

MAKING THE SPACE

Voices from the girls of Cambodian minority communities

April 2022



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Cambodia is a diverse country. Although 90% of the country's residents are ethnically Khmer and practice Buddhism, around 10% come from other ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups. In a country where women find themselves in a lower social status, minority girls face a 'triple burden.' 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.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

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. It is a ground-breaking contribution that provides new knowledge at the intersection of gender, age, and identity. Research was conducted on the lived experiences, perspectives, challenges, issues, inner hopes, and dreams for the future of girls from 343 participants of four minority groups in Cambodia - Indigenous, ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslim, and Khmer Krom.

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?

This research was entirely participatory and community-driven by the same communities at the centre of the study. Taking a mixed-method approach, research began with a qualitative study 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. Focus group discussions were simultaneously 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.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

The lives of minority girls in Cambodia vary greatly depending upon the group. For Indigenous girls, language and culture are deeply important but also contribute to barriers not only in mainstream Khmer society, but even within their own communities. Social norms and stereotypes about girls often limit their opportunities to follow their dreams. Ethnic Vietnamese girls are facing complex issues including unknown legal identity, housing insecurity, and discrimination. They are often isolated and lack access to basic services, such as education. Cambodian Muslim girls place great importance on identity, language, and religion, but are often pressured to leave school and work to contribute to family livelihoods. Khmer Krom girls frequently face strong social norms related to gender roles in their communities and must focus on housework, often feeling they have little control of their lives.

Although the contexts of girls from each group differ, there are some commonalities found among minority girls more generally. Cross-analysis of the study's findings showed some shared issues.

Poverty

Nearly all girls from minority communities see themselves living in poorer situations than girls from the mainstream Khmer majority.

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.

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 with the Khmer mainstream majority. They often feel unheard and perceive young female voices in their communities as less valued.

Pride in Identity

Despite feeling stigmatised, minority girls often feel pride for their ethnic, re-

ligious, or cultural group. They identify feeling proud to speak languages apart from Khmer and having their own culinary traditions.

Experience of discrimination from others

Nearly all minority girls face some form of discrimination. They are often teased because of their cultural traditions or accents in Khmer language and feel "othered" in Cambodian society.

Dropping out of school and lack of prospects for higher education

Staying in school is tough for nearly all minority girls. Most drop out by the high school level for reasons specific to their own communities, such as getting married, getting a job, or being unable to provide proper identity documents for study at public schools. For those who wish to go to university or pursue higher education, many barriers often prevent them. Financial costs, housework responsibilities, gender perceptions in their own communities, long distance travel, having to work, and discrimination were all cited as key reasons to not study.

WHO IS LEADING THIS RESEARCH?

This research initiative was led by minority girls and young women across Cambodia under the leadership of Le Sen at Women Peace Makers. It was funded by Danmission with additional support from Voice and Pangea Giving.



HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research has important policy and practice implications. At the national level, minority girls must be considered in areas particularly related to gender equality and empowerment. Intersectionality allows deeper understanding about how each layer of identity can affect the lives of people, and the triple burden of minority girls needs to be evaluated in the scope of their age, gender, and minority status. Government Ministries must incorporate a stronger intersectional lens into policymaking and ensure that minority girls receive special consideration in achieving national goals in the development of the country. Development partners working in Cambodia must also take into account minority girls, particularly in gender initiatives that are often leaving them behind. Broader civil society advocacy must also be made to sensitise the Cambodian public on issues faced by minority girls in the country and to promote not only their inclusion, but their prioritisation in efforts to achieve sustainable development goals and their voice in human rights initiatives that target the most marginalised groups.

LEARN MORE

For more on this study, read the book *Making the Space: Voices from the girls of Cambodian minority communities.*

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