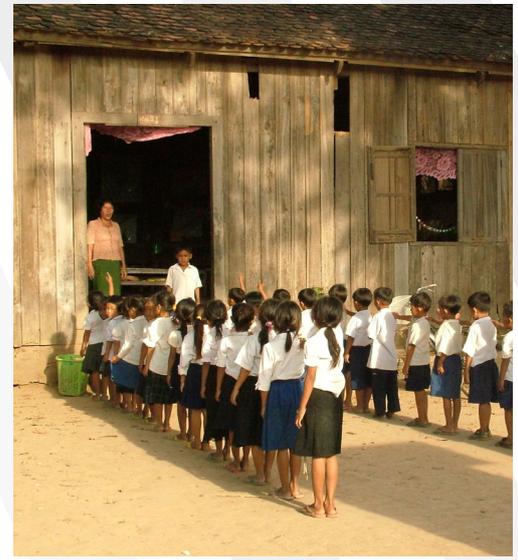


Examining improvements to girls' education in Cambodia through a gender-responsive lens

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Background

Since 2002, the Cambodian government has taken serious steps to address pervasive gender imbalances and improve the status and treatment of women and girls, especially in education. A series of policies that call for child-friendly, gender-aware schooling have been enacted in the past two decades, accompanied by scholarship programmes, expansion in lower secondary school construction, and gender-focused teacher and school leader training programmes. These combined efforts are paying off: in 2021, girls' enrolment was at 100%, and girls surpassed boys for enrolment in lower secondary for the first time. Girls are also outperforming boys in reading, writing, and mathematics at Grade 5¹, and in PISA-D², conducted with 15-year-olds, girls outscored boys in reading and science. Beyond these improvements in statistics for enrolment and performance, we sought to understand the extent to which gender imbalances are being addressed and improved within the classroom. Here, we explore the following question:

Are schools and classrooms in Cambodia simply gender-sensitive and aware of gender discrimination, or are they moving to actively root out and address gender imbalances, thus demonstrating aspects of gender-responsiveness?

In this context, Education Development Trust (EDT), working in collaboration with the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), is producing two phases of research on aspects of the education system from a gender-responsive perspective. Taking a mixed-methods approach, we drew data for the first phase from two sources:

1. Desk review of academic literature, policy documents and guidelines related to gender
2. Interviews with 35 informants from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), development partners, sub-national education officials, school principals, and teachers³.

Many contexts, like Cambodia, have been moving away from gender-unequal policies and practices which discriminate against girls and women, do not ensure girls and women's equal participation in society, and perpetuate inequalities. Often, policies may call for **learner-centredness**, where teaching and learning is tailored to the individual needs of the child, but many approaches to learner-centredness do not specifically address gender in understanding individual differences. Thus, when countries adopt a gender-mainstreaming approach, they begin to acknowledge that gender is an important element in understanding who can access resources and opportunities in society more broadly and education in particular, demonstrating **gender-aware** or **gender-sensitive** positions.

¹ UNICEF (2021)

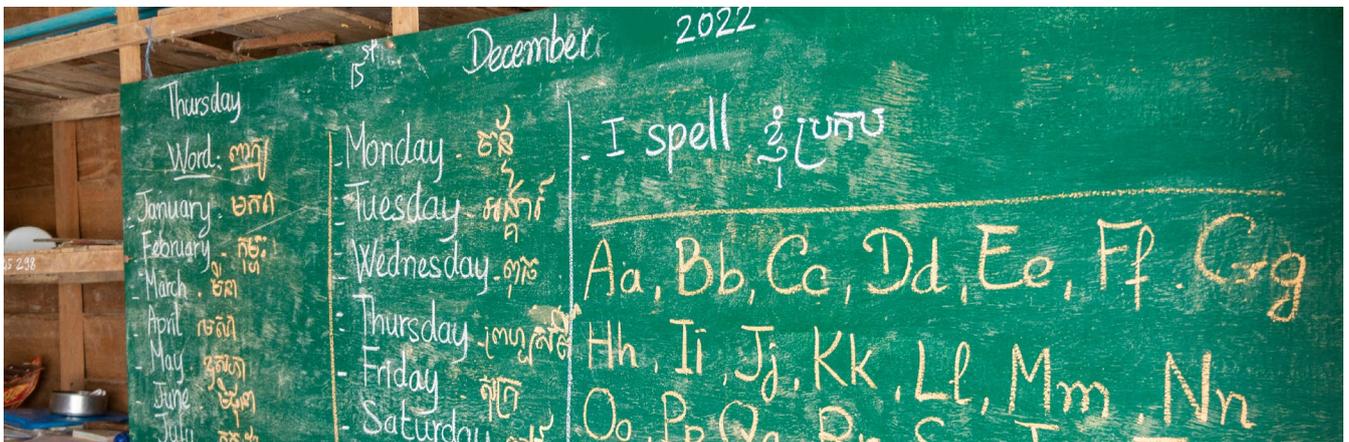
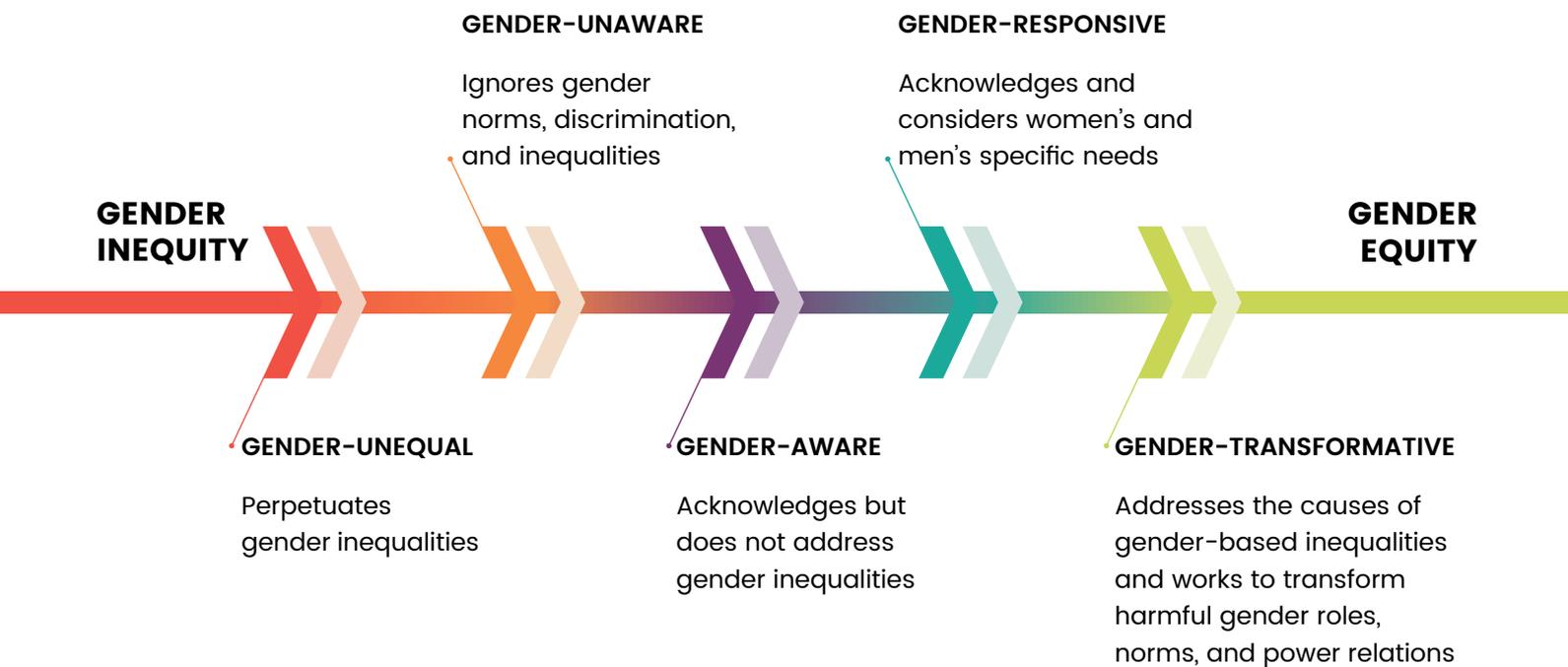
² MoEYS (2018)

³ CDRI has independently published their findings from this research as a Working Paper: Chea Phal, Tek Muiyting, and Nok Sorsesecha, 'Gender Gap Reversal in Learning and Gender Responsive Teaching in Cambodia'.



Gender-sensitive policies may ensure that boys and girls have equal access to schooling and ensure that both genders are represented in education, for example, in textbooks and learning materials. **Gender-responsive** approaches go further in taking active measures to reduce gender inequalities, addressing internalised bias due to gender, ensuring meaningful participation of all children, and considering the specific needs that girls and boys may each have to ensure equal opportunities for learning and leadership. Gender-responsive pedagogies and practices lead to **gender-transformative** environments, which actively combat and correct gender-based inequalities and power imbalances, and reimagine gender roles to allow both girls and boys to pursue the personal and professional lives that they value. Figure 1 illustrates how these terms fall on a continuum of moving from gender inequality to gender equity.

FIG 1⁴: Continuum from gender inequity to gender equity



⁴ Figure adapted from INEE, 2023, which draws from work by UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women.



Key findings

Is gender-responsiveness evident in policy?

Cambodia has integrated a focus on gender across its policy for more than two decades, taking particular action in response to the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000. National strategy frameworks, including the current Rectangular Strategy, identify gender considerations in improving human resource management throughout the country. Mid-term policies, such as the Neary Rattanak V Strategic Plan (2019–2023)⁵, promote gender equality and monitor implementation of measures for gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment.

Within the education sector, several policies, including the Child Friendly School (CFS) policy⁶ and the MoEYS’s Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan (2021–2025), have been influential in improving girls’ enrolment and learning outcomes. Based on the UNICEF framework⁷, CFSs ensure access for all, including the most vulnerable, and provide an effective, participatory learning environment in addition to attention to health, safety and protection. Each Cambodian CFS has a girl’s counsellor and gender is a focus across school design, classroom environments, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) facilities, extra-curricular activities, and learning approaches. Likewise, the Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan calls for gender-equal, equitable learning environments and increased female participation in education services. Key strategies include establishing gender-sensitive school environments, working to raise public awareness, investing in capacity development and monitoring, integrating gender issues into teaching and learning processes, promoting gender-responsive activities, and strengthening partnerships among all stakeholders.



Is gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) being implemented in education programmes and practices?

Our desk review indicates a clear policy architecture to ensure gender-equal educational environments. Our second data stream, key informant interviews, provides understanding on how those policies are being carried out – and whether practices are moving from simply being gender-sensitive to becoming gender-responsive.

First, informants reported on the preparation that teachers receive before entering the classroom. For **pre-service teacher training (PRESET)**, 90 hours of the 1600-hour programme are dedicated to units on CFS, inclusive education, children’s rights, human rights, women’s rights and gender knowledge. Learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) is a key focus: a learner-centred teaching approach has been promoted since the 1990s, and the 2007 CFS policy mandated that LCP be used to ensure that classrooms meet the diverse needs of students, including girls. In the policy, LCP is meant to encourage active participation of learners and develop their critical and creative thinking. Lesson plans issued by the MoEYS call for teachers to pay attention to all learners and to be aware of their different needs; they are to ensure that all children are involved in the learning process. Suggestions for activities do not specify roles for boys and girls. But gender, as a form of ‘differentness’, is not specifically referenced. Further, informants noted that LCP implementation appears inconsistent, a trend noted in other contexts worldwide⁸, and despite the training received, classroom realities and teachers’ understandings of LCP have inhibited implementation.

⁵ MoWA (2019)
⁶ MoEYS (2019)

⁷ UNICEF (2006)
⁸ See Bremner et al. (2022)



For **in-service teacher training (INSET)**, there is less standardisation and organisation, as there is no set INSET requirement, and most programmes are donor-driven and ad hoc. Teachers who completed pre-service before gender was mainstreamed across education may have difficulty understanding and implementing gender-responsive pedagogies. Informants reported on a particular donor-funded project that has seen significant gains in improving teachers' understanding and implement of GRP: VVOB's Teaching for Improved Gender Equality and Responsiveness (TIGER), which ran from October 2017 to December 2020.

The TIGER project aimed to improve school leaders' and teachers' knowledge and skills for GRP. An Action Guide was developed to provide relevant ideas, tools, and information to assist schools' teaching practices and leadership in a gender-responsive manner. Training, individual coaching, and peer discussions introduced pre-service and in-service teachers to GRP. They were provided with gender-responsive lesson plans and other learning materials and training in language use and classroom management. By the end of the project, 40 primary and lower secondary schools and one teacher training college in Battambang province had undergone this extensive GRP training. Impact evaluations⁹ demonstrated that teachers improved their knowledge and were involved in fewer instances of emotional and physical abuse of students; however, the project has not been scaled up or formalised into national teacher training and development.

Finally, informant feedback demonstrates that at district level, aspects of gender-responsiveness have been integrated into **school monitoring procedures**, where it functions as one of six dimensions being assessed. Evaluators are to look for evidence of ten different indicators which signify equitable education and equal opportunities for girls and female staff, specifying whether these practices 'exist', 'do not exist', or 'are not practiced', and marking them from 'excellent' to 'not good'. The form is well designed and presents evaluators with distinct, concrete, observable indicators that link back to three different outcomes to delineate gender-responsiveness. Evaluators use this checklist to feed back to school leaders, and the school inspection scores provide an overall picture of gender-responsiveness within a district.

When we examined documentation on the processes and programmes emanating from these policies, we found evidence of procedures and practices that fall within the gender continuum, as represented below:

	Learner-centred but gender-unaware	Gender-aware	Gender-sensitive	Gender-responsive
School monitoring procedures	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines
National PRESET curriculum	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines
INSET: national offerings	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines
TIGER project	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines
National pedagogy: lesson plans	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines	Diagonal lines

⁹ Cabus et. al. (2019)



Is gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) practiced in Cambodia?

Overall, we found that there is a mixed picture of how gender-responsiveness is understood and implemented in Cambodia. It is referenced in official documentation – as with the monitoring procedures – but in other cases, such as the 2007 CFS policy, it is referenced but not defined. Only two of our 36 informants were familiar with gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP), and this was due to their participation in the VVOB TIGER programme. Other informants provided background on how attention to gender is moving away from ‘sensitivity’ and towards action. So, while the term ‘GRP’ may not be well known, some aspects of it appear to be in effect. Here, using aspects of classroom GRP suggested in the influential GRP handbook published by the Forum for African Women Educationalists¹⁰, we highlight some of the practices our informants indicated.

Classroom management – Informants commented that classrooms should involve a balance of participation between boys and girls, and there should be equal opportunities for leadership, for example in group activities. Teacher informants noted that in the past, class presidents were nearly always boys, but more girls are now willing to take on the responsibility. Classroom chores used to also fall along gendered lines, with boys taking care of trash and plants, and girls cleaning toilets, but now those tasks are shared.

Classroom organisation – Without strict Ministry guidelines on classroom set-up, teachers have a say over seating arrangements and classroom decorations. Traditional schooling norms have seen boys and girls divided and sitting on opposite sides of the room, and informants noted that seating arrangements still vary according to teacher preference. Others felt that gender mixing was incompatible with cultural norms and would raise concern among parents, especially the parents of girls. Informants also repeatedly reported changes in classroom decorations: as teachers have become more aware of gender stereotypes, they have ensured that posters and images represent both genders. But there is still room for improvement: one informant noted the inclusion gendered slogans like “*good children listen to the mother, outstanding students listen to the teacher*” [which] place parenting duties on women and mothers.’

“Before, girls were scared and less opinionated. After we mingle them with boys, they are brave and express their ideas more. Girls have become more confident nowadays.”

– Teacher informant, commenting on the success of the VVOB TIGER project

Language use – MoEYS informants noted that attention to language use has long been integrated into the teaching curriculum, but others admitted that practices would still vary between teachers. Some had observed teachers using inappropriate language that constituted emotional abuse, a trend also noted in a VVOB study¹¹. MoEYS officials noted that they had witnessed teachers blaming students for mistakes because of their genders, saying ‘how come you, as a boy, cannot do it?’ or ‘because you are a girl, you cannot go anyplace far like the others.’ Informants agreed that improvement was needed, and teachers, especially from the older generation, needed better training to understand how their language could adversely impact students’ mental health – and reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.

Teaching and learning materials – Informants agreed that materials for classrooms had been updated and showed fair representation of the sexes, helping both boys and girls to see the many possibilities available to them. In addition to ensuring that teaching and learning materials are gender balanced, the MoEYS also operates a gender committee that approves materials ahead of publication, and ensures that images show not only a mix of genders but also people of different abilities.

¹⁰ FAWE (2020)
¹¹ Cabus et al. (2019)



School-related gender-based violence – Violence in Cambodian schools includes instances of emotional abuse (as with the use of language noted earlier), physical violence, and sexual abuse. Historically, physical or humiliating punishments were used to discipline learners. One informant noted that a teacher from her school used physical violence against a student but regretted that behaviour after learning about gender-based violence in a school training. VVOB¹² found that all three forms of violence still occur in Cambodian schools, and emotional abuse is the most common.



Conclusions

Findings from this first phase of the study indicate that progress has been made in moving from gender-sensitive to gender-responsive approaches, but more work remains. Policy demonstrates a clear stance on the equality of boys and girls, but there is further work to be done in moving practices beyond simply ensuring parity and instead addressing underlying bias. GRP-focused interventions like TIGER have been trialled and evidence demonstrates their success in improving classroom practice and reducing violence, but it is up to the MoEYS to decide whether to scale up this practice, particularly through the PRESET and INSET training curriculum.

Next steps for research

The next stage of this research will be important in understanding the extent to which GRP can create an inclusive classroom to attend to the specific learning needs of both boys and girls. EDT and CDRI have developed a research project which will look in more detail at the gendered experience of teaching and learning in Cambodia. Mixed-methods data collection in eight schools in Battambang province will explore teacher mindsets around gender, understanding and engagement with gendered challenges in learning, as well as the support and professional development teachers have accessed. The research will also document gender-responsive practices through classroom observation and exploring students' experiences.

Lessons for policymakers

The following lessons draw on the data from this phase of the study and EDT's wider work on gender equality and girls' education¹³, including addressing harmful attitudes towards gender, ensuring a supportive policy environment for gender equality, quality pedagogy, and ensuring inclusion for all.

- » As seen in Cambodia, gender transformations require alignment between policy and practice, ensuring that different actors, including government departments and donor partners working in education, work towards a common, agreed-upon goal. Here, donor priorities were well aligned with policy directives.
- » Key terms – especially 'gender-responsive' – need to be clearly defined and standardised across policy language and programming. A national framework is needed to guide and measure the progress of gender transformation.
- » Improved teacher training for GRP is a pressing need for the Cambodian context. A more systematic approach to teacher training and professional development, which builds on the successes of donor-funded programmes like TIGER, can be rolled out to ensure that all teachers are gender-aware and able to reflect on and change their practice.
- » Further, while there are modules on gender sensitivity in pre-service teacher training, a focus on GRP has not yet been integrated. Such a focus is needed to ensure that teachers undergo reflection on their own biases and enter the classroom able to address gender imbalances.
- » Teachers are only one piece of the puzzle: school leaders, middle-tier officials, and ministry-level officials also need support in understanding and implementing GRP to be able to support classroom- and school-level efforts.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Education Development Trust. (2023). *Girls' education*. Education Development Trust. [Available online: <https://www.edt.org/girlseducation> - accessed January 2024].



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