Making the Space

Voices from the girls of Cambodian minority communities

A holistic participatory inquiry approach to hear directly from researched groups who lead the journey

LE SEN, SUYHEANG KRY, AND RAYMOND HYMA

Edited By Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan

Foreword by Dr Staci B. Martin

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The views expressed in this book come directly from the voices of girls and community members who shared their perspectives, the research team who reflected on the findings and their experiences, the analysts who reviewed the recorded data, and the authors who translated it all to written form. They do not necessarily reflect the position of any particular organisation or partner involved in the implementation or publication of this work.

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Foreword

by Dr Staci B. Martin

We met at Rojo's home in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. Rojo's home also served as a place for an afterschool program. At that time, I had been meeting with the same middle school aged children and youth for the past four weeks. That day, we played a game where a Somali girl in a red hijab needed to hold my hand. It was weeks before this girl rarely gave me eye contact and would cover her mouth when she spoke in fluent Somali. When the game ended, she was told that we did not need to hold hands. She continued to hold my hand and even squeezed it. At the time, I was not sure (and still unsure) why she continued to hold my hand and yet, all I knew was that I loved it. As we played a Somali game that I barely understood, I was lost in her hand. I was lost in the connection of the squeeze and the peace it gave me as I received it, (even though I am never certain that I belong anywhere) but for a split second I felt I belonged in that circle of friends.[1]

I open with this story because this book, "Making the Space," reminds me of that feeling of my hand being held and belonging to something more. When I was asked to write a foreword to this book, I was taken aback by the enormous depth and care that was taken in doing

[1] Staci B. Martin, "Co-Creating Spaces of Critical Hope through the Use of a Psychosocial Peace Building Education Course in Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Context: Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya" (PhD diss., Portland State University, 2018), 221.

this community-based action (CBA) research. Although, my CBA and/or Speaking for Ourselves Action Research (SOAR) approach strives to be like this, what these researchers have done is at the heart of participatory action research – spoken from the heart, grounded in the context and culture, and most of all, applying the hopes and dreams into something that is actionable. I am honoured to be asked and indebted to them for sharing their wisdom and time with me.

In the preface, Le Sen makes a profound statement when she says, "I am absolutely convinced we made the right choice in carrying out this research in our way, on our own terms, and using our own approach" (p. 7). Impacted communities need to understand why research is needed, how it is done, and what they can do with the research. Too often impacted communities are research subjects, but rarely as producers of the research. They are talked about and rarely talked with. Moreover, most impacted communities do not see themselves as producers of knowledge. This book is an act in direct opposition to and defiance of this notion. The research has rigour in that it is valid, reliable, generalisable, and authentic.

I am a CBA/SOAR researcher that studies hope and despair in the classroom. I study critical hope, that is, acknowledging that systems often support dominant society at the expense of others, while recognising our role in complicity in maintaining the status quo. Critical hope is a process where we address these unjust systems through meaningful and reflective dialogue. Oftentimes decentring and disruption happen, and this is where critical hope can manifest and ultimately foster change and transformation in students, teachers, and communities.[2] The reflective dialogue, seen in the

[2] Martin 2018; Staci B. Martin et al., "Participatory Action Research and Co-Researching as a Tool for Situating Youth Knowledge at the Centre of Research," *London Review of Education* 17, no. 3 (2019).

Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) approach of this work, appears to me at the heart of the methodology and core value of this book. This team of minority women and girls in Cambodia not only conduct the first-of-its-kind research in their communities, but they use FLD, a methodology that has been pioneered and developed in their own country by practitioners at Women Peace Makers who they partner with. The entire underpinning of such a bold approach is not only daring, but it pushes the boundaries of traditional "outsider" academic research and contributes something entirely radical to the way we generate knowledge and share it with others.

Just like there was nothing said between my Somali friend and me, I sensed from her that we both longed to be together and to belong. Although she was displaced and reconstructing her own life, for that moment, we belonged together. My hope is that when you read this book, you will come away with this belongingness and insight, knowledge, and a radical shift of perspective of how research can be produced by, for, and led by the impacted community. I also hope that this book offers you space to believe that you can change your situation, whether it be a big or small change. Like Binh, a participant in the book who decided she wanted to help her community and focus on the girls who no longer went to school after the participatory research was done, when we become more aware how one action can create ripples, we might just follow through on it.

Staci B. Martin, EdD, Fulbright Scholar, Rotary Peace Fellow, SOAR researcher that researches critical hope and despair, psychosocial and social-emotional learning, peacebuilding, and higher education in protracted and conflict contexts.

Preface

by Le Sen

Minority girls in Cambodia face a "triple burden" around three intersectional aspects of their identities; their age, their minority status, and their gender. Putting all these identity markers together, a minority girl is faced with very unique and special circumstances in navigating her life in a country that already faces a myriad of social, economic, and developmental challenges.

I deeply understand many of the findings presented in this publication because I was a minority girl. Now I am a minority woman, but my journey is certainly comparable to the experiences of nearly all the girls that I have encountered and worked with over the last three years in bringing this research to fruition. Growing up as a Cham Muslim girl in a rural community of a province far from the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, I spent many years in isolation from not only the mainstream Khmer majority population, but also the rest of the world. I learnt the Cham language well before Khmer, speaking with my community in my native tongue while only learning to write Khmer script through extra lessons from my father. I knew how to pray to Allah long before I knew how to visit a local pagoda and give thanks to Buddha, like the vast majority of Cambodians. I learnt about the harrowing journeys of my migrating ancestors, fleeing from the Champa Kingdom of the Mekong

Delta, well before I knew about the ancient Khmer Empire whose people built the spectacular Angkor Wat.

My journey from my village to going to school was not so different from many of the girls who participated in this study. I faced several incidents of discrimination from teachers and local authorities as a Cham girl. I encountered the daily stereotypes of others about my Cham ethnicity and my religious affiliation to Islam. My mother even faced pressure from our own community by some who truly believed that rather than sending a girl like me to school, it would be best for me to stop studies and work at a nearby factory. Luckily, unlike many of the girls who participated in our research, my parents, and especially my grandmother, supported my pathway to study from a toddler right up to my university education. When other girls in my community came with their friends to my house so that my father could include them in our daily tutoring sessions, I could understand that I was fortunate to grow up in a minority household that valued education for girls in a way that was not common.

In spite of my own understanding of many of the dynamics in minority communities and the issues that minority girls specifically face, this initiative has opened my eyes in so many profound ways. In fact, looking back at the last three years, I am genuinely surprised at how little I knew about the lives of other minority girls across Cambodia. My deeper understanding of the Cambodian Muslim context presented in this work contrasts to my newfound knowledge from other minority groups. The discussions, analysis, and subsequent findings from other communities have greatly enriched my own perspective as a minority. My sisters from Indigenous highland villages in Mondulkiri, from ethnic Vietnamese communities living on the river in boats and along the border, and from Khmer Krom groups with

their stories of migration moving up along the Mekong River - all of them are living under very special circumstances in Cambodia.

Each ethnic, religious, and cultural minority group faces its own challenges and its girls have their own unique stories and narratives. At the same time, however, we are connected on so many levels. We have many shared experiences from living our lives as minority girls outside of mainstream Khmer society, who are often considered the recognised and well-known face of Cambodian culture and its people.

This publication is a first of its kind and is driven by the efforts, determination, and passion of minority girls and young women across Cambodia. With little to no data on minority girls in the country, choosing such a participatory and grassroots approach to generate new knowledge was a complex, and even risky, undertaking. However, having come to the end of our inquiry activities, I am absolutely convinced we made the right choice in carrying out this research in our way, on our own terms, and using our own approach. We present not only new information to help readers better understand the situation of minority girls in Cambodia, but we offer our own voices directly, so you can truly hear from us in the clearest and most genuine way possible.

Introduction to the Initiative

This research, locally known as *Making the Space*, is the result of nearly three years of active inquiry and participatory design among girls coming from ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups in Cambodia. Minority girls in Cambodia are very often left behind. With so much social and development programming directed towards gender equality and children's rights, gaps persist for minority girls who continue to be marginalised at multiple levels due to gender, minority, and age.

The intersection of gender, minority, and age, has not been deeply explored in Cambodia. In fact, gender inequality and minority discrimination are sensitive issues. As a result, adolescent girls from minority communities in Cambodia are often vulnerable, marginalised, and lack a voice on the national stage. Coupled with the vast lack of data or analysis on these particular groups, minority girls are relatively invisible and underrepresented in national and international conversations that are relevant to them. This invisibility results in few, if any, interventions along the spectrum of development assistance that have been specifically tailored for minority girls.

This gap has significant real-life consequences on the lives of minority girls. Policymakers and duty-bearers, or those that have a responsibility to respect, protect and uphold the rights of minority girls, frequently design programs with very limited awareness of the issues that directly affect these girls. In fact, the particular situation, challenges, and barriers of minority girls are not often considered in policy development or national initiatives that target poverty and exclusion. The voices, perspectives, and unique experiences of minority girls are also missing from analysis on domestic violence and gender based violence, and as a result, interventions are designed focusing on the experiences and contexts of the mainstream Cambodian public. Ultimately, exclusion and invisibility directly affect not just the opportunities available for minority girls, leading to or reinforcing existing inequity, but also diminish minority girls' self-confidence and how they perceive themselves, consequently reducing their potential to contribute to their communities and society at large.

Since the beginning, this initiative has prioritised confronting the basic lack of documentation, stories, and narratives from girls of ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups across Cambodia. This information gap has prevented minority girls from being included in policy conversations, excluded them from development and international aid coming into Cambodia, and limited their representation in social and political spheres. The participatory research approach in this work has been an opportunity for making the space and providing the tools necessary to capture voices from diverse communities, and shine a light on the girls themselves.

Beyond collecting and analysing data, the research, through design and process, has also placed great importance on bringing minority girls together. They connected not only with each other in their own

communities, but also with other ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities in the country to engage in broader dialogue on intersectionality and discuss issues important to all of them.

Overcoming self-consciousness, providing opportunities for empowerment, encouraging expression and identity awareness, and cultivating pride have all been fundamental components to address issues at the community level. In addition, the objective of fostering awareness among duty-bearers is key to ensuring the voices of minority girls are heard by the people who can directly impact them. This includes leaders in the communities, civil society, authorities at the local, provincial, and national levels, and the public at large. These values drive the research approach as well as the efforts for knowledge mobilisation of the findings and results.

Making the Space thus serves as a conduit from the people it has sought to better understand to those making decisions about their lives and their futures by amplifying the voices of these minority girls and their communities. The overarching shared values of this participatory research approach view girls of ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities in Cambodia as possessing the same human rights as everyone else and advocate their full inclusion and social and political participation.

Throughout the entire process, minority girls and their communities have driven, influenced and developed this initiative. Minority girls and young women have led the process of designing the research, the implementation, analysis, and writing, and this process has responded to collective learnings and discoveries along the way. This initiative uses novel qualitative methods and community-led quantitative tools designed and carried out in local languages. It paves the way for participatory research approaches that not only gather information, but also become transformative interventions that

empower communities and bring different people together around shared issues of intersectionality.

Beyond employing a mixed-method approach, the initiative has also incorporated accompaniment and creative interventions that provided the minority girls with opportunities to express themselves and share their perspectives. This included a country-wide initiative to bring conceptual art directly to the communities involved through community exhibitions of the minority girls' creations. These exhibitions allowed the minority girls to creatively communicate directly to their parents, grandparents, siblings, and other community members about issues that were important to them. Some works of art are shared in this publication to complement the understanding of minority girls' voices through their own creative and artistic processes interweaving dialogue and art.

As preliminary research findings indicated the specific challenges that minority girls had in accessing education, this research initiative simultaneously pioneered a tailored support system that became known as *Send Girls to School*. This intervention sought to address the particular barriers preventing minority girls from studying by providing them with the means and tools to overcome the barriers they identified to be able to attend school. The insights and lessons from these specific interventions have identified real and practical ways to help girls from minority communities overcome barriers that limit their opportunities to go to school.

The *Making the Space* publication encapsulates the research findings and the process itself. The objective of this publication is two-fold. Firstly, it introduces the findings from the insights, perspectives, and opinions that were shared by 343 people, including 268 minority girls and 75 family and community members from minority groups in Cambodia. It presents how

the girls and their communities perceive the status of minority girls, their ongoing challenges, their triumphs, and their hopes and dreams for the future. It also examines the community researchers themselves, who are also affected by similar issues. Their participation in this research process as "Listeners," focus group facilitators, and survey interviewers has provided them with the space to contribute to the analysis by sharing their perceptions after conducting research in their own communities.

Secondly, the publication shares the research process in detail to ensure that readers are better able to understand the data and analysis, including the limitations and the implications of the findings. While choosing a participatory research approach that is driven by communities themselves can be challenging, particularly when aiming to produce data considered traditionally verifiable, this approach can also provide incredible opportunities to hear genuine insights, reflections, and conclusions from groups and community members, and be verified by the community researchers as well.

Approach, Design, Methods, and Implementation

This research set out to understand the situation of girls from ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups in Cambodia, including their challenges and triumphs. It also explores the views of their siblings, parents, relatives, neighbours, and community elders on the status of girls in their contexts. It employed a community-centred and participatory approach that succeeded in gathering new data and generating knowledge. It also mobilised minority girls and their communities to design and lead the inquiry processes, and to engage with other minority communities to share commonalities and foster understanding amongst them.

Taking a mixed-method approach, research was carried out with the use of several tools and strategies. It began with a qualitative approach centred on storytelling and sharing, using Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), a Cambodian homegrown information gathering methodology that leverages listening and conversations among people through narrative inquiry design and customised tools. FLD preliminary findings informed the development of a survey that was used to gather quantitative data from the minority girls. The survey findings provided a stronger statistical understanding through structured questions that followed up on what was learnt after FLD.

Focus group discussions were held to bring other community members together to share their opinions and views about the status, level of participation, and opportunities of girls in their communities. The focus groups included participants from different generations, including women, men, and boys who occupy different community roles. Having a range of participants offered diverse perspectives from several community and relational angles.

Subsequent art-based activities were also developed that gave opportunities for minority girl participants to further express their thoughts, needs, and dreams through creative forms. This comprehensive approach has allowed us to present the complexity of the experiences and challenges of four minority groups, and particularly the unique situation of minority girls in Cambodia.

Facilitative Listening Design

FLD is an information gathering and transformational methodology that centres on a process of inquiry that brings diverse people together to examine their communities and use the analysis and findings to dialogue with others. FLD has deep roots in Listening Methodology, an action research approach to better understand perceptions through deep listening in conversations. Listening Methodology has served as an effective way to gather information and better understand people's views and opinions. It has often proven to be a less intrusive alternative to more structured surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. Pioneered by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects through their ground-breaking Listening Project in 2005, it helped the international community to gain better understanding of those on the receiving-end of humanitarian aid and development assistance.

FLD is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an "insider" human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other to find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It can also be used to explore sensitive issues that require more intimate space for conversing. Taking out the aspects of traditional interview settings that can often cause people to

feel uncomfortable to share their own experiences or their "truths," FLD focuses on the relationship and process of getting to know each other between those who listen and those who share. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than as research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

This initiative began with FLD because of the sensitivity of speaking about difficult topics among young minority girls. FLD was chosen because of the primacy given to ensuring that the participants were always comfortable during the conversations. By using the more informal listening conversations, girls and other members of minority communities could feel at ease sharing their feelings and opinions when talking about sensitive issues such as sexual reproductive health, violence, and identity.

The FLD approach first allowed Listeners from minority groups to return to their own communities to engage girls and other members of the community to collect information. It subsequently provided the space for representatives from the four minority communities to share with each other what they found, and to explore similarities and differences among their groups as they strengthened their bonds by deepening their understanding of each other's perspectives and experiences. The information gathered through FLD provided a strong qualitative preliminary analysis base that informed the development of other inquiry methods.

FLD implementation

Listener recruitment

One of the earliest and most critical components of FLD is building a team. The "Listeners," or those who go out to gather information, are the most important participants in the process. They go on eventually to collect data, analyse it, and present the findings to other groups.

Project members conducted scoping trips beginning in August 2019 to explore different areas with recognisable minority populations and make decisions on which communities would be suitable. Tapping into existing networks, contacts in the populations helped to reach out and connect with potential Listeners. Fourteen Listeners were recruited over the course of the research. Twelve of the Listeners are women while two identified as men. The two men were included only after the chosen communities expressed that they were comfortable having these particular Listeners working on issues sensitive to girls. All Listeners, apart from one, conducted FLD in their own ethnic, religious, or cultural minority group. This included Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslim, and Khmer Krom. The exception was made for one ethnic Khmer Listener who focused on the Khmer Krom population and felt comfortable to culturally and linguistically communicate with them. Listener ages ranged from 16 to 26 years old.

Conversation facilitation and recording tools

FLD incorporates fully adaptable and versatile tools that the Listeners can use to have smooth and effective conversations. Tools are also provided to guide Listeners to be able to discreetly record and begin analysis of the collected data by helping them identify the range of issues and themes heard across the conversations. The following tools were developed and customised to meet the particular objectives of this initiative.

Conversation inquiry	A conversation inquiry was developed to help guide and frame the conversations. First drafted by the initiative designers, a range of probing and follow-up questions were considered to facilitate a conversation assisted by active listening and demonstrated interest. During the FLD Coaching and Training Lab, Listeners worked together to assess, discuss, and modify the conversation inquiry to better fit their respective ethnic, religious, and cultural minority contexts. Two versions were developed; one specifically used for minority girls and another used for the few conversations that were carried out with 10% of Sharers from the communities that were not minority girls themselves (elders and siblings). The guide questions are found below: **Education** 1. Do you think education is important to you? Why? • Are you still in school? » If not, why? » If yes, what degree do you want to get? • What obstacles are you facing or will face to pursue education? 2. Do you understand or want to study your mother tongue? Why? **Daily Life** 3. What do you think about the lifestyle of minority girls (Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslim, Khmer Krom) in general? How is it similar or different from the mainstream majority population (Khmer)? **Gender perceptions/roles** 4. What is your routine from the time you get up to when you go to bed? What about the boys in your community? 5. How would you compare opportunities and rights between girls and boys in your community? What do your parents and siblings think about that? 6. Do you feel any pressure from your parents, siblings, or community members? If yes, what kind of pressures? **Minority dynamics** 7. What do you think about other minority groups? 8. Are you proud of your minority identity? Why or why not? 9. Do you have any friends from other ethnic, religious, or cultural groups? What are those relations like?

Conversation inquiry	**Health and violence** 10. Do you ever or dare to discuss openly about sexual and reproductive health? About what? With who? 11. Have you ever faced any kind of violence (mental, physical, sexual)? If yes, could you tell us about it? **Needs/Dreams** 12. What is your dream? How do you think you can help your community? 13. What kind of support do minority girls need? 14. What do you want others to know about your community and culture?
Conversation log	The conversation log served as one of the key recording tools for Listeners to be able to capture the details of the Sharers' thoughts, opinions, and perceptions based on their conversations. Since conversations were conducted by listening pairs, each conversation was captured in two separate conversation logs, one from each Listener. Each Listener individually completed the log immediately after their conversation, beginning with the demographic information. Listeners are required to gain consent from the Sharer so this is recorded in the log. Each Listener then provides a recap of the conversation and highlights the main themes or points they heard from the Sharer. Each Listener then fills out the concluding section with up to three quotations that stayed with them from the conversation. In the final section, each Listener includes any observations they had about details, dynamics, or opinions that they want to share about the conversation or the Sharer.
Quad journal	At the end of the day, or after the completion of four conversations, the Listeners work together to reflect and analyse what they heard from all conversations in their quad journal. Most Listeners used the quad journal to identify recurring themes they heard, contrasts or differences they observed among the Sharers, and issues they might have disagreed about or have understood differently. If Listeners do not necessarily agree on what they each heard, they make a note of this in the quad journal for later discussion and clarification with the analysts.

FLD Coaching and Training Lab

Listeners, project staff, and initiative designers were brought together for a two-day training lab in Kandal province. This was the first time that the young minority women came together.

The training lab focused on coaching Listeners on how to implement FLD with girls in their own minority communities. Fundamental research skills, active listening techniques, and bias recognition were all incorporated into training and group exercises so the participants could reflect and practice how to apply everyday listening as an information gathering approach. Listeners were provided with an FLD draft conversation inquiry, which included probing and follow-up questions that could be used to foster a richer conversation as it progressed. The Listeners worked together with the initiative designers to adapt the FLD conversation inquiry through a cultural and linguistic localisation process in order to carry out smoother conversations in their communities. Listeners studied the conversation recording tools so they could familiarise themselves with the documentation process of what they heard after their conversations. Planning sessions also took place to consider where each pair would work as well with whom they intended to speak. This included consideration of appropriate demographics, logistics, and practical ways they would find people to participate in the project as Sharers.

Before completing the FLD Coaching and Training Lab, all Listeners were tasked with a mock FLD conversation and recording activities within the group. This included using all the tools available to later record and reflect on the data gathered in the conversation with their listening partners. Through the test run, Listeners gained a practical understanding of the process and the challenges that would follow when they eventually went to their designated communities in pairs. It also provided an opportunity

for project staff and designers to assess the feasibility and appropriateness of the process and tools provided, as well as identify any potential problems with the Listeners themselves. The Listeners were brought back together following their first conversation to assess the process and share any challenges.

Conversations in the field

Most Listeners went back to their communities and began searching for Sharers immediately following the FLD Coaching and Training Lab. Many of them had extensive contacts and networks in their own communities and reached out directly and set their own targets and goals. Listeners managed their own schedules and were able to complete their conversations within one month.

During the initial roll-out of FLD, it was very challenging to locate both Listeners and Sharers from the Khmer Krom community. For this reason, the FLD intervention did not take place until nearly two years later after stronger relationships had been developed between the group and members of the community. Unlike other groups, the Khmer Krom FLD work took place in December 2021 and only involved ten conversations rather than 40.

Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab (Info-Space Lab)

After carrying out conversations with minority girls and selected elders and family members in the respective communities, the second lab took place. The Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab, informally called the Info-Space Lab, focused on two primary objectives – firstly to process information and data that Listeners heard directly from conversations they had with Sharers; secondly, to provide a safe and encouraging

space for Listeners to reflect on and express any impact FLD may have had on them, their own perceptions of the issues, and any personal or group transformation that may have occurred over the course of the project among the different minority groups.

The first goal - to collect and process information from Sharers - was achieved through intensive pair work and presentations to the full group on their findings. After submitting all reporting documentation, including conversation logs and quad journals, pairs relied on their memory to provide an overall breakdown of the ideas, topics, and themes they heard most often in their conversations with their minority communities. Each pair presented to the whole group and answered follow-up questions from a small analysis team composed of project staff, designers, and external note-takers for further clarification and deeper analysis. Following all presentations, the analysis team held a session to discuss recurring themes, identify any patterns that emerged, and discuss the reliability of the data.

A separate Info-Space Lab was carried out for the Khmer Krom group in January 2022 due to the delay in FLD implementation. The lab followed the same format but involved two Listeners and two facilitators.

Information verification and thematic analysis

The next stages of analysis occurred over several months following the Info-Space Lab. Data was entered into a database and dedicated analysis project members from minority groups employed a thematic analysis approach to categorise data into themes. Research assistants who had been already working on the initiative sorted through all the recorded conversation data. This included all quad journals and conversation logs. Given that the FLD activities for the Khmer Krom group were carried out later, subsequent data were analysed separately.

First, quad journals were closely examined to compare with the themes that Listeners identified during the Info-Space Lab. Findings were categorised into themes, and additional topics or issues not mentioned during the Info-Space Lab were also identified. Research assistants then read the conversation logs in detail, usually going through the two logs that each Listener wrote for each conversation. Conversations were broken down and classified under corresponding themes together with examples and quotations to explore the depth and variations among Sharer opinions on each subject. Research assistants also classified the surprising or unique stories that emerged from particular Sharers to expand on the emerging and sometimes alternative narratives.

Adapting to communities on their terms and time

One of the major challenges at the early phase of this initiative was finding the Khmer Krom community. Khmer Krom originally lived in an area known to Cambodians as "Kampuchea Krom" which was once part of the historical Khmer Empire, but today is part of southern Vietnam. The Khmer Krom are recognised as an ethnic minority group in Vietnam but some decided to move to Cambodia in order to be part of a country with a majority Khmer population. Given that they speak the same language, have many of the same customs, and similarly self-identify as Khmer, they often blend into Khmer society much easier than others. However, being a group with a migration history, they do face challenges and have distinct experiences vis-à-vis the Khmer majority of Cambodia.

Given that the research team took more time to better connect with the Khmer Krom and build stronger relationships, research with their community saw delays and changes. Surveys and focus group discussions took place with Khmer Krom girls and their communities in Siem Reap,

however the FLD did not happen until late 2021 and was implemented in Kratie. Community researchers observed that the two communities were quite different and had different perceptions of what being Khmer Krom meant. In Siem Reap, for example, Khmer Krom people tended to be more organised with associations and had a stronger sense of community identity. In Kratie, however, most girls were second or third generation, meaning that they were able to integrate into mainstream Khmer society much easier than earlier generations. Although working with two quite different communities contributed to more limitations in understanding the data, it also helped to paint a fuller picture of the different contexts and helped to contextualise how to view Khmer Krom communities. It also highlighted many differences between first generation migrants and subsequent generations, particularly girls, born in Cambodia.

Focus group discussions

Although some FLD activities included a small number of family and community members of minority girls, focus group discussions (FGDs) were specifically designed to bring together community members to share their understanding and opinions about the challenges and situation of minority girls in their communities. Twelve FGDs were carried out in the same communities where FLD and survey activities were conducted. The exception was with Khmer Krom participants, where surveys and FGDs took place in Siem Reap while FLD was deployed in Kratie. FGDs brought together men and women from different generations, including grandparents, parents, and siblings of minority girls along with community elders. FGDs were sex-disaggregated but contained a mix of generations with wide age ranges within the same minority group.

Given the differences within some of the established four minority groups in the study, two groups were further separated to delve deeper into the differences between these sub-groups. The traditionalist and orthodox Cham separated into subgroups in recognition of the differences between their community outlook, and cultural and religious practices. The ethnic Vietnamese communities were separated by location, which also corresponded to varying levels of legal status in Cambodia to some extent. While residents living in floating villages along the river were living in homogenous groups, and

faced distinct issues pertaining to legal identity and displacement, ethnic Vietnamese residents living along the border often lived in mixed-race communities, frequently crossed the Cambodia-Vietnam border, and more commonly had established legal identity.

The FGDs were informal and provided the space for community members to share their views about the girls in their communities. A facilitator who was conversant in the local language in the instances when the groups used a language other than Khmer structured the discussion around six core questions classified under three common themes that emerged from the FLD findings.

School and education

1. What are your thoughts about school and education for girls in your community?
2. What are the challenges that girls might face in gaining education in your community?

Gender perceptions

3. What are the roles and responsibilities of boys in your community? How about girls? What do you think about prescribed gender roles?
4. Have gender roles for girls in your community changed from a generational perspective? Were things different at different times?

Sexual and reproductive health

5. What is your perspective about sexual and reproductive health education and understanding for girls in your community?
6. Should girls be able to openly discuss issues of sexual and reproductive health in your community? Why or why not?

Focus group participants were invited to expand on the questions and engage in dialogue with each other. Most groups sat in circles and reflected on the questions asked, providing their own thoughts in turn. The discussions were recorded and later transcribed. The focus group data was included in the analysis, and supplemented individual FLD thematic findings, providing snapshots of community perspectives that accompanied the primary data from the minority girls.

The Survey

Due to the lack of quantitative data about ethnic, religious, and cultural minority girls in Cambodia, a survey was designed to gather information and provide some statistics from a limited number of people in selected communities. The FLD early analysis provided strong qualitative indications of themes and issues that were significant to the minority girls. The preliminary findings from FLD guided initiative designers to develop a survey consisting of dichotomous and multiple choice questions.

Survey design centred on thematic sections reflecting themes identified by FLD through Sharer responses and Listener analysis. The thematic sections included demographic backgrounds, perceptions on education, gender perceptions, sexual and reproductive health, violence and discrimination, and issues of identity. The survey included 42 general questions along with subsequent probing questions for expanding on selected answers of some questions (see the full survey in the Annex). The team held a survey training workshop with interviewers, who helped to customise the questions and the language to ensure that the survey was culturally and linguistically appropriate and understandable in their own ethnic, religious, and cultural contexts. The process for obtaining consent required the interviewer to orally provide information about the

survey, the research, and the purpose, with the interviewer checking off the verification in the survey itself.

The survey targeted 160 minority girls and young women who lived in the same or neighbouring communities where FLD had been carried out. The one exception was with Khmer Krom respondents, who were interviewed in Siem Reap before FLD was carried out in Kratie. The team ensured that none of the survey respondents had previously participated in FLD activities so that the surveys could provide additional perspectives. The survey only included minority girls and a small selection of young minority women, thereby providing direct insight into the lives and experiences of the girls themselves.

For the most part, interviewers conducted interviews orally in the interviewees' language of preference, and filled out the survey form for the respondents. In some cases, depending on literacy and language levels, the respondents preferred to fill out the survey themselves in Khmer language. Upon completion, interviewers submitted the survey forms electronically.

Volunteers verified that the electronic data matched the written survey forms and a research assistant entered the data into a database. The data was analysed as a whole to understand the bigger picture of minority girls in the country. The data was then disaggregated into four groups based on ethnic, religious, and cultural classifications - Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslims, and Khmer Krom. Selected data from the survey was used to supplement the research scope and presented in the chapters along with FLD and focus group findings.

Context

Cambodia is predominantly a rural country with 75% of its near 15.6 million people living in rural areas,[3] of which, according to the government, 17.8% are living in poverty.[4] Other international estimates of rural poverty in Cambodia show a more dire picture of the differences between the city and the provinces. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index of 2018 noted that some countries within the East Asia and Pacific region showing lower levels of poverty overall in fact had pockets of very high poverty. Phnom Penh's 7% poverty level, for example, contrasted with a 64% poverty level in Preah Vihear and Steung Treng provinces, making this rural area one of the poorest in the entire region.[5] More than 60% of the total population

[3] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning, National Institute of Statistics, *General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019, National Report on Final Census Results,* Oct 2020, 25. See also World Bank Data, *Rural Population (% of total population) - Cambodia,* 2020, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=KH (accessed Feb 16, 2022).

[4] Nov Sivutha, "Planning ministry revises poverty line figures," *The Phnom Penh Post*, Nov 18, 2021, https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/planning-ministry-revises-poverty-line-figures (accessed Feb 16, 2022).

[5] Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2018: The Most Detailed Picture To Date of the World's Poorest People*, Oxford: University of Oxford, 2018, 57.

are below the age of 30.[6] Ethnically speaking, Cambodia is also a diverse country. Though 90% of the population is predominantly Khmer, 10% of the population is made up of a rich mix of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ethnic minorities.[7] The further diverse Indigenous minority, broadly known as the Khmer Loeu (literally translated as "upper Khmer"), consists of numerous tribes traditionally residing in the highlands.

The ethnic Vietnamese are among the largest minority populations in Cambodia. Although there is no exact figure, according to the 2019 population survey, 0.5% of the total population identified their mother tongue as Vietnamese.[8] Self-identifying ethnic Vietnamese groups may represent a smaller number as the long history and mixing between Khmer and Vietnamese have resulted in ethnic Vietnamese communities who identify as Khmer. Many groups of ethnic Vietnamese are also likely to be living in more precarious situations and are uncounted in general censuses or included in official population figures. Some sources estimate the ethnic Vietnamese population to be between 400,000 to 700,000 residents in the country.[9] That would indicate a figure closer to between 3% to 5% of the total Cambodian population.

[6] UNDP Cambodia, *About Cambodia*, http://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/countryinfo.html (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[7] Laura Marcia Kirchner. *Living on the margins: on the status and standing of minorities and indigenous people in Cambodia.* (Phnom Penh: Heinrich Böll Foundation, July 2015), 5, https://kh.boell.org/sites/default/files/hbs_living-on-the-margins_a5_3_rz-online-with-publishing-date.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022). However, note that from the observation of the authors, the figure of minorities may appear to continue to decrease as a "Khmerisation" process continues, in which ethnicity is not identified on the Cambodian National ID card. In Cambodia, both ethnicity *and* nationality are referred to as "Khmer" rather than "Cambodian" nationality.

[8] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning, *General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019, National Report on Final Census Results*, 25.

[9] Minority Rights Group International, *Cambodia - Ethnic Vietnamese*, https://minorityrights.org/minorities/ethnic-vietnamese (accessed Feb 17, 2022)

Religious minorities also exist in Cambodia, with various degrees of ethnic association depending on the group. According to Cambodia's Ministry of Cults and Religion, 95% of Cambodians practice Theravada Buddhism, which has been the state religion since the 13th century. The remaining 5% of the population generally practice Christianity, Islam, animism, Baha'i, and Caodaism.[10]

In 2019, according to the government census, Muslims made up 2% of the Cambodian population.[11] Some non-governmental organisations, however, estimate up to 4-5% of the population practice some form of Islam, be it from the Shafi'i, Salafist, Wahhabist, or Ahmadi doctrines. 90% of Cambodian Muslims are adherents to Sunni Islam.[12]

The "Cham" are the most well-known Muslim group in the country and are often associated with the historical Champa Kingdom in modern day southern Vietnam. Their history of migration across the region led to pockets of Cham communities to be found across Vietnam and Cambodia. As well as being a religious minority, many Cham also identify themselves as being an ethnic minority that traces its roots to Austronesian navigators of the sea who came from South Asia and travelled to Malaysia, Indonesia, and eventually to Champa in the Mekong Delta. In contemporary Cambodia, the Cham have two major subgroups; the traditionalist, Cham Bani, and the orthodox, Cham-Cham. Some Cambodian Muslims prefer to be

[10] U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, *Cambodia 2020 International Religious Freedom Report*, May 2021, 2, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/240282-CAMBODIA-2020-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[11] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning, National Institute of Statistics, *General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019: National Report on Final Census Results*, Oct 2020, Phnom Penh, 23, https://www.nis.gov.kh/nis/Census2019/Final%20General%20Population%20Census%20 2019-English.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[12] U.S. Department of State, 2.

referred to as "Khmer Islam." These Muslims may be of Cham origins or may have origins elsewhere and do not necessarily identify themselves in the same ethnic terms as the Cham. For some that call themselves Khmer Islam, they may even see themselves more closely linked to the Khmer ethnicity while practicing Islam.

The Khmer Krom (literally translated as "lower Khmer" or "southern Khmer"), on the other hand, are also one of the minority groups with origins in an area historically referred to by Cambodians as *Kampuchea Krom* (meaning lower Cambodia), which covers modern day southern Cambodia and Vietnam's Mekong Delta. In Vietnam, the Khmer Krom are considered an ethnic minority group. However, a sizable population migrated from present-day Vietnam to Cambodia, where they are no longer seen as an ethnic minority given their Khmer ancestry. Nevertheless, as a migrating population with a distinct background and past outside of Cambodia, they can be seen by some as a cultural minority with distinct issues in terms of legal identity, language variation, and histories. There are no reliable figures on the exact Khmer Krom population living in Cambodia. Even though those that live in Cambodia are considered Cambodian, as declared by the government of Cambodia, domestic laws have made it sometimes difficult for the Khmer Krom to obtain identity documents because, for instance, they lack a permanent address in Cambodia.[13]

[13] Alliance for Conflict Transformation, Khmer Kampuchea Krom for Human Rights and Development Association and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, *Citizenship rights for Khmer Krom in Cambodia*, Jan 2017, https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/report/report/english/2017_01_27_CCHR_Report_on_Legal_Status_of_Khmer_Krom_English.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

As recognised globally, violence against women takes place regardless of age, class, race and ethnicity.[14] According to a report titled *The Status of Cambodian Women*, "the lower social status of women… means that many are treated as mere possessions or objects, and are denied their rights and full participation in society."[15] An example of this deep seated inequity can be felt in a commonly spoken Cambodian proverb, "Men are gold, women are white cloth," which reveals the lower social value ascribed to Cambodian women. The metaphor further demonstrates how a woman's reputation is seen as easily damaged and stained, while men are difficult to tarnish.[16] The reputation of an adolescent Cambodian girl can be fragile and subject to more scrutiny than that of a boy.

This double standard provides the context where women and girls are vulnerable to gender based violence. The most recent 2015 national survey on women's health and life experience in Cambodia showed that one in five Cambodian women, aged 15 – 64, had experienced physical and/or sexual violence, and one in three women had experienced emotional violence from their intimate partner.[17] The survey also revealed a concerning attitude of acceptance of violence, with 58% of the female respondents condoning husbands hitting their spouses under certain circumstances, such as in instances of unfaithfulness, or when the spouse is not taking care

[14] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, *National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experience in Cambodia Report*, 2015, 17.

[15] Mélanie Walsh, *Report on the Status of Cambodian Women: Domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking for sexual exploitation*, Montreal: Université du Québec à Montréal, 2007.

[16] Amnesty International, *Breaking the Silence: Sexual Violence in Cambodia*, London: 2010, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa230012010en.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[17] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Survey on Women's Health,* 46.

of their baby. Significantly, only 27% of male respondents had the same opinion. In addition, 19% of women did not believe that married women could refuse sex with their husbands as it was seen to be part of their marital obligation.[18] A culture of victim blaming remains omnipresent in Cambodian society and continues to be sustained and perpetuated even by the media itself.[19] Prevalent gender stereotypes and gendered expectations further disempower women and girls from speaking up. In Cambodia, 49% of female victims of violence chose not to tell anyone except family and/or neighbours about their cases. One of the common reasons for not reporting is because this kind of violence has become normalised.

Importantly, divorce remains subject to public stigma. Sexual and reproductive health issues are also problematic among adolescents due to lack of knowledge, particularly because discussion about sex continues to be taboo, especially among rural girls.[20] For ethnic, religious, and cultural minority women and girls, who often find themselves in more culturally and socially conservative, economically disadvantaged, and isolated contexts, and have less exposure to mainstream sources of information, these gender issues can be amplified.

In Cambodia, child marriage remains a common practice in rural areas, with approximately 2% of girls getting married before the age of 15, while 19%

[18] Ibid, 64.

[19] For an understanding of how media perpetuates victim blaming in Cambodia, see the case in Kong Meta and Ananth Baliga, "News anchor draws ire for saying women should 'not resist' rape," *The Phnom Penh Post*, Aug 14, 2017, https://phnompenhpost.com/national/news-anchor-draws-ire-saying-women-should-not-resist-rape (accessed Feb 14, 2022).

[20] Jaime R Lopez, Pamela E Mukaire and Ronald H Mataya, "Characteristics of youth sexual and reproductive health and risky behaviors in two rural provinces of Cambodia," *Reproductive Health* 12, no. 83 (2015): 2, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-015-0052-5.

get married before the age of 18 years old.[21] Cambodia also has a high teen pregnancy rate, with one in eight girls aged 15-19 already having their first child.[22] Teen pregnancy often makes it difficult for girls to continue their education, leaving them more likely to be vulnerable to intimate partner violence as they enter adulthood.[23] Not only is violence against women and girls a serious violation of human rights, it also has major economic impacts, hindering the growth of the economy and resulting in a low productivity of Growth Domestic Products (GDP) from 1.2 to 2%.[24]

Political empowerment of women in Cambodia is also much lower than the worldwide average. According to the 2021 Gender Global Gap Index, Cambodia placed a dismal 103 out of 156 countries world-wide.[25] Women are largely excluded from decision-making processes, which have resulted in inequitable political leadership and underrepresentation in professional positions at all government levels.

Like most countries, women account for more than half of the national population, yet hold a minority of political representatives.[26] A mere 20% of National Assembly seats and just 15% of Senate seats in Cambodia are held

[21] UNICEF Cambodia and Division of Data, Research and Policy, UNICEF New York, *A Statistical Profile of Child Protection in Cambodia*, United Nations Children's Fund, New York, March, 2018. https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/media/711/file (accessed Feb 16, 2022).

[22] Ibid, 13.

[23] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Survey on Women's Health*, 101.

[24] World Health Organisation, *Violence against women: a global health problem of epidemic proportions*, Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2013.

[25] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*, 2021, 143-144, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[26] See, for example, World Bank Data, *Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS (accessed Feb 14, 2022).

by women.[27] Approximately 17% of Commune Council seats were held by women in 2017, while only 8% of the commune chiefs were female.[28] The stark political inequalities reach right down to every young girl in the country who witness systemic under-representation, power imbalance, and the lack of female voices in policy decisions that affect their everyday lives.

On top of this are the increased risks and vulnerability of specific groups, such as minority women and girls from Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Muslim, and Khmer Krom communities. Minority girls and women are internationally and nationally recognised as one among the most vulnerable groups and face discrimination regularly. Girls from these groups often find themselves at the intersection of gender inequality, minority marginalisation, and age discrimination both inside their communities and vis-à-vis the Cambodian Khmer majority population.

The government of Cambodia has also specifically recognised Indigenous, ethnic, and religious minority women as vulnerable and who face a higher risk of violence with less access to justice:

> Women who are stigmatized and are neglected or ignored in their communities or in society occupy a very vulnerable position, which increases their risk of human rights abuses, including violence... In Cambodia this includes (but not limited to) women with disabilities, women living with HIV, LBT women, sex workers, entertainment workers, garment factory workers and other

[27] Cambodia Development Resource Institute, "Gatekeepers in Local Politics: Political Parties in Cambodia and their Gender Policy," *CDRI Working Paper Series* No. 87, Phnom Penh: Invent Cambodia, January 2014, 8-10, https://cdri.org.kh/public/storage/pdf/wp87e_1617793505.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[28] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning, National Institute of Statistics, *Women and Men in Cambodia, Facts and Figures 2018,* Phnom Penh, April 2018, 64, https://www.nis.gov.kh/nis/WM/Women%20and%20Men's%20in%20Cambodia%20final%20version_EN.pdf (accessed Feb 16, 2022).

female workers, women who use drugs or their partners use drugs, women in prisons, indigenous women and women from religious or ethnic minorities.[29]

To summarise, minority girls and women are at risk of higher exposure to violence and gender-based violence, they have more problems accessing public services such as health, education and justice, and are likely to be more economically disadvantaged or at higher risk of poverty and health issues.[30] However, the majority population is often unaware of the acute problems that minority women and girls face, resulting in their continued marginalisation. Even the national survey on women's health and life experience includes only 0.3% of Cambodian women who speak another language other than Khmer. Ethnic data is also not included. This demonstrates a major gap in information available on the situation of minority girls and women in the country. In particular, until now, there have been no significant studies or research carried out to bring voices from minority girls directly to the public.

While each group has its own unique context, what can be finally said is that all minorities are facing major difficulties in Cambodia.[31] Using a "triple burden" lens to explore minority status, gender, and age, it is crucial to put focus on minority girls in the country and understand the major existing gaps that prevent their full inclusion and equality in society.

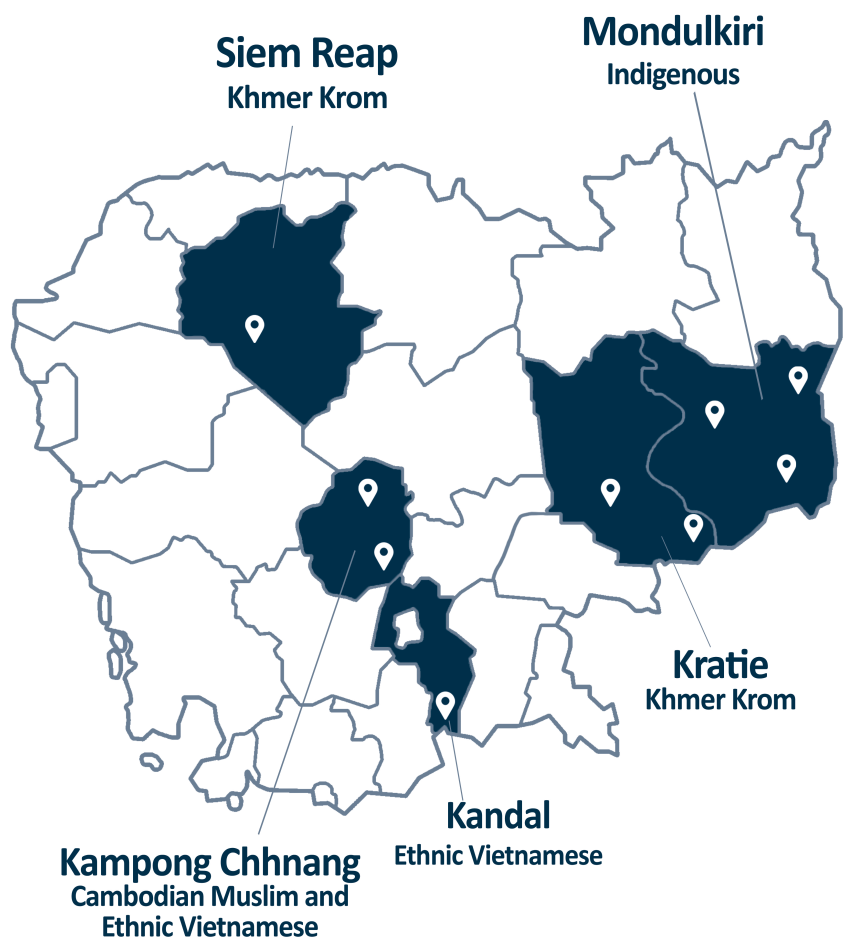
[29] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, *National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women 2014 – 2018*, Dec 5, 2014, 6, https://cambodia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/NAPVAW2014-2018%28Eng%29.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[30] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, "Rights: Vulnerable Groups of Women and Girls Cambodia Gender Assessment," *Policy Brief* 9, 2014, 5, https://www1.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DemoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20Rattanak%204%20-%20Vulnerable%20Groups%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls_Eng.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022).

[31] Kirchner, 57.

Community Profiles and Demographics

Locations and communities



Mondulkiri: Indigenous (Bunong)

Located in the northeast of Cambodia, Mondulkiri province is known for its highlands and Indigenous communities. Although one of the largest, it is also one of the most sparsely populated provinces in the country. The population is made up of largely Indigenous groups, most notably the Bunong. Other residents include Khmer, Cambodian Muslim, and ethnic Chinese. Mondulkiri faces numerous challenges in terms of illegal logging and land disputes.

This study included FLD Sharers, focus group participants, and survey respondents mainly from Dak Dam Commune and partly from Sen Monorom town and Pech Chreada District, a rural area approximately 30km from the provincial capital of Sen Monorom. Dak Dam residents are mainly from the Indigenous Bunong group and are known for subsistence farming. The area lacks a school, with the nearest high schools being 20km and 40km away. Both schools are overcrowded and students from Dak Dam face challenges in registering even if they want to attend.

Kampong Chhnang: Cambodian Muslims and Ethnic Vietnamese

Given that the soil in Kampong Chhnang province is not very productive for farming, the province has become an industrial area with many factories.

This study included two minority groups in the province. In Kampong Tralach District, Cambodian Muslims from a large community were included as Sharers. Given that Cambodian Muslims include diverse groups, both traditionalist and orthodox Cham groups were contacted. The traditionalist Cham (also known as the Cham Bani) in this study mainly reside in Orussey commune while the orthodox Cham (also known as the Cham-Cham) reside in Chres and Chhuk Sa Communes.

The two distinct Cambodian Muslim communities are approximately 20km from each other.

The ethnic Vietnamese in Kampong Chhnang, who live mainly on the river at Chong Koh village, 1.6 km from the provincial capital, were also included. The floating village communities are known to be quite transient, with the ability to move locations along the river or even up into the Tonle Sap Lake.

Kandal: Ethnic Vietnamese

Kandal Province surrounds the Cambodian capital city of Phnom Penh. It also extends on the eastern side of the country along the border with Vietnam. This study included a second ethnic Vietnamese community in Koh Thom District next to the Cambodia-Vietnam border. Most work was carried out in a small village in a district with sizable Khmer, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Chinese populations. Being so close to the border, many people in the province earn incomes from trade and cross-border business. Given the diversity and proximity to Vietnam, inter-marriage among different ethnic groups is quite common and mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer populations are present.

Siem Reap: Khmer Krom

Siem Reap is an internationally renowned tourist destination famous for temples and places to visit, including the historical Angkor Wat. The surrounding temple areas provide many opportunities for business and interaction with outsiders, with many locals dependent on tourist seasons. Although there is not a large population of Khmer Krom descendants in Siem Reap, there are communities and some connections among those who identify as Khmer Krom. There is also an active association of Khmer Krom community members and those of ethnic Khmer ancestry in Vietnam continue to come to settle in Siem Reap.

This study carried out focus group discussions and survey interviews in several communes such as Sla Kram, Kok Chak, Svay Dankum, and Sam Buor. Khmer Krom residents in Siem Reap often sell street food to earn an income.

Kratie: Khmer Krom

Kratie province, in the northeast of Cambodia, has 140km of the Mekong River stretching through its heavily forested region. Considered one of the poorest provinces in the country, Kratie also has a large Indigenous population. In this study, a small FLD activity was conducted with Khmer Krom community members mainly in Khsuem Commune within Snuol District and Kratie town. Khmer Krom families in Kratie tend to live among mainstream Khmer and hence do not have specific communities or locations.

FLD Demographics

Listeners conducted FLD fieldwork with 130 community members referred to as "Sharers."

Gender and sex

Gender	# of Sharers	% of Sharers
Female	127	98%
Male	3	2%

Nearly all Sharers were female. Three males were included in FLD conversations in some cases to include diverse perspectives.

Age

Age of Sharers	# of Sharers	% (of 130)
14-19 years old	117	90%
20-52 years old	13	10%

Almost all (90%) of the Sharers represented adolescents between the ages of 14 to 19 years old. A small number of conversations took place with family or community members to get a sample of perceptions on minority girls with 10% in the age range of 20 to 52 years old.

Minority group

With a focus on ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups, identity was an important factor in engaging Sharers. The four main groups in this study included Indigenous (all from the Bunong group), ethnic Vietnamese (including both those living in Kampong Chhnang or Kandal provinces as subgroups as well as mixed-race), Cambodian Muslims (including both traditionalist and orthodox Cham as subgroups), and Khmer Krom. The subgroups within the four main categories served to distinguish diversity in the identified grouping.

For Cambodian Muslims, traditionalist and orthodox Cham generally self-identified as one or the other, with traditionalist Cham tending to view themselves as an ethnic minority and orthodox Cham seeing themselves as a religious minority. Although both groups shared a common faith and lived only 20km apart, they were quite different in terms of culture and religious practice. Therefore, Listeners were asked to identity their particular group within the Cambodian Muslim choice in the demographics section.

Ethnic Vietnamese were further identified as either from Kampong Chhnang province or Kandal province due to the very significant differences in their community and identity make-up. In Kampong Chhnang, for instance, ethnic Vietnamese tended to live in floating villages along the river, were far more isolated from mainstream culture and Khmer language, and nearly all had issues related to legal identity or were at risk of statelessness. Ethnic Vietnamese in Kandal, however, were often mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer, somewhat more likely to have identification documents, able to freely cross country borders, and could speak Khmer language and integrate into mainstream culture with more ease.

Minority identity of Sharer	# of Sharers	% (of 130)
Indigenous	40	31%
Ethnic Vietnamese	40	31%
Cambodian Muslim	40	31%
Khmer Krom	10	7%

Conversation language

Listeners used the language that was most comfortable for the Sharer, either being in a non-Khmer mother tongue, Khmer, or a mix of both. Bunong, Vietnamese, Cham, and Khmer were the languages spoken in the conversations.

Language used in conversation	# of Conversations	% (of 130)
Bunong	39	30%
Vietnamese	28	22%
Mixed Vietnamese and Khmer	5	4%
Cham	20	15%
Mixed Cham and Khmer	5	4%
Khmer	33	25%

Occupation

Listeners attempted to reach out to girls and community members with a range of diverse occupations. Given that many girls were between the ages of 15 to 19, most Sharers tended to be students. Some also self-identified as school drop-outs, while others conveyed that they were unemployed. Others identified other occupations, both in the formal and informal sectors.

Occupation	# of Sharers
Student	82
Seller	7
Farmer	5
Factory worker	4
Fishing industry	4
Boat tour operator	1
Teacher	1
Housewife	1
Did not answer or unemployed	25

Focus group discussion demographics

Twelve focus group discussions were carried with community members consisting of grandparents, parents, and siblings of minority girls. In total, 53 participants joined focus groups.

Gender and sex

The focus groups were conducted separately for women and men.

Gender	# of participants	% (of 53)
Female	**31**	**58%**
Male	**22**	**42%**

Age

The focus group facilitators reached a wide range of participants across generations in their communities. Participants ranged from the ages of 18 to 70 years old.

Minority group

Given the focus on diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural minority girls, there was a wide range of minority groups represented in focus group discussions that were facilitated by youth from the same communities. The participants joined from Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese (from Kandal or from Kampong Chhnang provinces), Cambodian Muslim (traditionalist or orthodox Cham),

and Khmer Krom communities. All facilitators came from the minority groups that the communities identified with.

Minority identity of participants	# of participants	% (of 53)
Indigenous	**12**	**23%**
Ethnic Vietnamese	**13**	**24%**
Cambodian Muslim	**20**	**38%**
Khmer Krom	**8**	**15%**

Focus group discussion languages

In the total 12 focus group discussions held, facilitators each conducted the discussion in the language that the participants preferred. Elders, in particular, often preferred to speak in their native languages. In some circumstances, the facilitators mixed minority languages with Khmer language depending on the preference of the whole group.

Language used in focus group	Focus groups
Bunong	**2**
Vietnamese	**4**
Cham	**4**
Khmer	**2**

Survey Demographics

Gender and sex

Given that the project focused on the lives of minority girls, survey participants were all female. The survey was carried out with 160 girls and young women to better understand their lives and find both shared and distinct perspectives among all minority groups.

Age

A priority was put on reaching adolescent girls between the ages of 14 to 19. In some cases, interviewers selected slightly older respondents (women) in communities. This was especially the case when it was difficult to locate younger girls in some rural communities.

Age of Respondents	# of Respondents	% (of 160)
14-19 years old	**139**	**87%**
20-26 years old	**21**	**13%**

Minority group

The survey was conducted with the same ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups as FLD and focus group discussions. This included respondents from Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslim, and Khmer Krom communities.

Minority group	# of Respondents	% (of 160)
Indigenous	40	25%
Ethnic Vietnamese	40	25%
Cambodian Muslim	40	25%
Khmer Krom	40	25%

Occupation

In order to understand the lives of the girls and young women interviewed, respondents were asked to identify their status either as a student, working outside the home, or working inside the home or unemployed.

Occupation status	# of Respondents	% (of 160)
Student	79	49%
Work outside of the home	48	30%
Stay at home or unemployed	33	21%

The Findings

Indigenous
Girls

“Our land, our pride”

A 19-year-old Bunong girl mixed watercolour and oil paint to express her Indigenous identity to others. Her work of art portrays a group of friends in her ancestral homeland coming together to protect their territory and ensure it stays green, natural, and forever healthy.

Background

Indigenous peoples in Cambodia make up one of the country's recognised ethnic minority groups. Statistics on the composition of Indigenous peoples within the full scope of the Cambodian population vary. The Commune Database Statistics in 2015 showed an approximate population of 276,878 Indigenous from 24 groups residing in 15 provinces.[32] However, the more recent 2021 National Report on the Demographic and Socio-Economic Status of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia, issued jointly by the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Rural Development, has identified 183,831 Indigenous peoples from 22 recognised groups, or about 1.25% of the Cambodian population with an annual growth rate of 0.51%.[33] The report's identification of Indigenous communities was based on their unique languages spoken. Language has traditionally been an important indicator around the globe in regards to recognising Indigenous populations not only in its importance for communication, but also in representing a desire to preserve a culture or way of life.[34] The report also claims that among the 22 Indigenous groups, there are only six groups with populations over 10,000. These include the Tampuan, Bunong, Kreung, Kuy, Jarai and Brao, which account for approximately 88% of the total Indigenous population of Cambodia. 92.4% of Indigenous communities are largely concentrated in only six provinces including Ratanakiri, Mondulkiri, Kratie, Stung Treng,

[32] Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Alliance, Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association, and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, *Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia: Submission for the 3rd Cycle of Universal Periodic Review of Cambodia 32nd Session of the Human Rights Council January – February 2019*, (2019), https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/cambodia/session_32_-_january_2019/js1_upr32_khm_e_main.pdf (accessed Feb 9, 2021).

[33] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning and Ministry of Rural Development, *National Report On Demographic And Socio-Economic Status Of Indigenous Peoples In Cambodia*, 8, https://cipocambodia.org/national-report-on-demographic-and-socio-economic-status-of-indigenous-peoples-in-cambodia/ (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[34] José R. Martínez Cobo, "Definition of Indigenous Populations," *Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations* (New York: United Nations, 1981), 172-209.

Kampong Thom, and Preah Vihear.[35] The Indigenous Bunong group residing in Mondulkiri, the focus of this study, is considered to be the second largest population of Indigenous peoples in the country. The most recent demographic statistic indicates a population of 47,296 (2013) with 51.2% identifying as women or girls.[36]

Culture and traditions have generally been essential for the preservation of Indigenous identity among groups often living in widely dispersed communities.[37] For many Indigenous communities, language is an emerging issue that impacts the lives of different groups. Language loss is commonly acknowledged, with many having lost the ability to speak the native tongues of their community. This often leads to Indigenous peoples becoming less confident to even declare an Indigenous identity.[38] This could explain some of the potential shifts in understanding demographic changes in data on Indigenous populations in Cambodia, with more recent research reducing the number of Indigenous groups and population numbers from prior years.[39] If language becomes a prerequisite in identifying Indigenous groups in the country, those in rapid process of language loss could be left out from general census and data statistics. Even for those navigating life in a mainstream society dominated by Khmer language, literacy is a significant issue. Some data points to only 33.8% of Indigenous peoples aged 15 and

[35] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Report On Demographic And Socio-Economic Status Of Cambodia*, xii.

[36] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning, National Institute of Statistics, *Cambodia Inter-Censal Population Survey 2013: Analysis of CIPS Results Report 7, Literacy and Educational Attainment*, Phnom Penh, Feb 14, 2014, https://www.stat.go.jp/info/meetings/cambodia/pdf/c13ana07.pdf (accessed Feb 18, 2022).

[37] Kirchner, *Living on the Margins*, 41.

[38] Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Alliance et al., *Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia*, point 2.

[39] Many reports over the last decade have recognised 24 Indigenous groups in Cambodia while the most recent by the Ministry of Planning and Ministry of Rural Development only identifies 22 groups.

over being able to read and write Khmer, which contrasts to the general Cambodian population's literacy rate of 79%.[40]

Access to education is a significant issue among Indigenous communities. The government of Cambodia has recognised that Indigenous peoples have some of the lowest registration numbers in schools in the country. In fact, the percentage of Indigenous youth pursuing an education at secondary and high school levels is the lowest among all groups in Cambodia.[41] The government has also recognised that limited access to education is one of the most significant challenges facing Indigenous communities in the country. Many young Indigenous peoples are studying in grades far below their age and school dropout is a widespread problem. Nearly 66% of Indigenous youth, aged 15 years and older, do not go to school, while less than 1% ever finish high school. Almost 50% of all Indigenous children and youth, aged 6 to 18, have had no formal education whatsoever, which contrasts to the general population statistic of Cambodian children reaching high school graduation (10.59% from the same age group).[42]

More qualitative gender analyses have indicated that traditional roles of men and women in Indigenous communities differ among groups, but some general trends exist. Women are often tasked with duties related to preparing food, medicine, water supply, and field cultivation. Many Indigenous groups do have higher status roles for women, such as serving as community elders, religious leaders, healers, medicinal experts, and

[40] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Report On Demographic And Socio-Economic Status Of Cambodia*, 46.

[41] Son Minea, "Indigenous people are poorly educated with health, livelihood challenged," Khmer Times, Nov 5, 2021, https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50965260/indigenous-people-are-poorly-educated-with-health-livelihood-challenged (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[42] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Report On Demographic And Socio-Economic Status Of Cambodia*, 45-49.

midwives, for example.[43] However, societal changes are happening through mainstream influence in a more modern and contemporary context. As Indigenous men move more into a market economy in Cambodia's development, social biases about men also permeate traditional Indigenous ways of being and worldviews. In 2013, it was estimated that almost 58.9% of Indigenous men vs. 18.3% of Indigenous women are engaged in self-employment.[44] Some observers see an indication of differentiation developing in regard to economic status between men and women, where the work between the two sexes is no longer equal due to monetary compensation. This further marginalises women in Indigenous communities, and ultimately affects how girls are viewed and how roles and expectations on them form.[45] Some smaller studies on power and gender dynamics, specifically in Indigenous Bunong communities in Mondulkiri province, have purported that women more often hold dominant roles in their households in relation to key decision making as the "money safe box keepers" of the family.[46] However, another recent study found that even though Indigenous women seem to have "considerable household decision making ability," they still tend to have less voice and influence compared to men when it comes to any decisions outside of the household (group membership, employment, vehicle purchases, etc.).[47] This may be because women are more involved in reproductive roles as approximately

[43] Kirchner, 41.

[44] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Report On Demographic And Socio-Economic Status Of Cambodia, 60.*

[45] Kirchner, *43.*

[46] Piseth Vann, *Case Study on Indigenous Women's Voice, Livelihood, and Climate Change Adaptation in Pu Chhorb and Krang Teh Village, Mondulkiri Province,* Nov 15, 2019, 28.

[47] Cambodia Development Resource Institute, *Gender inclusive and development analysis: Women|LGBTI|People with Disabilities|Cham|Vietnamese|Indigenous Peoples,* Phnom Penh: USAID Cambodia, 2020, 29, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X7PN.pdf (accessed Feb 7, 2022); See also Sreyneang Loek and Raymond Hyma, *Indigenous identity and gender: Cambodian Indigenous women navigate life in the capital* (Phnom Penh: CIWWG/Women Peace Makers, 2020).

78.4% of Indigenous women continue to engage in unpaid work.[48] In addition, the fact that almost 84.4% of Indigenous communities lived without a toilet in 2013 further compounds issues for girls in relation to sexual and reproductive health as they reach puberty.[49]

In contrast to ethnic Khmer girls, Indigenous girls are far more likely to get married at a young age. 10.5% of Indigenous girls under the age of 15 are married versus only 1.5% of Khmer girls who are similarly married before becoming an adult. Over half (55%) of Indigenous girls between the ages of 15 to 19 years old are married while 39.7% of ethnic Khmer girls in the same age range get married. By the time Indigenous women reach the age of 24, 86.2% of them are married in contrast to Khmer women who have a marriage rate of 82.7%.[50] These numbers show that Indigenous girls are far more likely to be married at a much younger age than the mainstream Khmer population of Cambodia. In terms of education, only 24.6% of Indigenous girls aged 15 years and older, compared to 43.8% of Indigenous boys, can read and write Khmer language.

This study has focused entirely on the Indigenous Bunong community in three sites in Mondulkiri province. Located in both northeast Cambodia and southwest Vietnam, the Indigenous Bunong peoples have a large presence particularly in the highlands of Mondulkiri. Often living in settlements with close relations, Bunong are generally animist, rely on farming and the natural landscape of their environments, and maintain their language, arts, and strong cultural traditions.[51]

[48] Royal Government of Cambodia, *National Report On Demographic And Socio-Economic Status Of Cambodia*, 60.

[49] Ibid., 70.

[50] Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Alliance et al., *Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia*, point 31.

[51] Vann, *Case Study*, 14.

Women and men are both involved with farming with women more responsible for things inside the house. They are also more involved in selling food and livestock. Although once holding important status and roles, it appears that Bunong women are losing their influence in their communities. They also tend to have less free time than Bunong men, especially in the evenings. Since girls and women generally stay at home in Bunong communities, they are most often responsible for money management.[52] For Bunong youth, there has traditionally been resistance by their parents to allow them to attend school. More emphasis has been put on hunting, food collection, and learning how to live in the jungle.[53] For girls, that sentiment is extended further, particularly in the situation that they wish to go to the capital city to study. Some Bunong girls, for example, fear that their reputations will be tarnished since there tends to be a perception that Bunong girls who move to the city become prostitutes.[54] Bunong girls have particular challenges in their lives, but also provide a window into understanding barriers, triumphs, and the lives of many Indigenous girls country-wide.

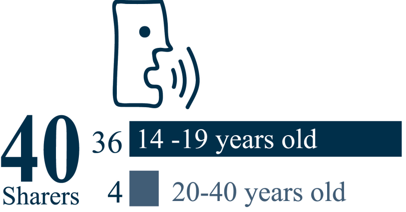
[52] Todd Bequette, *A livelihood and gender study of three Bunong kroms* (Phnom Penh: International Cooperation Committee, July 2004), 16-18.

[53] Mark Bibby Jackson, "Ethnic students swap the jungle for school," *The Phnom Penh Post*, Mar 25, 2011, https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-plus/ethnic-students-swap-jungle-school (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[54] Loek and Hyma, *Indigenous identity and gender*, 32.

Location and demographics

INDIGENOUS GIRLS



Focus Group Discussions

12 Participants

18 – 70 years old

Target locations

Mondulkiri Province

Survey

40 Respondents (14 – 19 years old)

FLD, focus group, and survey findings

Voices from Indigenous girls and their communities

FLD emerging themes

1. Indigenous girls want to preserve and study their language(s) but have difficulty accessing any available resources.
2. Indigenous girls are proud of their identity and want others to understand and accept their traditions and culture to end discrimination and negative stereotypes.
3. Most Indigenous girls feel shy, they lack understanding about sexual and reproductive health, and see it as a taboo.
4. The lack of a supportive space makes Indigenous girls feel less confident in expressing their ideas in public.
5. Lack of infrastructure, facilities, and public services is still a major concern for Indigenous girls in their communities.
6. Social norms, perceptions, and lack of resources continue to be barriers for Indigenous girls.
7. Some Indigenous women and girls want to see girls in their communities pursue higher education and become community leaders.
8. Indigenous girls do not have as much freedom and/or opportunities as Indigenous boys.
9. Violence against children is common in Indigenous communities.
10. Indigenous girls who drop out of school have little choice but working on farms, doing housework, or getting married at an early age.

Language is important

> I love my mother tongue and I want to learn it in the future. I want to know how to read and write it. I hope that we can have a school to teach the children in the community so that our religion, culture, and tradition won't go extinct.

-A 16-year-old Bunong girl who studies at a high school in Oureang District

Finding 1 Indigenous girls want to preserve and study their language(s) but have difficulty accessing any available resources.

Indigenous girls and young women from their communities overwhelmingly emphasised the desire to study and fluently use their local Bunong language and dialects. Of the 40 girls and young women participating in FLD conversations, 35 (87.5%) mentioned the importance of language. Many wanted to learn how to read and write, which they associated with preserving their culture and traditions, and ultimately their identity.

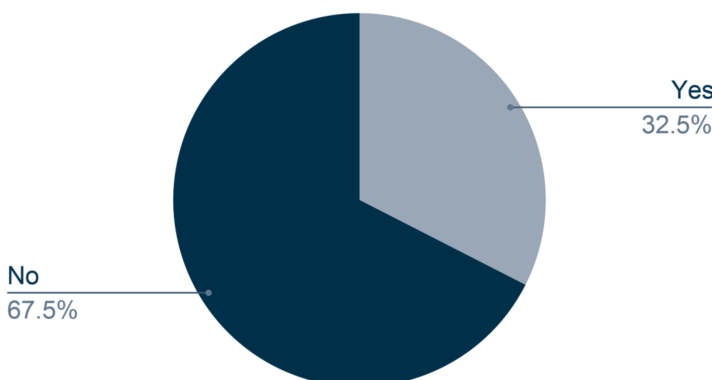
Sharers highlighted that the lack of teachers able to teach Bunong and the non-existence of Indigenous-centred schools were the major barriers for them to acquire fluency in their language. For those attending public or private schools, the discouragement of speaking Indigenous languages in Khmer classrooms further contributed to the ongoing perceived loss of their mother tongue. Many said that they were able to speak the language but unable to read or write. Nearly all of them expressed a strong desire to know how to read and write Bunong. Likewise, mothers, aunts, and older sisters included in the FLD study were all keen that girls have strong Bunong fluency. Of the 40 Sharers, only one said that she was not interested in her language because she felt it was not useful away from her

community. The vast majority emphasised their wish to learn it and study in their mother tongues.

All Indigenous adult women included in the FLD study strongly supported Bunong language learning and advocated the importance of their mother tongue in the lives of their daughters, nieces, and sisters. A 40-year-old Sharer frankly told the Listeners "I want my niece to study our language even if we can't use it outside our community. My own kids don't know Bunong because they don't study. I want to see the next generation able to use our language."

Apart from having nowhere to learn Bunong or teachers to support them, many Sharers confessed their embarrassment in not having a strong language ability. A 15-year-old Sharer said, "I want to learn Bunong because I don't want others to look down on us." Language was deeply connected to pride of identity as expressed by another 17-year-old Sharer who stated, "I want to study my language so I can proudly say I'm Bunong when someone asks me and it's our responsibility to study our language." Sharers overwhelmingly lamented the potential loss of their language happening at present and imagined future generations giving up Bunong.

Indigenous Bunong girls who participated in the survey showed that although many had some proficiency in the Bunong language, full fluency was not common. This could be a result of a majority of girls never having actually studied their minority language.



32.5% of the Indigenous girls surveyed said they had studied their mother tongue while 67.5% had not.

- 46% of them who studied Bunong said they learnt it in schools run by the Christian Church.
- Only 15% of all the girls said they felt they had full fluency and were able to read, write, listen, and speak the Bunong language.
- 85% said they could at least speak Bunong language at various levels with 78% stating they could understand it.

Pride in identity

> I don't feel bad for myself that I was born as Bunong because I like who I am. I want others to know about our culture, traditions, ways of living, and our many other celebrations.

-A 15-year-old girl who dropped out of school to help her parents on the farm

Finding 2 Indigenous girls are proud of their identity and want others to understand and accept their traditions and culture to end discrimination and negative stereotypes.

Pride in Indigenous culture was very apparent among Bunong Sharers in FLD conversations. In fact, every one of the 40 girls and young women who talked with Listeners expressed pride in their Indigenous roots, culture, traditions, and identity. They conveyed that being born of any ethnic identity was not a choice and that they embraced their destiny with not only acceptance, but also honour.

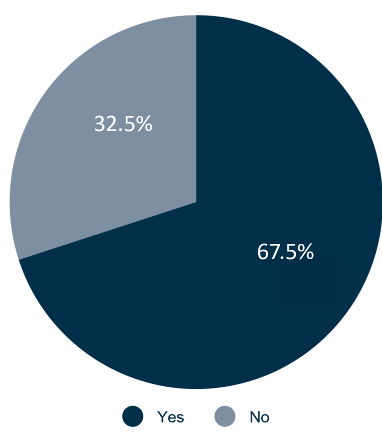
Sharers expressed pride in their identity through highlighting their unique culture and traditions. They specifically highlighted Bunong clothing, their food and drink, animist religion, special ceremonies, and the Bunong language as key components of their Indigenous identity.

Some Indigenous girls and women discussed stereotypes and social discrimination they faced as Bunong. For example, one 16-year-old Sharer said, "I don't have friends from other groups since Khmer people discriminate against us. I don't hate any certain groups at all, I can't judge them because I don't know anything about them." A 40-year-old Sharer confessed she personally had no connections to people from other ethnic groups since

she felt that Bunong people were generally unappreciated, especially by the mainstream Khmer majority. Another 36-year-old mother of two children said that she also did not connect to other groups outside her ethnic community mainly because she felt discriminated against for the colour of her skin, religious practices, accent, and traditional way of living. She felt that non-Indigenous people do not understand Bunong culture and traditions and some look down on them and see them as "stupid and illiterate." This negative perception led to her belief that others thought her children should not be allowed to go to school simply because of their ethnic background, deeply affecting her emotional outlook.

Cultural expression outside of the community was a significant finding in the FLD data. 38 of the 40 Sharers (95%) said they wanted "to show others" their culture, traditions, or way of life. This not only emphasised their feelings of lack of understanding among other ethnic groups, but also highlighted their great pride in their Bunong community. For example, one 14-year-old Indigenous student said, "I want others to know about my culture and community, such as our dress, specific Bunong culture and traditions, as well as our ways of living. I love my identity because I am who I am." For most Sharers, showing "others" generally referred to the Khmer population who they often interacted with in schools and public places.

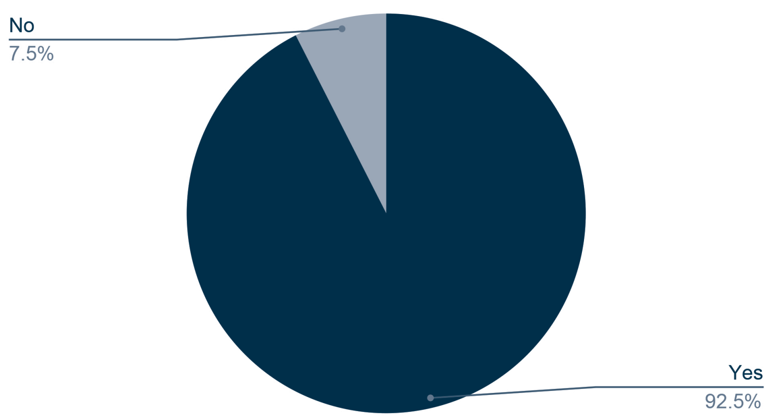
Indigenous Bunong girls interviewed for the survey mirrored the pride of identity seen in the FLD findings. Although all girls in the survey felt pride in being Indigenous, not all were comfortable in revealing their ethnic identity to non-Indigenous, however.



67.5% of the survey respondents said they felt comfortable showing their Indigenous Bunong identity to others, while 32.5% did not.

- 100% said they felt proud of their identity.
- 95%, however, believed that being an Indigenous girl carries more challenges than being a girl in the mainstream ethnic majority (Khmer).
- 50% said they felt marginalised, while 45% said they faced discrimination.

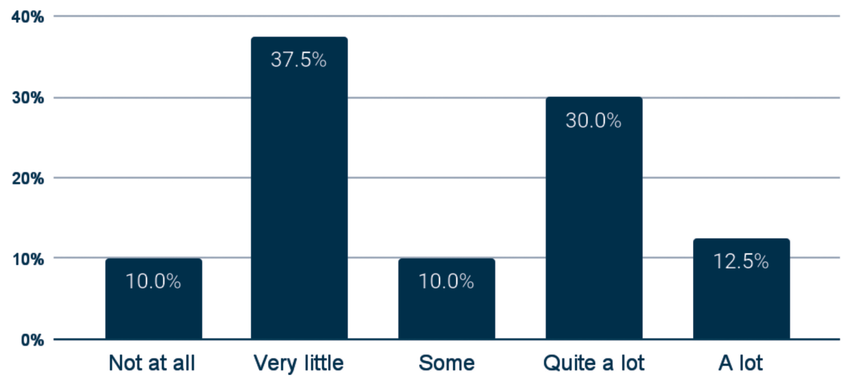
Survey respondents went deeper into discrimination with the vast majority saying that they had faced discrimination in their lifetimes.

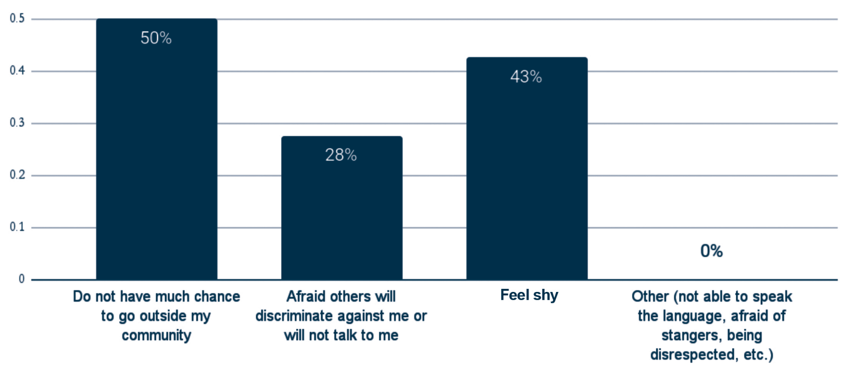


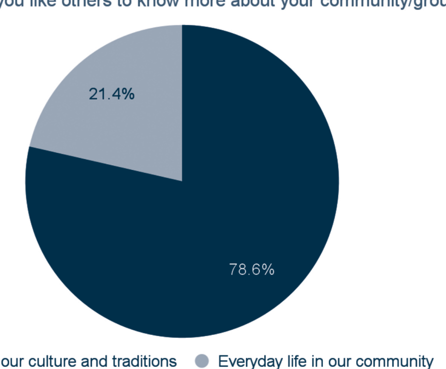
92.5% of Indigenous girls surveyed said that they had felt discriminated against in their lifetimes, while 7.5% said they had not.

- 55% of those who conveyed they experienced discrimination said it was because they practised a non-Buddhist religion, while 50% said they were discriminated against for speaking their mother tongue (Bunong).
- 85% of those who faced discrimination said they felt it made them of less value than others or it made them further self-critical of themselves.

In terms of exposure to other groups outside their communities, Indigenous Bunong girls who participated in the survey varied in their interactions with non-Bunong. The majority, however, wanted others to know more about their Indigenous culture and traditions.


Do you have relationship with people from different groups?
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
37.5%
30.0%
10.0%
10.0%
12.5%
Not at all
Very little
Some
Quite a lot
A lot


If you don't have relationships outside your own community/group; why do you think that is?
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
50%
28%
43%
0%
Do not have much chance to go outside my community
Afraid others will discriminate against me or will not talk to me
Feel shy
Other (not able to speak the language, afraid of stangers, being disrespected, etc.)


What would you like others to know more about your community/group?
21.4%
78.6%
About our culture and traditions
Everyday life in our community

A girl's shame

> I don't feel comfortable talking about sex since I feel embarrassed every time I get my period. I just stay at home and endure the pain until it's over.

-A 17-year-old Bunong girl

Finding 3 **Most Indigenous girls feel shy, they lack understanding about sexual and reproductive health, and see it as a taboo.**

Sexual and reproductive health issues proved to be a sensitive topic among young Indigenous girls. Throughout FLD conversations, 12 out of 40 (30%) Sharers specifically said that they felt shy about discussing issues related to sex, menstruation, or birth control. Only 6 (15%) said that they did not feel shy or uncomfortable talking about it. The rest of the Sharers were somewhere in between, mostly mentioning that they could discuss such issues with their mothers, sisters, or close friends, but not with others.

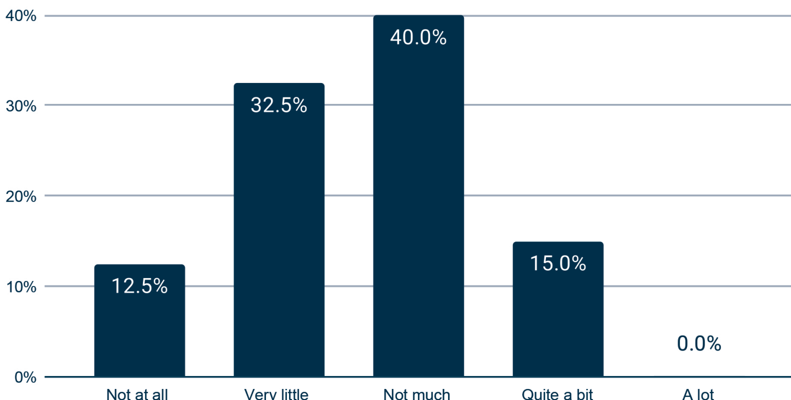
For Indigenous girls that felt shy or ashamed about menstruation or sex, most said that they mainly were on their own, without support or access to knowledge from others. For example, one 18-year-old girl said, "I feel shy talking about sexual and reproductive health so I don't talk to anyone." Another 15-year-old girl shared that she learnt how to manage her period when it came by herself.

Some girls acknowledged that there was a prevalent social norm of not talking about such issues but advocated that this should not be the case. One 18-year-old girl told the Listeners "When I have a menstrual problem, I go to my sister. I still feel a little shy talking with her. I want to see

NGOs promoting these kinds of health issues so that girls know how to take care of themselves." Another 19-year-old girl said that even though she felt comfortable talking with her mother and sisters, "It would be best if there were people coming to help girls learn how to take care of sexual issues and feminine hygiene."

In the focus groups, parents, grandparents and siblings shared their thoughts on sexual and reproductive health in an Indigenous context. Women tended to share stories about their daughters and granddaughters, mostly noting that they did not discuss such issues openly. Some said that they themselves felt shy when their daughters approached them and that it generally was not a topic to be shared with their husbands or other men. In the men's focus group, participants overwhelmingly agreed that Indigenous girls should not bring up topics related to their sexual or reproductive health with them. Older men, in particular, noted that such issues were not traditionally discussed around men, and should not become topics of conversation. One younger married participant expressed that Indigenous girls should be able to talk about sex and menstruation with other women in the family, but should never bring it up with men.

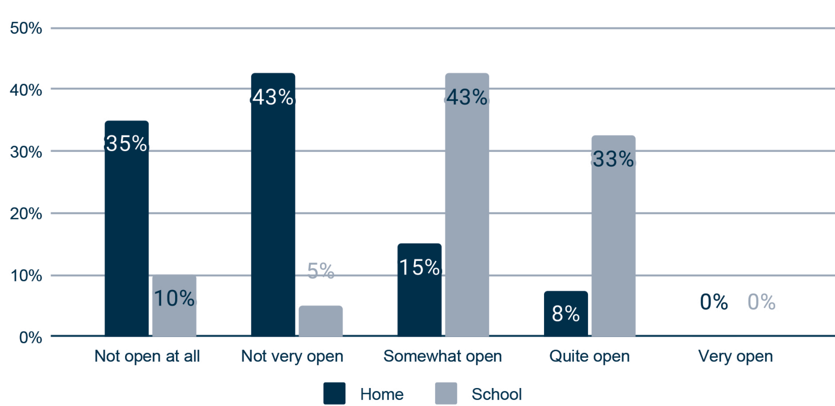
Results from Indigenous girls in the survey group painted a similar picture as FLD and focus group findings. Most girls knew little to nothing about sexual and reproductive health and schools tended to be more open than families to talk about it.



When asked if they knew about sexual and reproductive health, 85% of Indigenous girls surveyed said either not much, very little, or not at all.

- 73% of all surveyed said they did not know whether they have had any sexual health issues.
- 70% said they learnt about sexual and reproductive health at school.
- 33% said they felt shy or uncomfortable talking about the topic.

How open is your family or your school to talk about sexual and reproductive health?



Puberty in shame

Kha, a 14-year-old Indigenous girl shared that she was never comfortable to talk about sex, not even with her mother. Like some Indigenous girls in poverty, she uses a regular piece of cloth when she gets her period and usually does not go to school during those days. She said that sometimes she needs to borrow money from her brother to buy sanitary napkins, but has to lie to him and say it is for something else. Kha feels deeply shameful when she gets her period and says that she once had to cut and use her own scarf when she suddenly got it without warning. She usually does not go to school during her period because she fears someone will find out. She always takes a bath at night to hide her body's natural process. Kha feels there is nobody but her sisters she can talk about this with. Like most girls around her, she became terrified the first time she got her period and went through a traumatic emotional experience trying to understand what was unknown to her.

Self-confidence is a real issue

> I want to have more support for Bunong girls so that they are more confident speaking in public.

-A 17-year-old girl who dropped out of school to help her parents with housework

Finding 4 The lack of a supportive space makes Indigenous girls feel less confident in expressing their ideas in public.

Some Sharers described what they saw as a gap in support for the very prevalent issue of self-confidence among Indigenous girls. A lack of self-confidence was described as connected to the fear of making mistakes,

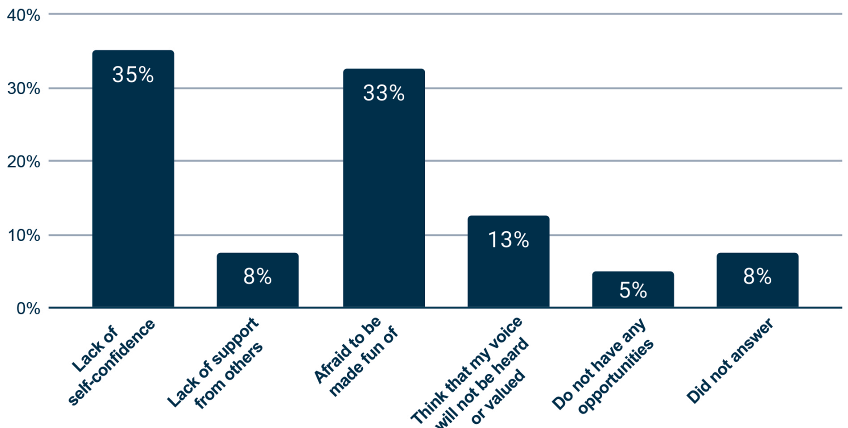
inability to voice concerns, or resistance to get out of their comfort zones. There was some agreement in multiple conversations that Indigenous girls generally want to express themselves and their ideas, but lack the confidence to do so and ultimately fear judgement of them by others.

Five of the 40 Sharers (12.5%) specifically expressed their wish to see more support available for Indigenous girls to build their confidence and have the capacity to speak in public. One 18-year-old girl said, "I want to see more support for Bunong girls so that they can feel more confident to speak out about our challenges." Another 14-year-old girl said, "I want to see more support related to education so that girls feel more confident in expressing themselves. I have seen that girls do not have a supportive environment to really speak in public." The girls who made specific comments on seeking support and space often referred to both educational opportunities as well as social acceptance and encouragement for girls to speak and share more openly in their own communities.

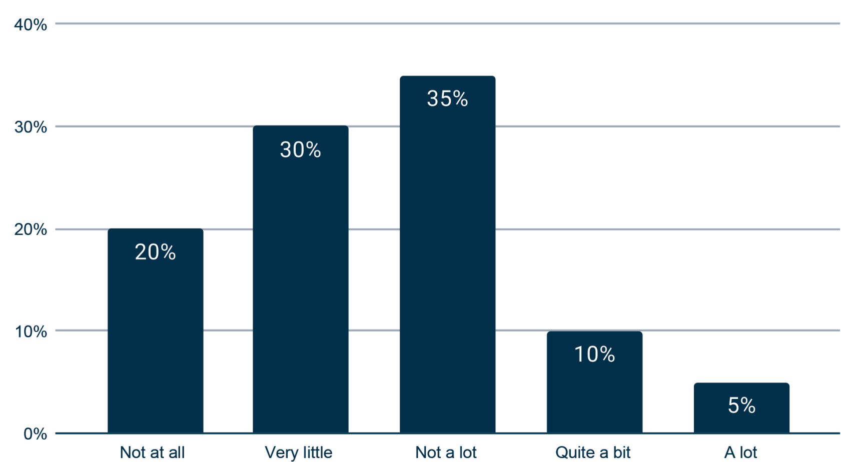
A considerable number of Indigenous girls surveyed also expressed discomfort in conveying their own ideas in their communities and in public, largely due to lack of self-confidence along with other factors.

- 40% of the Indigenous girls surveyed said they felt uncomfortable expressing their ideas in the community or in public.
- They felt uncomfortable due to lack of self-confidence, afraid of being made fun of, thinking their voices would not be heard or valued, lack of support from others, or not having any opportunities.

Why do you feel comfortable to express your ideas in your community/public events?



This also corresponded to an overall lack of community engagement among the girls participating in the survey.



Lacking the basics

The distance from my home to school is really far so it's challenging to get there. There is no proper dormitory with clean water or even a toilet to use.

-An 18-year-old Indigenous girl who lives at her high school outside of her community

Finding 5 Lack of infrastructure, facilities, and public services is still a major concern for Indigenous girls in their communities.

Infrastructure and public services were noted concerns for 15 of the 40 Sharers (37.5%). This ranged from physical infrastructure, such as sanitation and water, to community public services like hygiene education and individual rights.

Lack of toilets was one of the top mentioned infrastructure-related issues in FLD conversations. An 18-year-old girl said that she wanted to see "toilets available in every household." Half of the Sharers (50%) said that they did not have a toilet in their home. In addition to having toilets for family use, they also wished to have more public toilets built in their communities and in public places, such as schools. The need for clean water was similarly discussed. An 18-year-old Sharer said that "The school doesn't even have enough water for the students to use." Roads were also mentioned frequently with Sharers complaining of slippery and undeveloped roadways that created barriers for mobility.

Several Indigenous girls brought up the need for more hygiene education in their communities as an important public service. One 17-year-old Sharer from Bunong Community noted that "It would be great if there were people

promoting good sanitary and hygiene practice to the girls here." Beyond physical infrastructure needs for schools, several Sharers also talked more broadly about education and the lack of support for girls to be able to go to school. An 18 year-old girl from Poutraeng village said, "We need a school that teaches Bunong language. The girls here need a quality education…"

Unlikely dreams

An 18-year-old struggling Bunong high school student took the opportunity to share her personal story with Listeners. She dreamt of going to university because she wanted to see the world outside of her community but said she did not have enough money to attend and noted several real barriers to achieving her dream. Her current high school is too far from her home and she could not ride a motorcycle to get there so she had to move into the school dormitory. The dormitory lacks basic facilities and does not provide a supportive home environment for girls who are studying. Due to not being clean and also lack of safety, she cannot focus on the education she is trying to obtain. Being so far away from home, she has become dependent on others to catch rides with and often feels fearful when travelling between home and school. All of these barriers make dreaming about a university education nearly impossible.

Discouraged to study

> I quit school because I don't have money and my family doesn't seem to support me to continue.

- A 17-year-old vegetable seller

Finding 6 **Social norms, perceptions, and lack of resources continue to be barriers for Indigenous girls.**

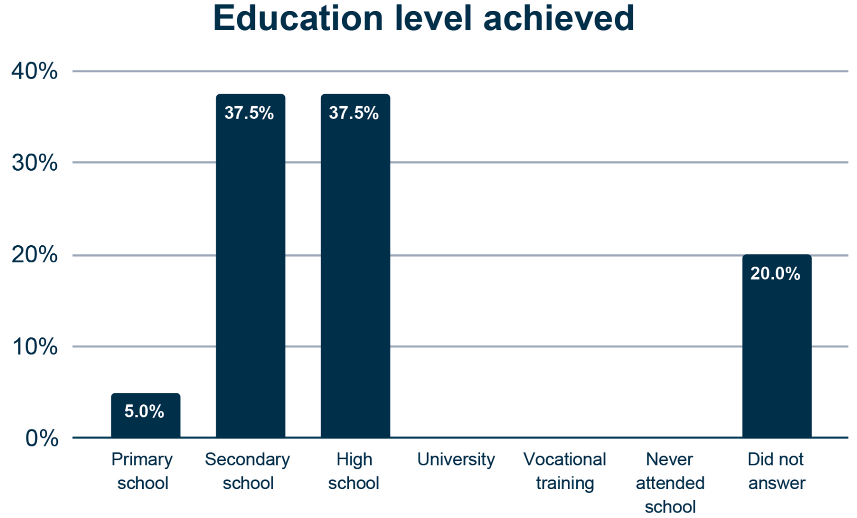
Indigenous girls face multiple barriers to go to school in all levels of education. 28 out of 40 Sharers (70%) said that they already had to quit school or they were at risk of dropping out because of specific challenges.

57.5% of Sharers said that money was either the greatest barrier or one of several barriers that stopped them or other Indigenous girls from going to school, or could prevent them from continuing in the future. Some mentioned they personally did not have their own funds or their families could not financially support them to pursue education both at the high school and university levels. A 15-year-old high school student in Dak Dam Commune said, "I want to finish high school since I won't be able to afford any school after that and I will also need to earn money to support my mother." Another 18-year-old girl who already quit going to school honestly shared her reality: "The main barrier for me to go to school is lack of money since my dad passed away and there is no one else in the family capable of earning an income, so I decided to drop out of school."

Beyond the practical barriers and lack of resources for Indigenous girls to go to school, social norms in their communities played a significant role in discouraging them from getting or continuing an education. Five Sharers specifically mentioned that either their families or their communities did not support the idea of going to school or leaving their communities to obtain an education. An 18-year-old girl who had to drop out said, "I already quit school since my dad doesn't want me to study and always scolded me when I got home." Another Sharer with educational dreams said, "I want to go to university but I can't go far from home… People in my community tend to think that girls who go to study far from home aren't good."

The focus groups with community family members shed more light onto social attitudes towards Indigenous girls going to school. The women's focus group associated the girls' role more with housework. They tended to agree that if a girl wanted to go to school, she had to balance that with her chores at home. They also agreed that if she wanted to move away to study, that was up to her. The men's focus group, however, more strongly supported the idea of boys attending higher education beyond high school given that they would become family heads with financial responsibilities. Some of the men explained that the reason they would not allow girls to study away from home was based on their fear they might get married outside of their community or take a wrong life direction. They also felt that boys should not have to help with housework and, therefore, girls needed to stay at home and prepare for getting married and looking after their families.

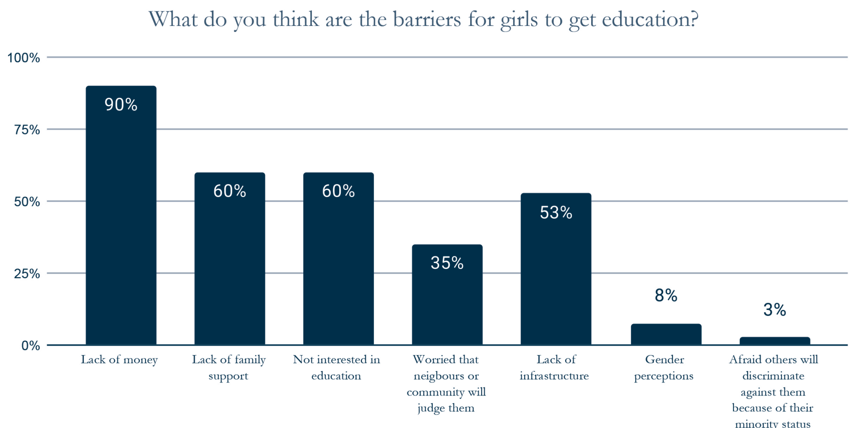
Indigenous girls in the survey group had somewhat more promising educational backgrounds than FLD Sharers. Most of them had achieved some level of education.



All Indigenous girls that chose to answer the question on their education had achieved some level of schooling, either primary, secondary, or high school.

- 80% of the Indigenous girls surveyed were students, while 18% were working.
- 85% said that they believed education was crucial for girls, and especially for Bunong girls.

Similar to FLD Sharers, Indigenous girls who participated in the survey felt that lack of money was the biggest barrier in the way of girls getting an education. Likewise, family and community also served as recognised barriers for girls to go to school.



Fighting marriage destiny

One young Bunong girl studying in grade 7 and with the dream to become a nurse said she was determined to finish her secondary school. She was, however, stuck in a situation that was becoming more and more unbearable. Her parents were adamant that she get married and tried to force her even before reaching 14 years old. Rejecting that path, the girl's resistance led to family conflict and constant insults and arguments. Everyone in her family except her brother put enormous pressure on her and felt she should not go to school. She said that every day she got to school she cried because she felt her time to study was coming to an end and she would be forced to marry very soon.

Learn and lead

> I want my kids to go to university so that they don't have to live a tough life like mine, being looked down on and judged by others. I think that women can be leaders because we are working to bring equality and girls could even be a village or commune chief if they are determined enough.

-A 36-year-old Bunong mother of one daughter and one son who works on her farm and manages the household

Finding 7 Some Indigenous women and girls want to see girls in their communities pursue higher education and become community leaders.

Despite the prevalence of social norms and beliefs that Indigenous girls should not consider higher education or become community leaders, there

is a significant number of Indigenous women who do support their education and paths to leadership.

The FLD study included four adult women Sharers. Three of them (75%) shared their opinions on education for Indigenous girls and female leadership. One of the women specifically said a university education is very important. All three of them conveyed that female leadership should be encouraged and an important aspect of that was that the girls' determination, ability, and own drive for leadership play a significant role in their success. Some of them also mentioned the importance of putting aside community stereotypes and overcoming barriers involving neighbours or others who discouraged girls from going to school. Their advice was frankly to "not care."

The Indigenous girls themselves participating in FLD also conveyed support for young girls to consider leadership and education. Even in cases where some girls were unable to attend school or achieve their own dreams, they expressed their wish for others to change the norms that push girls to quit school or retreat from leadership ambitions - particularly, those that had themselves quit school and regretted their decision years later. Interestingly, seven of the 40 Sharers (17.5%), all who were adolescent Indigenous girls, expressed their dream to become a teacher and associated it with being a leader in their community. A 16-year-old girl also shared a similar rationale for wanting to become a police officer. "I want to be a police officer because I think that I can help the girls in my community to study hard and share my knowledge with them."

The focus group with Indigenous women, including mothers and grandmothers, also showed female support for women leadership in the Bunong community. The women agreed that education should be an equal

opportunity for girls and boys, and should be an option for girls depending on whether they wanted to study or not. At the same time, some concern was expressed by women who felt they had to be careful not to put too much pressure on their children to go to school. They worried that pushing school on children could lead to stress and even self-harm.

Community ambitions

Nib Ri, a 22-year-old married Bunong woman who works on her farm, shared her story to help others better understand the reality of Indigenous girls and the challenges they face in going to school. Without hardly anything to eat, she told Listeners that she must work very hard. She envied Khmer people saying they seemed to have better lifestyles and opportunities to study. Nib Ri said she quit school in order to start working and earn money for the family. Like most Bunong girls, she said that doing housework and earning an income were necessary responsibilities in her family. Boys, she said on the other hand, usually go to the farm and focus more on manual labour. After her father passed away, she had little choice but to support the rest of her family as her mother became the decision-maker. Despite being unable to go to school, she felt that education is important for girls in order to gain knowledge and improve their status in society. She said it was important that others understood that girls can be leaders in schools and in their communities, and they are equal to boys in every aspect.

The burden of extra responsibility

> Boys and girls might have equal rights and opportunities, but girls have more responsibilities in the house so we don't have spare time like boys do.

- A 15-year-old Bunong girl from Dak Dam Commune

Finding 8 **Indigenous girls do not have as much freedom and/or opportunities as Indigenous boys.**

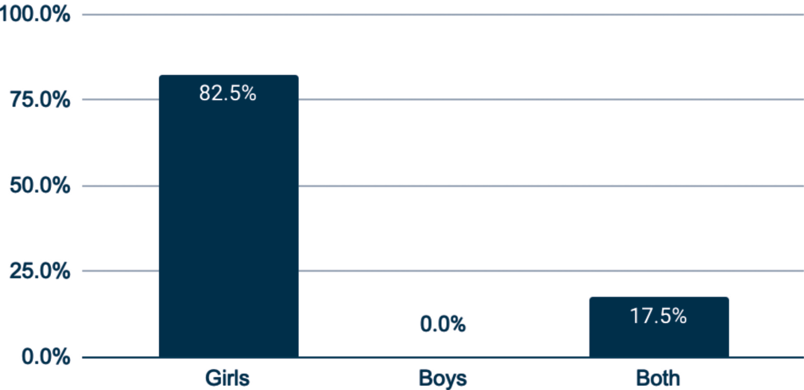
In reflection on the FLD findings, Listeners who spoke with Sharers felt that Indigenous girls follow different rules from boys. They mentioned that they are not allowed out after dark and do not have the same freedom to wear the clothes they wish. For example, some felt that younger girls, especially with darker skin, are prohibited from wearing shorts and face being severely judged by members of their communities. Although they mostly felt that at an official level, there are equal opportunities for education these days, the reality for girls is that specific barriers and different social norms led to less overall freedom to go to school. For example, a girl coming home late from class is treated differently from a boy who does the same thing.

Indigenous girls and young women who spoke as Sharers in the study overwhelmingly felt that girls had more responsibilities than boys in their communities and within their families. Despite most stating that overall, girls and boys had equal rights and opportunities, 29 out of 40 Sharers (72.5%) said directly, or suggested, that girls have more to do. Housework was most commonly seen as the activity contributing to higher responsibility levels of girls. In fact, 36 out of 40 Sharers (90%) said that housework is the responsibility of girls, with many also adding that they felt boys did

nothing. Others (22.5%) saw boys having responsibilities, but most often associated them with earning income, gathering wood, and farming. For instance, a 15-year-old student stated, "I think that Bunong girls and boys aren't much different because boys have their own work to do and girls do the housework." Four Sharers said, however, that boys do help with housework, though none said that boys have more responsibilities than girls. A 14-year-old girl, for example, said, "I think that girls and boys have equal rights since girls can also go to school just like boys do... but girls have more responsibilities at home and at the farm. Boys only go to the farm sometimes. Girls have to cook for the whole family right after they wake up and then they clean the house."

The focus group with grandfathers and fathers of Indigenous girls provided deeper understanding into the male perspective on gender roles and the responsibilities they saw as important for their granddaughters and daughters. Most of the group agreed that girls have to stay at home and do housework. They had the opinion that because boys do not know how to do housework, it ultimately falls under the responsibility of girls. Unlike most of the women, men felt that boys do have more privileges and freedom than girls. They believed it was justified, however, because boys work harder while girls have less work and do not need the same level of energy to carry out their daily duties.

Survey respondents also showed an imbalance between girls and boys in their Indigenous communities. For the majority, girls were fully responsible for doing housework and only a small number said boys shared in that work. Indigenous girls surveyed also expressed other gender-based norms they faced in their homes.



82.5% of the Indigenous girls surveyed said that in reality, girls do the housework, while 17.5% said both girls and boys do it.

- 65% expressed that girls in their communities do not have the same freedom to go out of the house as boys.
- 48% said that their families do not allow them to go out.
- 45% said that cultural perceptions towards girls prevent them from having full freedom in their lives.

Alcohol and violence a part of life

> My dad used to beat me when I was younger.

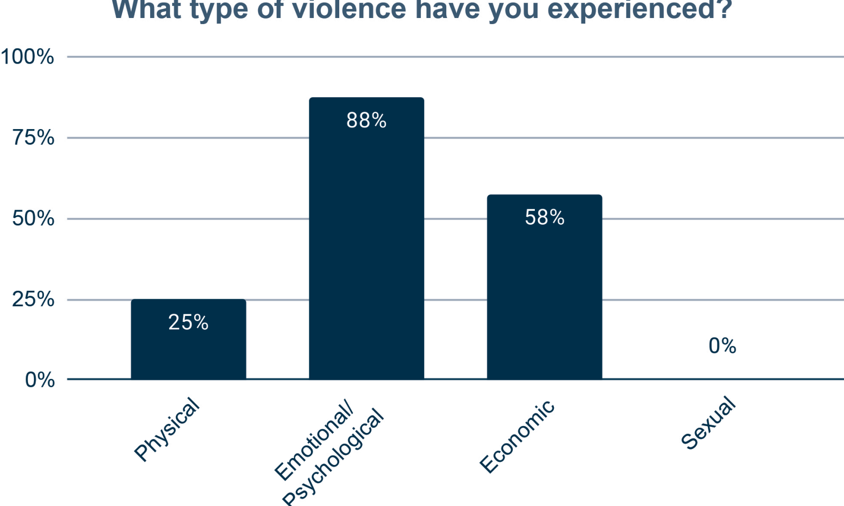
- An 18-year-old high school student

Finding 9 **Violence against children is common in Indigenous communities.**

Although a sensitive issue, Indigenous girls and young women spoke out about domestic violence. Eleven out of the 40 Sharers (27.5%) either openly stated or indirectly suggested that they face violence in their own families. Ten of those Sharers, including both girls and young women, specifically said that such violence was connected to their fathers and involved alcohol consumption. A 19-year-old Bunong girl who dropped out of high school because of getting married confided, "My dad normally drinks and gets violent." Of the 40 Sharers, only three (7.5%) directly said that they did not experience violence in their families.

Girls living in violent family situations discussed the effects that it had on their mental health. In particular, girls that witnessed their mothers being beaten mentioned more about being emotionally affected by it. Eight girls (20%) said they felt emotional distress or even experienced depression from seeing their mothers face violence. An 18-year-old girl who shared more about her home life in detail said, "When my dad gets drunk, he always picks a fight with my mom and sometimes uses physical violence. It affects me mentally, I sometimes lock myself up and just cry." A 22-year-old married Indigenous woman reflecting on her community shared her observations: "Violence still happens in the community. When a man gets drunk and uses physical violence towards family members, it really affects the girls mentally."

The survey among the group of Indigenous Bunong girls in Mondulkiri also indicated high levels of violence experienced by respondents who were between the ages of 14-19 years old. The majority had faced violence by a family member at some point in their lives.



Indigenous girls surveyed identified emotional/psychological, economic, and physical violence as the most prevalent in their lives.

- 87.5% said they had experienced some form of violence by a family member.
- 70% said they did not seek any form of help or support after facing violence.
- 28% experienced harassment more than three times in their lives, while 23% said they had experienced it less than three times.
- 43% said that they did not tell anybody else when they faced harassment, while 50% said that they discussed it with their close friends or neighbours.

Trapped in violence

Chit is a 14-year-old Bunong girl who studies in secondary school and dreams to become a teacher. She loves to study. At home however, her life has a darker aspect. Her father drinks often and can get violent with her mother. Chit feels responsible for her mother's safety and stays with her when they begin to fight. In reality, she fears that if she is not around, he will begin to hit her. This causes her to miss school. Her brother could no longer handle the family situation and especially the conflict he had with his father. He decided to leave and move in with his aunt. Chit does not feel that she has the option to leave the family because she has become the person responsible for taking care of her parents.

Limited options

> I quit school when I was in grade 8 to get married. This is my karma. If I hadn't got married, I would still be studying.

- An 18-year-old Bunong housewife

Finding 10 Indigenous girls who drop out of school have little choice but getting married at an early age, working on farms, or doing housework.

There is often a lack of value placed on studies among Indigenous girls, their families, and in their communities. For those who choose to quit at the primary or high school levels, however, few options exist. 13 of the 40 Sharers (32.5%) dropped out of school before graduating. Getting married after leaving their studies was one of the most viable options presented to them. Some even left school specifically to get married to partners chosen

by their families. Early marriage, even between children, was an issue often discussed in FLD conversations between Listeners and Sharers.

Even for girls who did not get married after dropping out, their options appeared limited. What often became one of the justifications for quitting school became the destiny of the girls that stop studying. For example, those that chose or were forced to leave school to do housework or work on farms tended to take on those roles on a permanent basis. A 16-year-old Bunong girl who identified herself as a farmer said, "I already dropped out of school when I was in grade 2. I couldn't focus on my studies and my mother had to do all the housework and farm chores by herself. I ended up leaving school to help her." A 17-year-old girl who sells vegetables from her home said, "I dropped out of school because my parents couldn't afford to send me anymore. I'm the oldest child in the family and I had to earn more income to support my siblings by picking vegetables and working on the farm." One Indigenous Listener participating in the processing of data during the Info-Space Lab noted that in most cases, girls are not directly forced by their parents to drop out of school. However, because they see how hard their parents struggle to earn income to support their family, older daughters often feel responsible to take on the role of their parents.

Both the male and female focus groups supported what was heard in FLD conversations among the Sharers. The men noted that if Indigenous girls chose to leave their studies and drop out of primary or high school, they would normally get married at a young age. Women more commonly saw girls quitting school to help them with housework or working on the family farm. One mother in the women's focus group stated, "I don't allow my older daughter to study since she has to look out for her younger siblings who go to school and manage the household."

The Listeners' Take

Collecting information and deepening perspectives

Teav and Phuon are high school students from Mondulkiri province and are part of the Indigenous Bunong community. They participated as Listeners in FLD implementation to go out into their community and listen to the views, perspectives, and stories of Indigenous girls. In total, they had 20 conversations with Bunong girls across several villages.

Teav said she felt inspired to become a Listener because she wanted to hear more from other Indigenous girls about their issues and problems they faced. From her conversations, she said that issues about education, sexual health, and family dynamics were the ones that really stayed in her mind.

"It was challenging since the girls seemed to not have enough time for the conversation, they were shy and not always willing to open up about their stories," Teav shared.

"Some even seemed like they couldn't get permission from their family, and were uncomfortable talking during the conversation."

Teav felt concerned about those who had to get married at a young age or girls who had to drop out of school because their families could no longer financially support their studies. She confessed she had her own dream for the girls she met up with during FLD:

"I learnt a lot more about my own community than I had expected from my conversations. I want to see Bunong girls have more access to education in schools, through organisations, or by other institutions."

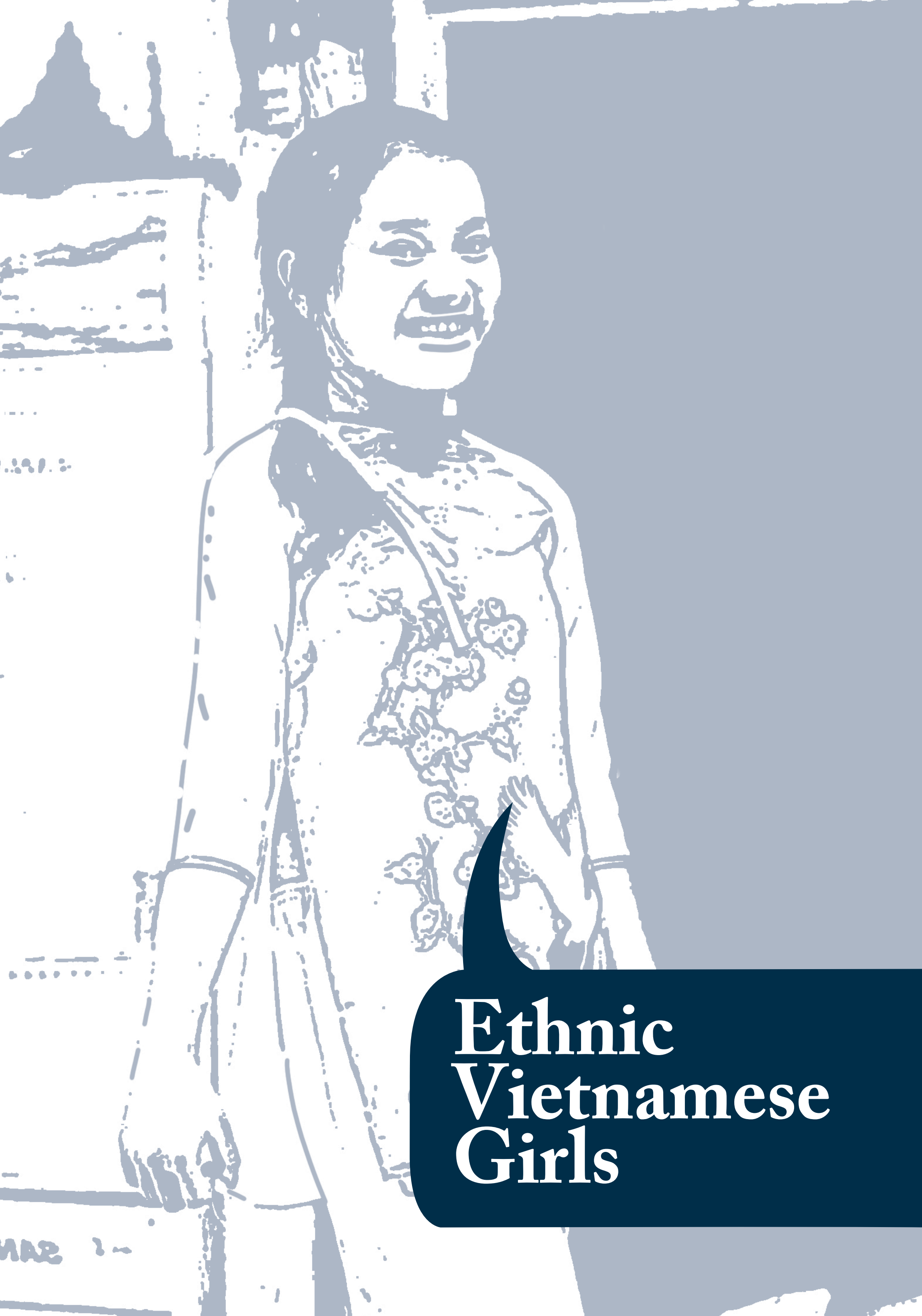
Phuon saw the process from a very personal perspective. She appreciated the chance to reach out to girls from her community and noted that she even became more courageous to speak to others and connect with new people she did not previously know.

There were some challenges, particularly regarding planning for conversations.

"Sometimes we'd try two or three times to meet up," Phuon told the FLD group. "It was often hard to travel to conversations and sometimes they were very shy when we would finally connect."

For Phuon, higher education is the key to support the girls in her community and change their lives. As a high school student planning to go to university herself, she shared her dream for Bunong girls to find a way to study further:

"I want to see more Bungong girls gain strength, overcome their unique circumstances, and become leaders to comfortably raise their voices on issues that matter to them the most."


Ethnic
Vietnamese
Girls

“Floating Towards”

An adolescent ethnic Vietnamese girl living on a boat in a floating village in the Tonle Sap River used oil paints to create a work of art that expresses her most intimate dream: she wants to wear nice dresses, have a comfortable home, and eat a birthday cake with her friends. The water hyacinth and the fish below represent life under her floating house, which is also what grounds her. The star and the sun at the top symbolise hope and allow her to keep looking up into the sky as she floats towards her dreams.

Background

The ethnic Vietnamese make up one of the largest minority populations in Cambodia. Although there is no agreed upon universal figure, according to the 2019 population survey, 0.5% of the total 15,552,211 population identified their "mother tongue" as Vietnamese.[55] Self-identifying ethnic Vietnamese groups may represent a smaller number as the long history and mixing between Khmer and Vietnamese has resulted in people of ethnic Vietnamese origins who today identify as Khmer. However, given the sensitivity of this minority group in the political context of Cambodia, there has been a lack of public census data released, and issues of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia remain under-researched.[56] In 1997, the government of Cambodia reported to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) that there was a "foreign population" of 98,590 Vietnamese individuals living in the country.[57] However, researchers working on this particular minority group estimate the population somewhere between 400,000 to 700,000 people.[58] In response to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia in 2018, the government of Cambodia recognised a population of 180,690 Vietnamese residing in the country, in which 69,413 were classified as "old settlers" holding older documents

[55] Royal Government of Cambodia, *General Population Census*, 25.

[56] Christoph Sperfeldt, "Minorities and Statelessness: Social Exclusion and Citizenship in Cambodia," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 27, 1 (2020): 117, doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02701002.

[57] UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), *State Party Report, Cambodia*, 5 May 1997, CERD/C/292/Add.2, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6af468.html (accessed Jan 30, 2022).

[58] Minority Rights Group International, *Cambodia: Ethnic Vietnamese*. It has been reported that some scholars even estimate an ethnic Vietnamese population of up to one million, see Andrea Frazzetta, "A People in Limbo, Many Living Entirely on the Water," *New York Times*, Mar 28, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/28/magazine/cambodia-persecuted-minority-water-refuge.html (accessed Feb 17, 2022).

(49.55% being women), 76,614 possessing irregular Cambodian documents, and 34,663 without any legal documents.[59]

Population figures seem to reveal a complex migration history and questionable legal status of a number of ethnic Vietnamese who continue to live on the margins of mainstream society. Ethnic Vietnamese populations in Cambodia can be categorised into five main groups depending on their migration backgrounds:

1. Long-term ethnic Vietnamese born in Cambodia, later evacuated to Vietnam before/during the Khmer Rouge regime, and returning back to Cambodia in the 1980s
2. Vietnamese not born in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge period but came with Vietnamese soldiers during the 1980s, remained living in Cambodia, and had children born and raised in Cambodia
3. Vietnamese migrant workers coming to Cambodia in the 1990s and remained in the country
4. Vietnamese that live back and forth between Cambodia and Vietnam
5. Asylum seekers and refugees that have come to Cambodia[60]

It is important to note that marriage between Vietnamese and Khmer took place among all the groups and that mixed-race descendants also live in unique situations with their own context. This study has focused mainly on the populations of the first and second categories in two different locations.

[59] UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia : comments by the State* : note / by the Secretariat, Geneva : UN, Sept. 11, 2018, 23, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1642278 (accessed Jan 30, 2022).

[60] Jesuit Refugee Service Cambodia, *Living in limbo: A follow up report on statelessness and status of people living in the Lake and Peri-Urban communities*, 2015.

Migration of Vietnamese into contemporary Cambodia can be seen well back into the 18th and 19th centuries. Given that borders were not always well defined and French colonisation in the region facilitated movement througout the area referred to as Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam), much migration of Vietnamese people to Cambodia to work in civil administration and on rubber plantations can be traced to this period.[61] It has been estimated that the Vietnamese population in Cambodia sharply increased from 5,000 in 1874 to 150,000 in 1921 and later to between 230,000 – 250,000 by 1951.[62] Many of the fishing villages around the Tonle Sap Lake appear to date back to around the 1920s.[63] Despite long-standing residence in Cambodia, many historical Vietnamese communities have remained to be viewed as foreigners following the independence of the country in 1953.

A new Law on Nationality was adopted in 1954 stating that naturalisation was not a right, but rather a "favor under administrative discretion, exercised upon a request."[64] Yet, interestingly, one of the provisions [article 22(2)] of this new law was the principle of *Jus Soli,* stipulating that "citizenship is conferred automatically to a person born in Cambodia after 13 November 1954, where one of the parents was also born in Cambodia."[65] Arguably, this 1954 nationality law was still in effect until

[61] Keo Duong, "Migration History of Ethnic Vietnamese Living along Tonle Sap in Relations to Their Statelessness" (paper presented at the 13th Asia-Pacific Sociological Association Conference 'Globalization, Mobility and Borders: Challenges and Opportunities in the Asia Pacific', Phnom Penh, Sep 24, 2016).

[62] Ramses Amer, "The Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia: A Minority at Risk?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 16, no. 2 (1994): 213.

[63] Lyma Nguyen and Christoph Sperfeldt, *A Boat without anchors: a report on the legal status of ethnic Vietnamese minority populations in Cambodia under domestic and international laws governing nationality and statelessness*, Phnom Penh: Jesuit Refugee Service, 2014, 11.

[64] Ibid, 26.

[65] Christoph Sperfeldt, *Report on Citizenship Law : Cambodia*, [Global Governance Programme], GLOBALCIT, Country Reports, 2017/02, 4, http://hdl.handle.net/1814/45084 (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

a new nationality law was adopted in 1996, giving people of Vietnamese descent, who had one parent also born in Cambodia, the right to become Cambodian citizens.[66]

Given the geopolitical context of the Vietnam War at the time, a growing nationalism emerged that negatively viewed ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, who were estimated to have a population of around 450,000 by the end of the 1960s.[67] Ethnic Vietnamese were "accused of conducting subversive activities and of lending support to foreign forces operating in the country [leading to] arrest by the authorities."[68] Even past naturalisation of any ethnic Vietnamese would possibly be refused or even revoked as confirmed in the 1963 National Congress.[69] Over 4,000 Vietnamese were violently attacked and killed,[70] while 200,000 to 250,000 were forcibly sent to Vietnam in 1970[71] with over "28% of those who repatriated claimed to be Cambodian citizens."[72] During the Khmer Rouge (KR) period of genocide from 1975-1979, an estimated 150,000-170,000 ethnic Vietnamese were deported to Vietnam.[73] Those who stayed in Cambodia were targets of systematic mistreatment and killing, estimated to include approximately 20,000 victims.[74] Senior KR leaders were later charged and

[66] Nguyen and Sperfeldt, 28.

[67] Jacques Migozzi, Cambodge faits et problèmes de population, (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1973), 41-44.

[68] Amer, 216.

[69] Sperfeldt, "Minorities and Statelessness," 101.

[70] Karl D. Jackson, ed. *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 154.

[71] Sperfeldt, *Report on Citizenship Law*, 6.

[72] Nguyen and Sperfeldt, 13.

[73] Ibid., 14.

[74] Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia, "Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia, April 1975 – January 1979. A Critical Assessment of Major Estimates," *Demographic Expert Report*, Sept 30, 2009, 49, https://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/documents/courtdoc/D140_1_1_Public_Redacted_EN.PDF (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

found guilty of genocide against ethnic Vietnamese and Cham in 2018 by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and were sentenced to life imprisonment.[75]

Following the end of the KR's dictatorship, the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime (1979-1989) under the leadership of Vietnam was seen as a very politically controversial period in the country. Two opposing viewpoints emerged with some seeing "Vietnamese intervention as a 'historical fact' liberating Cambodia from the brutality of the KR regime and securing the country from KR's return, others view it as an invasion serving 'Vietnamese interests', by dominating Cambodia over economic and political affairs."[76] During such a politicised Cold War context, the advent of Vietnamese returnees and their descendants, as well as some newcomers, only added fuel to the fire regarding anti-Vietnamese rhetoric, which continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Regardless of the possibility that these returnees and their descendants "could have had Cambodian citizenship before they were forced to leave the country in the 1970s,"[77] they remained to be seen as foreigners. Between 1992 and 1993, surviving forces of the KR employed anti-Vietnamese political rhetoric and violent attacks against ethnic Vietnamese resulting in 130 deaths and 75 injuries.[78] In a high-profile case during the run up to the election in

[75] Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Case 002/2 Judgement, Nov. 16, 2018, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LA9ttO7C4fgC1aSb1cAoe9ofzwDuERx5/view?ts=5c9c9bb0 (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[76] Suyheang Kry and Terith Chy, "Cambodia's Relations with Vietnam: Prospects and Challenges," in *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts*, eds. Dek Sok Udom et al. (Phnom Penh: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018), 69.

[77] Amer, 221.

[78] Amnesty International, Cambodia: *Arbitration killings of ethnic Vietnamese*, Sep. 1993, 4, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa230051993en.pdf (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

1998, four ethnic Vietnamese civilians were mob-killed by bystanders after a rumour spread about Vietnamese trying to poison the water and food.[79]

In 1996, a new nationality law was adopted. In contrast to the 1954 law, which required only one foreign parent to be born in Cambodia and did not require legal residency, the 1996 Law on Nationality Article 4(2) stated the conferral of "Khmer Nationality/Citizenship" to "any child who is born from a foreign mother and father (parents) who were born and living legally" in Cambodia. Article 4(1) also stipulated the automatic conferral of citizenship from a Khmer parent to their children (*Jus Sanguinis*). Confusingly, the term "Khmer Nationality/Citizenship" was used throughout, which inferred that Khmer referred not only to ethnicity, but to nationality as well. This contrasted the previous 1954 law which used the French term "Cambodgien" (Cambodian). Based on local research in 2007 on the perception of interethnic relations and national identity, findings seemed to "suggest that culture or ethnicity-based conceptions of citizenship continue to dominate the attitudes of the majority population, despite the fact that the legal framework has progressively changed over time."[80] Meanwhile, with an unclear definition of the term "Khmer citizen," it can "become particularly problematic when establishing whether a parent may be considered a Khmer…"[81] Given the marginalisation of long-term ethnic Vietnamese minority residents living on boats in Cambodian waterways, many of them "who may meet the *Jus Soli* requirements for acquiring Cambodian citizenship [still] cannot afford to get proof for their citizenship."[82]

[79] Kry and Chy, 76.
[80] Sperfeldt, *Report on Citizenship Law*, 10.
[81] Nguyen and Sperfeldt, 30.
[82] Sperfeldt, *Report on Citizenship Law*, 15.

In the run-up to the 2013 Cambodian election campaigns, anti-Vietnamese sentiment once again erupted. A Vietnamese business was ransacked and an ethnic Vietnamese man was beaten to death by a mob...[83] With such recurring incidents during election cycles, it "seems to suggest that as long as the current political context is concerned, political discourse could once again make reference to Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia."[84] In 2014, a foreigner census was conducted with the subsequent deportation of over 10,000 recent Vietnamese immigrants to Vietnam. A year prior to the adoption of a new 2018 Law on Nationality, which contained the same *Jus Soli* and *Jus Sanguinis* provisions as the 1996 law, a nationwide registration process of ethnic Vietnamese was conducted and accompanied by an issuance of a new permanent resident card and a "systematic confiscation of all prior documentation that authorities deemed to be 'irregular.'"[85] It was reported that almost 90,000 ethnic Vietnamese were eligible to apply and the card would identify them as a Vietnamese national "without any verification of such status."[86] This action appeared to give no distinction between recent Vietnamese immigrants and the long-term ethnic Vietnamese minority population and/or their descendants who "may in fact be entitled to Cambodian nationality… but struggle to provide or obtain documentary proof."[87] A number of research studies and reports concluded that numerous long-term ethnic Vietnamese, especially those coming from the Tonle

[83] Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening? Tackling Hard Issues with Empathy. Using Facilitative Design to understand and respond to anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodian communities* (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2019), 36.

[84] Kry and Chy, 76.

[85] Christoph Sperfeldt, "Legal Identity and Minority Statelessness in Cambodia: Recent developments," *Statelessness and Citizenship Review* 3, 2 (2021): 350.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 351.

Sap floating village communities, appear to be stateless.[88] Their connection to any other country is not clear, as "many … report no connection to Viet Nam, no family there and have neither Vietnamese nationality nor the likelihood of being able to secure such."[89] However, the government of Cambodia has repeatedly rejected the claim of stateless ethnic Vietnamese in the country.[90]

Despite the fact that the Cambodia law allows children of foreign residents living legally in Cambodia to register their birth and receive a birth certificate,[91] the majority of the children from boat communities, whose parents already possess the new permanent resident cards, could not access them. According to a 2016 study by the Minority Rights Organization, only 5% of the survey participants had birth certificates.[92] A 2019 UNICEF report stated that most ethnic Vietnamese descendants living in the boat communities "have no legal status … [and] face harsh environmental and legal challenges unique to their status, which work together to compound the insecurities and vulnerabilities of the children from these communities

[88] Sperfeldt, "Minorities and Statelessness"; Nguyen and Sperfeldt; Sperfeldt, *Report on Citizenship Law: Cambodia*; Sperfeldt, "Legal Identity and Minority Statelessness in Cambodia"; Laurie Parsons and Sabina Lawreniuk, "Seeing like the stateless: Documentation and the mobilities of liminal citizenship in Cambodia," *Political Geography* 62 (2018); Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW, *Concluding Observations on the Fourth and Fifth Periodic Report of Cambodia*, CEDAW/C/KHM/CO/4-5 of 18 October 2013, paras. 30-31; Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW, *Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Cambodia*, CCPR/C/KHM/CO/2 of March 2015, para. 27.

[89] Rhona Smith, "Relocating Floating Communities in Cambodia: Kampong Chhnang," *Human Rights Quarterly* 43, no.2 (2021): 302.

[90] OHCHR, *Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviews report of Cambodia, asks about nationality, land grabs and civic space*, Nov. 29, 2019, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25372 (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[91] Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Interior, "Directive on Issuance of Administrative Letters and Birth Certificates for Cambodian Spouses, Children and Foreign Immigrants," *Circular* No 015, 2019.

[92] Minority Rights Organization, *Research Finding: Statelessness Minority Groups in Cambodia: Takeo, Kampong Chhnang, and Pursat Provinces*, 2016, https://kh.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2017/07/fact-finding_legal_document_of_minority_groups_en_final.pdf (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

who attend floating schools."[93] Given their vulnerability status confined to their own boat communities, many of these children do not speak Khmer, which is a major educational barrier, and often must drop out of school to focus on fishing activities with their families.[94]

Girls at risk of statelessness or lacking clear legal identity face very distinct issues worldwide. Women and girls experience higher levels of sexual and gender-based violence, which has spiked particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.[95] They have also been found to be at higher risk of human trafficking and exploitation. This stems from other major barriers including lack of access to education, travel restrictions due to fear of encountering authorities with questionable legal status, an inability to gain employment and earn income, and often a difficulty in owning land.[96] Statelessness and child marriage are often linked and disproportionately affect girls who may not have clear legal identity in their country of residence. As a response to other risks girls face, including human trafficking, child marriage is sometimes seen as a solution rather than a problem. "For the stateless, child marriage is not only a traditional cultural practice. It can also be a modality through which women seek to gain protection from the vulnerabilities associated with statelessness - protection the institutions of one's home nation normally provides."[97]

[93] Meredith Lunsford, Solyda Say and Safa Shahkhalili, *Inclusion and Equality in Islamic Schools, Buddhist Monastic Schools, and Floating Schools* (Phnom Penh: Unicef Cambodia, 2018), 10.

[94] Ibid., 37.

[95] Asia-Pacific Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, *Good Practices Brochure: Stateless Women and Girls*, 2021, 3, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2021/05/ap-GiHA-Brochure-Stateless-Women.pdf (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[96] Laura van Wass et al., *The Nexus between Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Thailand* (Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2015); Laura van Wass et al., *A methodology for exploring the interaction between statelessness and human trafficking* (Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2015).

[97] Sheila Menz, "Statelessness and Child Marriage as Intersectional Phenomena: Instability, Inequality, and the Role of the International Community," *California Law Review* 104, 497 (2016): 501-502.

This study focused on two distinct communities: one including the girls living in floating villages along the Tonle Sap River in Kampong Chhnang province, and another with girls living along the border between Cambodia and Vietnam in Kandal province. These communities are vastly different, with nearly all girls living on the water in boat communities finding themselves in the context of unclear legal identity and at risk of statelessness. Those near the border, on the other hand, often live in mixed-race environments and are far more integrated into Khmer mainstream culture. However, both communities face distinct challenges and obstacles and are often seen negatively by mainstream Cambodian society that view Vietnamese as intrinsically foreign and different from other minorities in the country.

Location and demographics

ETHNIC VIETNAMESE GIRLS

FLD

4 Listeners
(1 ethnic Vietnamese and
3 mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer)

40 Sharers

30 ethnic Vietnamese and
10 mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer

34 14 -19 years old
6 21-52 years old

Focus Group Discussions

13 Participants

16 – 50 years old

Target locations

Survey

40 Respondents (14 – 19 years old)

37 ethnic Vietnamese
3 mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer

93 Participants

FLD, focus group, and survey findings

Voices from ethnic Vietnamese girls and their communities

FLD emerging themes

1. Ethnic Vietnamese girls face specific barriers to study including lack of financial resources, legal documents, transportation, infrastructure, and experience discrimination.
2. Girls who are living on boats in floating communities face housing insecurity and possible relocation.
3. Ethnic Vietnamese girls and their parents prioritise legal identity and the chance to study to avoid a future living in poverty.
4. Most ethnic Vietnamese girls feel shy and do not understand their rights or have knowledge about sexual reproductive health.
5. A large number of ethnic Vietnamese girls have precarious legal identity or do not have citizenship.
6. Ethnic Vietnamese girls do not have much freedom and opportunities as boys do because of family and community norms.
7. Most ethnic Vietnamese girls lack confidence and are not able to achieve their own dreams.
8. Most ethnic Vietnamese girls do not have regular communication with people outside their communities and feel anxious making contact with others.
9. Violence against children is an ongoing issue in ethnic Vietnamese communities.
10. Many mixed-race ethnic Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodians hide their identity to avoid discrimination.
11. Ethnic Vietnamese are proud of their identity and want others to know more about their culture and way of life.
12. Girls in isolated rural communities have less opportunities to study Khmer language.

Real challenges to stay in school

There were kids at school who teased me and discriminated against me for being Vietnamese saying I don't need to go to school. I want to pursue higher education but I have to drop out since I don't have any way to get to school and I have to help my mum. There are people who look down on me and say I'm stealing their country's territory.

-A 16-year-old girl who sells ice cream on the river in her floating village and is engaged to get married

Finding 1 Ethnic Vietnamese girls face specific barriers to study including lack of financial resources, legal documents, transportation, infrastructure, and experience discrimination.

Ethnic Vietnamese girls in Cambodia have complex challenges and face unique barriers related to gender and ethnicity that often make it difficult to go to school or continue studying. Money was an issue for many girls. Ten of the 40 Sharers (25%) said that financial issues were a major concern in their lives. For many, poverty made going to school and paying daily expenses very difficult. A 14-year-old ethnic Vietnamese girl living on the water in Kampong Chhnang who processes fish to make fish cakes said, "Girls here are living in poverty and can't access a lot of things, like education, since they have to help their parents."

Unlike other ethnic minorities in Cambodia, the lack of legal documentation is a very particular issue for ethnic Vietnamese girls and their families. Girls without legal documentation often are not able to attend public school. Five girls among the 40 Sharers (12.5%) specifically mentioned that not having legal documents created challenges in their lives. A

21-year-old woman in Kandal province explained that girls who did not have legal identity documents were only able to attend public school until grade 6. Therefore, most girls she knew in that situation went to a Christian church to study where they did not have to meet specific documentation requirements.

Whether living on land in Kandal province or living on the river in Kampong Chhnang, transportation was a challenge often discussed by ethnic Vietnamese girls and young women in FLD conversations with Listeners. Nine of the 40 Sharers (22.5%) brought up transportation issues or distance challenges they faced, often in the context of getting to school. For those girls near the border who studied in Vietnam, travelling back and forth between countries was often a major hardship both in terms of distance and safety. Boat travel also proved to be difficult for those in floating villages. A 16-year-old recently married housewife recalling her school days said, "The hardest part of going to school was having to ask for a ride by boat, and sometimes I had to just row myself to get there."

Poor infrastructure or lack of infrastructure was a relatively common theme at both study sites that affected the girls more broadly in their daily lives. A lack of, or poor-quality infrastructure personally impacted 14 of the 40 ethnic Vietnamese Sharers (35%). More specifically, this included roadways, electricity, housing, school buildings, hospitals, clean water, and sanitation. Infrastructure problems contributed to many girls' inability to attend school. A 15-year-old girl from the floating village in Kampong Chhnang said, "I think that girls including myself lack money, time, and there isn't even a proper school where we can really get a quality education. I want to have a proper school, clean water, and electricity in our community." In Kandal province, ethnic Vietnamese girls living in rural areas faced similar issues. A 16-year-old struggling to stay in school said, "Education

is very important for me but my house is too far from the school and soon we won't be able to keep paying for it. It would make a difference if we had a school nearby."

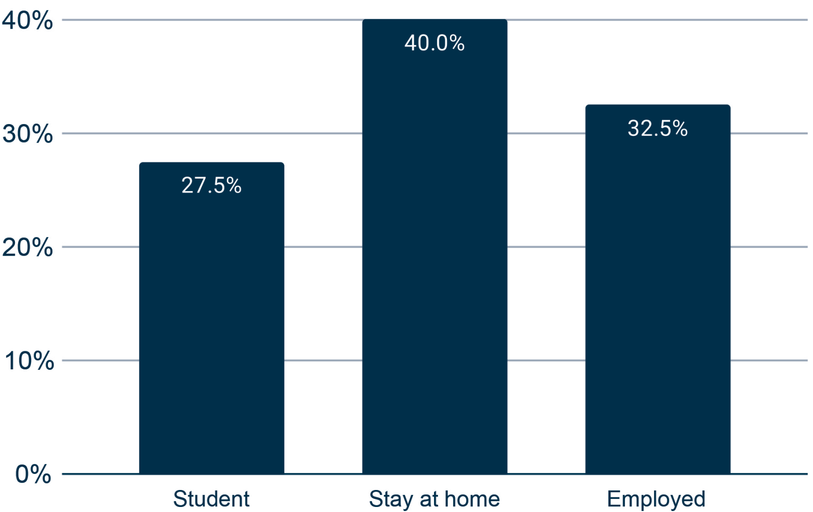
Discrimination was a fact of life for many ethnic Vietnamese Cambodians and was particularly highlighted in Kandal communities near the border. Six of the 40 Sharers (15%) mentioned that discrimination was an issue in their lives. More specifically, several ethnic Vietnamese girls felt that discrimination at school pushed them to drop out or put them at risk of quitting their studies. A 17-year-old mixed-race Khmer and Vietnamese grade 12 student in Kandal told Listeners "I still feel I'm being discriminated against here. Sometimes, people call me the 'Yuon kid.' "[98]

Focus groups in both locations provided more insight into the perspectives of parents and grandparents on barriers that made going to school more difficult for girls in their communities. The lack of legal documentation was one of the most dominant themes in all groups with both women and men. Many discussed their specific situations noting that without identification or birth certificates, opportunities were very limited for their children and grandchildren. For those with precarious legal status, several said that the option available was to study Vietnamese at churches offering classes and attending public school until grade 6, after which a document proving citizenship was required to continue studying. Women in Kampong Chhnang further elaborated on both financial and infrastructure challenges for their girls to go to school, saying that beyond

[98] Note that the term "Yuon" is a common Khmer language word used in Cambodia to refer to Vietnam or Vietnamese. It is controversial in nature and perceived differently by different speakers. Although some claim that it has been a historical term used for centuries to identify something or someone of Vietnamese origins, many ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia see it as a derogatory slur used with negative connotations. See Kry and Hyma, *Who's Listening*, 78-79.

being unable to afford their studies, there was no transportation to get them to schools from their floating communities.

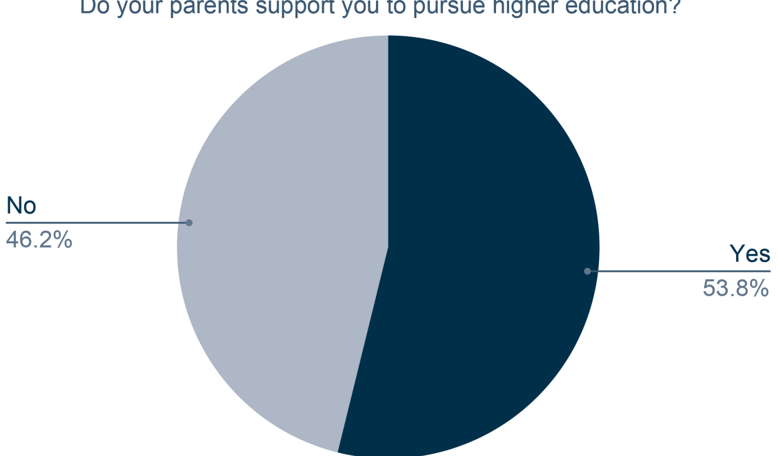
In the survey group, 11 girls were in school, 16 were staying at home or were fully responsible for housework, and 13 were employed outside of the home.



The majority of ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed (72.5%) either stayed at home or worked outside the home, while only 27.5% identified themselves as students.

- 73% of all the girls achieved primary school education and only 15% were able to attend secondary school between the ages of 14 to 19 years old.
- 53% identified themselves as living in poverty while 43% felt they were fairly stable.
- 80% thought that education is very important

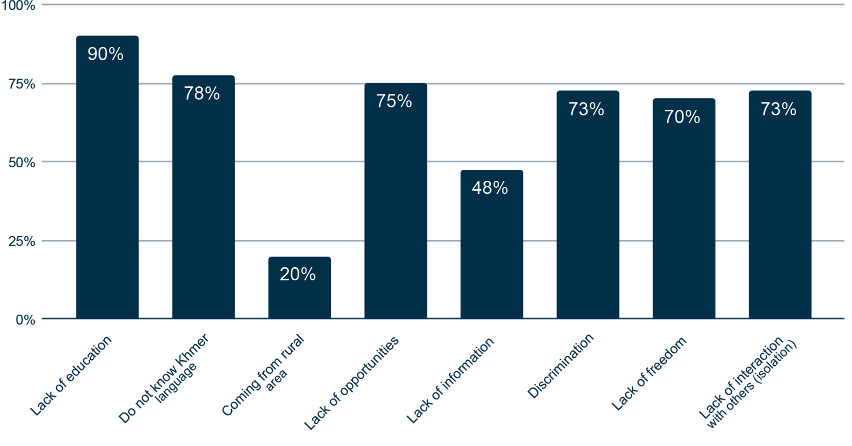
A small majority (21 girls of the 40 surveyed) said their parents do support them to pursue studies beyond high school. 18 girls, however, said they do not get that support.

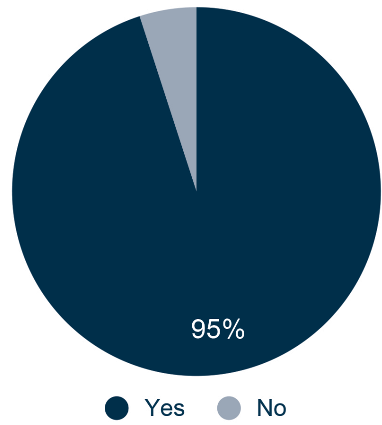


53.8% of girls are supported by their parents to pursue higher education, while 46.2% are not.

- 40% mentioned that parents do not support girls' education because of housework responsibilities, while the other 35% mentioned the lack of financial support.
- 85% expressed that the lack of money and the responsibilities on housework are barriers for girls to pursue education.

Structural challenges that ethnic Vietnamese girls face also emerged in the survey results. These challenges not only impacted them in their pathways to education, but demonstrated complex barriers in navigating their everyday lives.





95% of the ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed thought that minority girls face more challenges than the mainstream majority.

Going to school: No easy task on the water

Chang is a 16-year-old ethnic Vietnamese girl who lives on a boat in Kampong Chhnang. She faced multiple barriers growing up, especially related to going to school. She dropped out of school at only 10 years old after finishing Khmer studies in grade 4 and Vietnamese studies in grade 6. Chang said she had to leave her studies firstly, because there was no school nearby and secondly, she had no way to keep getting to the one she was attending. Because her younger brother has a serious medical condition and cannot walk, all the family's financial resources are spent on his treatment. There was no more money to pay for school fees or transportation, and she also had to use her time to help her mother to earn income and support the family. She recalls when she went to Khmer school she experienced constant bullying from other students. One of her dreams is for her family to have a better life and to see her community prosper.

Floating in uncertainty

> I want to have a permanent and legal place to live with better living conditions so that we don't have to be told to move over and over again.

-A 15-year-old ethnic Vietnamese girl who moved from the river onto the land after her houseboat was destroyed

Finding 2 Girls who are living on boats in floating communities face housing insecurity and possible relocation.

Although only involving half the study Sharers, certain issues for girls in the Kampong Chhnang floating villages were emphasised in the data and during the data processing at the Info-Space Lab, meriting a specific theme within the full scope. In particular, housing was an issue that pertains to the evolving context of efforts to relocate the communities to land. Of the 20 Sharers in Kampong Chhnang, 10 (50%) of the girls and young women discussed issues surrounding the status of their homes or their uncertainty in being relocated.

Several Sharers said they lived in very insecure conditions without proper assurances that they could continue living there. A 16-year-old ethnic Vietnamese girl said, "They used to come to the community and threatened to destroy our houses and told us to move to land. I only want to have a stable place to live that is legal and accepted by others, have a job, live in peace, and no more moving!" For others, the prospects of leaving their homes on the water came with further financial and logistical challenges. A 37-year-old woman living on a boat in the Tonle Sap with two children who participated as a Sharer and was deeply concerned about her community's situation said, "It's hard and I worry that if we have to move to another place, we'll have to spend a lot of energy and money on building a new house."

The changing context and lack of clarity caused anxiety for several girls in the study. For example, a 14-year-old girl born and raised in the floating community said, "it's so hard when we are told to move all the time." Ultimately, for many ethnic Vietnamese communities that had been living on the water over generations, moving to land was not only difficult, but in fact a complete lifestyle change that caused concern. A 17-year-old girl who worked with fish for most of her life frankly said, "We are told to move back and forth… we can't even earn enough for our daily lives

here… I don't know what else I can do besides processing fish because we don't have any other knowledge or skills."

The Listeners' Take
A community in transition

Pisey and Vanti have worked with the floating village communities along the river in Kampong Chhnang province for several years. Not coming from the area themselves, they spent a lot of time getting to know the river-dwelling residents in other projects. Having visited them many times since 2019, they have watched major changes taking place. The difference three years ago from now is quite startling, they shared. They saw many communities that were once thriving no longer exist. People have had to move out following several relocation campaigns to have them leave the river. Many have had to move onto land in designated areas that are far from the water. The relocation of floating communities, including those of ethnic Vietnamese backgrounds, has deeply impacted communities. The difficulties and uncertainty undoubtedly affect the lives of girls in a particular way.

The value of education

I think that education is very important, especially for girls, because they can get better jobs and avoid poverty. I want to see more girls go to school and give back to the community so we won't be living in a tough situation like we are now.

-A 23-year-old woman who lives in Kampong Chhnang

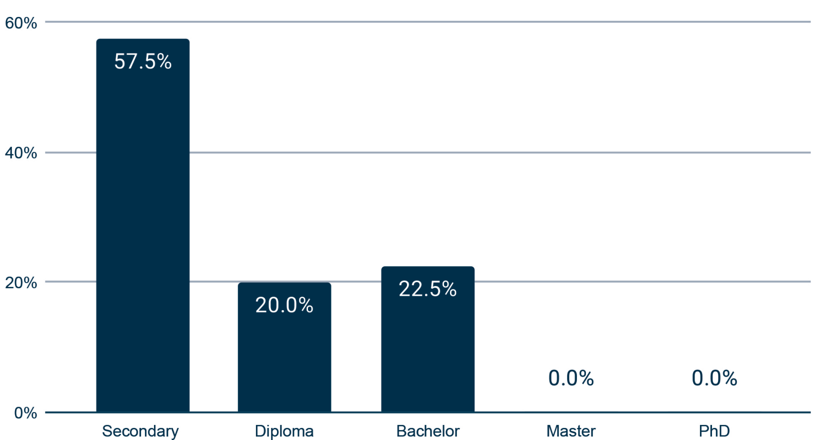
Finding 3 **Ethnic Vietnamese girls and their parents prioritise the chance to study to avoid a future living in poverty.**

Education tends to be valued for ethnic Vietnamese families in Cambodia. 29 of the 40 Sharers (72.5%) expressed that education was important or that they hoped that girls in their communities could study. Seven of those were adult women who showed value for education. A 52-year-old ethnic Vietnamese mother from Kandal whose own daughter was able to graduate from university said, "I value education because it helps a lot with their future… I want to see girls become leaders. My dream is to see all the girls here having access to education." A 21-year-old woman, despite having dropped out of school herself in grade 6, felt that education was crucial. She ended up working at a casino so that she could support the other children in her family to go to school. She told Listeners, "Education is very important for my siblings and for other girls in the community." A young girl also talked about her mother's value of her education and said, "My mum always encourages me to study hard even though she works so much because we've gone through a lot since my dad passed away." In spite of most Sharers personally expressing support for education and their hopes for girls to go to school, some noted that such an attitude was not completely shared in their communities. One of the men included in the study who participated as a Sharer in a floating village in Kampong Chhnang said, "Most of the families here do not value education, they only think about earning money to live day-to-day."

Several Sharers felt that education was important in terms of escaping poverty and obtaining better financial security. They associated education with better job prospects and opportunities for employment. A 15-year-old student in Kandal province stated, "Education is very important for me because I can get a better job. I want to pursue higher education if I can."

Khmer language education was particularly seen as beneficial for ethnic Vietnamese wanting to find work in Cambodia. A 14-year-old grade 8 student who studied in Vietnam explained "I want others to know about my community and to know that most minority girls like us can't go to school. Most of us quit school in Vietnam to study Khmer so we can work in the casinos or open up small businesses at home."

Among those surveyed, all girls had some desire to achieve a certain educational goal. 23 girls wanted to pursue secondary education, eight girls aimed for a high school diploma, and nine aspired to get a bachelor's degree.



All ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed express wanting to pursue an educational degree at some level.

- 90% of the girls said that they thought both boys and girls should pursue education.

Navigating puberty

> When I get my period I talk to my mum. Sometimes, I don't tell her and I hide it because I'm afraid she worries too much. There isn't really anyone who talks openly about sex or reproductive health.

-A 19-year-old girl who works in fishing in Kampong Chhnang

Finding 4 Most ethnic Vietnamese girls feel shy and do not understand their rights or have knowledge about sexual and reproductive health.

Across communities in both Kampong Chhnang and Kandal provinces, ethnic Vietnamese girls generally felt shy to discuss topics related to sexual and reproductive health. Many girls said they did not talk about such issues with anyone as puberty began, though 31 of the 40 Sharers (77.5%) said they did feel comfortable approaching their mothers, family members, or close friends. A 14-year-old girl in Kandal confessed, "I'm not comfortable talking about my own sexual health. I only talked to my mum about it when I first got my period." Several girls highlighted shame or discomfort about menstruation in particular. Three Sharers specifically mentioned that they felt shy or ashamed about getting their periods.

Many Sharers explained that there was virtually no sex education or information in their communities. Seven Sharers simply said they did not know anything about sexual and/or reproductive health. 17 other Sharers specifically said that there was nobody to teach them about sex or women's health issues, or that there was no public information or advocacy on the issue. Mixed-race Khmer-Vietnamese girls that were able to attend public school often had more access to sex education. Isolation in Kampong Chhnang, however, was reflected in the findings on this particular theme

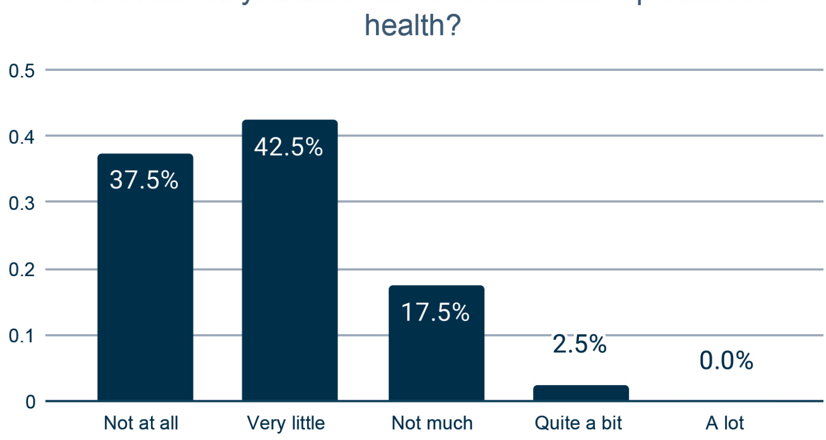
with most girls, women, and the men included in the study noting that nobody came to their communities to share information on these issues for girls. A 16-year-old housewife in a floating village, for example, said, "No one comes to share with us anything about sex or our health. I have to figure it all out by myself and talked to my mum when I got my first period." Given that the floating villages continue to be rather informal and mobile, there were some signs that inconsistency of support and services varied from one place to another. The relocation of residents from the water to land also appeared to contribute to a gap in information services possibly provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the area. One of the adult males included in the study conveyed that girls had some access to information and discussion on sexual and reproductive issues in his former community on the water, but that they were no longer available after moving to land. "There used to be people coming to talk with us about sex and health when we lived in the Phnom Dar area," he said. "But there isn't anybody anymore."

One 14-year-old girl in Kandal went to Vietnam to study until grade 7 but subsequently dropped out and came back to Cambodia. She talked about her experience growing up living on the water. The first time she got her period she was terrified. Scared to discuss what was happening, she went to her mother for support. Her mother told her that if she got close or sat next to a boy from now on, she would get pregnant and have a baby. She took the information as the truth, making her even more anxious and imagining it happening to her. From then on, she avoided any close contact with boys or men.

Focus groups that took place in both provinces supported the evidence collected in FLD fieldwork in terms of sexual and reproductive health knowledge and access to information for ethnic Vietnamese girls. The women

shared that girls in their communities usually go to their mothers or their aunts to discuss any issues related to sex and female health. They noted that information and knowledge on such topics are passed from one person to another and felt that such exchange should be open between women and girls. The men were less receptive to open communication on the same issues. Many felt that issues on female sexual and reproductive health should not be talked about openly and that girls already understand it through experiencing it by themselves.

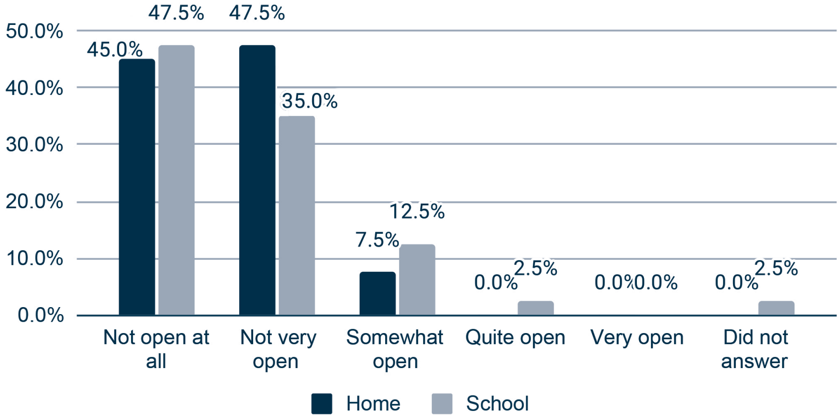
Ethnic Vietnamese girls in the survey groups also showed major gaps in understanding sexual and reproductive health issues. Most said they knew very little or nothing at all about the topic.



When asked how much they knew about sexual and reproductive health, 97.5% of ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed answered either not much, very little, or not at all.

- 60% said they got information about sexual and reproductive health through social media, 58% through family members, and 55% from their friends.
- 35% of the girls had experienced sexual health problems.
- 60% thought that talking about sexual and reproductive health and rights-related topics was taboo.

Most felt that their communities and families were not open to discussing sexual and reproductive health issues.



The majority of ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed felt their families and schools were not open to talk about sexual and reproductive health.

- 88% said it was because they were shy or they were prohibited to talk about it by their family or elders.
- 40% said it was because of social or cultural norms in their community.
- 68% said it was because they did not want to be seen as a "bad girl" by others.
- 13% said there were other reasons like being made fun of or the intended to hide from family members.

No ID, no citizenship, no country

> I don't have an identity. I do have a home here but I don't have any legal documents. I don't really know who I am.

-A 14-year-old girl who sells groceries from her houseboat
in a floating village in Kampong Chhnang

Finding 5 A large number of ethnic Vietnamese girls have precarious legal identity or do not have citizenship.

Legal identity is a complex issue for ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. Both legal frameworks and practical application of nationality laws often contribute to a gap among ethnic Vietnamese residents, even those born and raised in the country. Legal precarity and the lack of proper documentation to confirm identity can leave girls in a particularly marginalised situation without access to public services, healthcare, and even education. Sharers in the FLD study frequently brought up their family histories and their migration stories. In Kandal, some ethnic Vietnamese residents talked about coming to live in Cambodia after the genocide period under the Khmer Rouge regime but having lost their Vietnamese identification documents over the years. In Kampong Chhnang, many residents talked

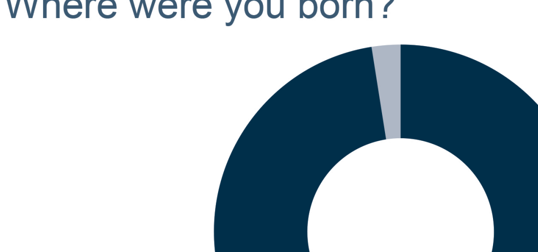
about having been there over four generations, but moving from place to place along the river in floating communities. In that situation, most had neither Cambodian nor Vietnamese citizenship.

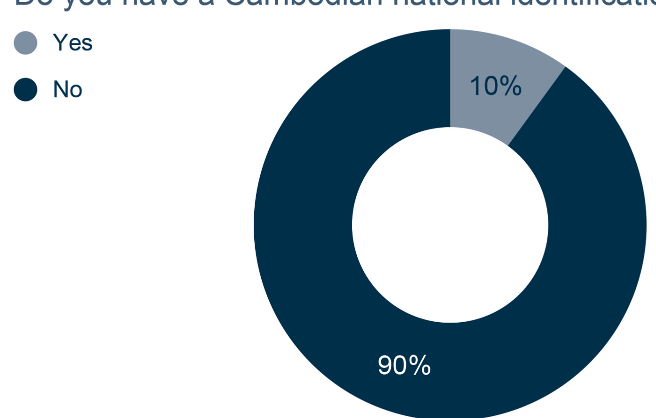
Among the 40 Sharers in both Kampong Chhnang and Kandal, 11 (27.5%) said they held Cambodian citizenship while 29 (72.5%) said they did not. Seven Sharers (17.5%) reported that they held Vietnamese citizenship while 22 Sharers (55%) suggested they had no citizenship of any kind. For the Sharers that had Cambodian citizenship, most (ten of the eleven) were mixed-race ethnic Vietnamese-Khmer. Two Sharers in the study had dual citizenship, in possession of documents from both Cambodia and Vietnam. Lack of any citizenship was a more pronounced issue in Kampong Chhnang where 18 of the 20 Sharers claimed having no citizenship or ID documents at all. In Kandal, however, four of the 20 Sharers similarly found themselves in the same situation, appearing to have no legal identity either associated with Cambodia or Vietnam.

Undocumented and uncertain

Da is a 14-year-old girl living on the river in Kampong Chhnang. She had to drop out of school in grade 3. She shared that she loved studying Khmer, Vietnamese, and English but has not had much chance to go out of her community or get to know others. Da said that she feels bad being ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia because she does not really know who she is or where she comes from. She has no legal documents or citizenship and feels uncertain about her identity. She said that the hardest part is feeling unrecognised by any country. Faced with all the challenges and barriers of living without citizenship, Da still dreams about the next generation, hoping that they can have a proper education, live in a permanent location without worry of relocation, and have things that she sees most normal people having, such as roads, clean water, and electricity.

Ethnic Vietnamese girls in both Kampong Chhnang and Kandal provinces participating in the survey also shed light on issues of legal identity. Despite the vast majority of girls being born in Cambodia (all but one), the number of them that did not have an identification document was very high (90%).





Tied to the home

> We value both boys and girls here. The difference is that boys have more freedom, like hanging out at night… Girls normally stay at home and help their mothers with housework. It's kind of typical in Vietnamese culture.

-A 15-year-old student in Kandal

Finding 6 Ethnic Vietnamese girls do not have much freedom and opportunities as boys do because of family and community norms.

For ethnic Vietnamese girls, social gender norms deeply affect their lives and the paths they take in the future. Girls and women in the FLD study discussed real differences between boys and girls in their communities. There was a general expectation that girls should not travel far from their homes and sometimes do not even go to school. Some girls faced criticism about what they chose to wear or felt they were prevented from doing specific jobs because of their gender. Many girls and young women felt isolated and talked about being unfamiliar with the world outside of their communities.

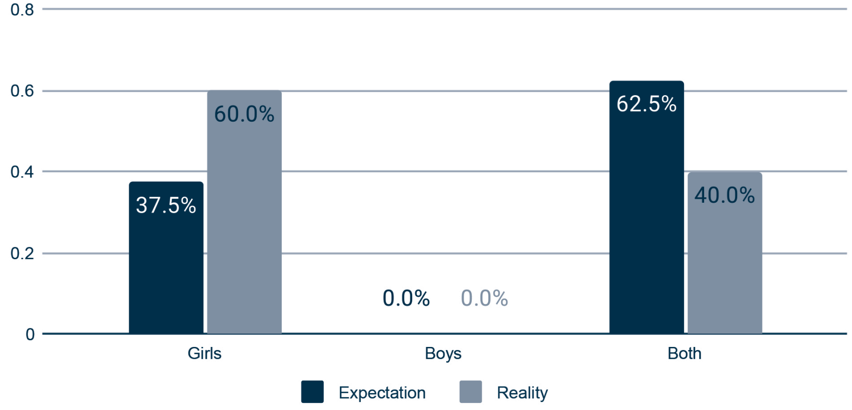
On the surface, most Sharers felt that boys and girls are both valued or treated equally in ethnic Vietnamese communities. 21 of the 40 Sharers (52.5%) agreed that boys and girls are the same. In deeper conversations, however, differences in freedom and opportunities outside of the house are rather stark. 20 Sharers (50%) made mention of girls having less freedom than boys in their everyday lives. The large majority of these Sharers referred to housework obligations as the main factor contributing to their sense of unequal levels of freedom with boys. One girl in Kampong Chhnang,

however, very clearly shared that she felt boys have more rights and freedoms than girls. She discussed in detail her opinion on the differences she observed in the lives of boys and girls. In her explanation to the Listeners, she said, "Every day, I have to tidy up the house and work at the shop… I can't go out. I want to go and work at a salon in Phnom Penh but my mother won't allow me because she's worried I'm going to get cheated. I can't work at a cafe either because she thinks being required to wear shorts is not okay and she's completely against it. Meanwhile, boys can do whatever they want." Girls who often initially stated they thought boys and girls were treated equally later reflected on their statements and shared examples that suggested they were in fact not, such as having more housework responsibilities or saying that boys had more free time. This contradiction could be explained by the evolving conservation through the FLD methodology that allowed them the space to further elaborate on their initial statements and assumptions. For example, in spite of saying that boys and girls were treated equally in her community in Kandal, a 15-year-old girl said, "I go to school in the morning and then do the housework when I get home. The boys nearby don't have to do anything but that's because girls are supposed to do all the housework."

Being responsible for housework or having a prescribed role in their families or communities, females can be impacted most directly in accessing opportunities or achieving their own dreams. Among the FLD conversations, Sharers elaborated that girls and women facing particular barriers related to gender roles limited their ability to participate in activities such as going to school, getting a job, or even socialising with others, including their friends in the community. One 15-year-old girl living near the border in Kandal reported that she was unable to go to work after dropping out from school. She told Listeners, "Some of the girls in my community are going

to Vietnam to work in factories. I want to go too but my mother won't let me. My family won't allow girls to travel far from our home."

The participants in focus groups among ethnic Vietnamese parents and grandparents tended to reinforce the difference in perceived gender roles and the obligations of girls versus boys in their communities. Women discussed their protective instincts towards their daughters, sharing that they often would not let them go out at night but had no objections to their sons doing the same because they could protect themselves. They also rationalised the dominant housework role of the girls in the community saying that boys were unable to cook and girls did not do well in school and could not earn money like the boys. One woman in the Kampong Chhnang focus group even said, "girls don't know anything." In Kandal, however, some women remarked that they supported their daughters to go to university and felt that it should not be a choice simply to find a better husband, but to also help them become more independent. The men in the male focus groups echoed much of what was said in the FLD study and the women's groups. Most felt that boys and girls have equal rights and opportunities, but noted that they saw girls as weaker and needing more protection and sheltering. They were also more supportive of boys going to school over girls, explaining that it was important to see males as the family breadwinner, and the ones that would eventually earn income while women would end up doing housework. Girls in the survey group showed a similar expectation on them in terms of housework compared to boys although some showed that there was pressure on both boys and girls.



Ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed felt that in reality, they did more housework than boys, even if it was expected that both girls and boys would contribute.

- 75% thought that they did not have as much freedom to go as boys did.
- 70% of the girls could not go out because their parents did not allow them to.
- 53% think that it is unsafe to go anywhere outside their community.

Unreachable dreams

> I want to be an artist in the future because I've liked painting since I was young, but had to drop out of school. I really wanted it to happen but I can't do anything about it.

-A 14-year-old who dropped out of school to help her mother in the house

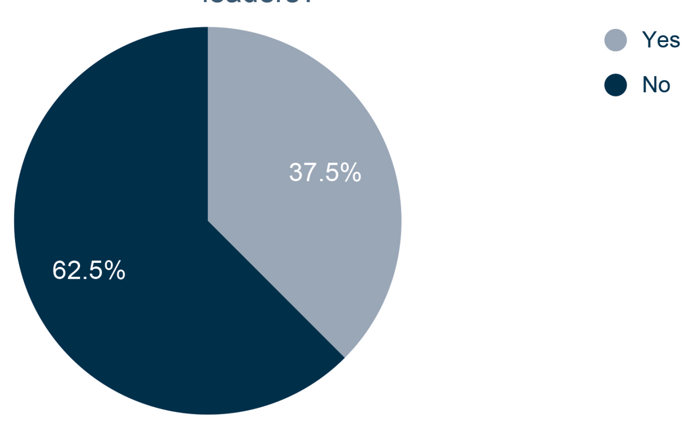
Finding 7 Most ethnic Vietnamese girls lack confidence and are not able to achieve their own dreams.

Many ethnic Vietnamese girls have dreams. Of the 40 Sharers, 21 (52.5%) made a reference to their dreams, either what they currently wanted or what they had once wanted in their lives. For the most part, ethnic Vietnamese girls shared their career dreams, imagining what they wanted to be in the future. In Kampong Chhnang, the majority of girls who talked about job ambitions most commonly wished to work in the beauty industry, working in or owning salons. In Kandal, becoming a police officer or a teacher were the most popular dreams for young ethnic Vietnamese or mixed-race girls who participated as Sharers. Apart from those professions, girls also mentioned wanting to become artists, accountants, nurses, chefs, flight attendants, or lawyers.

In reality, however, most girls talked more about what they once wanted but had failed to achieve or that they had given up. Twelve of the 21 Sharers who expressed some kind of dream or hope for the future ultimately resorted to giving up or suggested that it was no longer possible. Most often, this was related to the contexts of their lives or their lack of confidence to further pursue what they had once dreamt about. A 17-year-old girl in a floating village in Kampong Chhnang shared her feeling of hopelessness in achieving her dream to run her own business. She said, "I used to dream about learning to do beauty treatments and manicures. I want to open my own salon because I don't want to work for others but I don't have the ability to achieve my dream." In Kampong Chhnang, Sharers seemed more likely to refuse the idea of dreaming beyond the reality of their everyday lives. A 14-year-old girl frankly said, "Whenever I think of my future, I don't dare to dream much, I only want to help my parents. That is enough for me." Similarly, another girl from a floating village who helps her mother

selling groceries on their boat said, “I never dare to dream much, I only live my life as it is and I never think about it.”

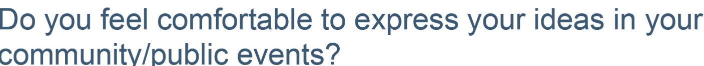
A lack of confidence among ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed also emerged in the findings, particularly in terms of perspectives of leadership and gender. A majority of the survey respondents felt that they could not become leaders in their communities.

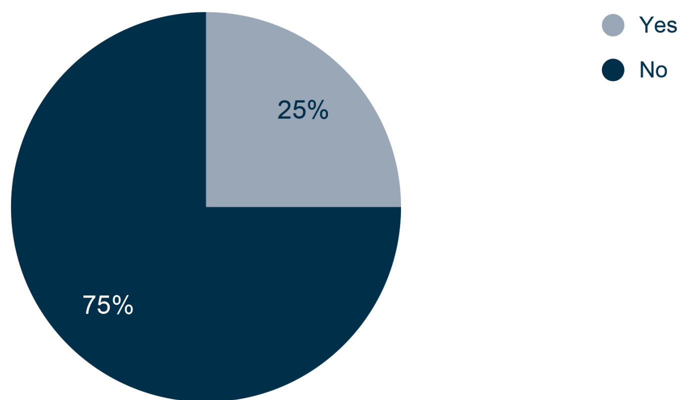


62.5% of ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed believed that minority girls cannot become community leaders, while 37.5% thought they could.

- Of those who felt it was not possible for girls to become leaders, 55% said it was because of lack of knowledge.
- 53% felt it was because girls lack capacity.
- 50% said it was because girls are not given the opportunity to be leaders
- 45% believed they cannot become leaders due to cultural and social norms.

This was also reflected in community engagement and a general lack of participation among ethnic Vietnamese girls in the survey.





Of the ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed, 75% of them said they did not feel comfortable expressing their ideas in public, while 25% said they were comfortable to do so.

- 53% said they take little part in any services to the community and 40% said they have never participated in anything related to their communities.
- 88% said they do not engage in their communities because of housework, 78% do not have enough time, 75% feel no connection, and 65% said they had no opportunities to do so..
- 68% expressed that girls' voices have very little impact on decision-making within the family, school, and/or community.

Disconnected from the outside world

> I don't really interact with others from outside my community because I rarely go onto the land, maybe only once or twice a month. I just stay at home and help my parents.

-A 14-year-old girl who lives on a boat in a floating village along the Tonle Sap

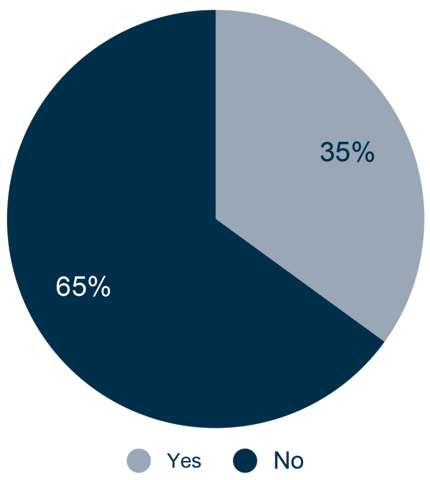
Finding 8 Most ethnic Vietnamese girls do not have regular communication with people outside their communities and feel anxious making contact with others.

Isolation is a real issue for ethnic Vietnamese living in both Kampong Chhnang and Kandal. 24 of the 40 Sharers (60%) said that they did not interact with people outside of their communities. More specifically, 16 Sharers actually said they had never talked to anyone. Most often, "people outside their communities" referred to the mainstream ethnic Khmer populations living nearby. Ethnic Vietnamese communities living on the river in floating villages in Kampong Chhnang were understandably more isolated from those living on land. In addition to geographical isolation, they tended to share cultural and language barriers that prevented them from engaging with other communities. A 16-year-old girl said, "I don't have any Khmer friends or know any because I can't really communicate in Khmer." Others said that their families and lifestyles were the main reasons they tended not to mix with outsiders. Another ethnic Vietnamese girl there said, "I don't know anyone other than the Vietnamese in my community since I only stay at home and my mum doesn't allow me to go anywhere too far from here because she worries about my safety."

Sharers in Kandal were somewhat more likely to know others outside of their community or identify having a friend from a different ethnic group. One 14-year-old girl living near the border said, "I have a Muslim friend and our relationship is good." Another said, "I'm surrounded by Khmer people so our relations are not a problem." Still, even in Kandal, many Sharers reported that they did not significantly interact with other groups outside of their communities. Eleven out of the 20 Sharers there said they did not connect with people other than their own groups because of language and their lack of Khmer skills. A 19-year-old girl, for instance, said, "I'm living in Cambodia but I don't really have any good relationships with Khmer people because I can't communicate in Khmer, plus I don't go out much. I don't really care about things outside my community." Unsurprisingly, mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer Sharers were more likely to express having relationships with people in other ethnic groups outside of their own communities. Five of the ten mixed-race Sharers said they had connections to others or suggested that interethnic relationships were not an issue for them.

Isolation and lack of contact with other communities and ethnic groups contribute to anxiety among ethnic Vietnamese girls in situations where they do interact with others. The two Listeners who did their FLD fieldwork in the floating village communities of Kampong Chhnang said, "They feel scared going outside their community because they can't communicate in Khmer. They feel insecure about not being able to communicate with others. Their parents do not allow them to go out to protect them from other people. They have mentioned that they're scared of outsiders." Even for them coming in as outsiders, they mentioned that it was over several years of engaging in FLD activities and other events in the community that they finally felt accepted and approachable, especially with the adolescent girls. Watching them interact with others for the first time, however, seemed to make them nervous and uncomfortable.

Safety was a major concern to ethnic Vietnamese girls who were surveyed. The majority of girls did not feel safe to go outside of their own communities.



65% of the ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed did not feel safe in their communities or when they went out.

- 45% of those who said they felt unsafe to leave their communities mentioned it was because they worried about getting harassed by others.
- 38% of those feeling unsafe to go outside said it was because they lacked proper identification or did not have a clear legal identity.

Violence against children

> The teachers always beat the students as a discipline measure. Also, parents sometimes beat their own children in order to make them behave.

-A 14-year-old girl in Kampong Chhnang who dropped out of school

Finding 9 Violence against children is still happening in the community.

Like other groups, ethnic Vietnamese children experience physical violence in different contexts in their lives. Both girls and women who spoke as Sharers brought up issues of violence. Nine of the 40 Sharers (22.5%) talked about violence with two of them speaking from their direct experiences and personal stories while the other seven focused on witnessing cases of violence involving others.

Several Sharers discussed in detail about violence at schools, mostly involving teachers as well as some cases of children committing violence against other children. Several girls framed the violence they had witnessed or experienced by teachers as a form of discipline. One 14-year-old girl studying in a Christian school explained, "Teachers here beat the students until they get sick and have been confronted by parents about it, but without any change. Sometimes, the teacher uses a stick to hit them when they are noisy in class."

Violence at home was another issue brought up by several girls as well as an adult female. During a reflection on the data, the Listeners who went to Kampong Chhnang said that in discussing violence, some girls believed that their fathers beat them out of love, as a way to teach them

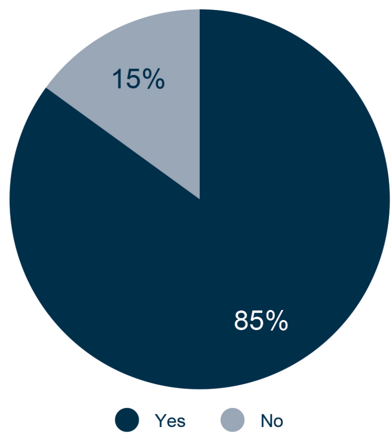
how to behave. One Sharer, an adult woman, noted that family violence was seen as a private issue in her community. Several girls who said they did not experience violence themselves, however, did mention that they were witnesses to violence, often involving their neighbours or friends. For example, a 16-year-old girl living on a boat in a floating village in Kampong Chhnang said, "I never experienced violence in my own family but I do see my neighbour using violence towards their kids, like hitting them with a belt."

Enduring violence to preserve harmony

A 15-year-old with seven siblings living on the Tonle Sap in Kampong Chhnang shared her very personal story living with violence on a day-to-day basis. Her step-father beat her mother and began beating her at a young age. She said that every day after coming home from her job processing fish, he tries to pick a fight with her, especially after drinking. Her mother told her to stay quiet or her step-father might become even more violent. Over time, she felt great pity towards her mother and she resisted fighting back in order to keep her home as stable as possible.

Strong evidence of domestic and gender based violence came out from interviews with ethnic Vietnamese girls in the survey group. A large majority were facing violence in their lives.

Have you experienced violence in your family or from an intimate partner?



85% of the ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed said that they had experienced violence.

- 78% expressed they faced emotional/psychological violence and 45% experienced physical violence.
- 78% experienced violence from within their own families.
- 48% did not seek help when facing violence, while of those who did, 43% went to their friends and 25% went to their family or relatives.
- 48% experienced sexual harassment at least once in their lives with 33% choosing to do nothing about it, while 33% talked about it with their close friends or neighbours.
- 38% said they believed the violence they experienced was their fault.

Hiding who I am

> I still feel a lot of discrimination living here. Sometimes people call me the "Yuon kid." I get worried that other people will discriminate against me if they find out I'm mixed.

-A 17-year-old mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer girl from Kandal province in her last year of high school

Finding 10 Many mixed-race ethnic Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodians hide their identity to avoid discrimination.

Identity and discrimination were relatively common topics brought up in conversations in Kandal province. Listeners reflecting on the data they collected mentioned specific cases of mixed-race Sharers hiding their ethnic Vietnamese heritage to avoid bullying or discrimination. Among the mixed-race Sharers that participated in the FLD study, identity was often a complex issue. Unsurprisingly, Cambodians that shared Vietnamese and Khmer ethnic heritage were more likely to try and hide their identity (specifically their Vietnamese background). In Kandal province, where most of the mixed-race Sharers were located, hiding one's identity was often a way of life for youth.

In Kandal province, eight mixed-race Sharers identified themselves as both ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer. Over half of these Sharers specifically discussed identity and discrimination. One teenage boy from Kandal included in the study, for example, had both Cambodian and Vietnamese citizenship but did not want others to know he was mixed-race in Cambodia. Another girl said, "If I could change, I wouldn't want to be mixed-race. I would want to be either Khmer or Vietnamese."

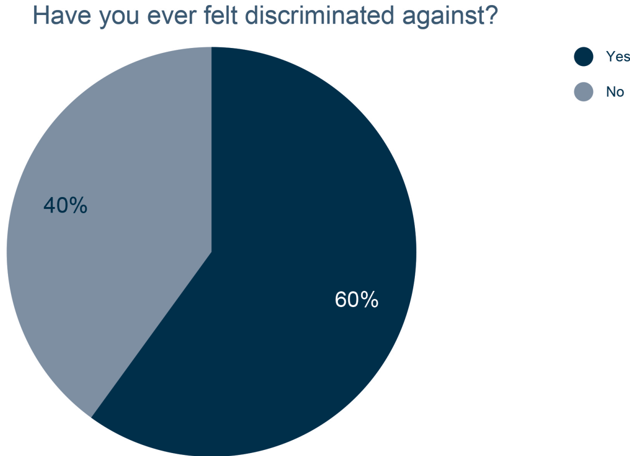
Mixed-race Sharers that spoke about hiding their identity or feeling ashamed of their ethnic background also brought up issues of discrimination. Several mentioned being referred to as "Yuon" or having a focus on their ethnic Vietnamese heritage as a negative aspect in their lives. A 15-year-old girl who stopped studying in Vietnam and started in Cambodia told Listeners that, "There are friends at school who like to call me 'Yuon.' I feel hurt and I hate them when I hear this." A 17-year-old high school student in Kandal said some of her friends told her she does not even need to study simply because she is a "Yuon."

The female focus group, including mothers in Kandal, also emphasised the challenges their mixed-race daughters were facing at school. Some mentioned that there was a general attitude among Khmer that ethnic Vietnamese children did not really need to go to school at all. One woman in the group said that she told her mixed-race daughter to ignore such negative words and to continue studying the best she could.

Easier to hide

One of the Listeners who went out to gather data in ethnic Vietnamese communities shared her own personal story struggling with her identity growing up in Kandal. A daughter of a Khmer father and a Vietnamese mother, she understood very well the situation her Sharers found themselves in as Cambodians with a mixed ethnic background. Throughout her childhood, she continually denied her Vietnamese roots, even when her own teacher put her on the spot and called her a "Yuon." Becoming increasingly defensive, she was very quick to yell at anyone who insisted she was Vietnamese or had any Vietnamese background. She began to avoid using Vietnamese language in public and would only speak Khmer to others, even when they approached her in Vietnamese. After getting involved in more interethnic work, however, the Listener said that she became somewhat more comfortable with her mixed-race identity and more confident to challenge discrimination.

Ethnic Vietnamese girls who took part in the survey also provided more context on the discrimination they faced outside of the their communities. A majority of them had experienced discrimination in their lives based on their ethnic background or other aspects of their identity. 60% of the 40 girls answered "yes" when asked whether they had ever felt discriminated against.



60% of the ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed felt that they had been discriminated against in their lifetimes.

- 53% mentioned they were discriminated against because of their ethnic minority identity and/or the language they were speaking.
- 45% said they experienced discrimination because of their cultural or traditional practices.
- 20% felt that their accent in Khmer language was one of the main reasons they faced discrimination by others.
- 53% said that they felt devalued when being discriminated against and 38% said it even led them to drop out of school.
- 90% suggested that everyone should respect diversity and eliminate discrimination.

We are who we are

> I love my identity… I want others to know about our way of living and culture in our community.

-A 15-year-old ethnic Vietnamese girl who studied in Vietnam but started going to school in Cambodia because she wanted to focus more on the Khmer language

Finding 11 Ethnic Vietnamese are proud of their identity and want others to know more about their culture and way of life.

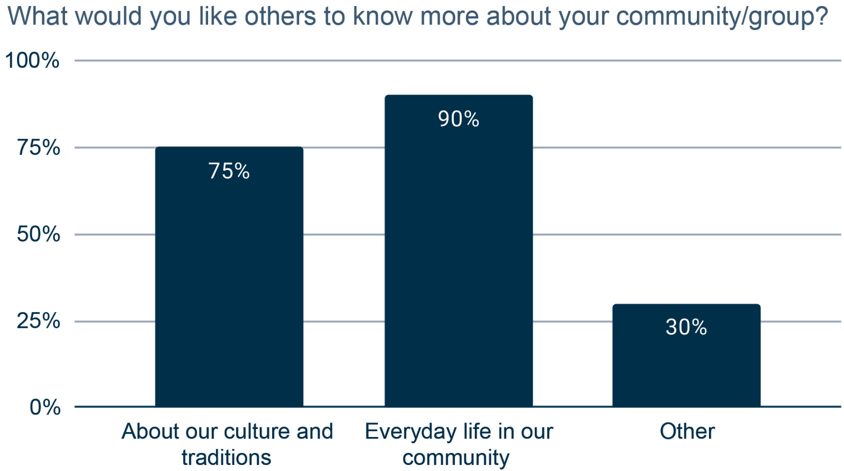
Despite cases of hiding identity to avoid discrimination, many ethnic Vietnamese and mixed-race Sharers expressed pride in their identity. 21 of the 40 Sharers (52.5%) said that they "love" or that they "feel proud" of their identity, referring to either their Vietnamese roots or their mixed-race heritage. 18 of the 40 Sharers (45%) specifically mentioned that they wanted others to know more about their ways of living, culture and tradition, or to accept who they are.

In frank terms, many Sharers that felt comfortable with their identities noted that they accepted the community that they were born into and that being who they were was not a choice. A 14-year-old ethnic Vietnamese student in Kandal simply told the Listeners, "I'm proud of who I am because we don't have a choice who we are born as." Others expressed more pride for their cultural characteristics including language, celebrations, and their community ways of living.

Mixed-race ethnic Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodians also expressed some pride in being bi-cultural and bilingual, able to interact in two different contexts. A 17-year-old mixed-race student in Kandal said, "I love my

identity because I'm loved by everyone every time I visit Vietnam. They say I'm pretty, smart, and bilingual." Another girl said, "I'm proud of being mixed because I can communicate in two languages."

Survey results showed similar opinions about identity and pride among ethnic Vietnamese girls who participated. In addition to being proud of their backgrounds, girls felt that their culture, traditions, and everyday life in their communities were aspects they wished they could share with others.



Most girls wanted other people in Cambodia to know more about their minority communities.

- 98% of ethnic Vietnamese girls participating in the survey said that they felt proud of their identity, culture, and traditions.

Language exclusion

"I'm an ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia but I only study Vietnamese. I want to study Khmer and English too but I can't go to school often because I have to process fish and only get to go when I'm free."

-A 16-year-old girl in Kampong Chhnang who goes to an informal Christian school.

Finding 12 Girls in isolated rural communities have less opportunities to study Khmer language.

Despite being born and raised in Cambodia, the Khmer language is often an issue for ethnic Vietnamese girls. 16 of the 40 Sharers (40%) mentioned either that they struggled to speak Khmer, that there was a barrier to studying the language, or that they wished to use it with more fluency. Understandably, more Sharers living in floating communities in Kampong Chhnang tended to mention inability or low proficiency in Khmer. Sharers in Kandal that brought up Khmer limitations seemed to relate more to being educated in Vietnam or in Vietnamese language schools.

Barriers to going to school were often associated with limited Khmer study opportunities. For girls who could not attend school, particularly in Kampong Chhnang, there were next to no opportunities to interact with others in Khmer language. Their geographical isolation on the water coupled with their cultural isolation as ethnic Vietnamese resulted in a lack of Khmer fluency, particularly among adolescents. A 19-year-old girl who worked in the fishing industry studied Vietnamese until dropping out in grade 8. She said, "I can only read and write a little Khmer because I have a Khmer sister-in-law that teaches me a bit. I can't speak well since I don't

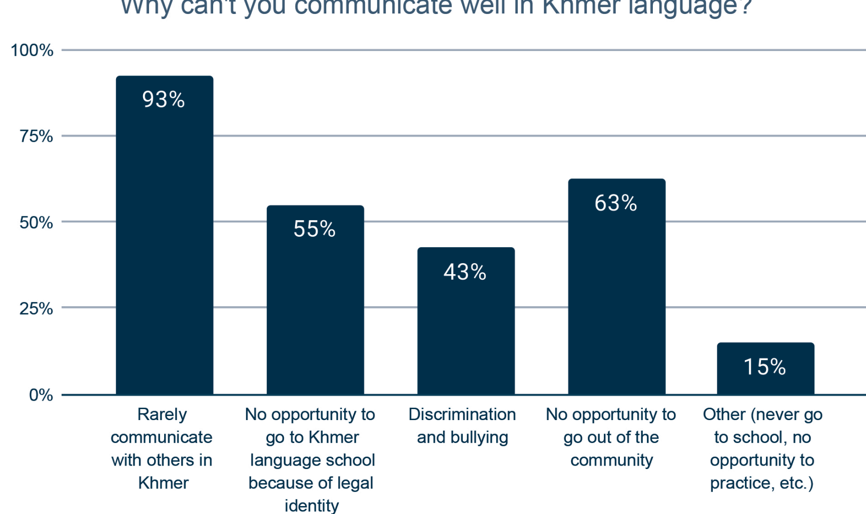
have anyone to talk to." Access to education was an issue that also affected their chances of learning Khmer. For girls that could not go to school, either due to lacking documentation or their economic situation, Khmer was often a challenge. A 14-year-old ethnic Vietnamese girl in Kandal shared "I want to know more Khmer even if it's not my mother tongue because I live in Cambodia. Sometimes I feel jealous of Khmer kids who can go to school while I am just in grade 3 because my parents have to get someone to come and teach me at home. I want to be fluent in Khmer so I can communicate better."

Focus groups with the communities also revealed more context in understanding the barriers that ethnic Vietnamese girls were facing to speak or study the Khmer language. Male focus groups in both Kampong Chhnang and Kandal raised the issue of language and literacy more often. In Kampong Chhnang, some fathers mentioned that their children only studied Vietnamese and could not speak Khmer fluently, adding that they could not speak Khmer either since most schools did not teach the language. In Kandal, a grandfather, father, and son all said that they wished they could study Khmer themselves, but without any birth certificate or other legal documents, they could not access Khmer education.

Nobody to talk to, no way to learn

One 14-year-old Sharer living in a floating village in Kampong Chhnang talked about her journey in the informal education system and the struggle to learn Khmer. Without any Khmer-speaking friends or acquaintances, she thought that the only way to learn was to try and study at her Christian school. Her responsibility to help her mother sell rice and drinks, however, led to her dropping out of school. Only able to read and write Vietnamese, she no longer had any opportunity to learn Khmer and continued to feel limited in her isolated community on the river.

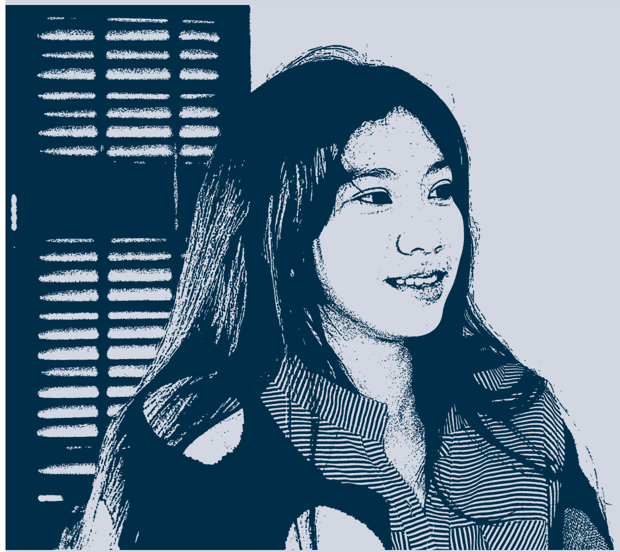
Of the 20 ethnic Vietnamese girls surveyed in floating villages along the river in Kampong Chhnang province, the majority could speak little to no Khmer language. Their reasons for not speaking Khmer varied.



For ethnic Vietnamese girls with little to no Khmer language ability, their reasons were lack of interaction with Khmer speakers, isolation, inability to go to school, discrimination, among others.

- 63% learnt Vietnamese at a religious school (Christian)
- 88% of the girls could speak, read, write, and understand Vietnamese.
- 45% of the girls could only communicate very little in Khmer language, while the other 40% could not communicate in it at all.
- 93% wanted to be fluent in Khmer.

The Listeners' Take
FLD - Real research in action



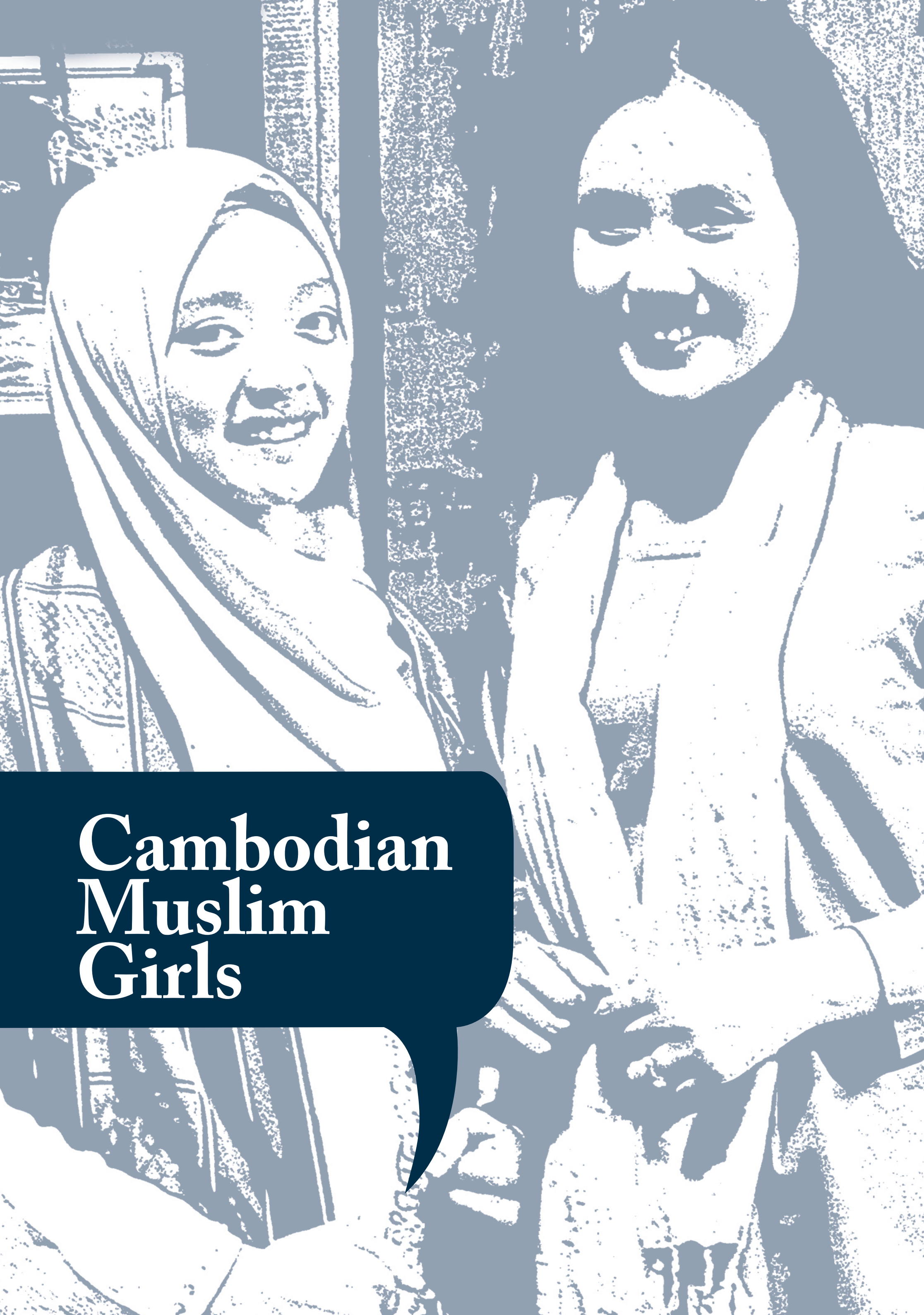
Binh was both an FLD Listener and worked as a survey interviewer for ethnic Vietnamese in Kandal. A mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer, Binh grew up speaking both languages and immersed in two different cultures.

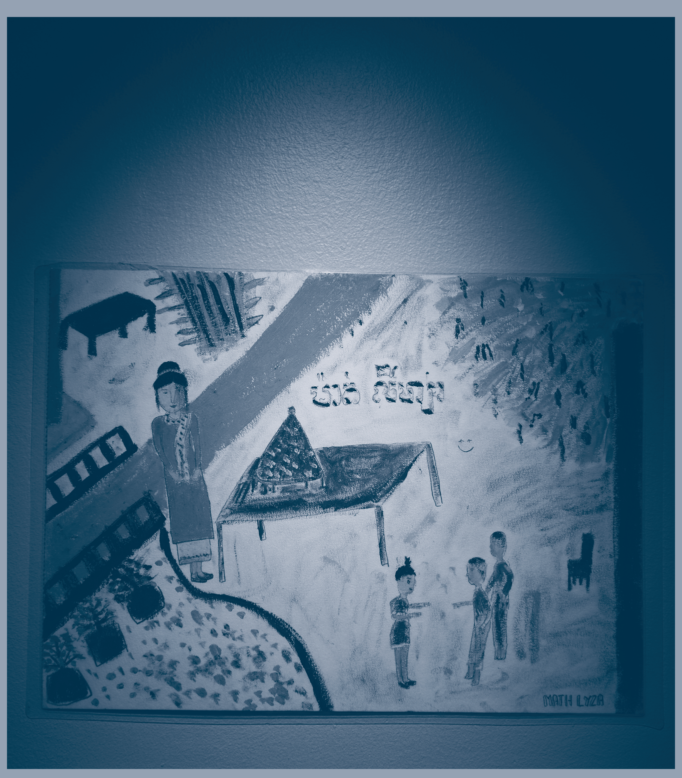
After talking with 20 Sharers and 20 survey respondents in her own community during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Binh was especially troubled by something she heard. Given that most of the girls she spoke with did not have Cambodian citizenship and normally crossed into Vietnam to study, the sudden border closure dramatically changed their lives.

"I felt so much pity for the girls who could no longer go to school," Binh shared. "Their parents even came to me after the conversations and asked if there was anything I could do."

Following the participatory research activities, Binh decided she wanted to help her community and focus on the girls who no longer went to school. In the uncertain time of the pandemic, she opened up her own house and began teaching them. She gave classes in both Khmer and Vietnamese and helped them to stay focused on their studies. Binh continued her support and has become a full-time teacher in the community for both girls and boys who are not able to attend public school in Cambodia.

The very nature of FLD is making the space for people to act on issues that are important to them. By having community members lead the research, engage in their communities, and listen to the real issues, they have the chance to take action in response to what they learnt. Binh's involvement in *Making the Space* and her subsequent leadership in her community demonstrate that participatory research centred on community does not only provide new information, but can generate solutions first-hand by those who are most invested in the results.


Cambodian
Muslim
Girls



“Carrying Ancestors”

A 15-year-old traditionalist Cham girl in Kampong Chhnang province painted with watercolours to show her identity through traditions, culture, and Islamic faith. The girl in the painting is preparing to carry a tray of Cham delicacies to the mosque on Friday, when women usually bring food while male elders pray. This tradition has been carried out among generations over centuries. The girl who created this artwork is deeply proud of her ethnic and religious identity and wished to express her customs to others who may not be familiar with the Cham.

Background

Although Cambodia is well-known for a Buddhist identity that is enshrined as the state religion, Islam has a long history in the country with Muslims being very much part of society. According to 2019 government census data, Cambodian Muslims account for 2% of the population.[99] Some non-governmental organisations, however, estimate the number of people practising Islam to be more around the 4-5% mark.[100] Most often referred to as "Cham" by the Cambodian mainstream, Cambodian Muslims have significant diversity within their own communities and by no means are a single collective. In fact, many of the considerable differences between distinct Cambodian Muslim groups have purported to cause some divisions, often stemming from differences in practice of the Islam faith.[101] In particular, with increasing external influences from the Muslim world outside of Cambodia and the changes happening in the practices within, conflict among different Muslim groups reflect past tensions between modernists and traditionalists in the evolution of Islam.[102] There are three main subgroups recognised by Cambodian Muslims; the Cham Bani (traditionalist Cham), Cham-Cham (orthodox Cham), and Cham-Chvea. An additional group includes ethnically Khmer Muslims, a small minority that have usually converted to Islam or through intermarriage.[103]

[99] Royal Government of Cambodia, *General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019*, 23.

[100] U.S. Department of State, *Cambodia 2020*, 2.

[101] Claudia Seise, "The Cham Minority in Cambodia: Division within - Introduction to Contemporary Changes in Cham Communities," *Religi Journal, Vol. VI, No.1,* (Jan 2007).

[102] Philipp Bruckmayr, "The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 23, no. 3 (2006): 15.

[103] John Goodman, *The Minority Muslim Experience in Mainland Southeast Asia: A Different Path* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 50.

The traditionalist Cham, referred to as the Cham Bani inside Cambodia and also sometimes referred to by outside Muslim countries as the Cham Jahed, make up about 10% of the Cambodian Muslim population.[104] For traditionalist Cham, historical connection to the Champa Kingdom motherland, located in contemporary Vietnam, is one of the major focuses of their identity construction. Unlike the majority of Muslim groups, they pray once a week on Fridays, and this only includes men. Traditionalist Cham women tend to have greater roles in ceremonies and often practice rituals that date far back, including some that are even considered "pre-Islamic." They generally use traditional Cham script and speak the historical Cham language. In contrast, the orthodox Cham, sometimes categorised as Cham-Cham and who often prefer being referred to as Khmer Islam, practice a more globally known form of Islam and make up the majority of the Cambodian Muslim population. Like the traditionalist Cham, they are also descendants of the Champa Kingdom, but tend to be more influenced by international Islamic groups. They pray five times a day adhering to the five pillars of Islam. They also often speak Cham language, but they may use Arabic script and also speak Khmer, and sometimes Malay. The Cham-Chvea make up a smaller group who trace their background to present-day Malaysia and Indonesia rather than the Champa Kingdom, and despite the subgrouping name given to them, are not usually ethnically Cham. They do not necessarily speak Cham, but like the orthodox Cham, practice a more universally accepted form of Islam.[105] This study focused on the Cham Bani and the Cham-Cham groups in Kampong Chhnang, who are referred to as the traditionalist and the orthodox Cham respectively.

[104] Seise, 23.

[105] Deepanshu Mohan and Sen Chantarasingh, *The Ethnic-Religious Minority of Cham in Cambodia: Reflections from an Ethno-Historical Account,* Jan 13, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3518222 (accessed Feb 14, 2022); Seise, 23-25; Yekti Maunati and Betti Rosita Sari, "Construction of Cham Identity in Cambodia," *SUVANNABHUMI*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (Jun 2014): 107-135.

Although Cambodian Muslims tend to be viewed as fairly well integrated in society, they generally live in more poverty, have less education and higher illiteracy, and poorer health than mainstream Khmer Cambodians.[106] They are, however, quite well represented in Cambodian politics and government with increasing improvement in numbers and status.[107] Nevertheless, Cambodian Muslims have faced persistent discrimination by mainstream Khmer and other groups in the country. Historically, like several other minority groups, Muslims were specifically targeted during the Khmer Rouge genocide period from 1975-1979. Although not necessarily an initial target of ethnic racism by the regime, Muslims were killed in high numbers by the Khmer Rouge because of religious practices and their failure to comply with assimilation. The Cham language was also banned. These actions propelled more Muslims to rebel and subsequently be seen as enemies of the state.[108] In more modern times, Cambodian Muslims have tended to be targets of systematic discrimination in relation to specific geopolitical contexts or situations. During periods of heightened threats of terrorism after the 2001 September 11 attacks in the United States, for example, Cambodian Muslims faced pressure and suspicion by others. The fear of radicalisation caused rifts between mainstream Khmer and Muslims, including two school closures and arrests of religious teachers.[109] Covid-19 put more pressure on Cambodian Muslims after an outbreak took place early on in the pandemic. Following a religious gathering of 79 Cambodian Muslims in Malaysia, some of whom were infected and subsequently returned to Cambodia, they became a target of widespread fear and stigma among the

[106] Federico Sabeone, "Islam in Cambodia: The fate of the Cham Muslims," *EU-Asia at a Glance*, European Institute for Asian Studies, Jun 2017, https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EU_Asia_at_a_Glance_Sabeone_Cham_Cambodia_2017-1.pdf (accessed Feb 8, 2022).

[107] Kirchner, 14; Sabeone, 116.

[108] Bruckmayr, 4-7.

[109] Kirchner, 15-17.

public.[110] The government began reporting Covid-19 case numbers from its first outbreak by separating "Khmer Islam" in its own category. This initial distinction was reported to fuel others to no longer purchase at Cambodian Muslim shops and to use masks only in their presence. The government later changed course and classified all cases under "Khmer."[111]

Minority Muslim women around the world encounter challenges living in non-Muslim majority contexts. Often because of particular dress customs, such as using a hijab or being fully covered in long garments, it is not uncommon for them to experience discrimination or be the focus of persistent stereotypes. Differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in relations and interaction between men and women, for example, may also cause difficulties in integration or living alongside other communities.[112] Particular gender issues exist for women in Cambodian Muslim communities. Some research carried out in Kratie province among Cambodian Muslims provided evidence that women and men had similar opportunities to participate politically at the commune level. However, religious bias tended to favour men as leaders and marginalised the voices of women and girls. Particularly among young Muslim females, there was a perception coming directly from them that they were "too young" or not knowledgeable enough to raise issues or approach leaders.[113] Although the traditionalist Cham (Cham Bani) group tends to have more liberal attitudes towards women and girls than the more orthodox (Cham-Cham) group, some

[110] Sun Mesa, "Muslim community denounces discrimination," *Khmer Times*, Mar 24, 2020, https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50704916/muslim-community-denounces-discrimination (accessed Feb 13, 2022).

[111] U.S. Department of State, *Cambodia 2020*, 4-5.

[112] Tabassum Fatima Rehman, "Women Who Choose Islam: Issues, Changes, and Challenges in Providing Ethnic-Diverse Practice," *International Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 4 (2003): 36-38.

[113] Cambodia Development Resource Institute, *Gender and Inclusive Development Analysis*, 31-32.

observations have been made that there are little differences between the groups in terms of gender equality.[114]

Cambodian Muslim girls face significant barriers to access schooling. Many do not complete primary school. This is often because they need to take care of their siblings, do housework, farm, lack resources, and lack cultural and religious accommodation in public schools.[115] In fact, it was only in 2008 that Muslim girls were permitted to wear hijabs in Cambodian schools.[116] Prior to this, the prohibition of wearing headscarves in schools was a major factor in girls dropping out in early years.[117] Gender bias is a major factor determining the likelihood of Cambodian Muslim girls pursuing education. Favouring boys over girls, conservative attitudes towards girls' education, and access to schools (both in terms of cultural differences and physical distances from communities) all impact the decision of Cambodian Muslim parents to allow their daughters to study, or not.[118] Language has also sometimes been a barrier for young Muslims who predominantly speak Cham language at home. For those with little to no Khmer language, academic performance lagged in state schools.[119]

This study examined the lives of Cambodian Muslim girls from communities in Kampong Chhnang province's Kampong Tralach District;

[114] Farina So, "The Study of the Qur-An vs. Modern Education for Islamic Women in Cambodia," (Paper presented at the Short Course on Islam, Gender, and Reproductive Rights, Southeast Asia, Center for Women's Studies, State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, June 4-25, 2005), http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Cham%20Muslim%20Leaders/Cham_Muslim_Leaders.htm (accessed Feb 13, 2022).

[115] Ibid.

[116] Nguon Sovan and Khouth Sophak Chakrya, "Muslims allowed to wear traditional clothes at school," *The Phnom Penh Post*, May 15, 2008, https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/muslims-allowed-wear-traditional-clothes-school (accessed Feb 13, 2022).

[117] So.

[118] American Institutes for Research. *Assessing Marginalization of Cham Muslim Communities in Cambodia* (Washington DC: Oct 2008), 2, http://www.kapekh.org/files/report_file/33-en.pdf (accessed Feb 9, 2022).

[119] Lunsford et al., 11.

the traditionalist Cham of Orussey Commune and the orthodox Cham of Chres and Chhuk Sa Communes - only 20km apart from each other. Although the two communities are geographically close and are both Muslim, there are differences between the groups that reflect distinctions of practice and orthodoxy described in this background. Similarly for both, however, is the presence of numerous factories in the area which serve as the source of employment for many Muslim families. Factory work opportunities also tend to provide pull factors for girls in school to frequently leave early to contribute to family incomes.

Location and demographics

CAMBODIAN MUSLIM GIRLS

FLD

4 Listeners
(2 Traditionalist Cham
and 2 Orthodox Cham)

40 Sharers

20 Traditionalist Cham
20 Orthodox Cham
15-19 years old

Focus Group Discussions

20 Participants

Traditionalist Cham ♀♀♀♀♀♀ ♂♂♂♂♂
Orthodox Cham ♀♀♀♀♀ ♂♂♂♂

23 – 65 years old

Target locations

Kampong Chhnang Province

Survey

♀ **40** (14 – 20 years old)
Respondents
38 Girls and **2** Women

100 Participants

FLD, focus group, and survey findings

Cambodian Muslim girls and their communities

FLD emerging themes

1. Language is an important aspect for Muslim communities related to cultural identity and connection.
2. Cambodian Muslim girls are proud of their identity.
3. Girls who drop out of school have few options but working in a factory, emigrating abroad, or getting married at a young age.
4. Girls greatly value the importance of higher education and wish to go to university but often face too many barriers to attend.
5. Most girls feel shy, lack understanding about their rights and sexual and reproductive health and think that talking about it outside the family is taboo.
6. Girls do not have as much freedom or as many opportunities as boys due to community norms.
7. There is pressure to quit school and girls are often discouraged from studying.
8. Cambodian Muslim girls have high hopes and dreams for their futures and their communities.
9. Girls suffer from complex family relations, violence, and emigration.
10. Cambodian Muslim girls feel that they overwhelmingly have good relations with other ethnic groups, but recognise that there are cases of some cultural misunderstandings about Islamic practices.

The culture in language

> I always use my mother tongue in the community and for daily communication.

-A 17-year-old orthodox Cham girl who studies in high school

Finding 1 **Language is an important aspect for Muslim communities related to cultural identity and connection.**

Cham language is an important aspect of identity among the Cambodian Muslims in the study. Cambodian Muslim girls frequently mentioned Cham as their mother tongue and discussed it in terms of communication or studies. 28 of the 40 Sharers (70%) brought up the topic of Cham language in their conversations with Listeners. 19 of the girls (47.5%) expressed that they could not study or no longer studied Cham because of other priorities or issues that prevented them while six (15%) said they continued to study. An 18-year-old traditionalist Cham girl shared, "I used to study Cham, but I can't now because I don't have time and there is no proper school." A 16-year-old orthodox Cham student, however, told Listeners, "I'm studying my language every day."

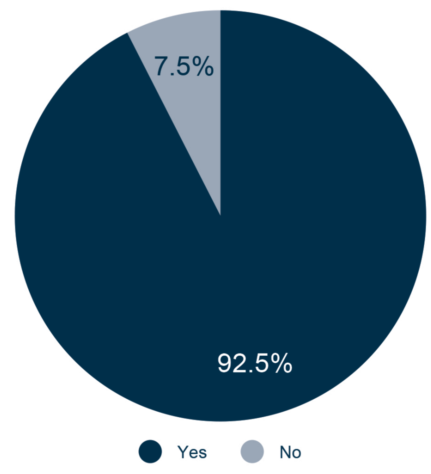
Listeners shared in detail their reflection on Cham language in the communities where they carried out their FLD fieldwork. They saw Cham as the dominant language of communication that not only connected the community, but also helped to preserve culture and traditions. Some said that they felt embarrassed if they were not fluent in Cham as a Cambodian Muslim and said there were schools for teaching Cham. For traditionalist Cham communities, Cham was commonly spoken as a first language and used to communicate in most local exchanges. For orthodox Cham

communities, girls often learnt Khmer first or at the same time as Cham, more frequently mixing the languages. In addition, orthodox communities also shared that they learnt Arabic as a third language for praying as well as learning the Arabic alphabet to write the Cham language in. Traditionalist Cham, on the other hand, talked about using Cham script as a written form of the language.

For many Cambodian Muslim girls, Cham was a language used for everyday life, spoken with their families and in their communities. A 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl said, “I use Cham in everyday life and I study my language in the evening after public school classes.” It was not the case for all, however. Another 17-year-old orthodox Cham girl shared, “I can’t speak Cham well because the villagers here use Khmer mostly and I haven’t studied Cham for a long time already. I’m too occupied with Khmer classes.”

For three of the Sharers in the orthodox community, learning Cham language was very important for them. An 18-year-old girl working in the factory said, “I use my native language with my family. I want to see girls able to study Cham so that they can be educated in our language as well.” Another girl studying in high school called on others to recognise the importance and said, “I want to see support for girls to study our language.”

For Cambodian Muslim girls and young women who participated in the survey, minority language and mother tongue was also an important aspect of their lives. Almost all survey respondents (92.5%) had studied the Cham language.



92.5% of Cambodian Muslim girls and young women said they studied their own language.

- 90% learnt their mother tongue at a religious school.
- 30% said that they were fluent in either Cham or Arabic including writing, reading, listening, and speaking.
- 45% said they could communicate quite well in Khmer language while 18% said they could only communicate very little.
- Of those who said they were not fluent in Khmer, 58% said it was because they rarely ever communicated with others in the language while 43% said it was because they had no opportunities to go outside of their communities.

Proud of who I am

> I love my identity and I have never once hid who I am.

-A 16-year-old orthodox Cham high school student

Finding 2 Cambodian Muslim girls are proud of their identity.

Sharers overwhelmingly expressed pride or said that they loved their identity as a Cambodian Muslim. 36 of the 40 Sharers (90%) conveyed such a sentiment. A 17-year-old orthodox Cham girl studying in high school proudly said, "I love my identity because it's the religion I believe in and I'm not afraid to show others I'm Muslim. I want others to know about my community, culture, and traditions." A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl similarly expressed, "I love my identity as a Cham. I want others to know about our culture, like how we celebrate the Malot Ceremony as well as Ramadan."

Identity was often associated with particular things related to culture or religion among the Sharers. They identified aspects such as clothing, diet, celebrations, and religious texts as sources of pride in expressing their identity as traditionalist or orthodox girls. A 15-year-old traditionalist Cham girl working in a factory told Listeners, "We wear a scarf to the mosque and I love my identity because we were born as we are and we can't change it." Another girl said, "I love my identity because I can learn the Quran and I love myself as an orthodox Cham."

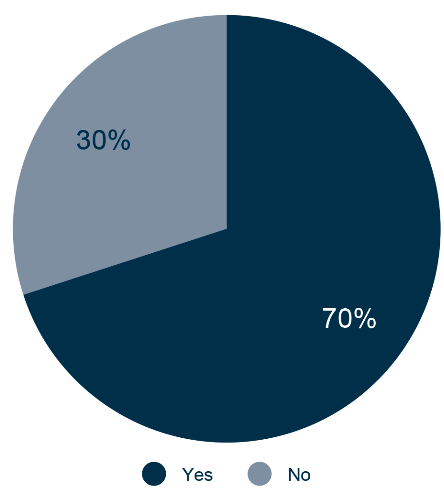
Some girls compared themselves to others, particularly to the mainstream Khmer population, often expressing that although it was more difficult to be a Cambodian Muslim, they were still proud. 12 of the 40 Sharers (30%)

made such a mention of comparison, but always finished by expressing their satisfaction at being who they were. For example, a 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl said, "I think that Khmer people can wear and eat whatever they want and they also have a lot more freedom than us. But I still love being Cham and I love our traditions and the fact that we don't wear shorts and have our own culture and beliefs."

Listeners analysing the data noted that the Cambodian Muslim girls were nearly all comfortable with their identity and coming from their communities. They most often expressed no desire to hide their identities with other groups and said they were proud of who they were. In fact, Listeners said that most Sharers specifically expressed that in considering if there was a next life, nearly all wished to be born again as a Muslim.

Similarly to the FLD Sharers, those in the survey group also shared pride and comfort in being Cambodian Muslim. Nearly all girls and young women felt proud of their identities but recognised challenges as minorities.

Do you feel comfortable showing your identity to others?



70% of the Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed felt comfortable to show their identity to others while 30% did not.

- 98% said they felt proud to be born as a Muslim in Cambodia.
- 78%, however, felt that minority girls face more challenges than the mainstream majority girls (Khmer).

I wouldn't change who I am for the world

A 15-year-old traditionalist Cham student from Kampong Chhnang shared her personal story with the Listeners during their FLD conversation. She felt that girls in her community had less opportunities than boys and she struggled to continue studying in school. She noted that Cham culture was much stricter than Khmer culture and felt that dress was quite different with many more rules for Cham girls. She was nevertheless very proud to be Cham and said, "I love who I am and what I have."

Limited choices, study or survive

> Most of the girls here quit school to work in the factory, get married, or engaged. Only a few girls in the village are still in school.

-A 15-year-old traditionalist Cham girl who already dropped out of school

Finding 3 **Girls who drop out of school have few options but working in a factory, emigrating abroad, or getting married at a young age.**

Staying in high school was a real issue among Cambodian Muslim girls who participated as FLD Sharers. 22 of the 40 Sharers (55%) either said they personally could no longer attend school or that most girls in their community could not study. Most girls that drop-out of high school before graduation are pressured for financial reasons. Poverty or the incentive to earn income are real drivers of ending studies. For most girls, leaving school allowed them more opportunities to support their families or gain financial benefits in their own lives.

The presence of many factories in Kampong Chhnang particularly influenced the lives of the Sharers. When it came down to a choice between studying or having the chance to work and receive a salary, many girls had no choice. A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl talking generally about her community said, "We're so poor so we can only go to work in the factory." Another 16-year-old traditionalist Cham girl who had been pressured by her mother to drop out of school to provide caregiving in her family said, "I quit school because I don't have money, my mother asked me to look after my 2-year-old brother." The result, however, was that the mother decided to eventually take care of the child and the girl ended up working at a factory to supplement the family's income.

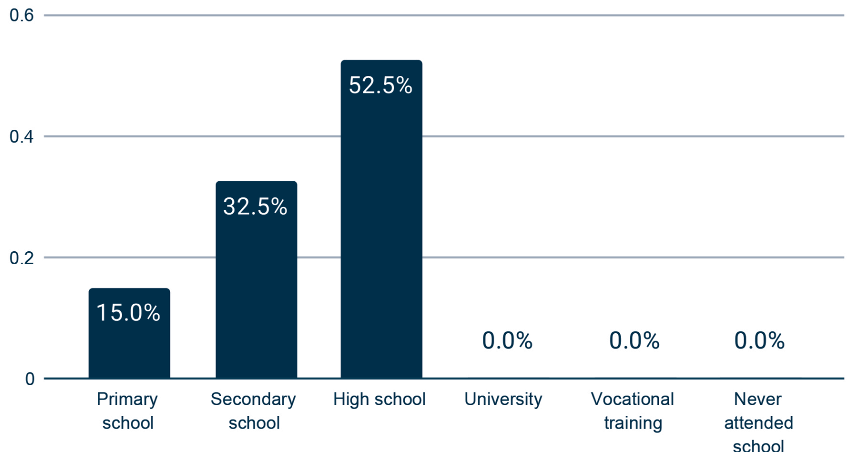
For Cambodian Muslim communities, emigration of family members was relatively common. For traditionalist Cham communities in Kampong Chhnang, some girls talked about going to Korea to work. A girl still in school said, "Most of the people who quit school go to work in the factory or go to Korea." For orthodox Cham, it was more common to mention emigrating to Malaysia. A girl who had dropped out before graduating

high school shared her story about moving to Malaysia to sew clothes where she could earn from $200-$300 per month.

Early marriage was a common topic discussed by Sharers in connection with dropping out of school or ending studies before high school graduation. Often also associated with poverty, marriage was another pathway to a more financially secure future. A traditionalist Cham girl talked about her community, sharing that girls around her village were dropping out of school because they had no money to study and would just get married instead. A 19-year-old orthodox Cham Sharer reflected on her past telling the Listeners, "My mother told me to quit school to get married. I ended up getting divorced after two or three months of marriage because I married someone I didn't love."

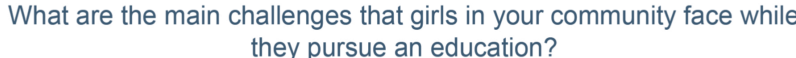
Focus groups with parents, grandparents, and siblings of Cambodian Muslim girls in Kampong Chhnang tended to support the narratives shared by the FLD Sharers. Men in the traditionalist Cham male focus group acknowledged that some girls dropped out of school to support their families in income generation and had to work on farms or take care of family members. Women from the orthodox Cham female group said that girls usually quit school to work at the factory or to get married. Unlike the FLD Sharers, however, the women in the focus group thought that girls in their community did not genuinely value education. They generalised that the girls themselves were not ambitious enough to stay at school and would simply rather earn money like the majority in the village.

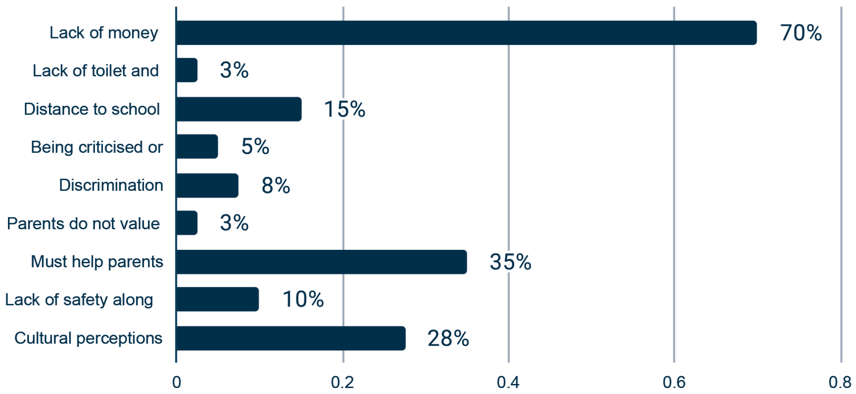
Survey respondents painted a similar picture about education among Cambodian Muslim girls in Kampong Chhnang province. Although there tended to be a lot of encouragement and enthusiasm for them to study, some barriers also stood out.



All Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed had attended some level of school with the minimum being primary, and over half (52.5%) had gone to high school.

- Of the 40 respondents, 45% studied, 27.5% stayed at home to do housework, and 27.5% worked outside of the home.
- 70% felt that education is very important for girls.
- 85% said lack of money is a barrier to studying, 30% said lack of family support, while 13% said community norms led to barriers to go to school.





Unable to achieve the university dream

> I think that education is very important so that I can have a better future. I don't have money to go to university in Phnom Penh.

-A 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl in Kampong Chhnang

Finding 4 Girls greatly value the importance of higher education and wish to go to university but often face too many barriers to attend.

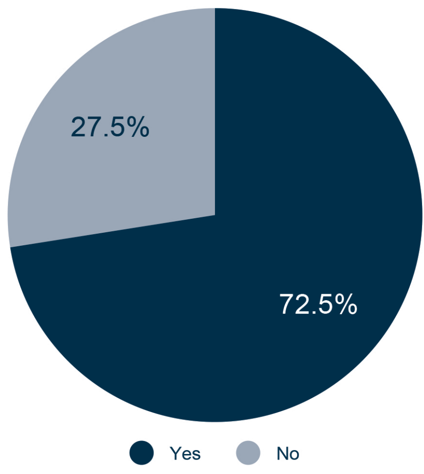
Post-secondary education is very important to Cambodian Muslim girls. 31 of the 40 Sharers (77.5%) specifically said that higher education is important to them or that they wish to study beyond high school. However, 19 of those 31 girls said they could not continue their studies or that it was not likely they could pursue a higher education due to barriers mainly associated with unaffordability.

Girls that put such value on a post-secondary education often felt that a university degree would allow them to gain better employment and earn more income in their futures. A determined 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl said, "Education is very important because we can gain new knowledge and get a good job. I will go to university after graduating from high school. I want to see more support for girls to go to school." A 16-year-old traditionalist Cham girl felt similar: "I think that education is very important because it helps us to be knowledgeable and can help us earn more money to support our families." She was less certain, however, if she would have the possibility to go. "I'm not sure if I can pursue higher education because we don't have the money," she confessed. They also expressed a connection between post-secondary education and social status or community recognition. An 18-year-old orthodox Cham student in her final year of high school said that she wanted to pursue a higher education so that her parents could be proud around their neighbours and feel less looked down upon in the village.

Beyond financial barriers, several Cambodian Muslim girls discussed other reasons that discouraged them from attending university. For those that set their ambitions on studying in the capital city, real barriers existed for them to move to Phnom Penh. Many parents did not want their daughters to leave their communities and move to the city. A single-child from a family in Kampong Chhnang said it was specifically her mother that did not support her to leave the home because she was the only child. Others mentioned that housework and responsibilities at home prevented them from dreaming about a school life after high school. For some, the move to the big city was intimidating. A 16-year-old orthodox Cham student who said she would go to university expressed anxiety about coping because she did not know how to live in Phnom Penh.

Focus groups among adult family members heavily turned towards topics of university education and the status of girls in their communities. Among both male and female traditionalist Cham groups, participants felt that girls should have the opportunity to pursue higher education. Traditionalist Cham women felt that their community's girls would benefit from education to gain better employment. Traditionalist Cham men believed that girls had the same opportunities as boys nowadays and that the context had changed more favourably for them compared to when they were young. Orthodox Cham focus groups, however, tended to be less supportive of post-secondary education for girls. Women, for example, said that boys should be provided with more opportunities since they would eventually be the breadwinners of the family. Men, on the other hand, did share that they believed girls should be encouraged to go to university, but that boys should be prioritised since girls could face more danger in their educational pursuits.

Cambodian Muslim girls and young women who participated in the survey also showed that higher education was important to them and their families.



72.5% of Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed said that their parents supported them to pursue a higher education or go to university, while 27.5% said they did not get that same support.

- Over half (55%) of the girls and young women surveyed said they wanted to pursue a bachelor's degree at university.

Determined to learn, determined to teach

A 17-year-old orthodox Cham student in the community was determined to achieve her dreams and go to university after graduating the following year. She told Listeners that she dreamt of becoming a teacher and to be able to one day support Muslim children to keep studying and stay in school. Although the girl was very enthusiastic and confident in finding her way to pursue a higher education, she acknowledged that she faced similar challenges as other academically ambitious girls in her community. Her family's financial struggles made the reality

of depending on income support very unlikely. She also did not know how she could step away from all her housework duties. She was also experiencing pressure from her parents to get married and leave her dreams for school behind. She also felt that the negative perceptions of her neighbours in terms of education for girls influenced her family and was causing them to undervalue education for girls in their community. In spite of feeling everything was working against her university dreams, she still believed that she would study and become a teacher no matter what happened.

The taboo of womanhood

I don't talk to anyone about my menstrual issues since I live with my grandmother and my mother is living abroad. There isn't anyone who comes here to teach us about sex and our health.

-A 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl who is the only child in her family

Finding 5 Most girls feel shy, lack understanding about their rights and sexual and reproductive health and think that talking about it outside the family is taboo.

Sex and sexual health continue to be rather sensitive topics within the Cambodian Muslim community. For young girls entering puberty, discussions about their changing bodies or about sex are often limited. Nearly all Sharers who discussed the topic of sexual and reproductive health with Listeners focused mainly on their menstruation. Five of the 40 Sharers (12.5%) specifically expressed some kind of discomfort or difficulty in talking about menstruation. 30 of them (75%), however, did say that they

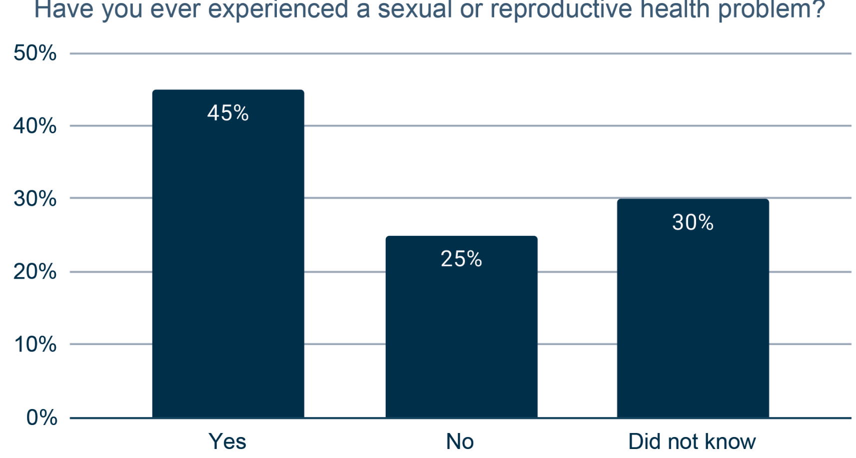
talked with their mothers, grandmothers, or friends about it. Some girls shared the advice they received when bringing up the issue. An orthodox Cham 17-year-old student said that her mother used to take her to the hospital whenever she got her period and had any problems, like when it would not stop. Another 16-year-old orthodox student said that when she approached her mother about a menstrual problem, she was advised to drink warm water. A Listener who carried out FLD in the communities said that some girls used a heated stone on their stomachs to reduce the pain and cramps experienced from their menstruation cycles.

The Listeners who had conversations with the Cambodian Muslim girls said that they heard that sex education was being provided in public schools as part of a class with lessons that sometimes lacked appropriate details on certain topics. Girls felt especially shy to discuss such issues with boys being present in the class. They said that some teachers did talk about menstruation but were less likely to raise issues about sex or reproduction.

Separate focus groups among orthodox and traditionalist Cham communities - each including men and women - provided more information on perceptions and norms related to how Cambodian Muslim girls navigate sexual and reproductive health as they grow and develop. Orthodox and traditionalist Cham females, including grandmothers, mothers, and sisters of the Sharers, all felt that the older generation was unable to discuss these topics with others but agreed that younger girls should be able to, given it is a health issue. There were some generational differences in opinion in the two female groups. Younger women were more likely to have the opinion that girls should openly discuss menstruation and sex. Elders, however, were less supportive of them bringing up such topics and felt that girls should remain more private in terms of sexual and reproductive health, including about their periods. Women in the traditionalist Cham focus

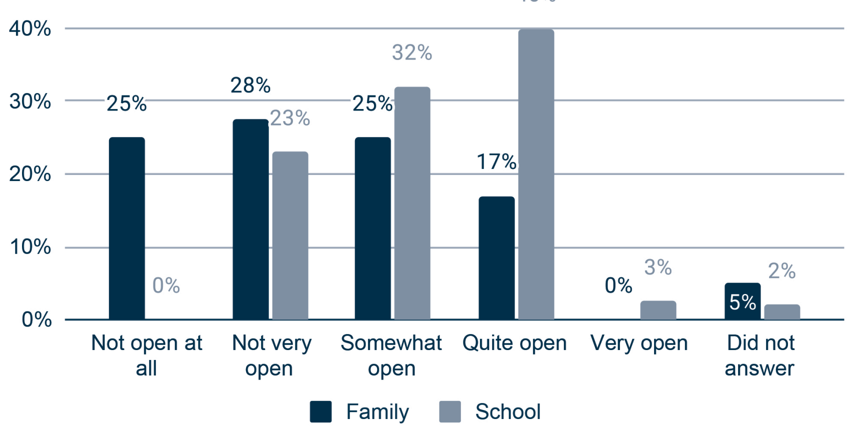
group mentioned that it was important that boys learn about sex from elder men in their community before getting married, but that girls did not need the same kind of information. Orthodox Cham women additionally mentioned that girls in their community were most likely shy to bring up menstruation issues because there was a perception that "good girls" did not discuss such matters with others. Cambodian Muslim men from both traditional and orthodox communities mainly agreed that girls should not openly talk about sexual reproductive health, apart from with female family members or friends.

The surveyed group also showed that despite a high number having experienced a sexual or reproductive health issue, there was relative discomfort and inability to talk about such topics with others in their communities.



45% of Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed said they experienced a sexual or reproductive health problem. 25% said they had never had such a problem, while 30% said they did not know whether they had or not.

- 48% thought that talking about sexual and reproductive health was taboo.
- 40% said they learnt about sexual and reproductive health from the gynaecologist in their community while 23% said they learnt about it from their family.
- 55% said they faced barriers to discuss the topic due to feeling shy or being prohibited by family or elders, 45% said because of community and cultural norms, and 28% said they would be seen as indecent if they spoke about it.



The triple burden

> I think that Muslim girls are not able to go out or go far from home and can only do housework. Boys have more freedom and rights. I want to see girls get the same support as boys do...

-A 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl who dropped out of school along with her three older sisters while their brother continues to study

Finding 6 Girls do not have as much freedom or as many opportunities as boys due to community norms.

Cambodian Muslim girls and young women are often able to elaborate on aspects of multiple marginalisation they encounter in their lives. Sharers from both the traditional and orthodox Cham communities in Kampong Chhnang saw being young, being an ethnic and religious minority, and being a female as three layers that affected their freedom and rights. Every single Sharer said that being a girl is more restrictive in some way or forced them into a role that disadvantaged them in comparison to boys in their communities.

Responsibility for housework was by far the main topic discussed by Cambodian Muslim girls within this theme. 21 girls (52.5%) specifically mentioned that housework was the responsibility of girls. A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl told the Listeners, “I have to do the housework, go to school, and work to support myself, but my brother only has to help on the farm and can do whatever he wants when he’s done.” Similarly in the orthodox community, a 16-year-old high school student told Listeners, “Girls mostly do housework. I help my mother with the shop when I have

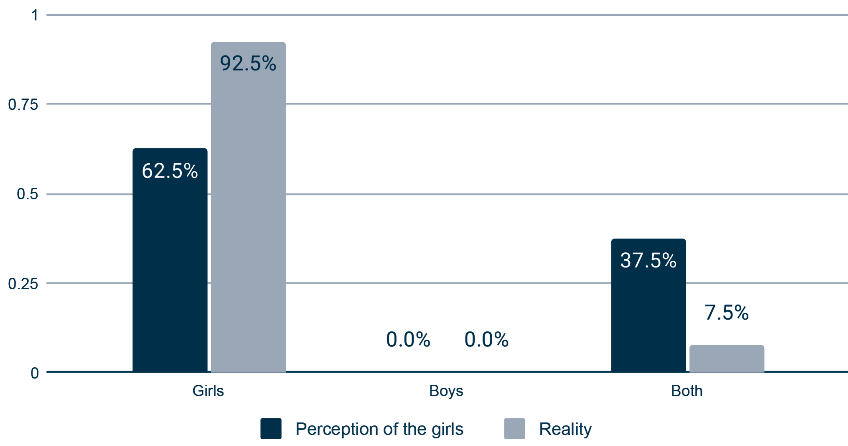
free time. Boys just go to school and play online games when they get home."

Restriction of movement, going outside of the house or leaving the community, in particular, was another frequently heard issue with 25 of the 40 Sharers (62.5%) noting this as the case for them. A 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl said, "Girls are like pets, not allowed to go out far from home, but boys can do whatever they want." Many traditionalist Cham girls also mentioned social restrictions and the inability to go out, often associated with social norms or risks of being judged by others. A 15-year-old traditionalist Cham high school student shared, "Girls can't hang out like boys because of community perceptions." Many girls were preoccupied by being judged by neighbours, particularly when being accompanied by males or going out of their homes. In cases of violence and sexual assault, there was some evidence of victim-blaming. A 19-year-old orthodox girl who had escaped a sexual assault while working in Malaysia came back to Kampong Chhnang to find herself stigmatised by her own community noting, "the villagers tend to talk behind my back about what happened and it makes me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed."

The ability to choose a partner was also significantly brought up as a distinct gender difference between Cambodian Muslim girls and boys. Five Sharers (12.5%) said that girls did not have the right to choose their partners or future spouses. This was compared to a double standard where boys tended to have more choice or influence in who they would marry. For most, this was a decision made by their parents or family members, and arranged marriage was an aspect that affected their lives, even as young girls. An orthodox Cham student who spoke about inequality felt that "boys have more opportunities than girls and sometimes girls are forced to get married while boys are able to refuse."

Focus groups with Cambodian Muslim adults discussed in depth the differences between boys and girls in their communities. All groups, including men and women in both traditionalist and orthodox Cham groups, tended to support and rationalise restrictions put on girls. Traditionalist Cham women felt that girls were vulnerable to being kidnapped or assaulted if able to go out freely. Orthodox women worried about the possibility of their girls getting pregnant and were especially concerned about how neighbours would judge them if given too much freedom. Traditionalist Cham men also felt that the reputation of girls in their community was at stake if they went out at night and worried their daughters, granddaughters, or sisters would be looked down upon or spoken about. Orthodox men were more conservative in their views on gender roles, saying that because boys were more masculine and could take care of themselves, they were given more freedom compared to girls. They also felt that women were not natural leaders, being weaker than men and more emotionally dependent. Like other Cham men and women, they felt that girls needed more protection in their communities.

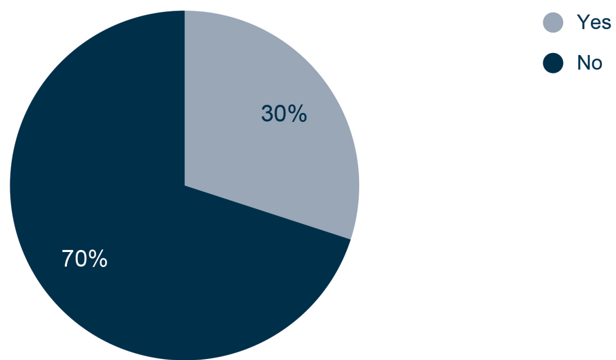
For Cambodian Muslim girls and young women who responded to the survey, a stark contrast of gender differences between males and females also emerged. Housework, in particular, was an activity seen as very gender-based, both in perception and in reality. In fact, no girls or young women felt that boys alone should do the housework, and few of them felt that it should even be shared.



A majority (92.5%) of Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed said that in reality, girls are responsible for the housework.

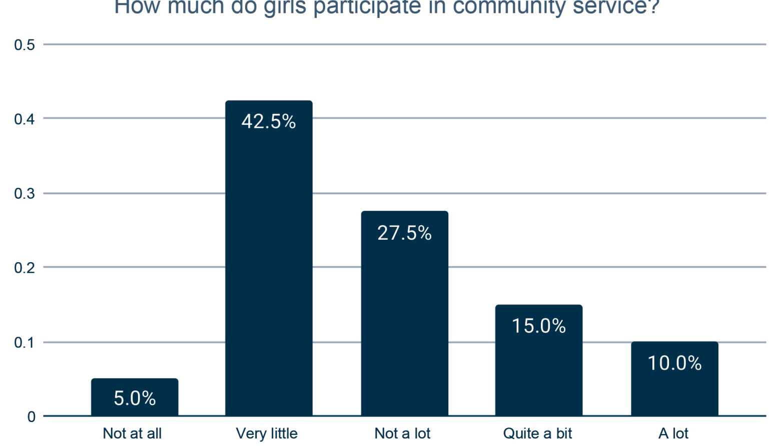
- 88% of the girls and young women surveyed said that they did not have the same level of freedom as boys did in their communities.
- For those that saw they had less freedom than boys, 68% said it was because of cultural norms, 50% said because of family rules, and 48% felt less freedom due to fear of being judged by others in their communities.
- 35% said that girls do not have the freedom to choose their partner or future spouse.

Gender perceptions also came through in survey questions related to community participation and the ability for Cambodian Muslim girls and young women to express themselves in their families, schools, and communities.



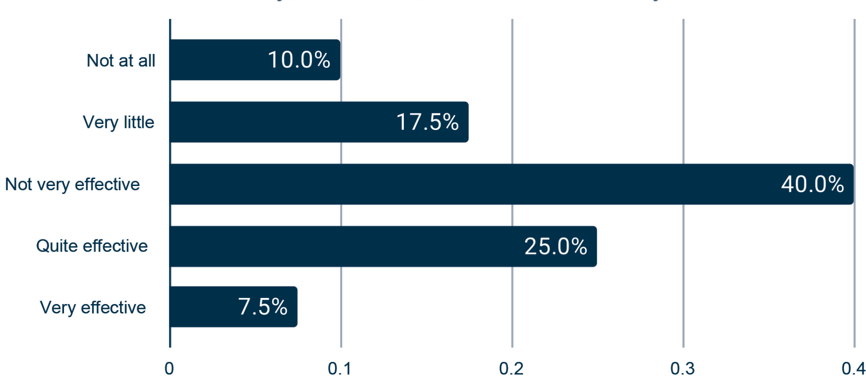
70% of Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed said they did not feel comfortable expressing their ideas in their community or in public.

- 63% of those not feeling comfortable said it was due to their own lack of confidence, while 13% said it was because of lack of support from others or they had no opportunities to do so.



75% of the Cambodian Muslim girls and young women surveyed said they participated not a lot, very little, or not at all in community service.

- 53% of the girls and young women said they could not get involved in community service because they had no time, 35% said they had too much housework, and 33% said they had no opportunities to do so.
- 50% said that minority girls and women are not capable of becoming leaders in their communities with 25% of them believing it was because of lack of knowledge and 20% of them saying because there were no female role models.



A young minority girl and the barriers she faces

A 19-year-old orthodox Cham girl talked in depth about how she felt barriers coming at her from all directions. As a young girl, she quit school and got married at a young age with the support of her mother. Her father told her that girls did not need to study or get a higher education because they would eventually become a wife and be taken care of by their husbands. Realising she made a mistake choosing the wrong partner, she got divorced after only three months of marriage and moved to Malaysia to work. While abroad, she experienced gender-based violence after a man attempted to sexually assault her. Returning to Cambodia, she began working in a factory and felt the wrath of her community and being judged for her situation. Her neighbours considered her to be a "bad girl" and her mother began beating her after finding out she had a new boyfriend. She became restricted from leaving her house by her family and her relatives would no longer allow their children to be in contact with her. While talking with the Listeners, she conveyed that she felt her community and culture was more repressive on her and that Khmer groups had far more freedom, especially for girls in terms of the way they could dress. The Sharer clearly conceptualised how a triple burden, related to age, gender, and ethnicity/religion, affected her everyday life and her prospects in the community.

Pressure to quit school

> My family and neighbours told me to quit school because they think that there is no point studying and I should just go to work in the factory instead.

-A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl who managed to graduate high school despite community pressure to quit

Finding 7 There is pressure to quit school and girls are often discouraged from studying.

Many Cambodian Muslim girls face pressures to drop out of secondary school from an early grade. Among Sharers, 13 out of the 40 (32.5%) clearly said they were discouraged to continue studies at the secondary level. Much of this discouragement was coming from community members, such as their neighbours, or even their parents, and often grounded in gender biases, financial pressure, or a general lack of value for education specifically for girls.

Girls in both the traditionalist and orthodox groups shared stories from their communities suggesting that education for young females was not necessarily valued by those around them. For girls that were pressured by their parents to leave their studies, most conveyed that their families felt that working outside the home was more valuable and important than staying in school. For Sharers in these Kampong Chhnang communities in particular, the nearby factories producing footwear, clothing, and beverages were providing major pull factors for the girls and their families that pushed girls to drop out. An 18-year-old traditionalist Cham who successfully graduated from high school reflected on the pressures she faced to leave earlier on. She said, "My neighbour told me that education was not important and I wouldn't be able to find a job and that I should just work in the factory to earn some money." Another 15-year-old traditionalist Cham girl shared her story saying, "I felt pressure from my mother to drop out of school in grade 9 to look after my brother so she could work at the factory. Eventually, I was the one who had to go and work there and she took care of him." The move from school to a factory as a young teenager affected her future and even appeared to be irreversible at this point in her life from her

perspective. At only 15 years old, the Sharer confessed to the Listeners, "To be honest, I really want to study but it is too late now."

In a session to process the FLD data and analyse findings, Listeners noted that most of the girls working in factories had unsupportive parents in terms of their basic education and prioritised earning income as a family unit. An orthodox Cham Listener further elaborated on her interaction with one of the Sharers she spoke with whose father said that his daughters should only be allowed to study up to grade 7 or 8 but that his sons could continue as long as they like since they would be the family breadwinners in the future. Listeners noted that many children quit school to work in factories and that most of the Sharers they spoke with wished to study but were forced by their parents to quit.

Discouraged until convinced

An 18-year-old orthodox Cham girl working in a factory discussed the pressures that led to her dropping out of school at a young age. Although she believed that education was important for getting a good job, she felt she was not motivated enough to continue. Her father played a big role in her decision to walk away from her studies when he said it was time to leave, and that girls should not pursue any higher education because it would not contribute to anything tangible. He often referred to her sister as someone who went to school but never amounted to anything and simply got married and dependent on her husband. The girl also said that although her brother was encouraged to keep studying in high school, she was not and by the end she also could not consider any reasons to stay in school. She began to feel that earning money was more important and her life at the factory not only gave her an income, but made it easy to meet her friends and carry on with her life in the community.

Dreaming big

> My dream is to become a pilot and I want to help my community, especially the girls, to have stronger voices.

-A 17-year-old orthodox Cham high school student who also dreams of studying abroad one day

Finding 8 Cambodian Muslim girls have high hopes and dreams for their futures and their communities.

Cambodian Muslims from both traditionalist and orthodox communities in Kampong Chhnang shared their dreams with Listeners during their FLD conversations. 31 of the 40 Sharers (77.5%) took the opportunity to convey their dreams, hopes, and desires for the future. Their dreams varied greatly, at times focusing on career ambitions while also often expressing their wishes to improve their communities or support fellow girls. Working in health, education, and tourism were among the most popular dreams shared by the girls who often associated their desired career paths with a sense of community contribution. A 17-year-old orthodox Cham student said, "My dream is to be a teacher so I can help my community to educate our children here and make sure they do not quit school early."

A 17-year-old traditionalist student shared, "I dream of being a tour guide and I want to help disadvantaged girls and those that had to quit studying." Girls also shared more personal career dreams such as working in IT, interpretation, accounting, the beauty industry, policing and security, as well as creative industries such as music and design.

In spite of having big dreams, several girls conveyed a lack of confidence in realistically achieving them. Five of the 40 Sharers specifically said that although they had a dream, they could not pursue it. A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl working at a factory said, "I wanted to be a nurse but it won't happen because I already dropped out of school." Similarly, a 15-year-old traditionalist Cham girl also working at a factory said, "I dreamt of being a military officer but it won't happen because I quit school." Some Sharers also discussed their dreams in the past tense, and although they may have not conveyed barriers or specific reasons for not being able to achieve them, it was apparent that their dreams were simply dreams. Listeners continued to share more personal stories of girls who were unable to follow their own dreams due to different reasons. Many of them were also connected to being unable to pursue higher education due to lack of family or community support.

A community dream

A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham high school student told Listeners she was dreaming of becoming a nurse. Just a year away from graduation, she was thinking about her final high school exams and how she might be able to go to university. She felt that if she became a nurse, she could help the elders in her community with their healthcare. She also dreamt of helping other girls in poverty to go to school. Everything she hoped to do was connected to improving her community and the overall image that others had of it.

Complex families and difficult dynamics

> My parents are divorced and it has affected me mentally. My mother went to work in Malaysia and my father lives in the nearby village. I never talk to him when he comes to visit because he got married to someone else.

-A 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl

Finding 9 Girls suffer from complex family relations, violence, and emigration.

Sharers from both the traditionalist and orthodox Cham communities spoke about sometimes intimate and sensitive details of their families and the issues that they caused them.

Several girls talked to Listeners about their complex family structures involving divorce, multiple partners, and stepfamily relations. Divorce was fairly prevalent among Sharers with seven girls noting that their parents had separated or divorced. For many of these girls, divorce or separation had a deep impact on them psychologically or emotionally. A 16-year-old orthodox Cham student confided, "I used to feel unloved because my parents got divorced." Some girls discussed having divorced parents who had remarried with new families or even having a parent with multiple spouses. This often caused them difficulties navigating interpersonal relationships with others such as stepparents or grandparents. A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham girl said, "I feel really unloved by my father who has two wives and always gets drunk… since he has many children with the two of them, he doesn't love us all equally… I used to dream about having a normal family and being happy and loved." A 16-year-old orthodox student discussed her

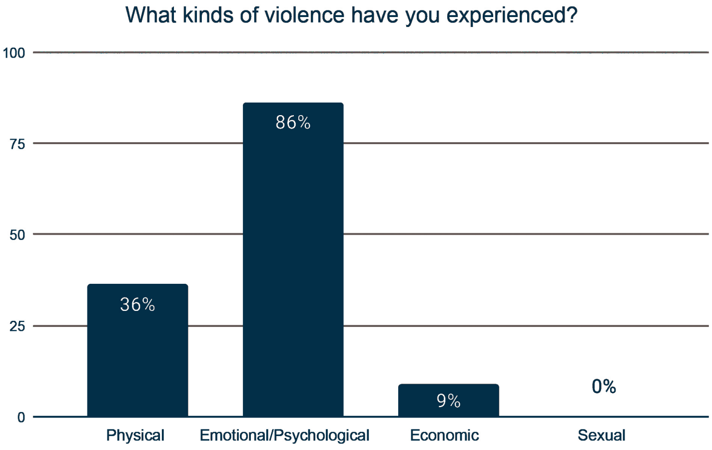
difficult family situation, telling the Listeners she often cried when she saw her parents because they had their own new families. She said, "I'm living with my grandmother because my parents are divorced and I don't feel loved by them. Whenever I come home late, my grandmother always says I should go live with my mother. I really want to live with my parents, but I can't." The girl felt personal shame from her family situation, also noting, "When there is a school event they invite all the parents but nobody comes from my side."

Sharers also revealed inside family dynamics, with violence being a worrying issue they faced in their lives. Five of the 40 girls specifically mentioned experiencing violence by someone in their family. A 15-year-old traditionalist Cham girl talked about her situation, confiding to Listeners, "My father used violence when I was young because he normally got drunk. My parents are divorced and he once beat me because I went to visit my mother without informing him." A 17-year-old orthodox girl shared that her mother was targeting her and felt emotionally abandoned. She said, "My mother used to beat me just to release her own anger after fighting with others." Violence did not only pertain to parents. Due to complex family structures with girls sometimes living with others, one 16-year-old orthodox Cham girl who lived with her grandparents after her parent's divorce said that it was her aunt who inflicted violence on her.

Given that Cambodian Muslims tended to migrate more frequently for work, girls often expressed particular impact from living in families who were separated by distance. Several orthodox Cham girls shared that their parents were living in Malaysia. One girl discussing her family situation said, "My parents are living in Malaysia and so I live with my grandmother here in Cambodia." She continued, "...it's hard not to be able to live with my parents and I really want to live with them but I can't since they don't

have much money." For traditionalist Cham communities, it was more common to have family members emigrate to South Korea. During the group analysis, one traditionalist Listener talked about a Sharer whose parents moved to work in South Korea leaving her with her grandmother who had little money. The girl eventually had to leave school and work in a factory to support both her grandmother and herself.

Data from surveys with Cambodian Muslim girls and young women also showed issues of violence. Slightly over half (55%) of the respondents had experienced violence from a family member or an intimate partner.



Of those experiencing violence, 86% mentioned emotional or psychological violence, 36% cited physical violence, and 9% had experienced economic violence.

- 43% said that they did not seek help when experiencing violence.
- 23% said that they had experienced sexual harassment.

Good relations but occasional misunderstanding

> I have quite a lot of Khmer friends, I've never felt discriminated against by them. However, some of them don't like how I dress.

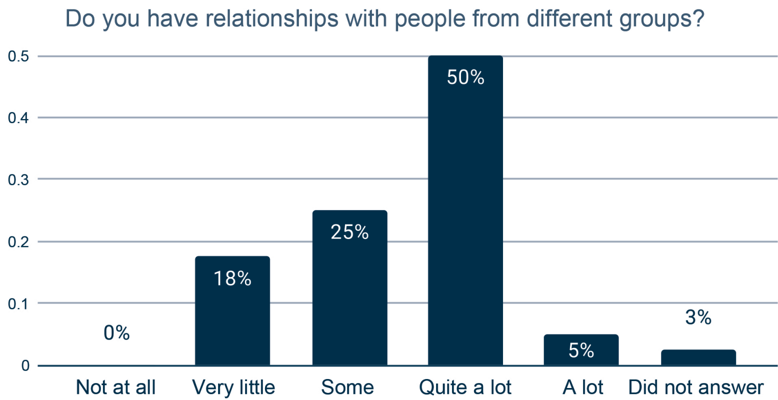
-A 17-year-old traditionalist Cham high school student

Finding 10 Cambodian Muslim girls feel that they overwhelmingly have good relations with other ethnic groups, but recognise that there are cases of some cultural misunderstandings about Islamic practices.

There is a general trend that interfaith interaction between Cambodian Muslims and the mainstream Buddhists has increased since the Khmer Rouge regime era. In conversations on social discrimination, both traditionalist and orthodox Cham girls talked about their relations with the Khmer mainstream majority population. For the most part, Sharers said that they have positive relationships with Khmer people and do not personally perceive discrimination against them. 25 of the 40 girls (62.5%) said they feel or experience discrimination as a Cambodian Muslim or that they had close relations with Khmer people. One 18-year-old employed orthodox Cham girl told Listeners, "I work at the factory with many other Khmer people so our relationship is good." Another girl with a similar profile said, "My relationships with Khmer friends are good… sometimes they want to try and wear a hijab like I do." In terms of social perceptions on Cambodian Muslims, one 16-year-old orthodox high school student said, "I never really feel discriminated against by others. I have friends from other communities. I think everyone shares the same common connection as human beings living on this land."

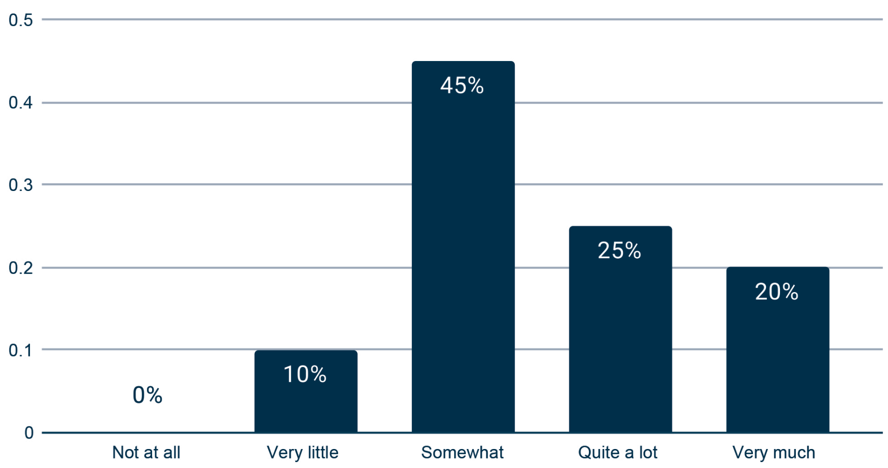
4 of the 40 (10%), however, did express some form of discrimination related to their ethnic and religious identity by providing examples. Identity and dress were cited as factors connected to experiences of discrimination from other groups. One orthodox Cham student said in her conversation, "I experienced hearing someone say they hate Cham and some of my neighbours also don't like me because of it. I get upset about that." Another girl recalled, "When I was in grade 6 my friends used to say I was ugly wearing my hijab, but I tried to explain to them what it was about." Listeners further elaborated on stereotypes that were heard about Cambodian Muslims in the communities they had conversations in. They mentioned that there were sometimes negative perceptions about how Muslims prayed, used black magic, or issues of teachers underestimating Muslim students and their intellectual capacity. However, Listeners from the communities also shared that those who had grown up together among different ethnic and religious groups with frequent exposure tended to foster closer connections and relationships between them.

Survey questions also touched on issues of interaction with other groups, including the mainstream Khmer, as well as about perceptions about how others view Cambodian Muslims.

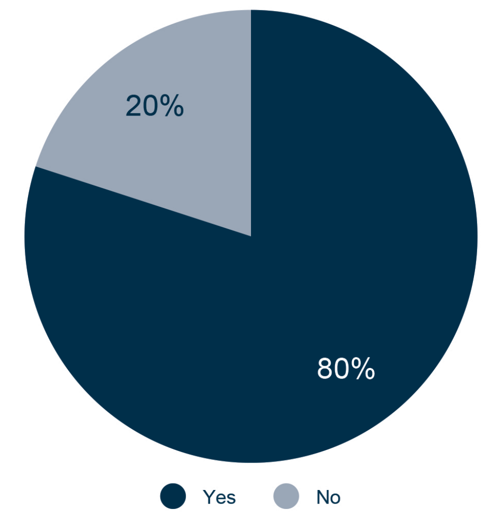


Most girls and young women in the survey said they had relationships with people from other groups. 5% said a lot, 50% said quite a lot, and 25% said some.

- For those who did not interact as much with others, 25% said it was because they did not have many opportunities to go out, while 15% said it was because they were afraid of being ignored or discriminated against by others.



Cambodian Muslim girls and young women also responded to questions about discrimination. The majority felt they had been discriminated against based on their ethnic or religious minority background.



80% of those surveyed said they had felt discriminated against in their lives.

- Of the girls and young women who felt they had faced discrimination, 43% mentioned it was due to their appearance or cultural clothing, 35% made reference to their accents, 33% said it was connected to their culture and/or traditions, and 23% felt that practising a non-Buddhist religion was the cause.
- 73% said they felt devalued when being discriminated against.

The Listeners' Take

Learning about other groups through the process

Kalyan and Sas are Cambodian Muslims from the traditionalist group who identify as Cham and are known for praying only on Fridays in Kampong Chhnang province. Both speak Cham language in their community but go to public school with other Khmer students. Although they have been exposed to mainstream Khmer culture, they have not had any experiences with other minority groups in Cambodia.

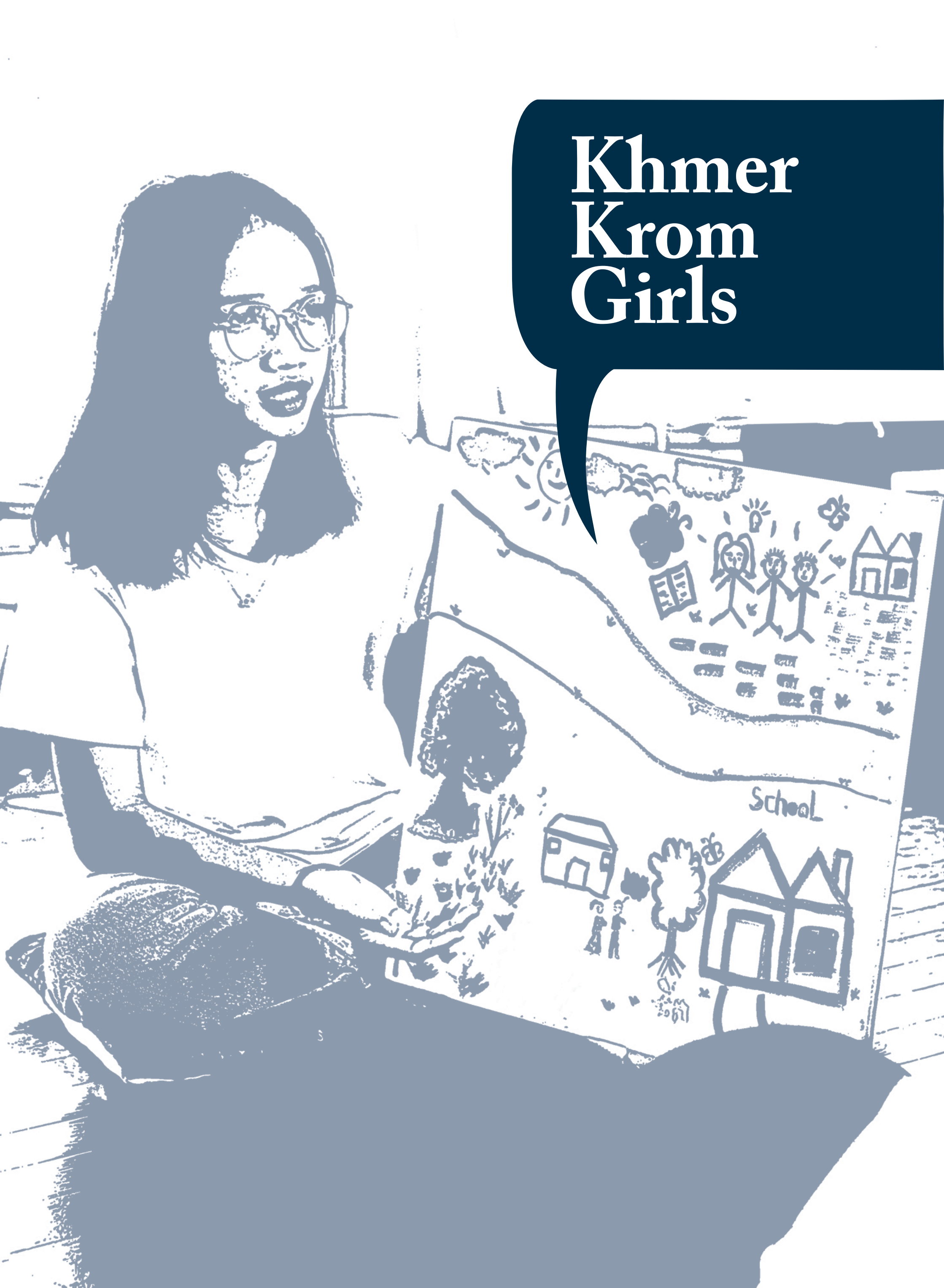
The first time the full group of minority girl Listeners got together for the FLD Coaching and Training Lab in Kandal province, Kalyan and Sas met fellow Listeners coming from the orthodox Cham, ethnic Vietnamese, Indigenous, and Khmer Krom communities. Even engaging other Cambodian Muslim women from the orthodox

group was something rather new for them as they had mainly stayed within their own traditionalist community. Their participation at the Info-Space Lab in Mondulkiri was truly eye opening to them. Staying at an Indigenous Bunong family's home was something very new and different.

"It was strange to hear my host family speaking another language I couldn't understand [Bunong]. But it wasn't so different from my own family who speaks Cham at home which is also different from Khmer," Kalyan said in a reflective discussion.

Sas got especially close with the ethnic Vietnamese Listeners throughout the FLD activities. Seeing their challenges and knowing that they came from a minority culture inside Cambodia was familiar to her. Given the historical context and often mistrust between Cham Muslims and Vietnamese, it was quite inspiring to see their relationship grow, and their capacity to listen to each other become stronger and stronger over time.

Beyond information gathering, FLD also makes the space for participants to listen to each other and build relationships around inquiry and participatory research. Bringing together minority women with a focus on better understanding the girls in their communities also provided the chance for them to learn about other minorities. Together they developed a deeper mutual understanding about both the unique circumstances of other groups as well as shared issues they faced in their lives as minority women themselves.


Khmer
Krom
Girls
School

“This Girl’s Life”

Khmer Krom girls came together to develop a forum theatre production to express their views to their community. “This Girl’s Life” was written and directed by participants and performed in Siem Reap to families and elders. It tells the story of a young girl of Khmer Krom descent who wants to go to university. The character is continually discouraged by her parents who believe that girls should not travel or live far away because they need to take responsibility for housework. The production also employs some comedy relief showing the stark and dramatic differences between girls’ and boys’ lives in the community.

Background

Who are the Khmer Krom? *Khmer Krom* is a distinctly regional expression and has unique connotations in its use. Literally meaning "lower Khmer," it can also denote "southern" in a geographical context. In a broader sense, Khmer Krom derives from Kampuchea Krom which refers to lower Cambodia, technically located in the modern-day Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Once part of the ancient Khmer Empire, the region's historical geopolitical changes turned the once majority ethnic Khmer residents into a minority group within the national borders of Vietnam. In Vietnam, the Khmer make up one of the largest ten ethnic minority populations among 53 recognised ethnic minority groups.[120]

Khmer Krom families have migrated from Vietnam to Cambodia over several decades due to certain driving factors that push and pull them into that direction. Issues of ethnic grievances, related to use of mother tongue, ethnic identity, and the practice of cultural traditions have emerged in the past, particularly among Buddhist monks and activists in Vietnam. Religious freedom has also become an issue among Theravada Buddhists, many of whom have demonstrated against authorities.[121] Migration theoretically makes Khmer Krom shift from an ethnic minority group in Vietnam to part of the mainstream ethnic Khmer majority group in Cambodia.

This study, however, explored the Khmer Krom as a cultural minority group within Cambodia based on sociological understandings of minorities. Early

[120] United Nations Population Fund, *Ethnic Groups in Viet Nam: An Analysis of Key Indicators from the 2009 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census* (Ha Noi: UNFPA, 2011), https://vietnam.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Ethnic_Group_ENG.pdf (accessed Feb 20, 2022).

[121] Human Rights Watch, On the Margins: Rights Abuses of Ethnic Khmer in Vietnam's Mekong Delta (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), p. 6-7, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/vietnam0109webwcover_1.pdf (accessed Feb 10, 2022).

conceptualisation of minority groups in academia often looked at distinctions that led to some form of marginalisation. Louis Wirth's definition, for example, is commonly used as a starting point for those exploring the dimensions of minority groups as a social construct: "A group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination."[122] In considering the context of the Khmer Krom, the understanding of a minority group can also be very much in relation to a state. A minority group should have some sense of continuity over generations, can be excluded from political processes, and may lack the same access to public services in comparison to a majority.[123] Through this understanding, Khmer Krom girls and their communities were explored as a cultural minority group in Cambodia despite being part of the ethnic majority.

According to interpretations of the law, Khmer Krom from Vietnam are automatically welcomed into Cambodia as Cambodian citizens which has been confirmed by numerous government officials in official documents, public speeches, and declarations.[124] The reality, however, is that many Khmer Krom residents in Cambodia are unable to access proper identification documents due to numerous factors at the local issuing level. A vast number are perceived as Vietnamese rather than Khmer when applying for ID with local authorities, even when presenting the

[122] Louis Wirth, "The Problem of Minority Groups" in *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. Ralph Linton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 347.

[123] Hans van Amersfoort, "'Minority' as a sociological concept," Ethnic and Racial Studies 1, no.2 (April 1978): 233.

[124] Alliance for Conflict Transformation, Cambodian Center for Human Rights, and Khmer Kampuchea Krom for Human Rights and Development Association, *Citizenship Rights for Khmer Krom in Cambodia*, 2017, p. 9: https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/report/report/english/2017_01_27_CCHR_Report_on_Legal_Status_of_Khmer_Krom_English.pdf (accessed Feb 14, 2022).

proper documentation. This is sometimes seen as part of a broader pattern of discrimination towards Khmer Krom who have chosen to migrate to Cambodia.[125] In the 3rd cycle Universal Periodic Review of 2018, a joint-submission by civil society identified this lack of access to regular citizenship rights as a "gap between the high-level statements of the Royal Government of Cambodia and their implementation at the local level."[126] Khmer Krom migrants and their descendants are sometimes unable to establish clear residency and cannot apply for refugee status since they are recognised in their country of origin on paper. Such factors sometimes push Khmer Krom to further migrate to Thailand in search of ending their precariousness.[127] On top of discrimination, their migratory journey contributes to them being disproportionately poor and lacking education in comparison to others.[128]

Even though the Khmer Krom are often perceived as able to quickly assimilate into mainstream Khmer culture due to cultural background and language, the reality is often different. In the capital city of Phnom Penh, for example, a study showed that Khmer Krom tended to prefer to live with other Khmer Krom with similar backgrounds. Due to their precariousness, they often move into low income or slum areas as a result of their economic realities.[129] In a 2017 survey of 264 Khmer Krom residents

[125] Cambodian Center for Human Rights, *False Promises: Exploring the Citizenship Rights of the Khmer Krom in Cambodia*, July 2011: 18-24, https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/report/report/english/CCHR_Report_Exec_Summary_and_Recommendations%20_False_Promises_Exploring_the_Citizenship_Rights_of_the_Khmer_Krom_in_Cambodia_en.pdf (accessed Feb 20, 2022).

[126] "Gender and Women's Rights," *Factsheet - UPR 2018 - Cambodia, 3rd Cycle Universal Periodic Review*, https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/general-document/pdf/final_versions_merged.pdf (accessed Feb 14, 2022).

[127] Kirchner, 28.

[128] Ibid, p. 29.

[129] Sochoeun Chen, *Khmer Krom Migration and their Identity*, (Phnom Penh: Royal University of Phnom Penh, December 2006), 52.

in eight Cambodian provinces, 92.8% said that they faced difficulties or problems in the country.[130] The main reasons for such challenges were identified as lack of housing or land (possibly due to a lack of proper identification), discrimination based on being perceived as Vietnamese, and lack of recognition by the authorities.[131]

Information about women and girls in Khmer Krom communities in Cambodia is very limited. Given that they are not recognised as an ethnic minority in the country, little research has been carried out to better understand their unique context. For those that are part of the migration generation, having moved from Vietnam to Cambodia, it is likely that the backgrounds and journeys of girls and women have impacted their ability to get an education in comparison to boys and men. A Khmer Krom woman, who migrated from Vietnam to Cambodia, went on to become a Miss Universe Cambodia contestant and raised awareness on the plight of Khmer Krom girls from her own experience. Having dropped out of school herself, she spoke about her life before arriving in Cambodia:

> Khmer Krom women have less education due to the financial and travel difficulties. Moreover, we can learn Khmer for only three months on vacations from school where we are taught in Vietnamese… Sometimes 15 or 16-year-old girls are married. They don't get a chance to see how big the world is. On the other hand, men can learn more because they have to become a monk at the age of 21.[132]

[130] Alliance for Conflict Transformation, Cambodian Center for Human Rights, and Khmer Kampuchea Krom for Human Rights and Development Association, 19.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Spoken by Chhorn Sreyneth as quoted in Po Sakun, "Miss Universe Cambodia Candidate Champions Khmer Krom Women," *Cambodianess ThmeyThmey in English*, Jun 11, 2021, https://cambodianess.com/article/miss-universe-cambodia-candidate-champions-khmer-krom-women (accessed Feb 14, 2022).

Khmer Krom girls in Cambodia face distinct challenges, although their context is different from those who grew up in Vietnam as an ethnic minority. The reality of difficulties in accessing proper documentation to prove citizenship that they theoretically have the right to, leads to other problems that are commonly present in populations with legal identity issues. Apart from the social discrimination of being perceived as a foreigner, services such as healthcare and education are often out of reach for those who are unable to show their legal status in Cambodia, including among Khmer Krom populations.[133]

This study explored the lives of Khmer Krom girls in two areas of the country; Siem Reap and Kratie provinces. FLD was carried out in Kratie province where it appeared that Khmer Krom families were quite integrated into mainstream Khmer society. Many of the girls were first and second generation, meaning that their parents or grandparents were the ones that had migrated from Vietnam. Focus groups and surveys were carried out in Siem Reap where Khmer Krom families tended to be more connected and Khmer Krom associations and activities were more pronounced. Given that these activities in Siem Reap included family members and elders, more participants and respondents born in Vietnam were present and likely provided more insight into the lives of the migrating generations. For those coming from Vietnam who had accents, they tended to have more challenges in acquiring documents and were more often mistaken for Vietnamese by the mainstream public. Most of the girls themselves, however, were born in Cambodia and had varying opinions about whether they considered themselves as part of a minority group.

[133] Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 – Cambodia*, 28 June 2012, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4fedb404c.html (accessed Jan 29, 2022).

Location and demographics

KHMER KROM GIRLS

FLD

2 Listeners
(1 Khmer Krom and 1 Khmer)

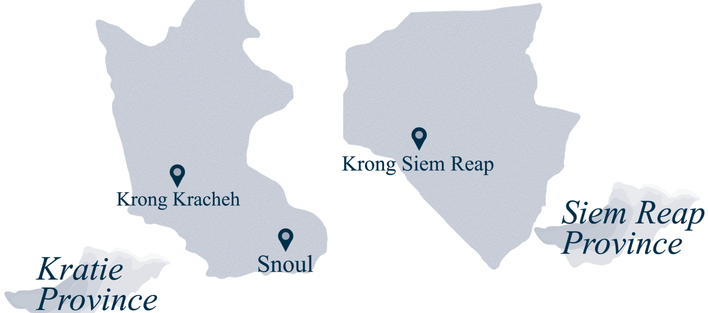
10 Sharers
(13-21 years old)

Focus Group Discussions

8 Participants

30 – 50 years old

Target locations



Survey

40 Respondents
(13 – 26 years old)
21 Girls and **19** Women

FLD, focus group, and survey findings

Voices from Khmer Krom girls and their communities

FLD emerging themes

1. Girls from families of Khmer Krom descent see housework as their main responsibility.
2. There are challenges to stay in school due to financial issues.
3. Girls desire to go to school and become something in their lives but are unsure if they can achieve their dreams.
4. Girls feel little control of their own lives and feel pressure and restrictions from their parents.
5. Girls are proud of their identity but face discrimination and their origin is sometimes misunderstood.

Housework: a girl's duty

> I think that housework is the main responsibility that must be done by the girls.

-A 15-year-old student from the Khmer Krom community

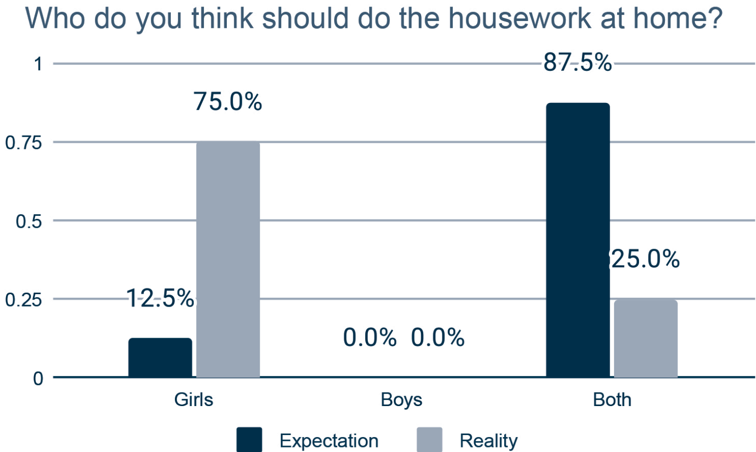
Finding 1 Girls from families of Khmer Krom descent see housework as their main responsibility.

Housework was the most frequently mentioned topic in conversations between the Listeners and the Sharers. Girls of Khmer Krom descent in Kratie province talked about their responsibility to lead in housework. This included tasks relating to cooking, cleaning, and laundry. For them, housework was predominately the work for women and girls and did not involve men or boys at all. According to the Listeners, Sharers saw this as a duty from birth and was a value they were raised with and did not necessarily express it as a complaint or hardship.

All ten of the girls (100%) in FLD conversations said that they were the ones in the family responsible for carrying out daily housework in their homes. They described their tasks and chores as beginning from the morning when they woke up. One girl stressed that she did not see housework as onerous on her and that, "it is the task of girls and I like that because I don't like going out and the only time I do go out, it's with my family." Another girl, however, felt pressure from her housework chores because her parents were never satisfied. "My mum always insults me when she gets home from the farm if the house is not tidy and the food is not ready when she arrives," she confided.

Focus groups with Khmer Krom family members and elders in Siem Reap similarly confirmed FLD findings in Kratie province among the girls themselves regarding a strong gender norm around their roles in housework. In the women's group, elders tended to reconfirm their view that "women can't go far from the kitchen."

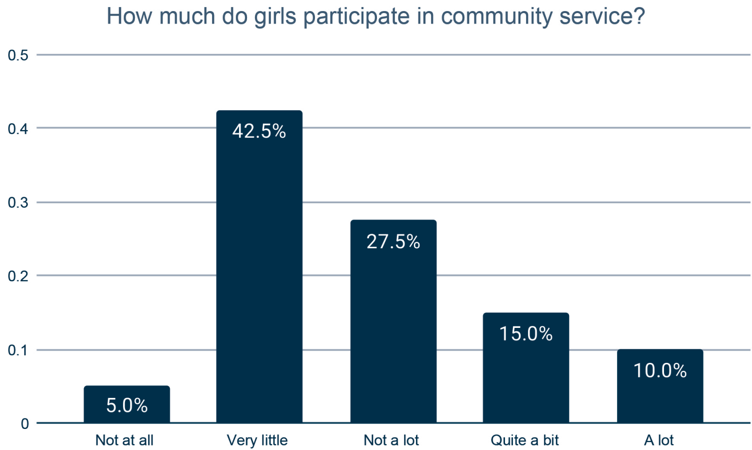
Among the 40 girls and young women of Khmer Krom descent who participated in the survey, gender issues emerged during the interviews and were reflected in the data. This came out in terms of both comparing their lives to boys as well as their own perceptions of their status within their communities.



Khmer Krom girls and young women show that although many expect both boys and girls to do housework (87.5%), in reality only a small number of families actually have boys contributing (25%).

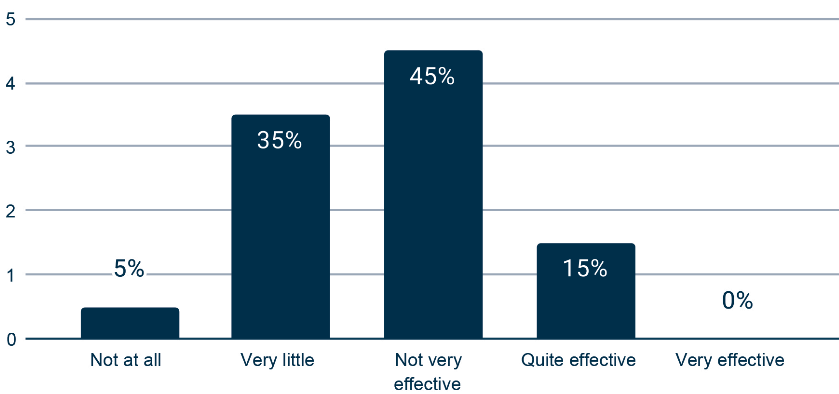
- 40% felt that girls do not have the same level of freedom to go out as boys do.

- Of those that said they could not go out of their homes or communities, 25% said it was because their families did not allow them to, 23% said it was due to community cultural norms for girls, and 18% said it was unsafe for girls to go out.



When asked how much girls participate in community service, 87.5% of Khmer Krom girls and women surveyed said either not a lot, very little, or not at all.

- 58% shared that they do not have the opportunity to participate in community service, with 35% saying they did not have enough time, 20% not having any information, and 18% feeling it had no importance or relation to them.
- 28% said they felt uncomfortable expressing their ideas in the community or at public events due to a lack of confidence.
- 55% said that no minority women became community leaders, while 33% expressed that the number is very low.



Dropping out for money

> I think education is important, but due to my family's family situation, I decided to drop out of school so that my brother could keep studying.

-A 19-year-old who dropped out in grade 7 and was unemployed after a hand injury

Finding 2 There are challenges to stay in school due to financial issues.

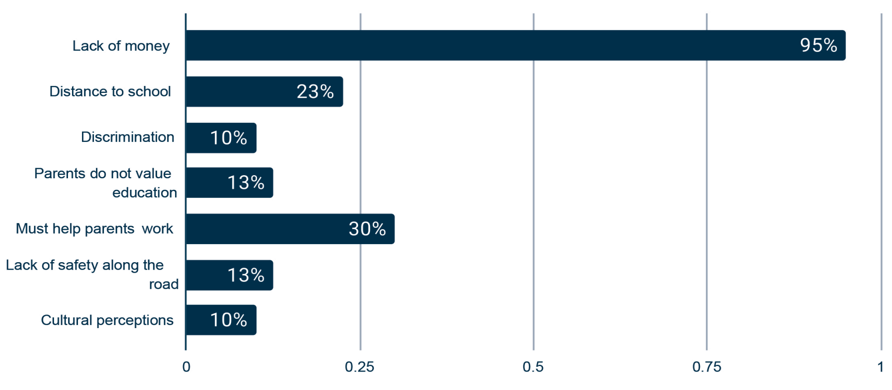
Although there were several barriers mentioned by girls in attending school, Sharers tended to see lack of money or financial issues as the root cause of dropping out or no longer continuing their studies. Of the ten Sharers, five of them (50%) had dropped out of high school without graduating. The other five were all currently attending school. Several mentioned that the main reason for ending their studies was having to go to work to contribute to their family's income. They provided examples of leaving school to work on farms, make noodles, garden, collect cassava, or to pick cashew nuts. It

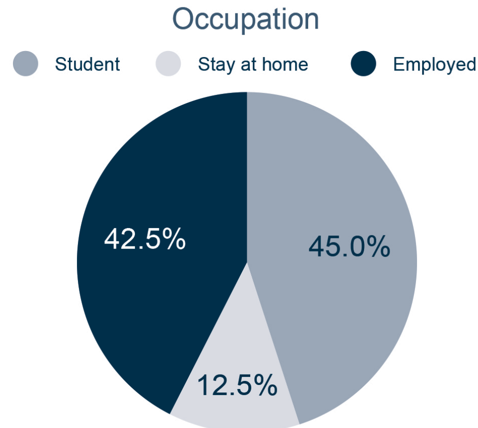
was sometimes the case that the girls came from large families and not all children could go to school. Some also mentioned that they could not afford transportation to get to schools in other areas. Of the five girls actually still attending school, four said that they hoped to go to university. A 16-year-old grade 10 student told the Listeners, "I wanted to go to university and study law, but currently I'm having financial difficulties."

Of the ten girls, including two who had dropped out of school, and those who were still at school, nine expressed a strong desire to study. All the girls stated in one way or another that they believed that education was important. Those that had dropped out, except for one Sharer, conveyed regret for having to leave school. A 21-year-old woman who dropped out when she was in grade 9 said, "If I could turn back time I would finish school because I think if I had graduated, I'd have a better job and be more independent."

Focus groups with another community in Siem Reap somewhat contradicted what girls of Khmer Krom descent in Kratie said about their pressures to leave school to work. Parents, grandparents, and siblings of the girls generally tended to express support for them to attend school. In the women's group, some mothers discussed trying hard to send their girls to school in spite of financial difficulties, because they did not have that same opportunity when they were young. Both women and men conveyed that they felt girls and boys should have equal opportunities to study and even go to university. The men, however, noted that some girls simply just wanted to go out and work rather than school.

Similar to the FLD group, girls and young women of Khmer Krom descent who were surveyed in Siem Reap province overwhelmingly saw financial issues as the main barrier to staying in school or pursuing a higher education.





45% of the Khmer Krom girls and young women surveyed were in school.

- 60% expressed that education is important for girls.
- 90% said that both girls and boys should pursue higher education.
- 28% mentioned their parents do not support them to pursue higher education.

Looking back: regrets of a drop-out

One of the oldest Sharers in the group, a 21-year-old woman of Khmer Krom descent, talked to the Listeners about her regret for having ended her studies in the fifth or sixth grade in primary school. A farmer since she was child, she was forced to quit in order to take on the farming duties and support her parents by contributing to food costs. Having left school many years ago, the woman talked about her inability to read. She mentioned that one of the biggest challenges in her life now was being unable to read signs, which made it more difficult to go around areas outside of her community. She felt that not having an education prevented her from getting a better job and left her at a disadvantage in communication with others and understanding people.

Big dreams, uncertain realities

> I wanted to go to medical school and I'm going to try my best to do it. However, I'm not sure if I can go since it really depends on my family's financial situation.

-A 16-year-old high school student of Khmer Krom descent in Kratie town

Finding 3 Girls desire to go to school and become something in their lives but are unsure if they can achieve their dreams.

According to the Listeners who spoke with Sharers in Kratie province, they were somewhat surprised that in spite of many difficulties shared, girls of Khmer Krom descent tended to have big dreams. For many, going to school was a foundational stepping stone towards their life goals. Among the girls, their dreams ranged from being teachers, lawyers, doctors, investors, and business women.

Of the ten Sharers, six of them (60%) talked about their dreams for themselves and their futures. However, for many, the obstacles for them achieving their dreams were clear and were too significant to overcome. A 13-year-old girl talked about her dream of becoming an English teacher and going to university to get a degree. However, her fear of moving to Phnom Penh caused her to put aside her dream and instead focus on her family. Another woman, who was 19 years old and had dropped out of school, dreamt about creating her own online business but could not successfully launch it due to family problems. For many girls, their dreams were big and they were not afraid to imagine a successful future. In reality, however, they were often practical and were willing to forgo their dreams due to other issues that impeded their hopes.

Impossible dream?

A 16-year-old girl from a Khmer Krom family in Snoul District in Kratie province shared her dream with Listeners during their conversation. She told them that she hoped so much to become a gynaecologist for women. "If I could achieve my dream, I would help villagers in my community that face sexual health problems," she shared. Unfortunately, the girl had to drop out of school after it was closed during the Covid-19 pandemic. After so long outside of school, she lacked the confidence to return. Despite her big dreams to become a doctor, at 16 years old without any chance to continue her studies, she did not see a pathway to get there.

No choice, under control

> I feel pressure because my family forbids me from going out. They only want me to stay at home, even when my friends ask me to go out, they never allow me to.

-A 19-year-old girl who helps her parents in farming

Finding 4 Girls feel little control of their own lives and feel pressure and restrictions from their parents.

One of the underlying themes emerging from conversations that was picked up on by the Listeners was the lack of control that girls from families of Khmer Krom descent felt in their daily lives. Most felt that their parents determined their lives, and that particularly their fathers were the decision-makers in the family that had the final word on their activities.

Of the ten girls, four of them (40%) specifically mentioned that they felt controlled in terms of not being able to go outside of their homes. Two of them actually compared their situation as girls and felt that they were more controlled in their households in comparison to the boys.

Focus groups with siblings, parents, and grandparents in Siem Reap showed a rather different picture from the family members of girls of Khmer Krom descent in terms of their freedom and perceptions on control in their lives. In the men's group, male family members expressed their wishes for the girls to be more involved in their communities, but particularly in a rural context. It was mentioned that age was the determining factor in freedom to make their own life choices rather than specific to gender. The women's group tended to be clearer in terms of restriction on their children and in

regards to their daughters, granddaughters, and sisters. Some discussion focused on the lack of money in the family as a reason that girls needed to obey their parents in terms of marriage and careers. At the same time however, the same rationale about lack of resources also motivated some women to see the need for the girls to "see the outside world" since there may not be enough money at home to support them.

Pride and prejudice

> I love who I am as a Khmer Krom because I used to go to Kampuchea Krom many times, and the people are welcoming and I feel such warmth. They are friendly, respect each other, and use gentle words… [but] when I was little, I felt pressure because a classmate called me a *Yuon*, and asked me why don't I just go back to where I came from. They discriminated against me.

-A 15-year-old girl from Sambo district

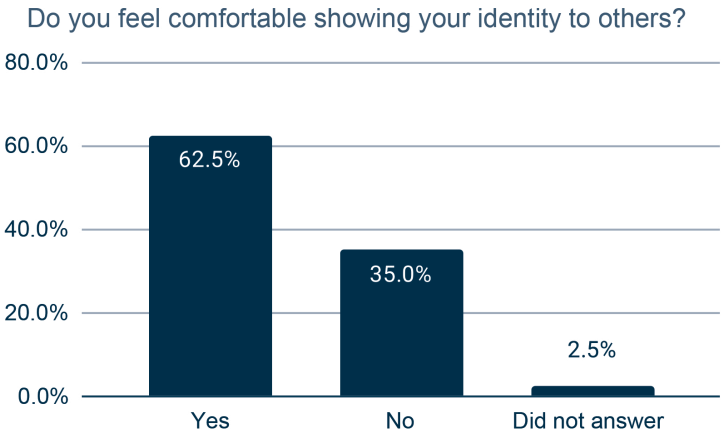
Finding 5 Girls are proud of their identity but face discrimination and their origin is sometimes misunderstood.

All ten girls expressed pride in their identities, with four (40%) specifically referring to their Khmer Krom heritage, and the rest referencing their Khmer identity. For those who discussed their ancestry and connection to Khmer Krom in present-day southern Vietnam, they often felt a connection to a long history. A 16-year-old girl said, "I like my identity as a Khmer Krom because the Khmer Krom have a rich history." According to Listeners, many Khmer Krom girls in the communities they visited in Kratie province were quite integrated into mainstream Khmer culture having come from families that migrated to Cambodia in their parent's or

their grandparent's generations. However, for some, their historical identity to Khmer Krom led to confusion by other Khmer youth who thought they were Vietnamese. This sometimes occurred in schools in which other students bullied them.

In discussions with family members of girls from Khmer Krom communities in Siem Reap, participants in focus groups tended to see discrimination targeting the generation that originally migrated from Vietnam to Cambodia (either parents or grandparents of the girls). Both men and women felt the older generation that had previously lived in Kampuchea Krom was discriminated against mainly for being perceived as Vietnamese or having an accent that sounded Vietnamese. They felt that the younger generation did not face the same issues because they were born in Cambodia and had standard accents for the area where they grew up. Legal identity, however, was an issue mentioned in the men's group that appeared to have some effect on both legal and social discrimination of Khmer Krom descendants. They mentioned that elders and some girls still did not have clear legal identity in Cambodia.

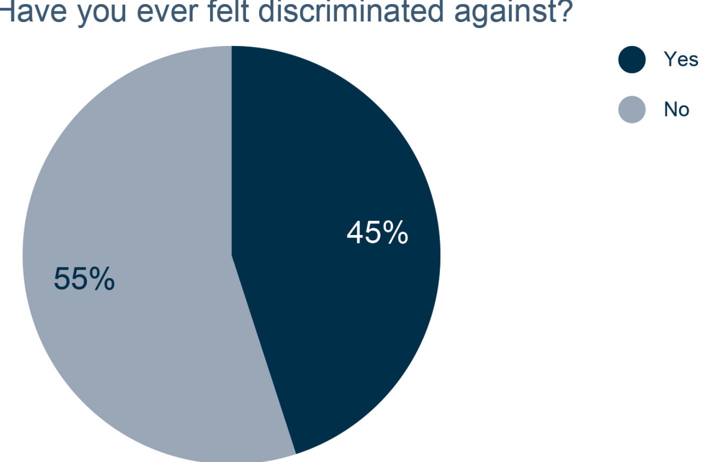
As with the FLD Sharers, survey respondents representing girls and young women of Khmer Krom descent overwhelmingly felt proud of their heritage and identity, but they did not necessarily all feel comfortable revealing their identity to others.



62.5% of girls and young women surveyed felt comfortable to reveal their Khmer Krom identity, while 35% did not.

- 98% said they were proud of being born and raised as a descendant of the Khmer Krom with a specific minority identity.

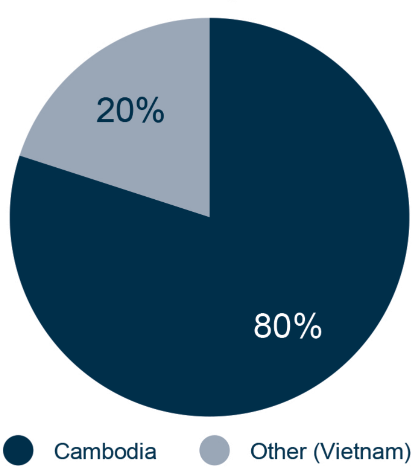
Those who participated in the survey also provided some insight into discrimination and misunderstandings about their origins by others. 18 out of the 40 surveyed noted that they had felt discriminated against at some point in their lives.

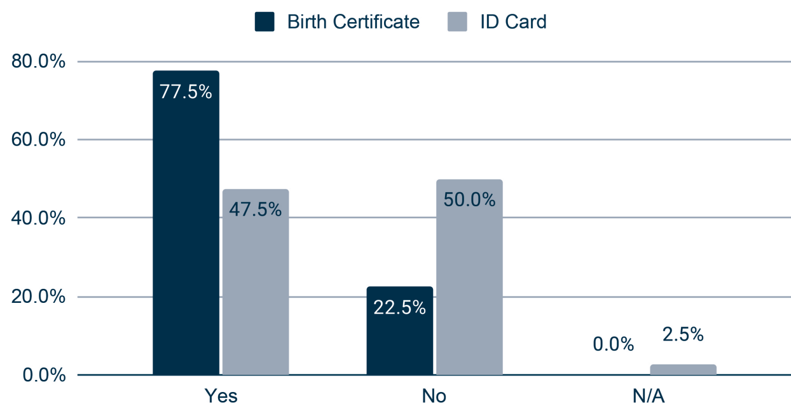


45% of the Khmer Krom girls and young women surveyed said they had felt discriminated against, while 55% did not share the same experience.

- Of the girls and young women who felt they had faced discrimination, 72% said that it was because of their minority identity, while 22% said it was due to their accent, culture, or traditions.
- All of them said they felt devalued when they experienced discrimination.
- 33% said they dropped out of school because of discrimination.

Issues around legal identity in Cambodia did emerge in the survey findings as well. Despite the majority of respondents being born in Cambodia, a significant number said that they did not have a Cambodian National ID card.


Where were you born?
20%
80%
Cambodia
Other (Vietnam)


Do you have birth certificate or identification card?
Birth Certificate
ID Card
80.0%
60.0%
40.0%
20.0%
0.0%
77.5%
47.5%
22.5%
50.0%
0.0%
2.5%
Yes
No
N/A

The Listeners' Take

A chance to listen to "the others"

Phary and Piseth were Listeners for the Khmer Krom girls and went to Phary's hometown in Kratie province. Piseth was the only Listener in the initiative that went to a community that was not his own. Coming from a mainstream Khmer background, Piseth felt comfortable to try to explore a new community and take a more background listening approach with his partner.

For Phary, talking to people in her own community and its surroundings also let her engage with people she did not previously know. Given that people of Khmer Krom descent are often spread out in Cambodia,

the fieldwork gave them a chance to explore and find new people to talk to.

Piseth felt that having a chance to be a Listener in a community as an outsider gave some benefits. He said that because the information he heard was sometimes new to him, he was constantly learning and it was interesting to later record and reflect on. He also gained new understanding into some of the issues that Khmer Krom girls face and felt more empathy and compassion for people in a unique situation.

In some rare instances in FLD deployment, people do fieldwork in communities that are not their own. This allows Listeners to hear something new and different, and to open their minds to other perspectives. It can be a useful tool in introducing people to the thoughts and opinions of others and help build deeper understanding and challenge existing stereotypes.

Cross Analysis of Minority Girls in Cambodia

The findings on ethnic, religious, and cultural minority girls have been presented according to minority groups in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the unique situation of minority girls in distinct communities. Coupled with data and insights from minority girls themselves, community members also provided their own perceptions on girls through a limited amount of FLD work and focus group discussions. Each chapter has helped to paint a clearer picture through an intersectional lens on how girls in each minority group navigate their lives, confront challenges, and even in some cases, overcome obstacles and dare to dream. The importance of breaking down minority girls into their ethnic, religious, or cultural minority groups is essential to reflect on the distinct contexts of each community. However, it is also possible to zoom out of specific communities and explore patterns across groups. There are certain characteristics that can be seen among minority girls in general. Such characteristics have been discussed and shared by the minority girls themselves in the full groups, as well as can be seen in the data collected and consolidated for analysis.

Poverty

As indicated from discussions with Listeners working together in the full group, nearly all girls from minority communities see themselves as poorer than girls from the mainstream Khmer majority. Poor, in this sense, can refer to less access to economic opportunities, the struggle to reach subsistence in daily lives, less possibilities

to save money, a lack of ability to engage in work outside of traditional means to survive, and living in less developed areas with less infrastructure and economic development. In the survey, 92% of the minority girls saw their own economic situation as either unstable or somewhat unstable.

Economic situation reported as by survey respondents	
Unstable	23%
Somewhat unstable	69%
Stable	3%
Very stable	0%
Refuse to answer	4%

Lack of sex education and access to sexual reproductive health services

Many minority girls feel they experience puberty alone or only feel comfortable discussing issues with their female family members or close friends. Often living in more isolated community conditions, minority girls share a common perception that they lack access to information about sexual and reproductive health. For some minority groups, quickly marrying off an adolescent girl if they become pregnant is the cultural norm, leading to more child marriages. For girls from several minority groups, menstruation is a very difficult issue. Due to the feelings of shame arising from some minority girls in their communities, along with levels of poverty and low income, many girls do not buy sanitary napkins when experiencing their first and initial periods. This can be explained by embarrassment, particularly when having to buy them from a male seller. It can also come from the hesitation of many girls to tell others about the physical changes they

are experiencing. It can also be related to the financial inability to purchase products that are often considered expensive and imported from other countries. In addition, girls living in minority communities without access to sanitation facilities, such as those living in floating villages on the river or in the highlands without plumbing, often live without the privacy or infrastructure to take care of their needs related to personal hygiene. Lacking a private toilet, for instance, can become a significant barrier for minority girls to properly deal with their menstruation cycles.

What do you think are the main barriers for having open discussions about sexual and reproductive health?	
Shy/Not allowed by family or elders	72%
Fear of being viewed as a bad girl	52%
Cultural and social norms	35%
Other (being made fun of, hiding from family members, etc.)	3%

Do you think having access to information about sexual and reproductive health is a human right?	
Yes	81%
No	1%
Don't know	15%
Did not answer	3%

Gender roles and expectations on girls

Girls from different minority communities tend not to feel comfortable speaking in public in both their own communities and within the Khmer mainstream majority context. This can be understood from different dimensions and through an intersectional lens that highlights their gender, age, and minority status. On one hand, in their communities, minority girls often feel unheard and even repressed in speaking out on any topic. This can stem from cultural norms that do not value women's voices as much as men's, but also from age dynamics that put far more importance on the roles of elders in the public sphere. One the other hand, minority girls often express hesitation in speaking publicly outside their communities in the Khmer mainstream. Coupled with feelings of their own lack of voice in their communities, they often feel insecure coming from an ethnic, religious, or cultural minority group. Their accents in the Khmer language can make them feel vulnerable in expressing themselves in an environment they may be perceived as being different. Their traditional dress, such as Indigenous clothing or for orthodox Cham girls required to wear a hijab, their visual appearance may highlight their differences and make them feel less confident to speak out to a mainstream Khmer majority public.

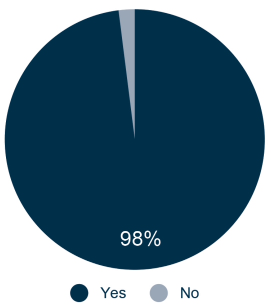
Do you feel comfortable expressing your ideas in your community/public events?	
Yes	46%
No	53%
Did not answer	1%

If not comfortable; why?	
Lack of self-confidence	48%
Afraid to be made fun of	23%
Lack of support from others	15%
Think that my voice will not be heard or valued	11%
Do not have any opportunities	7%

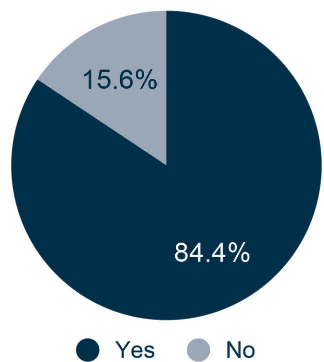
Pride in identity

Despite sometimes feeling hesitation to express their minority identities in the Khmer mainstream, minority girls from all groups included in this initiative tend to feel an internal sense of pride in their ethnic, religious, and cultural identity. This is significant and something unique that minority girls share, living as minorities in the country. Girls from several groups that have their own language or speak other languages besides Khmer, for example, also feel proud that they are bilingual or multilingual, compared to the mainstream population. Many also recognise the culinary traditions of their minority groups and the long-standing traditions they hold onto, even in contemporary Cambodia that continues to quickly change and modernise.

Do you feel proud about your own identity, culture, and traditions?

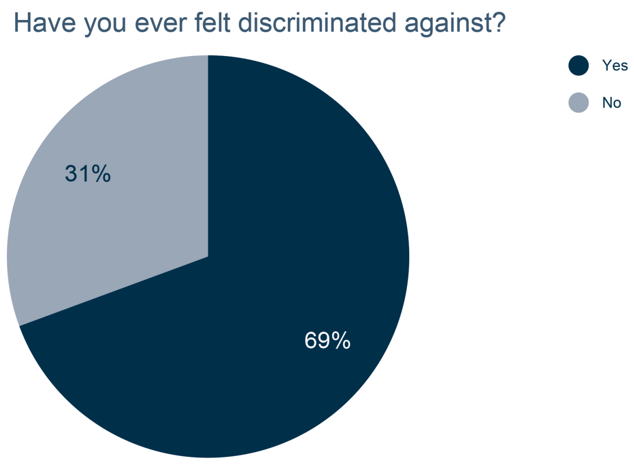


Do you think minority girls face more challenges than mainstream majority girls?



Experience of discrimination from others

The ethnic, religious, or cultural minority dimension affects minority girls deeply, particularly when outside of their own community contexts. In spite of a recognised pride in their identity, many minority girls experience discrimination both within mainstream Khmer society and by other minority groups in the country. Growing up as minority girls, several from specific groups experience being teased by others because of their physical appearance, religious practice, traditional dress or customs, and language use including speaking in their own language or their accent in Khmer language. These forms of discrimination happen both nearby their communities, such as in public events or public schools, as well as when the girls go outside of their communities, like moving to Phnom Penh, for example. Discrimination is also experienced among minority groups themselves, and girls are often aware and face discrimination from other minorities including among those that participated in this initiative. Stereotypes and negative perceptions from one minority group to another are common, and continue to perpetuate the "othering" that minority girls often feel growing up and coming of age.



If you have felt discriminated against; why do you think you experienced discrimination?	
My accent	25%
My religious practice outside Buddhism	23%
My ethnic minority identity	33%
My appearance (clothing, dress)	28%
Speaking my language	30%
My culture and traditions	23%
Other (I think I am different, people use slurs against me, etc.)	1%

If you have felt discriminated against; how does discrimination affect you?	
Feel devalued	69%
Lose confidence	29%
Isolated and do want to engage with strangers	15%
Drop out of school	14%
Other (ignore it, retaliate, revenge, etc.)	12%

Dropping out of school and lack of prospects for higher education

Across minority communities in Cambodia, girls struggle to stay in school. The girls from different minority groups tend to drop out of school at different levels. Indigenous Bunong girls appear to stop studying early, often at the primary or early secondary levels. They often shift to doing housework full-time, farming, or get married at a young age. Ethnic Vietnamese girls living in floating communities often face complex legal identity issues and grow up without the ability to attend public schools in Cambodia. Even those that manage to attend unofficial church-run schools generally leave at an early age to work in the fishing sector in their communities. Ethnic Vietnamese girls living close to the Cambodia-Vietnam border, sometimes also mixed race, tend to quit their studies to contribute income to their families. Many begin working at casinos or in the beauty industry as early as the age of 15. Cambodian Muslim girls tend to continue studying until high school, but often leave to obtain employment. In this study, the Cambodian Muslim girls often dropped out of school in order to begin working at nearby factories or help their own families in their local businesses. Likewise, girls from Khmer Krom communities in Cambodia frequently stop their studies by the time they reach secondary or high school to help their parents sell food or in their small businesses. Minority girls

across the board face unique barriers in pursuing higher education, particularly in going to university. For those that do manage to graduate from high school, many do not have access to information to encourage them to study at an undergraduate level, to choose courses or programmes, or provide them with an understanding of how education can improve their lives. Those who do dream about studying at a higher level are often discouraged by numerous barriers. The costs associated with going to school was the most often cited reason for minority girls not attending university in the survey. Many coming from minority communities in more isolated and rural areas are not permitted to leave their communities, specifically to move to Phnom Penh. For many, the value of a higher education for girls and women is not recognised in their communities or by their own families. In most of the minority communities included in this study, marriage was seen as more important for girls and young women than a university education. Girls also expressed fear about their safety as well as anxiety about a change of environment.

How important do you think education is for girls?	
Not important at all	1%
A bit important	4%
Somewhat important	10%
Quite important	11%
Very important	74%

What educational degree do you want to pursue?	
Secondary	20%
Diploma	17%
Bachelor	42%
Master	6%
PhD	8%
Did not answer	7%

Who do you think should pursue higher education?	
Girls	4%
Boys	3%
Both	92%
No comment	1%

How much do you think it impacts girls' lives if they are not educated?	
Not at all	4%
A little	8%
So so	11%
Quite a bit	11%
Very much	66%

Do your parents support you to pursue a higher education?	
Yes	74%
No	26%

If your parents do not support you; why?	
No financial resources	25%
Concerned I will not study seriously	5%
There is nobody else to help at home	19%
Worried about road and transportation safety	5%
Concerned that girls who go to school will not find a husband	1%
Gender perceptions	12%
Did not answer	33%

What do you think are the barriers for girls to get education? (choose all that apply)	
Lack of money	90%
Lack of family support	48%
Not interested in education	34%
Worried that neighbours or community will judge them	13%
Lack of infrastructure	22%
Gender perceptions	13%
Afraid others will discriminate against them because of minority status	13%

What are the challenges that girls in your community face when pursuing education? (choose all that apply)	
Lack of money	86%
Lack of toilet and sanitation facilities	3%
Distance to school	32%
Being criticised or judged by neighbours	6%
Discrimination	24%
Parents do not value education	16%
Must help parents work	55%
Lack of safety along the road	16%
Cultural perceptions	14%

FLD as a Transformative Intervention

The findings shared in the previous chapter reflect each community involved and explore the information as a whole for ethnic, religious, and cultural minority girls in Cambodia. Beyond the information gathered, analysed, and presented, the process has also provided deep insight into FLD as more than just a qualitative research methodology. Every time FLD is deployed as a method of choice, it evolves from learnings in specific contexts and implementation.

In this context, FLD was chosen as an initial method to understand issues about minority girls that were raised by themselves. The information gathered was subsequently used to design a quantitative survey to reach more minority girls and to structure focus group discussions to learn more about other family and community member perspectives. Being a participatory and community-centred approach, FLD served to mobilise minority girls and young women on the issues through a process of inquiry and reflection. Adaptations were made along the way and the tools and processes were customised by members of the communities themselves. For this initiative, using FLD to make a space for girls from very diverse groups, several elements were shown to support unique characteristics that FLD can contribute to beyond data and understanding.

Connecting to their own communities

Most FLD interventions encourage participants to initially leverage the process to engage with their own communities. This provides an opportunity to carry out inquiry through a different angle; as a community researcher that is pursuing more understanding on issues that are familiar, but through a structured information gathering process. A further result is that people are able to then analyse what they heard and present it to others as findings rather than coming directly from their own opinions or views (although the information may or may not match their own thinking). In this initiative, minority women, girls, and individuals went into their own communities, used their own languages and cultural knowledge, and engaged in deep conversations. This process connected them to girls and young women in their communities and created a space between the Listeners and the Sharers to discuss issues. That process not only connected community researchers with participants to co-create knowledge through interpretative narrative, but it also connected them on more personal levels to explore many shared experiences as minority girls.

Sensitive issues, challenges, and needs

Marginalised groups face unique challenges. Through an intersectional lens looking at aspects of identity, including minority status, gender, and age, conversations are bound to be complex and sensitive. FLD can be leveraged as a way to create safer spaces to discuss sensitive issues. Since there are no recording tools used during conversations, including neither notetaking nor audio recording, there is potential to foster a space that allows for genuine dialogue where issues may be brought up privately. This initiative used that space to engage on sensitive issues, as well as on specific challenges and needs among minority girls. Discussions about sexual and reproductive health, touching topics such as puberty, menstruation, and sexual relations are extremely delicate among teenage girls. These issues

came up and were recorded later by Listeners, demonstrating that FLD conversations can facilitate an intimate sharing space. It also allowed for discussion beyond only the challenges, and provided for reflection about needs, and even solutions in some cases.

Connection to other communities

FLD often brings very different groups together as part of a joint-project approach. Sometimes, the purpose can be to explore conflict and find ways to navigate it between conflicting parties. Other times, it can simply be a way to bring together different kinds of people and expand their understanding of others who they may normally not encounter. This initiative brought together people from distinct ethnic, religious, cultural minority groups living in different parts of the country. Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslim, and Khmer Krom women, girls, and individuals worked together to generate new knowledge on minority girl issues. Most of these groups had little to no contact with each other. The long process, however, brought them together to not only share their own community's data and findings with others, but to also build a collective understanding around minority girl perspectives, often with multiple elements that were shared across groups. Such "connectors" were explored and examined together, and left the group feeling a stronger sense of cohesiveness. Beyond the original initiative's intention, the participants who worked in collecting, analysing, and presenting their data have largely come together and are continuing their journey - hand-in-hand. FLD continues to make a space for different people and allow for them to share their unique differences but also to explore their connecting elements to encourage solidarity and collaboration.

Looking forward together

One of the most important aspects of ending an FLD intervention is looking forward to the future. This work is no exception. *Making the Space* brought together minority girls and women to explore their own contexts and, through the process, to connect with other ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities. At every step of the way, participants stopped to reflect and to think about what was next. After the research was done, the art activities conducted, and the girls began going to school after breaking their barriers, minority participants gathered in Kampot province to share what they had achieved, and to imagine the future. After three years, many of the girls had matured into young women.

Rather than evoking a sense of completion, the energy of the reflection gathering signalled a focus on the future, with some participants sharing that it felt more like "the beginning." FLD Listeners, survey interviewers, focus group facilitators, art workshop facilitators, Sharers, and even recipients of the *Send Girls to School* programme, joined to take the reins and plot a course for themselves. For them, this was not just a project or an initiative - this was a collective in the works that was taking shape.

The reflection provided an opportunity for the participants to think about both their specific minority

communities, and as a group of minority girls and young women. Each group had clarity on what the girls in their community needed and what needs to be done to address those needs.

For the Indigenous group, the young Bunong women stressed the importance of education and ensuring that Bunong girls have access. This means challenging community perceptions about the importance of educating girls as well as confronting the cultural, social, and economic challenges Indigenous girls face when trying to go to school.

The ethnic Vietnamese women and girls brought up several challenges but highlighted the links between legal identity, discrimination, and violence as among the most detrimental issues affecting the lives of girls in their community. They stressed the need to ensure everyone could get legal identification and for children to be able to go to school and learn regardless of where their ancestors came from.

For the Cambodian Muslims, gender inequality was identified as the most urgent problem for girls in their community. They felt that support from other communities is crucial to foster awareness among their families, neighbours, and community elders on why unequal treatment of boys and girls negatively impacts the lives of girls.

Participants from the Khmer Krom community identified the misunderstandings about their identity and overprotective parental control as among the most difficult aspects of their lives. Khmer Krom girls, particularly those born in Vietnam, are often misidentified as

Vietnamese in Cambodia, are discriminated against, and sometimes not allowed to get the proper legal documentation. They also feel that they have little freedom to go out, leave their communities, or even pursue education. They asked for support to strengthen awareness among others about their identity to ensure they had a place where they felt they could belong and to find ways to lessen the control they felt in their lives.

Reflecting together, the minority women who had been working with girls in their communities came back to present ideas that were grounded in their experience. They expressed three shared goals they had in common.

Ending discrimination

The girls and young women highlighted their 'triple burden,' often brought up throughout the journey in the context of marginalisation: age, minority identity, and gender. As a united group of minority girls and women, challenging discrimination among their own groups and within the mainstream Cambodian population is vital. They felt that exposing mainstream Cambodians to their cultures is crucial and having minorities promote their local dress, languages, and ways of life could be a way to foster curiosity and respect from others. They also said that taking the stories they collected about discrimination against girls and sharing this with a wider public could cultivate deeper empathy and push others to consider how thoughtless actions, such as teasing, impact young girls from diverse backgrounds.

Gender and feminist leadership

The young women and girls also felt that the concept of gender has been an important element throughout their journey. They particularly appreciated understanding how roles of boys and girls are different, the expectations on them as girls and young women, and the lack of opportunities they had simply by being born female. The group felt that more gender work needed to be done and suggested both engaging them as young feminists and targeting their communities with awareness activities. Surprisingly, they provided quite detailed ideas and approaches, including incorporating experiential learning to learn by doing, local and national campaigns to challenge stereotypes, doing more gender-focused research, providing leadership training, sexual and reproductive health education, and advocacy for women and girls' rights.

Thinking networks

The group also emphasised the importance of engaging other minority groups, as they all benefited from coming together, exploring their lives through different perspectives while recognising many elements they shared in common. They felt that connecting with other minorities could expand their understanding and provide opportunities to share what they learnt with others who may be struggling in similar contexts. Some of the minority women raised the issue of marginalisation and the importance of seeking out other groups of women in Cambodia beyond ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities. They mentioned the possibility of exploring similarities that young people and adolescents from other gender minorities, such as those in the LGBTQ+ community, may find to the lives of minority girls. The group felt that as a next step, reaching out to other marginalised and underrepresented groups and

networks may increase the impact of their collective approach and take intersectionality even further. At the same time, they stressed the importance of continuing to represent their own communities and sharing their own cultures and contexts.

....

The minority girls and young women involved in this three-year journey have demonstrated courage to get involved, explore the world around them, engage with others, and advocate on the most pressing issues in their lives. Through a participatory approach, they determined the direction, and they translated inquiry into action, culminating in their own plans for the future. After all the listening the girls and young women did to gather the data and subsequently provide the analysis to write this publication, they now want others to listen.

FLD demonstrates that it is through the power of listening that we not only understand more, but also take control of our ability to transform and drive change towards a more inclusive future.

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Rather than evoking a sense of completion, the energy of the reflection gathering signalled a focus on the future, with some participants sharing that it felt more like “the beginning.”

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Annex

Survey Questionnaires

Making the Space

Name:	Gender:	Age:	Interview Date:
Address:			Interviewer:
Consent for the interview	☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	

Section 1: Demographic Background		
1	Current Occupation:	☐ Student ☐ Stay at home/Unemployed ☐ Employed (Specify:………………………………….)
2	Educational level achieved	☐ Primary School ☐ Secondary School ☐ High School ☐ University ☐ Vocational Training ☐ Others (Specify…………..)
3	Marital Status	☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ In a Relationship. ☐ Engaged ☐ Separated ☐ Divorced
4	1/. If married, do you have marriage certificate? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2/. If married, do you have kids? ☐ No children ☐ 1-2 children ☐ 3-4 children ☐ More than 5 children
5	Who do you live with? (Can be more than one answer)	☐ Parents. ☐ Parents in-law ☐ Partner ☐ Siblings ☐ Intimate partner ☐ Friends ☐ Others (Specify…………………………………)
6	Ethnic minority group identification (Can be more than one answer)	☐ Cham ☐ Khmer Islam ☐ Khmer Krom ☐ Mixed Khmer Krom ☐ Indigenous (Specify…………………………)

		☐ Ethnic Vietnamese. ☐ Mixed Khmer-Vietnamese	
7	1. Where were you born? ☐ Cambodia ☐ Other (Vietnam, etc...)	2. Do you have birth certificate? ☐ Yes ☐ No	3. Do you have an identification card? ☐ Yes ☐ No
8	Economic situation	☐ Unstable ☐ Somewhat unstable ☐ Stable ☐ Very stable	
Section 2: Girls' perspective on education			
9	How important do you think education is for girls?	☐ 1. Not important at all ☐ 2. A bit important ☐ 3. Somewhat important ☐ 4. Quite important ☐ 5. Very important	
10	What educational degree do you want to pursue?	☐ Secondary ☐ Diploma ☐ Bachelor ☐ Master ☐ PhD	
11	Who do you think should pursue higher education?	☐ Girls ☐ Boys ☐ Both ☐ No idea	
12	How much do you think it impacts girls' living if they are not educated?	☐ 1. Not at all ☐ 2. A little ☐ 3. So so ☐ 4. Quite a bit ☐ 5. Very much	
13	1. Do your parents support you to pursue a higher education? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If your parents do not support you, why? ☐ No financial resources ☐ Concern I will not study seriously ☐ There is nobody else to help at home ☐ Worried about road and transportation safety	

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2"></td><td colspan="3">☐ Concerned that girls who go to school will not find a husband
☐ Gender Perceptions</td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td colspan="2">What do you think are the barriers for girls to get education?</td><td colspan="3">☐ Lack of money ☐ Lack of family support
☐ Not Interested in education
☐ Worried that neighbors or community will judge them
☐ Lack of infrastructure
☐ Gender Perceptions
☐ Afraid others will discriminate against them because of their minority status</td></tr>
<tr><td>15</td><td colspan="2">What are the main challenges that girls in your community face while they pursue an education?</td><td colspan="3">☐ Lack of money
☐ Lack of toilet and sanitation facilities
☐ Distance to school
☐ Being criticized or judged by neighbors
☐ Discrimination
☐ Parents do not value education
☐ Must help parents work
☐ Lack of safety along the road
☐ Cultural perceptions</td></tr>
<tr><td>16</td><td>1. Did you study your minority group's language?
☐ Yes
☐ No</td><td>2. Where do you learn your minority group's language?
☐ Religious school
☐ Private school
☐ Family members
☐ Public school</td><td colspan="2">3. How influence are you in your minority group's language?
☐ Can read ☐ Can Write
☐ Can Speak ☐ Can listen
☐ Can do all ☐ Cannot do all</td><td>4. Do you want to know your minority group's language?
☐ Yes
☐ No</td></tr>
</table>

17	1. How well can you communicate in Khmer Language ☐ 1. Not at all ☐ 2. A little ☐ 3. So so ☐ 4. Quite well ☐ 5. Fluent	2. If you selected number 1-4, why? ☐ Rarely communicate with others in Khmer ☐ No opportunity to go to Khmer language school because of legal identity ☐ Discrimination and bullying ☐ No opportunity to go out of the community ☐ Other (Specify……………………………)	3. If selected 1-4, would you like to be fluent in Khmer? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Session 3: Girls' perception on Gender concept

18	1. Who do you think should do the housework at home? ☐ Girls ☐ Boys ☐ Both	2. In reality, who does the housework at home or at homes in your community? ☐ Girls ☐ Boys ☐ Both
19	1. Do you think girls have the same level freedom to go outside of the community as boys? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you answered no, why? ☐ Cultural norms/ perceptions ☐ Unsafe ☐ Families do not allow it ☐ Other people judge ☐ Other (Specify ……………………………)
20	1. Do you feel comfortable to express yours ideas in your community/ public events? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If not comfortable, why? ☐ Lack of self-confidence ☐ Lack of support from others ☐ Afraid to be made fun of ☐ Think that my voice will not be heard or values ☐ Do not have any opportunities
21	1. How much do girls participate in community service? ☐ 1. Not at all ☐ 2. Very little ☐ 3. Not a lot	2. What are the barriers that stop girls from participating? ☐ No opportunities ☐ Do not have enough time

	☐ 4. Quite a bit ☐ 5. A lot	☐ Busy with housework ☐ Issues not related to them ☐ Their voices are not valued ☐ Do not know how to join ☐ Do not get any information ☐ Excluded by elders or are rejected from participating
22	1. Do you think minority girls are capable of becoming community leaders? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If not, why? ☐ Not provided with opportunities ☐ Lack the capacity ☐ Lack of knowledge ☐ Lack of female role models ☐ Cultural and social norms ☐ Other (Specify…………………………….)
23	In your view, how effective are girls' voice in decision-making within the family, at school, or in the community?	☐ 1. Not at all ☐ 2. Very Little ☐ 3. Not very effective ☐ 4. Quite effective ☐ 5. Very effective
24	1. Do you think girls should get married under the age of 18? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. How common is it for girls in your community to get married before the age of 18? ☐ 1. Not at all ☐ 2. Very uncommon ☐ 3. Not common ☐ 4. Quite common ☐ 5. Very common
25	1. Do you think girls should have the freedom to choose their partners? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. In reality, do girls in your community have the freedom to choose their partners? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Session 4: Girls' understanding on Sexual and Reproductive health		

<table>
<tr><td>26</td><td colspan="2">1. How much do you know about sexual and reproductive health?
☐ 1. Not at all
☐ 2. Very little
☐ 3. Not much
☐ 4. Quite a bit
☐ 5. A lot</td><td colspan="2">2. Where do you get your information about sexual and reproductive health?
☐ Family ☐ Social media
☐ Magazines ☐ School
☐ Radio ☐ Hospital
☐ Friends
☐ Others (Specify……………..)</td></tr>
<tr><td>27</td><td colspan="2">1. Have you ever experienced a sexual or reproductive health problem?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Do not know</td><td colspan="2">2. If you have ever experienced a sexual or reproductive health problem, who do you seek help from?
☐ Did not seek help
☐ Friends
☐ Doctor
☐ Villagers
☐ Family
☐ Others</td></tr>
<tr><td>28</td><td colspan="4">Do you think sexual and reproductive health is taboo topic?
☐ Yes ☐ No</td></tr>
<tr><td>29</td><td>1. How open is your family to talk about sexual and reproductive health?
☐ Not open at all
☐ Not very open
☐ Somewhat open
☐ Quite open
☐ Very open</td><td colspan="2">2. How open is your school regarding matters related to sexual and reproductive health
☐ Not open at all
☐ Not very open
☐ Somewhat open
☐ Quite open
☐ Very open</td><td>3. What do you think are the main barriers for having open discussions about sexual and reproductive health?
☐ Fear of being viewed as a bad girl
☐ Fear of being viewed as a bad girl
☐ cultural and social norms about
☐ Shy/ Not allowed by family or elders
☐ Other (Specify……………..)</td></tr>
<tr><td>30</td><td colspan="4">Do you think having access to information about sexual and reproductive health is a human right?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Do not know</td></tr>
</table>

Session 5: Perception and Experience in Violation and Discrimination

No.	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
31	1. Have you experienced violence in your family or from an intimate partner? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you have experienced violence, what kind of violence? ☐ Physical ☐ Mental ☐ Economic ☐ Sexual	3. If you have experienced violence, who committed that violence towards you? ☐ Intimate partner ☐ Family ☐ Other people/Strangers ☐ Others (Specify………)
32	1. If you experienced violence, do you seek help? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you do seek help about violence, who do you seek help from? ☐ Neighbors ☐ Doctors ☐ Friends ☐ Police ☐ Local authorities ☐ Family and relatives	3. In your view, whose is to blame when you experience violence ☐ Victim ☐ Perpetrator
33	1. Have you ever experienced sexual harassment? ☐ Never ☐ Once ☐ Less than three times ☐ More than three times	2. If your experienced sexual harassment, how did you deal with it? ☐ Did nothing about it ☐ Shared about it with family ☐ Shared about it with close friends and neighbors ☐ Sought support from a professional ☐ Legal document ☐ Others (Specify………….)	
34	1. Have you ever felt discriminated against? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you have felt discriminated against, who do you think you experienced discrimination? ☐ My accent ☐ My religious practice outside Buddhism ☐ My ethnic minority identity ☐ My appearance (clothing, dress) ☐ Seeking my language ☐ My culture and traditions	

		☐ Others……………………………………….
35	1. How does discrimination affect you? ☐ Feel devalued ☐ Lose confidence ☐ Isolated and do want to engage with strangers ☐ Drop out of school ☐ Others………………………………	2. How do you think discrimination could be eliminated? ☐ Foster general respect for diversity and humanity ☐ Exchange experienced and learn to understand each other ☐ Challenge assumption of those who do not know the group they discriminate against ☐ Others……………………………………….
36	1. Do you feel safe in your community and when you go out? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you do not feel safe, what is your concern> ☐ Going far away or dark roads ☐ Do not have proper legal identification ☐ Traffic accidents ☐ Harassment ☐ Others……………………………………..
Session 6: Girls' perception on Their own identity		
37	1. Do you feel comfortable showing your identity to others ? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you do not feel comfortable, why? ☐ Afraid that others will discriminate against me ☐ Afraid others will not value us ☐ Others (Afraid others do not allow me to work my Khmer language is not influence, etc)
38	1. Do you think minority girls face more challenges than the mainstream majority girls? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If yes, what are those challenges? ☐ Lack of education ☐ Do not know Khmer language ☐ Lack of opportunities ☐ Lack of information ☐ Discrimination ☐ Lack of freedom ☐ Lack of relations with others (Isolation)

39	1. Do you feel proud about your own identity, culture, and traditions? ☐ Yes ☐ No	2. If you could change, would you want to be born into another ethnic group or as the mainstream majority group? ☐ Yes ☐ N0
40	How much do you think others value and accept your identity?	☐ 1. Not at all ☐ 2. Very little ☐ 3. Somewhat ☐ 4. Quite a lot ☐ 5. Very much
41	1. Do you have relationship with people from different groups? ☐ Not at all ☐ Very little ☐ Some ☐ Quite a lot ☐ A lot	2. If you don't have relationships outside your own community/group, why do you think that is ? ☐ Do not have much chance to go outside my community ☐ Afraid others will discriminate against me or will not talk to me ☐ Feel shy ☐ Other (Specify…………………………..)
42	What would you like others to know more about your community/ group?	☐ About our culture and traditions ☐ Everyday life in our community ☐ Others………………………………..

THANK YOU!

Tôi vẫn cảm thấy bị phân biệt đối xử, đôi khi tôi bị gọi là con Youn. Tôi sợ mình sẽ bị phân biệt khi biết tôi là con lai.

Tôi là người ...
học tiếng Vi...
tiếng Anh ...
vì tôi phả...
những ...

ការសិក្សាគឺសំខាន់ណាស់សម្រាប់ខ្ញុំ ប៉ុន្តែដោយសារស្ថានភាពគ្រួសាររបស់ខ្ញុំ ខ្ញុំក៏បានបញ្ឈប់ការសិក្សា ដូច្នេះទើបប្អូនប្រុសរបស់ខ្ញុំអាចបន្តការសិក្សាបាន ។

Voices from the girls of Cambodian minority communities

The gap is real. Despite vast programming around the world with the objective of achieving gender equality, empowering youth, and fostering inclusion among minority groups, minority girls are still invisible, ignored, and left behind.

Making the Space is a ground-breaking contribution that provides new knowledge at the intersection of gender, age, and identity. Over three years, research was conducted on the lived experiences, perspectives, challenges, issues, inner hopes, and dreams for the future of girls from four minority groups in Cambodia - Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslim, and Khmer Krom.

Using a mixed-method approach of innovative participatory methods, minority girls and young women not only responded to researchers - but became the researchers themselves.

Making the Space offers new findings that take into account the ways in which their gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and their age exposed minority girls to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. It also paves the way for more community-driven and participatory action research by communities who are the most impacted by the studies carried out on them.