



## Bridging the Academic Disparities between Boys and Girls in Cambodian Secondary Education

### Key Highlights

- Girls in Cambodia consistently outperform boys academically, a trend observed since the 2014 national exam reforms, with boys facing higher risks of dropout.
- Boys are disproportionately affected by weaker academic engagement, higher absenteeism, economic pressures, and greater freedom, leading to socially undesirable activities, which hinder their academic performance.
- Negative societal factors, including drug use, vaping, gambling, and distractions near schools, have more adverse impacts on boys' learning, exacerbating the gender gap.
- While technology can enhance learning opportunities, boys are more prone to misuse it for gaming and leisure, further reducing their academic focus.
- Weak school discipline and limited gender-sensitive pedagogy fail to engage boys effectively, with teachers sometimes unconsciously lowering expectations for male students.

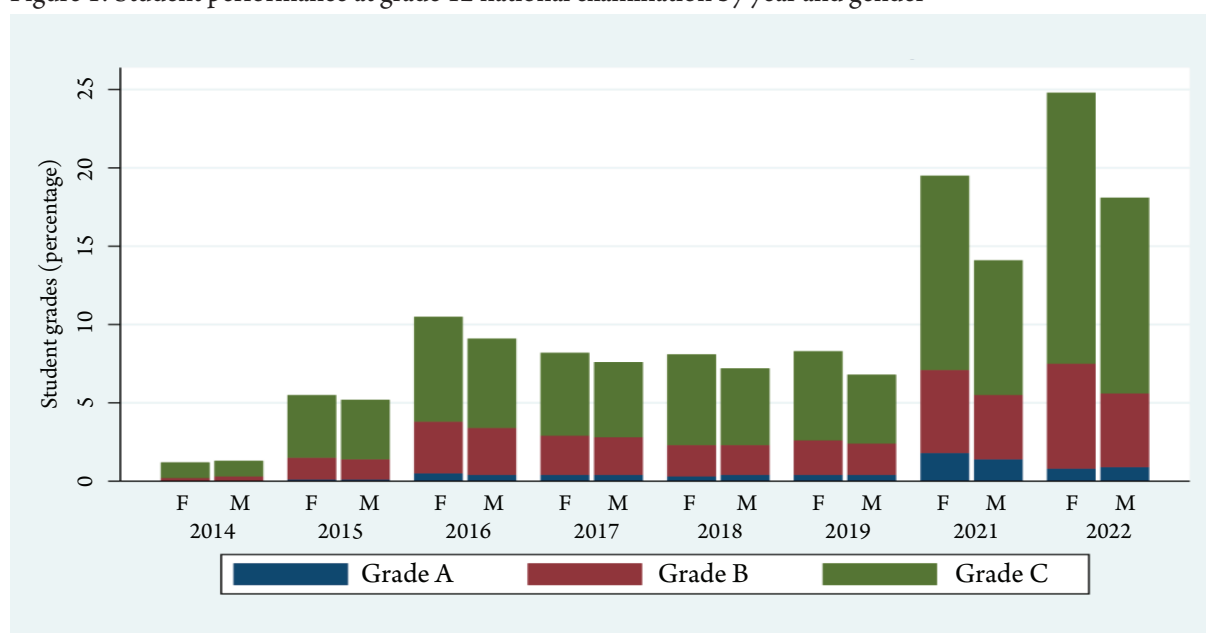
### Introduction

In recent years, a significant shift has emerged in the educational landscape of Cambodia, where girls outperform boys not only in enrollment but also in academic performance (Chea, Tek, and Nok 2023). This reversal of the gender gap in academic achievement exists as early as in primary education. Traditionally, gender disparities in education in Cambodia, as in many other developing countries, have focused on overcoming barriers to female participation and learning achievement. However, results from either national or international learning assessments reveal a consistent trend where female students now outperform their male counterparts, especially in Khmer and science disciplines and, to some extent, in mathematics. This shift aligns with a broader global trend, where in more and more countries, girls increasingly excel academically compared to boys (OECD 2023). In Cambodia, this reversal of performance in upper secondary schools can be observed as early as 2014 after the national

examination reforms, which introduced much stricter measures to prevent cheating during exams. As seen in Figure 1, girls consistently achieved higher pass rates than their male peers since 2014. This trend was brought to greater attention and concern in 2023 when the then Prime Minister called for a thorough examination of these changing trends.

The disparities in learning outcomes have profound implications for Cambodia's development trajectory. Male students' poor academic performance not only heightens the risk of school dropout but also jeopardises their future economic prospects in an increasingly knowledge-driven job market. Studies globally have shown that educational attainment and cognitive skills are closely linked to employment opportunities, earning potential, and social mobility (Heckman et al. 2006; Lin et al. 2018). Persistently poor academic outcomes among boys can lead to a less skilled workforce, which will hinder national productivity and limit the country's capacity

Figure 1: Student performance at grade 12 national examination by year and gender



Source: MoEYS's grade 12 national examination's results

to compete with neighbouring nations that are advancing in technology-driven industries.

Recognising this issue, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport's Department of Policy and the CDRI's Centre of Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) jointly conducted a study in 2023 to explore factors contributing to this reversal of the gender gap in academic performance in Cambodian upper secondary schools. The study collected interview and survey data from students, teachers, and school directors in 23 public schools in ten provinces across the country. Drawing on the analysis of these data, this policy brief aims to demonstrate how individual, familial, school, societal factors, and the widespread use of technology shape this reversal trend in academic performance and explores whether gender disparities persist across different levels of learning achievement.

## Key findings

### *Student characteristics*

Differences in learning behaviours and engagement were found to contribute significantly to the gender gap in academic performance. Female students tend to exhibit stronger study habits, self-discipline, and classroom engagement, positively influencing their academic outcomes. They are more likely to follow regular study routines and actively seek academic support when needed, contributing to the consistent outperformance of their male peers. In contrast,

male students often exhibit lower levels of academic engagement and motivation than their female peers, which are compounded by high rates of absenteeism and a tendency to engage in non-academic activities, including sports and social gatherings, over their studies.

### *Family and socioeconomic influences*

Family factors and socioeconomic pressures play a substantial role in shaping students' academic outcomes, with distinct impacts on male and female students. Yet, there is no strong evidence to suggest the existence of gender-biased parental support, as most participants believed that parents nowadays strive for equal educational opportunities for both genders. However, parents tend to be stricter with their daughters and more cautious about their daughters' safety. Boys tend to have more freedom to be away from home and are inclined toward socially undesirable activities. On the other hand, girls' behaviours are shaped by cultural norms that expect them to adhere to proper conduct and avoid engaging in inappropriate activities. This cultural influence limits girls' freedom to play truant or frequently hang out, leading to more responsible behaviours compared to boys. Boys living in provinces near the Thai border face a higher risk of dropout and work migration. Both male and female students engage in household and economic activities to assist their parents with workload burdens, but it appears that

boys are generally involved more in economic activities and undertake more physically demanding tasks. This economic responsibility, while essential, reduces the time and energy boys can devote to their studies, thereby limiting their ability to keep up with coursework and affecting their engagement in learning at school.

### ***School and teacher-related factors***

Schools and teachers are essential in shaping students' academic engagement and performance. The research data, similar to findings on family factors, suggest that there is no evidence of gender discrimination against boys in schools or unfavourable treatment by teachers. However, male students are more likely to be affected by inadequate classroom learning and weak school discipline. Sometimes, students do not receive enough curriculum delivery due to time constraints, ineffective teaching approaches, overwhelming learning contents, or teachers' intentions. Concurrently, examination contents are sometimes inconsistent with the covered lessons in the classroom, making the test a demotivational factor in academic pursuits. These matters have more impacts on male students, particularly those who are poorly performing, as they typically display poor discipline, lower motivation, and commitment than female students, as explained above. Insufficient disciplinary measures contribute to higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism among boys, which negatively impact their learning outcomes. Furthermore, a lack of teacher training in gender-sensitive pedagogy leaves many educators ill-equipped to actively engage boys in the classroom or address their specific learning needs. In some instances, teachers may unconsciously lower their expectations for male students, viewing them as less academically focused. This perception can result in reduced encouragement and guidance, further exacerbating boys' disengagement from school.

### ***Influence from peers and society***

Students with high-achieving peers are more likely to develop positive learning habits, benefiting from a competitive and supportive environment that promotes academic engagement. In contrast, those associating with peers who prioritise leisure activities, such as gaming or sports, are more prone to distractions that disengage them from their studies. Negative societal factors, including the widespread prevalence of vices such as drug use, vaping, gambling, and alcohol consumption, undermine student morale and

focus. These challenges are further compounded by the proximity of establishments like internet cafes and karaoke venues near schools, which divert students' attention from their academic responsibilities. While these issues also affect girls, their impact is more pronounced among boys. Participants emphasised the critical need for community and local authority interventions to address these societal distractions and mitigate the harmful effects on education.

### ***Technology and digital distractions***

Technology has a dual impact on student learning, serving both as a valuable educational tool and a source of distraction. While digital learning platforms provide access to supplementary resources that can enhance learning, many students primarily use technology for social media and gaming. Some even leverage social media platforms to generate income, such as through online businesses, which can further divert their focus from academics. The adverse effect of technology is also found among girls, but this issue is more pronounced among male students, who are more likely to engage in online gaming and e-sports. Excessive time spent on these activities can reduce boys' academic focus and increase disengagement from school. Some schools have responded to this issue by restricting smartphone use within school grounds, though most still allow it as of the 2023 data collection.

### ***Greater learning gaps among lower performers***

Using school-level student semester test scores, the study identified a consistent gender gap favouring female students across all achievement levels. However, this gap is much wider among low-performing students. For example, the gender gap at the 25th percentile is 3.4 times larger than at the 90th percentile. When examining the learning gap by subject, the disparities are less pronounced in mathematics compared to Khmer literacy.

### ***Conclusion and recommendations***

Gender disparities in academic performance in Cambodia result from the interplay of individual, familial, school, peer, and societal factors and the use of technology. Girls consistently outperform boys due to stronger self-discipline, parental support, and cultural expectations, while boys face challenges from weaker engagement, economic pressures, and societal freedoms that distract from academics. This gender gap is particularly pronounced among low-performing students. Addressing these gaps, the study

proposes the following recommendations that would require coordinated efforts among policymakers, schools, communities, and families to foster equitable and supportive learning environments that mitigate socioeconomic barriers and gender biases.

- **Minimising the negative societal and peer influences:** Strengthen collaboration among schools, families, and local authorities to mitigate negative societal and peer impacts, such as drug use, vaping, gambling, and the presence of distracting establishments near schools. Raise community awareness about the effects of these issues on student learning and work to create safer, more conducive educational environments restricting the operation of such establishments near schools. Addressing these issues will require strong support from all stakeholders from the central government to local authorities, and parents.
- **Fostering an effective teaching-learning environment in the classroom:** Strictly monitor and evaluate the delivery of the school curriculum to ensure that students can receive sufficient learning contents and exercises, potentially encouraging them (particularly boys) to stay motivated in learning. At the same time, further training would be valuable on teaching pedagogy that addresses mixed-ability students, heavy curriculum content, and time constraints and creating an engaging learning environment, as teachers might appreciate practical directions and strategies to handle the situations mentioned above. The design of tests or examinations must ensure alignment with the learning contents because this misalignment assessment is still a conundrum in some schools, as reported in this study.
- **Optimising technology use for teaching and learning:** To harness the benefits of technology in education, schools need to establish clear guidelines and mechanisms to monitor and direct students' digital engagement towards constructive learning activities. There is also the need to equip teachers with knowledge and skills to integrate technology effectively into their teaching while restricting its misuse for non-educational purposes. Support from parents is also essential to monitor and manage the use of digital devices, helping to curb their misuse.
- **Closely monitoring and expanding structured extra-curricular activities:** Strictly monitoring

sports activities, promoting inter-school competitions, and fostering structured sports programmes can mitigate unsupervised activities and absenteeism, thereby promoting balanced student development. Additionally, government-led initiatives to expand these activities can nurture students with athletic talents and aspirations, paving the way for them to become national athletes.

- **Strengthening discipline and accountability:** Ensure consistent enforcement of school rules by strengthening the functioning of school disciplinary committees. Enhance communication between schools and parents regarding student attendance, behaviour, and academic performance to keep students accountable and engaged in their studies.
- **Enhancing counselling services and student guidance:** Examine the effectiveness of existing career counselling programmes and explore opportunities to expand their scope. The counselling programmes should not only offer career guidance but also provide comprehensive support services to address both academic and socio-emotional challenges. Such programmes can offer targeted guidance and assistance to students, particularly male students facing difficulties, to foster a positive self-concept and improve academic outcomes. Additionally, equipping teachers with the skills to support students holistically through enhanced pre-service training and ongoing professional development is essential to achieving these goals.

## References

- Chea, Phal, Muiyting Tek, and Sorseseekha Nok. 2023. *Gender Gap Reversal in Learning and Gender-Responsive Teaching in Cambodia*. Working Paper Series No. 141. Phnom Penh: CDRI.
- Heckman, James J., Jora Stixrud, and Sergio Urzua. 2006. "The Effects of Cognitive and Noncognitive Abilities on Labor Market Outcomes and Social Behavior." *Journal of Labor Economics* 24 (3): 411–482. <https://doi.org/10.1086/504455>.
- Lin, Dajun, Randall Lutter, and Christopher J. Ruhm. 2018. "Cognitive Performance and Labour Market Outcomes." *Labour Economics* 51, 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2017.12.008>.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2023. *PISA 2022 Results: The State of Learning and Equity in Education*. Paris: OECD.