support, vulnerable students – especially boys – may internalize local narratives that deprioritize formal education, further weakening their motivation to remain in school.

Competing economic opportunities

Participants also highlighted how the availability of alternative income-generating activities within the

community – such as construction, rubber tapping and lifting things or working in factories or air conditioning and motorbike repair – presented an attractive alternative to school, especially for boys from economically constrained households. These opportunities offered immediate financial returns that were perceived as more tangible and attainable than the uncertain long-term benefits of education. While Cambodia's Labor Law sets the minimum working age at 15 and prohibits hazardous work for those under 18, participants noted that enforcement is often weak in rural areas. As a result, underage boys are frequently found engaging in informal or hazardous labour with little oversight.

A mother of a Grade 8 male student in Kampong Speu explained,

> *"My son saw his cousin earning money from working at the solar panel manufacturing factory. It looks so fun, and [he] could earn a lot. He told me, "Why should I study when I can already help the family?"*

Similarly, some teachers and school directors noted,

> *"Some boys think school is a waste of time when they can already earn US$5 a day. That is real money for them.' When reinforced by household financial pressures, these economic pull factors often lead boys to make early exits from formal education.*

Gender norms and cultural expectations

Community-level gender norms also played a decisive role in shaping boys' attitudes towards school. Across multiple interviews, participants described how deeply entrenched beliefs around masculinity and productivity influenced boys' schooling decisions. Boys were frequently expected to demonstrate independence, toughness and the ability to contribute economically from a young age. These expectations, often socially reinforced, led to internal and external pressures that conflicted with the demands of formal schooling. One PoE officer remarked:

> *"People here said boys should not rely on their parents too long. They must be strong, help in the field or find work. If a neighbouring boy of a similar age can start earning at a young age, the other parents or the other boys would start to feel pressure and be convinced to drop out of school and started doing the same job. Otherwise, people would start talking and comparing.*

These community expectations created social pressure for boys to prioritize work and household duties over academic performance, reinforcing a cycle of early disengagement. This finding aligns with research on gendered socialization in Southeast Asia, where masculinity is often associated with labour and financial responsibility, especially in agrarian contexts (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2012). In Cambodia, these expectations can intersect with poverty, rural livelihoods and under-resourced schools to intensify disengagement risks for boys (Berkvens, 2017; Scandurra et al., 2017). As long as prevailing gender norms continue to equate educational perseverance with dependency or weakness, boys may be less likely to persist in school despite their own aspirations or capabilities.

Structural barriers and resource gaps

Beyond norms and economic opportunities, structural limitations in community infrastructure and services indirectly shaped boys' school attendance and performance. Participants pointed to poor access to healthcare, inadequate transportation networks, particularly in rural and remote areas, and a lack of localized educational information as significant barriers.

A male school director in Mondul Kiri explained, '*Some boys missed school for a week because there was no clinic nearby. If they got sick, it became serious quickly.*' Similarly, long travel distances, exacerbated by unreliable transportation, discouraged daily attendance. '*It took some of our boys over an hour to get to school. If their bike breaks or there is rain, they stay home,*' reported a female head teacher in Mondul Kiri.

In some cases, respondents described how families and boys were unaware of scholarships, support programmes or pathways beyond secondary education. A Grade 9 teacher recalled, '*Many boys did not even know that they could apply for a vocational school. They thought school ends at Grade 9.*' This lack of information limited boys' sense of purpose and direction within the education system.

Collectively, these mesosystem-level challenges underscore how school and community environments, while designed to support learning, can unintentionally reproduce or exacerbate inequalities. The intersection of teacher quality, school infrastructure and policy implementation with broader socioeconomic constraints limits the capacity of the educational system to retain boys at the lower secondary level. These findings reinforce the need for school reforms that respond to context and gender, including teacher training, equitable resource distribution, improved student services, and interventions that explicitly address the differentiated needs of boys and girls within their schooling contexts.

Macrosystem

The outermost layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is the macrosystem, which encompasses the overarching cultural values, beliefs, laws and societal structures that influence the other levels. In the Cambodian context, participants in this study consistently emphasized that entrenched gender norms and structural inequalities are significant contributors to boys' disengagement from lower secondary education. These societal-level forces do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically with micro- and mesosystem conditions to create a complex ecosystem in which boys' educational participation is shaped.

Gender norms and expectations

A central theme that emerged from the data was the differentiated gender expectations placed on boys and girls. Almost all participants observed that girls are socially perceived as being more obedient, compliant and respectful of both parents and teachers. They are also often seen as more committed to their studies and diligent in their academic pursuits. A male Grade 8 teacher in Battambang reflected:

> *"Girls will usually sit in the front, do their homework, and listen to the teacher's explanation attentively. Boys, on the other hand, are often at the back, talking or playing. It is not that they cannot learn – it is just not expected of them in the same way.*

Although girls may have fewer opportunities to engage in physical or informal labour, this very constraint allows them to stay longer in school and maintain stronger educational trajectories. Conversely, boys are often framed through a more permissive and problematic gender lens. They are frequently described as playful, easily distracted and less disciplined, especially in academic settings. Participants noted that boys are less likely to sit quietly in class, focus on lessons or prioritize homework. As a male school director in Pursat observed:

> *"Many boys did not like being told what to do. They wanted to move around, talk, challenge things. In our system, that gets punished, and then they feel school is not for them.*

While influenced by personality and developmental factors, these behavioural tendencies are reinforced by social narratives that valorize boys' physical strength, independence and ability to contribute economically. As a result, boys are often expected to become breadwinners for their families, especially in the context of poverty. This societal pressure encourages boys to enter the labour market prematurely, often at the expense of their schooling. Such dynamics are consistent with broader gendered labour expectations in Southeast Asia, where boys are socialized into economic responsibility early, particularly in rural and low-income households (Inui et al., 2025).

State and society

Interviews across provinces revealed that structural barriers significantly contribute to boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia. Poor infrastructure, including inadequate roads, sanitation and transportation, remains a critical issue, especially in remote areas. These conditions increase the perceived risks and burdens of schooling, leading families to favour boys' economic contributions over continued education. As one school director in Mondul Kiri explained, '*When the road was flooded or damaged, families kept boys at home to help on the farm instead of sending them to school.*'

Moreover, state-level policies such as the auto-promotion policy,[1] which advances students to the next grade regardless of learning performance, were criticised by participants for diminishing the perceived value of academic effort. For boys who already struggle with motivation or foundational skills, this policy can reinforce disengagement by promoting a sense of futility or a disconnection from their academic progress. While intended to support educational equity, such policies can inadvertently lower accountability and reduce the quality of learning, particularly for male students who are less likely to self-regulate or seek remedial help (UNESCO, 2022a).

Another notable macrosystemic trend is the increasing prioritization of girls in national education policies and programmes, driven by global gender equity commitments. While this focus has yielded positive outcomes in girls' enrolment and retention, it has also created a perception of neglect among boys, who now receive fewer targeted interventions despite their growing disengagement. In this context, boys can fall through the cracks of a gendered policy agenda that no longer fully reflects their needs.

Finally, participants cited weak law enforcement and broader governance challenges as systemic barriers to educational continuity. Laws mandating compulsory education or prohibiting child labour are often poorly

1 During the COVID-19 pandemic, an automatic promotion policy was widely implemented in Cambodian secondary schools. Under this policy, students who met basic criteria based on formative assessments were promoted to the next grade without sitting for final exams (UNICEF, 2024).

implemented or monitored, particularly in rural areas. This legal invisibility leaves boys unprotected against pressures to drop out for work. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded these issues, disrupting schooling for millions of students and exacerbating existing inequalities. While recent data show that girls experienced a disproportionate rise in primary-level dropout during COVID-19, evidence from lower secondary education depicted that boys were more likely than girls to disengage during school closures, as their household roles shifted towards economic support and their learning routines were less structured or supervised (UNESCO, 2021b).

The macrosystem plays a fundamental role in shaping the context of boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia. Deeply ingrained gender norms and societal expectations, coupled with structural factors such as poor infrastructure and policy limitations, create significant challenges. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort at the societal and policy levels to challenge harmful norms, improve access and quality of education, and ensure equitable support for all students. By creating a more supportive and enabling macrosystem, Cambodia can work towards ensuring that more boys remain engaged in and benefit from lower secondary education and transition into upper secondary education and beyond.

Student-centred perspectives on educational disengagement

In addition to the student voices presented throughout the preceding microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem analyses, this section draws on two participatory exercises conducted with all students' groups: Social Network Mapping and A Day in a Student's Life. These tools were designed to complement the focus group discussions by offering visual and reflective insights into students' daily routines and the social relationships that shape their attitudes towards education. The SNM activity helped identify key actors in boys' social environments, such as family members, peers and teachers, and their influence on boys' learning and aspirations. The Day in a Student's Life exercise enabled students to map their daily time use, revealing how different groups (high-performing, low-performing and boys who dropped out) balanced or struggled with study time, work, rest and distractions. Together, these exercises enrich the ecological analysis by offering a more intimate and contextually grounded understanding of how boys experience education in practice.

Among high-performing students (both boys and girls), the most prominently cited influences on educational engagement and performance were individual-level and family-level factors. They attributed their success to a combination of personal effort, structured study habits and strong familial support. These students reported maintaining daily or weekly study routines, which included dedicated time for lesson review, participation in group or self-study, and engagement in supplementary classes. Even when contributing to household responsibilities, they demonstrated an ability to balance domestic tasks with educational commitments. These behaviours align with the literature on self-regulated learning, which suggests that successful learners exhibit goal setting, time management and metacognitive awareness (Zimmerman, 2002). Moreover, they reflected a high degree of intrinsic motivation, seeing education as a worthwhile investment for future aspirations, which is often supported by family encouragement and monitoring (Fan and Chen, 2001).

While the study focused primarily on boys, girls in the focus group discussions revealed important peer insights into boys' academic engagement. Many girls perceived a clear behavioural divide between boys who were high-performing and those who were disengaged. High-performing boys were described as 'composed, quiet and serious', 'always doing homework' and 'creating and helping others in group work'. In contrast, girls described disengaged boys as 'playing games too much', 'always skipping class' and 'just talking, playing around a lot, not listening to teachers'. Girls frequently noted that low-performing boys tended to form separate social groups within the classroom, sitting together at the back or in corners and disengaging from both lessons and peer interaction. As one Grade 8 high-performing female student in Pursat put it:

> *"They only sat with each other [low-performing boys with other low-performing boys]. If the teacher moved them, they just went back again on another day or class. We tried to scold them to pay attention, but it did not work. Most girls did not want to sit near them too.*

Advance version

These perspectives illustrate a form of social distancing, both self-selected by boys and subtly reinforced by others, which isolates disengaged students from more motivated peers and reduces positive academic influences. The girls' observations also highlight classroom-level gender dynamics and limited peer accountability, particularly when efforts to encourage focus are met with resistance or indifference. Girls also noted that some boys avoided asking for help or participating in class discussions due to pressure to appear independent or 'tough'. Another high-performing girl from the same school and class observed:

> *"Even when they did not understand, boys did not want to show they are weak. Teachers often got angry at boys more because they made noise or did not do homework, but boys just laughed or did not care much about scoring.*

These insights from girls align with patterns shared by boys themselves and help validate the dual pathways of resilience and disengagement in boys' education trajectories.

Analysis of activities of low-performing male students demonstrated less structured and consistent approaches to studying. Although they acknowledged the importance of education, their daily routines revealed a lack of dedicated academic time. Many boys reported spending most of their time throughout the week resting at home, socializing in the fields or villages with friends, playing games or engaging on social media. This group was less likely to engage in self-study or seek academic support and rarely attended extra classes. The 'Day in a Student's Life' activity made this discrepancy especially visible, pointing to the absence of routines that prioritize academic engagement. These findings underscore the role of poor study habits and time management as critical barriers to educational progress, particularly among low-performing boys. Research has shown that ineffective use of time and lack of academic discipline are key predictors of school disengagement and poor academic performance (Credé and Kuncel, 2008; Nonis and Hudson, 2010). The weak academic routines of this group also made them more vulnerable to negative peer influences and distractions, reinforcing a cycle of low performance and low motivation.

The perspectives of boys who had dropped out of school entirely revealed yet another pattern in the salience of ecological factors. For these boys, family-related issues were consistently reported as the primary factor influencing disengagement, followed by school and peer dynamics, with individual factors seen as less significant or beyond their control. Many described leaving school due to economic pressures, such as the need to earn an income, support siblings or respond to household crises like illness or debt. These findings align with existing literature on economic vulnerability as a primary driver of early school leaving in low-income contexts (Rolleston et al., 2013).

Some boys who had dropped out noted that, although they struggled academically, it was ultimately the lack of family support and the school's failure to respond to their challenges that led them to leave school. This reflects critiques of school systems that fail to offer adequate re-engagement pathways or targeted support for at-risk students (De Witte et al., 2013; Wang and Fredricks, 2014). Although boys often identified family-related issues, especially poverty, domestic instability and economic pressure, as the primary reason for leaving school, they also showed minimal evidence of having had structured study habits before dropping out.

Like low-performing students, boys who had dropped out reported spending much of their time engaging in informal labour, socializing or using digital devices, with little attention to academic tasks. These boys did not demonstrate proactive help-seeking or re-engagement strategies when facing difficulties in school, suggesting that the absence of study habits and daily academic routines contributed to their eventual disengagement. This aligns with the argument that disengagement is often a gradual process, beginning with reduced participation in academic behaviours before culminating in school leaving (Finn, 1989).

In summary, the analysis of student perspectives and routines illustrates that engagement in education is deeply linked to the development of academic habits and self-regulation, which are nurtured differently across the ecological contexts experienced by students. High-performing students tend to be supported by families who encourage academic discipline, and they internalize positive academic behaviours. In contrast, boys with low-performance and who had already dropped out often lack this support structure, and their daily routines reflect a broader disengagement from academic life. This emphasizes the need for differentiated intervention strategies that address structural barriers and the cultivation of daily habits and academic discipline, particularly for boys at risk of disengagement.

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Triangulation of findings

Understanding boys' disengagement from education requires analysing the interplay between the different system levels (micro, meso and macro) as well as the multiple intersecting and complex issues within and across these different levels. This section triangulates the qualitative evidence presented in Sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.4 with data drawn from the Cambodia Socio-Economic Surveys for 2019 to 2021. Probit regression analysis was conducted (see **Annex 1**) to identify factors associated with school dropout, which in this study is used as a measurable proxy for educational disengagement. While dropout represents the most visible outcome, it is treated here as part of the broader disengagement spectrum already evidenced qualitatively.

All regression coefficients reported below are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ unless otherwise noted. For clarity, results significant at the 1 percent level are simply referred to as 'statistically significant' throughout this document. By combining regression results with field-based insights, this section highlights seven interrelated determinants of boys' disengagement.

The analysis shows that boys' disengagement from education is shaped by overlapping risks at individual, household, and structural levels. Being male, older, or from a disadvantaged household significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out. Disability and living in rural areas further amplify this risk, while engagement in paid work is closely linked to early school leaving. Conversely, having educated parents greatly reduces the chance of disengagement. Minority ethnic groups also face compounded challenges, particularly due to language barriers and limited access to schooling. The following subsections explore these determinants in greater detail.

Gender and age dynamics

Consistently across both qualitative and quantitative evidence, gender and age emerge as central dimensions in understanding educational outcomes. Regression results show that being male is significantly associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out compared to being female ($\beta = 0.024$, $p < 0.01$). This aligns with the qualitative insights from this study, where boys were described as more likely to lack study routines, engage in informal employment and exhibit playful, risk-taking behaviours that are not conducive to sustained academic engagement.

Age is also a strong dropout determinant: students aged 15 to 17 are significantly more disengaged ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.01$), followed by those aged 12 to 14 ($\beta = 0.073$, $p < 0.01$), relative to the 6 to 11 age group. This progression mirrors what participants reported about increased risk of dropout during adolescence, when boys are more likely to be pulled into economic activities and face higher academic demands, including more subjects and more homework.

These patterns resonate with existing studies highlighting adolescent boys' greater vulnerability to disengagement due to identity exploration, the perceived irrelevance of schooling and pressure to contribute economically (Rolleston et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2022a).

Disability

The regression results further reveal that having a disability significantly increases the risk of disengagement for both genders, but especially for boys ($\beta = 0.156$, $p < 0.01$ for males). This reflects qualitative findings noting the limited measures to support inclusion in schools and poor implementation of the inclusive education policy, including lack of accessible infrastructure and teacher training on inclusive pedagogies.

Employment

Engagement in paid work significantly increases the probability of disengagement ($\beta = 0.130$, $p < 0.01$), while unpaid work shows a negative association ($\beta = -0.017$, $p < 0.01$). This confirms field-level reports that boys who engage in income-generating activities are more likely to drop out or disengage, particularly when they or their families perceive work as more rewarding or urgent than education. This corresponds to global literature emphasizing that boys, especially in rural or impoverished settings, are often socialized and expected to contribute financially to the household (Bourdillon et al., 2010).

Household characteristics

The analysis also reveals that household size has a positive but modest association with disengagement ($\beta = 0.004$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that resource dilution[2] may play a role. Larger households may struggle to support all children equally, increasing boys' likelihood of being pushed towards income generation. Importantly, students from ID Poor households are significantly more likely to disengage ($\beta = 0.036$, $p < 0.01$), validating

2 Resource dilution is a term used in family systems theory to describe how parental resources, including time, attention and financial resources, are increasingly divided among more children as the number of siblings increases. This can lead to each child receiving fewer individual resources compared to families with fewer children.

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participants' reports that financial constraints remain one of the most significant barriers, despite scholarships and other poverty-targeted programmes in Cambodia.

Education of household head

The household head's education level also shows a strong protective effect: students whose household head has completed Grade 12 or higher are significantly less likely to disengage from education ($\beta = -0.086$, $p < 0.01$), affirming that parental education strongly shapes aspirations, support and resource allocation (Davis-Kean, 2005). This supports qualitative findings where high-performing boys often cited that motivated and educated parents were key to their study habits and school persistence.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity-based differences show that students from ethnic minorities groups are significantly more likely to be disengaged from education ($\beta = -0.030$, $p < 0.05$) than Khmer or other ethnic groups students, consistent with field observations that minority communities face language barriers, limited access to services and weaker parental support structures. Conversely, students from Chinese, Vietnamese and other ethnic backgrounds show a positive engagement coefficient ($\beta = 0.082$, $p < 0.05$), which may reflect specific cultural or socioeconomic advantages.

Urban–rural divide

Boys living in rural areas are more likely to disengage from school compared to those in urban areas. While urban living shows a slight overall link to lower dropout rates ($\beta = -0.017$, $p < 0.01$), this effect is strongest for boys and not seen in girls ($\beta = -0.027$, $p < 0.01$). This supports the nuanced qualitative findings where rural boys face compounded challenges, longer distances to school, fewer extracurricular activities and weaker enforcement of school policies, making them more likely to drop out.

Policy and programmatic interventions

This section presents a synthesis of policy and programmatic interventions in Cambodia that aim to prevent or respond to boys' disengagement from lower secondary education. Drawing on qualitative findings and a scoping review of national policies and local practices, the analysis assesses the contextual effectiveness of these efforts and discusses implications for future programming. While multiple initiatives support education equity, relatively few explicitly target the unique disengagement trajectories of boys. Please refer to **Annex 2** for a summary of the scoping review of interventions.

Policy contributions

Cambodia has implemented a range of policies and programmes that, while not exclusively focused on boys' disengagement, have the potential for both preventing dropout and for re-engaging boys in education. These include a mix of national education frameworks and operational-level programmes that reflect commitments to inclusive and equitable learning for all students.

Strategic policy frameworks

The Cambodian government has adopted a wide range of policies and strategies over the past decade that contribute to education equity and retention. These include the Education Strategic Plans – ESPs (2014–2018, 2019–2023 and 2024–2028), the Child-Friendly School Policy (2007) aimed at ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment, the Inclusive Education Policy (2018) intended to cater to diverse learning needs, the National Policy on Youth Development (2011) which broadly addresses youth development, the Multilingual Education National Action Plan (2015–2018) to support marginalized learners and to further demonstrate commitments to safe, relevant and culturally responsive education systems, the Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan (2021–2025), the Policy on School Feeding (2024–2035), the Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019) and the National Policy on Child Protection System (2019–2029). Together, these frameworks demonstrate a consistent political commitment to equity, access and lifelong learning.

- **Education Strategic Plans (ESPs):** The ESPs set the overall direction for Cambodia's education sector. Their focus is on expanding equitable access to education, improving quality and learning outcomes, and strengthening governance and accountability. So far it has progressively recognized high dropout rates at the lower secondary level, particularly among poor and rural students, many of whom are boys.

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Highlighted achievements include reductions in national dropout averages, expansion of Community Learning Centres, provision of scholarships, and the rollout of new curricula integrating ICT, health and life skills. However, boys' dropout remains less visible in official monitoring, with scholarship schemes disproportionately benefiting girls. For example, between 2017 and 2018, at the lower secondary level, 71,669 students received scholarships, 60 percent of who were girls. Similar trends were seen after this period. The latest ESP (2024–2028) acknowledges persistent dropout (15.5 percent in 2024) and highlights flexible pathways such as the Basic Education Equivalency Program (BEEP). However, structural barriers, such as curriculum overload, teacher capacity gaps, weak parental engagement and migration pressures from climate change, continue to drive boys out of school.

- **Child protection and lifelong learning policies:** The National Policy on Child Protection System establishes a multisectoral framework to safeguard children from abuse, exploitation and neglect. It emphasizes prevention, early identification, referrals and responsive services across the education, social welfare, health and justice sectors. For education, its relevance lies in recognizing school dropout as a child protection concern and promoting community- and school-based mechanisms to keep children, especially those from vulnerable groups, safe and engaged in learning. The Policy on Lifelong Learning aims to ensure that all Cambodians have access to continuous learning opportunities through formal, non-formal and informal pathways. It prioritizes literacy, equivalency education, Community Learning Centres, skills development and the recognition of prior learning. For out-of-school youth, particularly boys, it provides flexible second-chance opportunities to re-engage with education or transition into vocational and technical training. Both policies are promising for re-engagement, but they remain underfunded, unevenly implemented and rarely tailored to boys' circumstances such as migration, child labour or social stigma associated with returning to school.
- **Inclusive and gender policies:** These frameworks promote equity and the elimination of barriers to education for disadvantaged groups. The Inclusive Education Policy addresses children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other marginalized populations, while the Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan focuses on narrowing gender gaps, historically prioritizing girls' access and retention. While successful in boosting female participation, these policies pay limited attention to boys' distinct vulnerabilities in education, leaving a gap in gender-responsive approaches.

Operational support policies

Complementing these frameworks, Cambodia has also rolled out operational policies such as:

- **Scholarships, school feeding and transport support**, which reduces financial barriers and improves attendance, though targeting mechanisms tend to privilege girls or the poorest households, overlooking boys engaged in informal work.
- The **Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP)**, a joint initiative of the MoEYS, Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) and UNESCO, provides an alternative pathway for out-of-school youth who have left formal education before completing lower secondary. Delivered through Community Learning Centres and increasingly via online platforms, BEEP allows learners to complete equivalency modules in Khmer, mathematics, science and life skills with certification enabling progression into formal schooling or technical and vocational training. BEEP has successfully piloted blended learning approaches in several provinces, with growing enrolment and certification rates. Its alignment with the Cambodian National Qualifications Framework ensures equivalency recognition. Despite these achievements, awareness and coverage remain limited and stigma sometimes hinders its take-up.
- The **Early Grade Learning Package (EGLP)** led by MoEYS with support from partners such as UNESCO, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), VVOB and UNICEF, is a comprehensive programme to strengthen foundational skills in Khmer literacy and mathematics from Grades 1 to 3. It provides curriculum-aligned teaching and learning materials, scripted lesson plans, professional development for teachers and ongoing coaching. Evaluations show significant improvements in Khmer reading fluency and comprehension, as well as mathematics skills, in schools implementing EGLP. EGLP could potentially address one of the root causes of disengagement later in lower secondary by improving students' literacy and numeracy foundations. However, scaling EGLP nationwide requires substantial teacher training, monitoring and resourcing. Teacher workload and uneven school support can also dilute its effectiveness.

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- The **Early Warning System (EWS) or Early Warning Dropout System** As part of the MoEYS Child-Friendly School Initiative, EWS was designed to identify students at risk of leaving school early and to intervene before dropout occurs. First piloted in 2014 as part of the School Dropout Prevention Pilot (SDPP) funded by USAID, the programme began in 108 lower secondary schools in 6 provinces and has since expanded across the system. Current guidelines building on the pilot lessons and in collaboration with UNICEF and other development partners, advise schools to use existing data, particularly on attendance, academic performance and behaviour, to flag students at risk, while also building school capacity to engage with students and families to address underlying needs. While the EWS represents an important tool for dropout prevention, its design and guidance materials do not explicitly identify boys as a high-risk group. Likewise, no interventions are tailored to the specific disengagement pathways boys often experience. This limits the system's potential effectiveness for addressing gendered patterns of disengagement and suggests the need for more nuanced, gender-responsive applications of EWS in schools.
- The **Student Tracking System (STS)**, developed by MoEYS with UNESCO support under the STEPCam programme, is a new digital platform designed to strengthen the monitoring of student enrolment, attendance, performance and progression. Each student is assigned a unique ID, enabling schools and authorities to track individual learning trajectories across year and education levels. Piloted in Siem Reap from 2020 and now being prepared for wider rollout, including a mobile app for school and community use, the STS represents a major step towards data-driven prevention of dropout. Its potential is particularly relevant for boys, who often disengage gradually through absenteeism or declining performance. However, as with the EWS, the system's effectiveness depends on schools' capacity to analyse data and follow up with at-risk students. Moreover, it does not currently integrate gender-sensitive indicators that could flag boys' specific vulnerabilities.

At the school level, the implementation of these national policies is supported by local practices that aim to engage families and monitor students' well-being. Common school-led efforts include boys' learning clubs, home visits, parent meetings, communication through Telegram groups, and direct letters or calls to parents. Schools also organize technical and vocational education and training (TVET) awareness sessions, establish partnerships with NGOs and development partners, and implement remedial classes, accelerated learning programmes and re-examination opportunities for struggling students. Other notable practices, though often localized or pilot-based, include the creation of student-help-student groups, targeted provision of learning materials for disadvantaged students, limited private tutoring support through NGO or school initiatives, and the enactment of flexible school policies that allow for re-entry or make-up opportunities. However, the reach and consistency of these practices vary considerably across provinces and schools, particularly between urban and rural settings and many remain dependent on the presence of external support or committed local leadership.

For students who have already dropped out, the government offers alternative and equivalency education pathways, such as the complementary re-entry programme, equivalency programme, income generation programmes, basic literacy and numeracy classes, and access to youth development centres, Lifelong Learning Centres and Community Learning Centres (**Table 8**). These programmes aim to provide second-chance learning opportunities and facilitate transitions to formal education, vocational training or the labour market. While promising in intent, the scope and reach of these programmes remain limited, and they often operate in select geographic areas with constrained resources.

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Table 8. Summary of MoEYS key interventions relevant to disengagement from education

Disengagement aspect	MoEYS key interventions
Never attended schools	• Multilingual education (pre-school and primary) • Inclusive education for children with disabilities • Literacy and skills training (Community Learning Centres/Lifelong Learning Centres) • Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP)
At-risk of dropout	• Scholarships • School feeding programme (primary) • Accelerated learning (primary education)
Dropped out	• Non-formal education re-entry programme (primary) • Non-formal education equivalency programme (primary/lower secondary education levels) • Literacy and skills training (Community Learning Centres) • Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP)

Source: Authors.

Despite these extensive policy measures, stakeholders across national, subnational and school levels consistently reported that no specific governmental policy has directly and adequately addressed the issue of boys' disengagement from lower secondary education. While many of the current policies are inclusive in design, they do not explicitly consider the gendered dimensions of disengagement that disproportionately affect boys. While certain aspects of existing initiatives are recognized as positive, such as the adoption of positive teaching methodologies, the use of Telegram groups for parent communication and the establishment of study clubs within schools, significant challenges persist.

Stakeholders identified four major policy-related challenges. First, issues of resource management and utilization persist across the system, including limited resources, inefficient resource management and utilization, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, issues with data and evidence reporting, the absence of clear action plans specifically targeting boys' disengagement, and a limited understanding of the nuances of inclusivity in this context. The second challenge is limited interest and motivation among boys, which may stem from a curriculum perceived as irrelevant, a lack of engaging pedagogical approaches or sociocultural factors influencing boys' aspirations. Third is limited parent and community engagement, often due to socioeconomic constraints, low levels of parental education, or a lack of effective strategies to involve them meaningfully in their sons' education. Fourth, the digital divide exacerbates inequalities in access to educational resources and opportunities, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Programmatic interventions

Development partners, NGOs and CSOs have played a significant role in complementing government efforts to improve education access, retention and quality in Cambodia. While a systematic review of their programmes was beyond the scope of this study, analysis of programmatic interventions identified by study participants reveals that while many initiatives contribute meaningfully to school engagement in general, very few explicitly address the unique disengagement pathways experienced by boys, particularly in lower secondary education. The existing interventions can be grouped into three broad categories: youth-centred interventions, family- and community-centred interventions, and school-based capacity-building interventions.

1. **Youth-centred interventions** directly involve students and aim to address their developmental, psychosocial and practical needs to strengthen their connection to schooling. Initiatives mentioned by study participants enhance life skills, gender awareness, literacy and retention. Other youth-focused approaches included food provision schemes, entrepreneurship training packages, evening classes and the Personal Education Retention Plan, which personalizes student learning trajectories based on individual needs. Efforts to build peer support networks and foster a sense of agency, especially among at-risk boys, were also mentioned by study participants.
2. **Family-and community-centred interventions:** These interventions target students' social environments, particularly families and informal

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support networks that influence education-related decision-making. These include cash transfer programmes, which have been widely shown to reduce financial pressure on poor families and support school retention (Baird et al., 2014). Complementary activities like mother groups, reading camps and school retention teams aim to enhance parental engagement, promote early literacy and facilitate communication between home and school.

3. **School-based capacity-building interventions:** These interventions relate to improving school infrastructure, pedagogy and teacher capacity. They include major initiatives for teachers, and support for learning materials and classroom infrastructure.

Despite the breadth of these programmatic efforts, the stakeholders – Development partners, NGOs, CSOs and school officials – largely agreed that no specific programme has definitively and successfully tackled the complex issue of boys' education disengagement in lower secondary education in Cambodia. Nonetheless, several aspects of ongoing initiatives were perceived by interviewees as positive. These include:

- The use of standardized tests for assessing learning levels
- Performance grouping to tailor instruction
- The provision of school meals to enhance student well-being and attendance
- The availability of re-examination opportunities to provide second chances
- The adoption of gender-responsive pedagogy to create more equitable learning environments
- The implementation of differentiation methods to cater to diverse learning needs
- The application of positive discipline strategies to foster a supportive school climate
- The provision of mentorship opportunities for students.

These elements suggest promising avenues for future programme design and implementation but also require rigorous planning and testing.

Nevertheless, these programmes face considerable challenges in their implementation in order to achieve desired outcomes:

- Participants highlighted limited contributions from the community as hindering the sustainability and contextual relevance of interventions.
- There is a notable lack of targeted interventions for students who have already dropped out, which limits their opportunities for reintegration into education.
- Limited partnerships at the subnational levels can impede effective coordination and resource allocation.
- The scarcity of professional counsellors for students also restricts the availability of crucial socioemotional support.
- Limited school governance competencies can undermine the effective management and implementation of programmes at the school level.
- Issues with data inaccuracy can hinder effective monitoring and evaluation.
- Limited school resources often constrain the scope and quality of programme implementation.
- Teacher workload can impede their capacity to fully engage with new initiatives.
- Low motivation and resistance among some stakeholders and instances of drop-out midway through the programmes.

Across both policy and programmatic levels, the scoping review underscores three overarching points:

- **Strong policy frameworks but weak gender sensitivity for boys:** Cambodia has comprehensive equity and inclusion policies, yet boys' disengagement is rarely a focal point, leaving their specific vulnerabilities (e.g. migration, informal labour, culture and social norms) under-addressed.
- **Promising operational tools with limited uptake:** Mechanisms like scholarships, EWS and BEEP are potentially transformative but remain inconsistently applied, particularly in rural and disadvantaged provinces where boys are most at risk.
- **NGO-led practices are innovative, but sustainability is a concern:** Pilot projects – life skills clubs, buddy systems and personal retention plans – demonstrate promising results for boys' engagement but are unevenly scaled up and insufficiently institutionalized within the public system.

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Contributions by parents, guardians and the community

In addition to state policies and programmatic interventions, the roles played by guardians, parents and community members, though often understated, are critical in shaping boys' engagement with lower secondary education in Cambodia. Across the study sites, participants identified a spectrum of ways through which families and community members contribute to educational engagement, albeit in mostly informal, non-systematic ways. These include emotional encouragement, material and financial support, and engagement, though sporadic, with the school. While such contributions may appear modest compared to formal interventions, they reflect deeply embedded social expectations and the relational dynamics that underpin educational participation, particularly for boys navigating adolescence and increasing socioeconomic pressures.

Guardians and parents who provided emotional support and encouragement were described by students and school staff as playing a stabilizing role in boys' educational journeys. In some cases, even a single family member expressing belief in the value of education helped boys persist through moments of academic or behavioural struggle. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the positive impact of parental warmth and emotional involvement on student motivation and school commitment (Fan and Williams, 2010). Similarly, parents who offered basic but consistent reminders about the importance of schooling, even without extensive involvement in daily learning, were often cited by high-performing boys as key motivators.

In terms of tangible support, families who could afford to purchase study materials, provide basic financial assistance or contribute to transportation and meal costs indirectly buffered boys against dropout risks, particularly in contexts where school-related expenses are still perceived as burdensome (UNICEF, 2019). However, for many low-income families, this type of contribution was inconsistent or absent, particularly when boys were expected to supplement household income through informal labour or farm work. This economic dynamic reflects broader structural constraints that shape educational opportunity, as seen in comparable rural Southeast Asian contexts (Rolleston et al., 2013). Another recurrent form of engagement was attendance at school-organized events, such as parent meetings, home visits and celebrations. While often described as infrequent, such participation was viewed positively by school staff as an opportunity to strengthen communication between schools and homes, especially when paired with school-led outreach through Telegram groups or phone calls. Yet, some participants noted that community engagement remains largely passive, shaped by traditional hierarchies and limited awareness of how to support boys' learning beyond logistical contributions.

However, similar to the policy and programmatic spheres, there is no evidence to suggest that current contributions by parents, guardians and the community have singularly or comprehensively resolved the issue of boys' disengagement from education at the lower secondary level. While the provision of basic necessities and encouragement undoubtedly plays a positive role, several factors limit the overall impact. These limitations often stem from socioeconomic constraints faced by families, including poverty and the need for boys to contribute to household income, which can overshadow the perceived value of continued education (Aikens and Barbarin, 2008). Furthermore, varying levels of parental education and awareness regarding the complexities of educational disengagement can limit their capacity to provide targeted and effective support. Cultural norms and gendered expectations within the community may also inadvertently contribute to boys prioritizing other activities over schooling. The lack of structured mechanisms to actively involve guardians and the community in addressing disengagement beyond basic support is also a challenge. For instance, while attending school gatherings is a positive step, the engagement often remains passive rather than actively contributing to solutions for disengaged students.

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Conclusion and recommendations

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Boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia is a multifaceted challenge that requires comprehensive and nuanced approaches. This study has highlighted the various factors contributing to this phenomenon, ranging from individual and family-related issues to broader societal and systemic influences.

At the individual level, boys face challenges such as poor foundational skills, lack of motivation and distraction by digital devices and sports. Family-related factors, including economic pressures, low parental engagement – especially by fathers, and household instability, further exacerbate the problem. Moreover, negative peer influence and inadequate school environments significantly influence boys' disengagement.

The mesosystem level reveals that school-related factors, such as teacher quality, school infrastructure and support services, are critical in shaping boys' educational experiences. Community-level influences, including limited community involvement in education and competing economic opportunities, also impact boys' engagement.

At the macrosystem level, entrenched harmful gender norms and structural inequalities create significant barriers to boys' educational participation. The study also reveals that these barriers are compounded for certain subgroups, particularly ethnic minority boys, those living in remote rural areas and students with disabilities, due to additional challenges related to language of instruction, access to services, and cultural or geographic disadvantages.

Despite the existence of various policy measures and programmatic interventions, there is limited evidence of targeted and sustained interventions that specifically address boys' disengagement. Most existing initiatives remain fragmented, under-resourced, or subsumed within broader gender equality or dropout prevention programmes, with limited tracking of impacts.

Addressing boys' disengagement from education in Cambodia requires a concerted effort at all levels of the ecological system. By understanding and addressing the underlying causes of this phenomenon, educators, policymakers and communities can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that support gender equality and empower both boys and girls to reach their full potential. Future interventions should strengthen foundational skills, enhance parental and community engagement, improve school infrastructure and teacher quality, and challenge harmful gender norms. By doing so, Cambodia can work towards ensuring that more boys remain engaged in and benefit from lower secondary education.

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Working version

Recommendations

This study highlights the multilayered and interrelated factors contributing to boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts at the student, school, community and system levels. Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen the foundation: Support boys in primary education and the transition to secondary education
• Prioritize early grade literacy and numeracy interventions, particularly targeting students (both boys and girls) who show early signs of education disengagement.
• Implement regular diagnostic assessments to identify and support students with learning gaps.
• Integrate socioemotional learning (SEL) and self-regulation strategies into the primary curriculum to build learning stamina and motivation.
• Introduce structured transition programmes starting in Grade 5 or 6 that gradually familiarize students with the expectations of lower secondary education.
• Organize orientation sessions, peer mentoring and school visits to reduce anxiety and improve adaptation to new academic and social environments.
Put boys on the policy agenda: Recognize emerging gendered needs
• Ensure national policies and education programmes take a more balanced approach to gender equality by explicitly acknowledging boys' growing vulnerabilities in education, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.
• Utilize existing data management systems, such as the Student Tracking System (STS) and School Information System (SIS), to track student learning outcomes, absenteeism and dropout patterns through sex-disaggregated data collection and reporting systems to enable evidence-based and gender-responsive interventions.
• Challenge harmful and restrictive norms of masculinity through gender-transformative teacher training and policy messaging, addressing the association of dropping out with independence or economic responsibility.
Support boys to succeed: Strengthen academic routines and motivation
• Develop targeted interventions for boys with poor academic routines, including free remedial classes or support within public school hours and mentorship by trained peers or community members.
• Offer flexible learning options and academic counselling to students at risk of disengagement, including those facing pressures to work or support their households.
Build inclusive learning spaces that work for boys and girls
• Invest in rural school infrastructure to address overcrowding, poor ventilation and sanitation, and the lack of learning materials. Ensure classrooms support students to focus, particularly for boys who may be sensitive to distractions.
• Tackle teacher-related challenges, including absenteeism and low motivation, through improved recruitment, compensation and ongoing professional development, with a focus on student-centred pedagogy.
• Integrate gender-transformative approaches into curricula and teacher training.
• Encourage strong teacher–student relationships by fostering caring, respectful and supportive classroom interactions, which boys consistently cite as important for their motivation.
• Promote structured physical education and extracurricular opportunities such as inclusive and well-supervised sports, arts and enrichment activities that strengthen boys' sense of belonging, responsibility and motivation to stay in school.

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Address social and emotional barriers
• Introduce school-based counselling and mental health services to support students coping with stress, bullying, family pressure or identity challenges.
• Invest in extracurricular programmes, including physical education and sports, to foster social-emotional development and school connectedness.
• Promote positive masculinities through school and community campaigns that redefine male success beyond economic productivity and toughness. Engage local leaders, youth groups and parents in reshaping community and societal expectations. Establish peer-led support groups or clubs for boys to develop emotional regulation, confidence and positive peer relationships.
Engage fathers, families and communities for boys' education
• Strengthen school–community partnerships to reinforce the value of education and increase local participation in school decision-making. This includes awareness-raising with families about the long-term benefits of education for boys.
• Encourage community-based learning initiatives and positive male role models that show diverse life paths beyond early work or migration.
• Develop communication materials for caregivers that use relatable storytelling and community voices to challenge harmful gender norms. These materials should highlight the value of education for both boys and girls, using a gender-transformative lens that redefines success, care and aspiration for boys and girls. These messages can be disseminated through parent–teacher meetings, local media, village forums and community theatre, drawing from successful gender-transformative education campaigns used in similar low-resource settings.
• Pilot father-focused activities such as 'Fathers for Education' peer groups, father–son learning dialogues, father mentorship networks or skill-sharing sessions at schools. These initiatives build emotional connection, promote supportive masculinities and encourage fathers to see themselves as active partners in their sons' education.
Enforce education laws locally
• Strengthen enforcement of laws on compulsory education and child labour.
• Build the capacity of local education authorities to identify, monitor and respond to disengagement early, through improved school-level data systems and referral mechanisms.
• Address inconsistencies in the implementation of dropout prevention strategies by providing schools with clearer guidelines and resources tailored to both girls and boys.
Expand flexible learning pathways
• Expand access to and improve non-formal and flexible education pathways, including youth development centres, Community Learning Centres, Lifelong Learning Centres, vocational skills training, BEEP and catch-up programmes designed for those who are out of school.
• Promote TVET options that combine learning with earning in a structured way. Ensure these programmes are not perceived as second-tier or last-resort options but are promoted as meaningful alternatives that lead to sustainable livelihoods and further learning.
Advance gender equality for all learners
• Ensure that gender-transformative policies and programmes consider the needs and vulnerabilities of both girls and boys, recognizing that challenges may manifest differently for boys and girls, but that both boys and girls are equally deserving of support.
• Avoid framing interventions as a zero-sum game or competitive by reinforcing a rights-based approach where every learner has the right to equitable support, regardless of gender.
• Conduct gender impact assessments for all new education programmes to identify and mitigate potential unintended consequences, such as boys feeling overlooked or girls being placed under disproportionate pressure to succeed.
• Integrate gender-transformative approaches in curricula, school culture and teacher training that challenge harmful stereotypes of both femininity and masculinity, rather than reinforcing traditional roles or binaries.
• Promote inclusive school environments that encourage mutual respect, cooperation and shared responsibilities between boys and girls in academic, leadership and extracurricular activities while recognizing how peer dynamics can both reinforce and challenge disengagement.

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Annexes

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Annex 1 – Probit regression results (marginal effects) of dropout

Variables	(1) Both sexes	(2) Male	(3])Female
Male	0.024***		
	[0.005]		
Disabilities	0.121***	0.156***	0.092**
	[0.030]	[0.047]	[0.040]
Age group			
Age group (12–14)	0.073***	0.088***	0.059***
	[0.005]	[0.008]	[0.007]
Age group (15–17)	0.364***	0.397***	0.330***
	[0.010]	[0.015]	[0.014]
Employment			
Unpaid work	-0.017***	-0.014*	-0.021***
	[0.006]	[0.008]	[0.008]
Paid work	0.130***	0.078***	0.178***
	[0.022]	[0.029]	[0.033]
Household factors			
Household size	0.004**	0.003	0.004*
	[0.001]	[0.002]	[0.002]
Have ID Poor	0.036***	0.048***	0.024**
	[0.008]	[0.011]	[0.011]
Household head gender (male)	-0.003	-0.001	-0.004
	[0.007]	[0.011]	[0.010]
Household head education			
Primary education	-0.017**	-0.012	-0.022**
	[0.008]	[0.012]	[0.011]
Secondary education	-0.062***	-0.066***	-0.060***
	[0.008]	[0.012]	[0.012]
G12 Certificate and higher	-0.086***	-0.089***	-0.084***
	[0.013]	[0.019]	[0.018]
Ethnicity			
Cham	0.017	-0.023	0.059**
	[0.018]	[0.023]	[0.028]
Local ethnic	-0.030**	-0.033*	-0.025
	[0.013]	[0.019]	[0.018]
Chinese and others	0.082**	0.057	0.118*
	[0.039]	[0.048]	[0.064]
Region			
Urban	-0.017***	-0.027***	-0.006
	[0.006]	[0.009]	[0.008]
Observations	**10,124**	**5,096**	**5,028**
Standard errors in brackets. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1			

Source: Cambodian Socioeconomic Survey 2019. Adapted by the authors.

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Annex 2 – Summary of scoping review of policies and strategic plans

Policies and strategic plans						
No	**Publisher**	**Document title and time**	**Focus and relevance to the study focus**	**Reported relevant achievements**	**Reported relevant challenges**	**Lessons learned and implications for the study**
1	MoEYS	**Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2014–2018**	• Ensuring equitable access for all to education services. • Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning. • Ensuring effective leadership and management of education staff at all levels. • Recognized high dropout and low completion rates at lower secondary, especially among poor and rural boys.	• Dropout at lower secondary decreased from 21.2 percent (2013/14) to 15.4 percent (2017/18) • Growth in technical high schools, improved promotion and positive image of technical education. • Expansion of Community Learning Centres and re-entry programmes. • Increased scholarships for basic education; helped poor families retain girls in school. • New curriculum rolled out across lower secondary level, including ICT, health, life skills. • Expanded youth councils, career orientation, and labour market forums. • Pilot of over 100 model schools. • Increased lower secondary school infrastructure.	• High dropout in rural areas due to family financial burden, poor infrastructure, limited access to teachers and learning materials. • Resource gaps in rural lower secondary schools. • Boys often untracked in non-formal education data while the programmes under-resourced and unevenly available. • Poor boys' dropout is less visible in data; their economic pressure is not prioritized for scholarship. • Dropout related to migration and informal work. • Overloaded curriculum, low teacher capacity to differentiate or support slow learners. • Uneven implementation of youth development programmes; limited reach to boys outside formal schooling or in rural areas.	• Need context-specific dropout prevention, including scholarships for boys, flexible pathways and improved relevance curriculum. • Formal–non-formal linkages and tracking systems needed; scale-up re-entry for dropout boys in migration and labour-affected zones. • Early warning systems and career guidance work but need better targeting and stronger follow-up mechanisms, especially for vulnerable boys. • Adjust scholarship criteria to also explicitly include at-risk boys. Community monitoring and flexible conditions (e.g. part-time schooling) help retain boys. • Integrated STEM or TVET options at lower secondary level can retain boys but must be accessible earlier and more broadly.
2	MoEYS	**Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2019–2023**	• Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. • Ensure effective leadership and management of education staff at all levels. • Emphasized reducing lower secondary and upper secondary dropout, promoting transition, and improving relevance through career counselling and early warning systems.			

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No	**Publisher**	**Document title and time**	**Focus and relevance to the study focus**	**Reported relevant achievements**	**Reported relevant challenges**	**Lessons learned and implications for the study**
			• Technical Education and Life Skills encourage practical, technical pathways starting in lower secondary and upper secondary. • Scholarship programmes mainly targeted poor and female students; boys' dropout less explicitly addressed. • Availability of Non-formal and Accelerated Learning Programmes targeted children out of school, especially over-age learners and those who dropped out early. • Curriculum reform and introduced student-centred methods, early warning systems, and inquiry-based learning. • Youth Development Programmes includes youth clubs, soft skills and career counselling.	• Promotion of digital/STEM learning. • Strengthened school governance. • Over 72,000 lower secondary and 11,000 upper secondary students were supported with scholarships; at least 60 percent are female.		• Effective pedagogy and support structures, such as peer tutoring and male mentoring, needed to help boys succeed in lower secondary. • Practical skills-based education motivates boys while scalable technical schools and strong counselling in lower secondary school can reduce disengagement. Relevant orientation must start before dropout point.

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No	**Publisher**	**Document title and time**	**Focus and relevance to the study focus**	**Reported relevant achievements**	**Reported relevant challenges**	**Lessons learned and implications for the study**
3	MoEYS	**Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028**	• Ensuring all Cambodians have access to quality, equitable and inclusive education enriched with knowledge, skills, discipline, ethics, good behaviour, health, fitness and lifelong learning. • Priority 1: Reforming schools for inclusive and equitable access to quality education. • Priority 2: Improving access, quality and relevance of higher education and research and innovation. • Priority 3: Promoting 21st century skills for youth. • Priority 4: Promoting physical activities, physical education and sports. • Priority 5: Promoting performance-based management.	• 65 secondary schools (including 5 lower secondary) met model standards. Improvements in learning, governance and student support reported. • Lower secondary dropout remained high at 15.5 percent in 2024 (slightly above target), signalling persistent challenges. • Increased scholarship provision reported. MoEYS linked scholarship allocation to performance need. • Over 1,168 learners completed Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP) in 2024 (exceeding target). • Teacher deployment plans implemented; reduction in overcrowded classrooms; Over 14,000 teachers trained in 2023–2024. • Over 10,000 digital contents shared; integration in target schools; teacher training ongoing. • Strengthened school management committees; 264 schools using management information systems.	• Capacity gaps in school leadership, inconsistent self-assessment accuracy and weak community engagement in some areas. • Limited scholarship coverage and delays in disbursement in some areas. • Limited teacher capacity in rural areas. Resource constraints for full implementation. • Ongoing teacher shortages in remote areas; urban–rural disparity persists. • Uneven infrastructure access in rural schools; digital divide by gender and region. • Limited BEEP geographic coverage and low awareness in some provinces.	• Structured support, capacity building and standardized tools improve school performance and may reduce dropout, especially if targeted in disengagement-prone areas. • Financial incentives help retention, especially among poor boys. Timely, predictable support improves trust and impact. • Relevant curricula motivate boys and reduce disengagement. Investing in teacher skills and rural outreach is key. • Digital tools support engagement but must be combined with equitable access policies. • Alternative pathways are essential for re-engaging boys. Partnerships with local governments and NGOs enhance reach.

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Policies and strategic plans						
No	**Publisher**	**Document title and time**	**Focus and relevance to the study focus**	**Reported relevant achievements**	**Reported relevant challenges**	**Lessons learned and implications for the study**
4	MoEYS	**Policy Guidelines for New Generation Schools for Basic Education in Cambodia – 2016**	• Aims to create high-quality, autonomous public schools with high investment and innovation. • Focus on STEM, youth empowerment, teacher incentives, reduced pupil–teacher ratio and more structured learning environments.	• Improved quality of education and STEM learning. • Teacher performance incentives. • Increased learning time and ICT usage. • Youth engagement structures like Youth Centres.	• Limited to select schools with high capacity. • Risk of elitism may not reach most disadvantaged boys. • Implementation depends on rigorous selection and oversight.	• Technology integration and STEM may motivate boys' interest if implemented inclusively. • Potential to re-engage boys if scaled or adapted to disadvantaged areas.
5	MoEYS	**Policy on Inclusive Education (2018)**	• Focus on equity and access for students with special needs and those facing social-cultural barriers, but female students are explicitly mentioned.	• Implemented the inclusive education programme in general knowledge secondary schools with 11,616 students with disabilities in 2023/24. • Legal and governance structures established. • Implementing 87 integrated classes in 53 schools.	• Limited trained personnel for inclusive education. • Infrastructure not always aligned with Universal Design. • Weak enforcement of policies at school level.	• Need to mainstream inclusive practices into all schools. • Boys with behavioural or emotional challenges benefit from flexible and supportive environments. • Community and teacher attitudes must shift to retain marginalized boys.

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Policies and strategic plans						
No	**Publisher**	**Document title and time**	**Focus and relevance to the study focus**	**Reported relevant achievements**	**Reported relevant challenges**	**Lessons learned and implications for the study**
6	MoEYS	**Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan 2021–2025**	• Focus to address all forms of difficulty and obstacles, which lead to gaps in gender inequality in education sector. • • Ensure the achievement of gender equality in education sector, to increase the participation of women in management and education services at all levels, and to enhance positive social attitudes towards gender responsiveness.	• Gender Parity Index (GPI) shows higher female students' completion at lower secondary school (52.2 percent) vs male students (42.4 percent). • Scholarships and sanitation improved access for girls; boys remain under-supported.	• Lack of targeted strategies for boys. • Community norms and engagement still focus more on girls' education while boys' vulnerabilities are under-addressed.	• Gender strategies must become gender-responsive (not only pro-girls) • Need to engage boys explicitly and target dropout-prone groups with tailored incentives.
7	MoEYS	**Teacher Policy Action Plan (TPAP) 2024–2030**	• Aims to reform teacher management, leadership, education and identity.	• Professional learning communities, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and increased standards for Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs). • Supportive school leadership and career counselling planned.	• Underqualified teachers in lower secondary (especially, in rural areas). • Low male teacher representation and weak career orientation.	• Effective teacher placement and mentoring can improve lower secondary boys' engagement. • Male teacher role models and well-trained career counsellors are key in contexts of male dropout.
5	MoEYS	**Policy on School Feeding (2024–2035)**	• Directly targets poor and food-insecure students who are at high risk of disengagement. • Strong focus on increasing attendance, reducing dropout and improving concentration; particularly relevant in rural, low-income settings.	• School feeding improved attendance and completion • Enrolment rose from 81 percent (2001) to 98 percent (2019) in target school • Dropout fell to 4.5 percent in targeted schools. • Stronger outcomes for girls also reported.	• Weak coordination and resource mobilization • Limited integration with other school support services. • Capacity gaps at subnational levels. • Food hygiene standards inconsistently applied.	• Feeding programmes can significantly reduce dropout and improve engagement, especially in food-insecure households. • Community-grown school feeding increases local ownership. • Strong cross-sectoral coordination and hygiene standards are critical for success.

Advance Version

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6	MoEYS, USAID, and UNICEF	**Early Warning System (EWS)/ Early Dropout Warning System**	• Now incorporated into the School Information Management System, the EWS collects data on student enrolment, grades, absences, dropouts and transfers which are key indicators to identify at-risk students.	• The system is operational in 394 schools across 25 provinces. • Real-time classroom-level data collection was enabled. • School-level capacity in digital management has improved in pilot areas. • Institutional ownership transferred to MoEYS with the support of the Institute of Technology.	• Uneven school readiness: Many schools lack electricity, internet, or trained human resources to fully utilize the EWS platform. • Statistical inconsistencies due to parallel data systems and reporting burdens. • Low analytical capacity among education planners and statisticians at national and subnational levels inhibits full utilization of data for intervention.	• School-level EWS must be paired with strong analytic and response mechanisms (e.g. case management or social worker involvement) to be effective in preventing dropouts among boys. • Equity-focused rollout is needed by targeting rural and disadvantaged schools where boys are at higher risk of dropping out. • Capacity development at all levels (school leaders, data officers, provincial planners) is critical to make EWS actionable. • Integration of behavioural and social indicators beyond academic records is needed for a gender-sensitive EWS model.
7	MoEYS	**National Policy on Child Protection System (2019–2029)**	• Programmes that potentially also help addressing boys' education disengagement: • Multidisciplinary Child Protection System that integrates education, social welfare, health and legal services to support vulnerable children. • Community-based mechanisms. • Outreach and awareness campaigns on positive parenting and violence prevention.	• National and subnational mechanisms established; child protection services piloted with NGO support. • Creation of Commune Committees for Women and Children to also engage in basic child protection tasks (reporting, referral). • Awareness initiatives outlined for caregivers, schools and local leaders.	• Fragmentation, weak case coordination, and limited local capacity hinder response effectiveness. • Often limited to formal tasks; lack of proactive outreach, staff and child-specific training. • Implementation is limited, especially in rural/indigenous areas; deeply rooted norms and practices resist change.	• Systems-level integration with education and welfare is vital for preventing dropout; local ownership and capacity-building are critical. • Community mechanisms must be empowered with training and resources to support early warning and targeted outreach to at-risk boys.

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8	MoEYS and UNESCO	**National Policy on Lifelong Learning – LLL (2019)**	• Offers pathways for out-of-school students and people to continue learning through formal, non-formal or informal education. • These programmes include: • Flexible and comprehensive programmes offering equivalency, literacy, life skills and vocational training. • Learning centres and Community Learning Centres. • Recognition, validation and prior learning. • Promotion of Gender Equality, Equity and Inclusion. • Education through technology and fostering private sector and NGO partnerships.	• Recognizes flexible pathways and skills-bridging programmes; promotes career guidance and TVET consultation. • Community Learning Centres established in several provinces. • Integration with the Cambodian National Qualification Framework (CNQF) underway. • Explicitly acknowledges dropouts and unemployed youth as priority groups. • Encourages enterprises and NGOs to offer training; acknowledges role of community initiatives.	• Access is uneven, especially in rural/remote areas. • Many programmes are outdated, underfunded, and not responsive to current job market demands. • Awareness is low; validation mechanisms still in development. • Gender framing often focuses more on girls; risks overlooking boy-specific vulnerabilities. • Limited ICT infrastructure and digital literacy. • Uneven partnership and limited incentives.	• LLL can be a re-entry point for disengaged boys if outreach is strengthened and programmes tailored to local labour needs. • Recognition of non-formal skills can motivate boys to pursue lifelong learning and create credible links to formal education and employment. • Policies must include a gender-differentiated analysis to capture boys' specific disengagement drivers. • Stronger collaboration with employers and NGOs can link disengaged boys to market-relevant skills.

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Lifting barriers

Boys' disengagement from education

Cambodia case study

UNESCO, the University of East Anglia, and Equimundo are co-publishing this case study authored by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) to explore the underlying causes of boys' disengagement from lower secondary education in Cambodia to understand how the individual, family, school, community, and structural factors interact to shape boys' educational experiences and trajectories. It draws on explanatory mixed methods research, combining administrative data, stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory activities with students, caregivers, teachers, school leaders, civil society, and government officials.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION
5 GENDER EQUALITY
Sustainable Development Goals