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Gender Equality in Access to Formal Secondary Education in Cambodia

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Acronyms

AY	Academic Year
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
ESP	The Education Strategic Plan
FSE	Formal Secondary Education
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
LSE	Lower Secondary Education
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NGS	New Generation School
NSDP	National Strategic Development Plan
OOSA	Out-of-School Adolescent
OOSC	Out-of-School Children
PE	Primary education
SDG4	Sustainable Development Goal 4

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1. Introduction

Investmentⁱ in education is one of the requirements to reach sustainable development and economic growth in Cambodia [1, p.12]. Since 2003, the Cambodian Government has been involved in the UNESCO agenda “Education For all” by 2015 [2, p.43]; equally important, the Government is working to fully achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (hereinafter “SDG4”ⁱⁱ), which states that equal access to education is a requirement [3, p.43]. At the same time, education is the most powerful way to achieve gender equality, which will enable women and girls to fully participate in society. Certainly, gender equality is closely linked to the right to education for all. In 2014, among ASEAN Member States with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and Republic of Korea, (called “ASEAN +6”ⁱⁱⁱ), the quality level of national education systems varies considerably from one country to countryⁱⁱⁱ [4, p.1].

Cambodia had been affected by civil war for decades. Most children and youth were not able to have access to education [5, pp.2-7]. According to data from the World Bank, the percentage of out-of-school adolescents (hereinafter “OOSAs”) at secondary school-age was 84.12 percent in 1998 (female adolescents: 88.99 percent, male adolescents: 80.31 percent) [6].

Girls and women and boys and men have equal access to education^{iv}, and access to lower secondary education (hereinafter “LSE”) is compulsory according to the legislation of Cambodia [7, p.12]. However, some reports from civil society and development partners state that gender equality in access to education still faces some problems [2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14].

1.1. Research problem

To ensure access to formal secondary education (hereinafter “FSE”) and gender equality with a view of achieving SDG4, the Government has been adopting a cooperative approach with development partners [1, p.12, 15, p.10]. While the number of children enrolled in primary education (hereinafter “PE”) was high in academic year (hereinafter “AY”) 2014-2015, attendance

ⁱ See Appendix 2, Table 4 about the Cambodian Government invests on education.

ⁱⁱ SDG4 focusing on quality of education is one of 17 goals of the Sustainable Development Goals which is initiated by United Nations. It aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030.

See <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/quick-guide-education-indicators-sdg4-2018-en.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ According to UNESCO research in 2014 shows that Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore have a high-performing education system; while, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar need considerable improvement.

^{iv} See Appendix 1 about the terminology of the key words.

until the end of secondary education was low due to dropouts[8]. As a result, significant challenges remain for the FSE, including low student enrollment, dropout rates and out-of-school children and youth^v (hereinafter "OOSC") due to barriers related to capacity, access, finance, economic difficulties, as well as those related to education and cultural norms.

This research aims to explore in depth the current situation of gender equality in access to FSE in Cambodia and identify the main challenges that the Cambodian Government faces in order to present policy options to overcome them.

1.2. Research questions

To achieve this objective, this paper will address five research questions, as follows:

- (i) What is the current situation of gender equality in accessing FSE in Cambodia?
- (ii) What are the main challenges in this regard?
- (iii) What are the Cambodian legal framework and policies to promote gender equality in FSE in Cambodia?
- (iv) What are the main international partners' initiatives to support gender equality in FSE in Cambodia?
- (v) What are the best practices or policy options to address the issues that have not yet been resolved?

1.3. Research methodology

It should be noted that, as agreed with the client, this research is conducted based on secondary data and information available online. It examines not only the existing documents from government bodies (10 documents) but also reports from international organizations (20 reports), non-government organizations (13 reports), academic articles (six articles), and blogs (13 links).

^v See Appendix 3, Figure 2.

2. Current situation regarding formal secondary education

FSE is considered one of the most important means for promoting access to appropriate education levels and life skills [9, p.17]. Furthermore, student progress is important in order to follow the process of enrolment, increases or decreases in the number of out-of-school young people, the transition rate from PE to LSE, and to ensure that children and youth have equal access to quality education[9].

In the last decades, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (hereinafter “MoEYS”) has strived to increase the number of students enrolled at all levels of education to comply with the Millennium Development Goals (hereinafter “MDGs”) and achieve the SDG4 [1, p.30], which has allowed for a gradual improvement in this overall number [6], and the percentage of OOSAs at secondary school-age. As a result, the latter has decreased significantly to 13.29 percent; 14.12 percent of women and 12.48 percent of men, in 2015 from over 84 percent; 88.99 percent of out-of-school women and 80.31 percent of out-of-school men, in 1998 [6] (see Appendix 3, Figure 1).

2.1. Transition rate to lower secondary education

Transition rate to LSE is the rate of children who have passed the final grade of PE and are preparing to enroll into LSE at grade 7. According to MoEYS, this transition rate has continuously increased year by year since 2010 [16, p.42]. In the AY 2010-2011, the total transition rate of students was 79.3 percent, and 80.6 percent of female students registered in PE passed to the LSE in the same year. There is an increase of these rates in year to year: in AY 2015-2016, the total transition rate of students was 85.5 percent, and the rate of female students registered in PE passed to the LSE was 88.3 percent [17, p.40]. While the transition rate for both sexes is increasing, the transition rate remains slightly higher for female students than for male students (see Appendix 3, Figure 3).

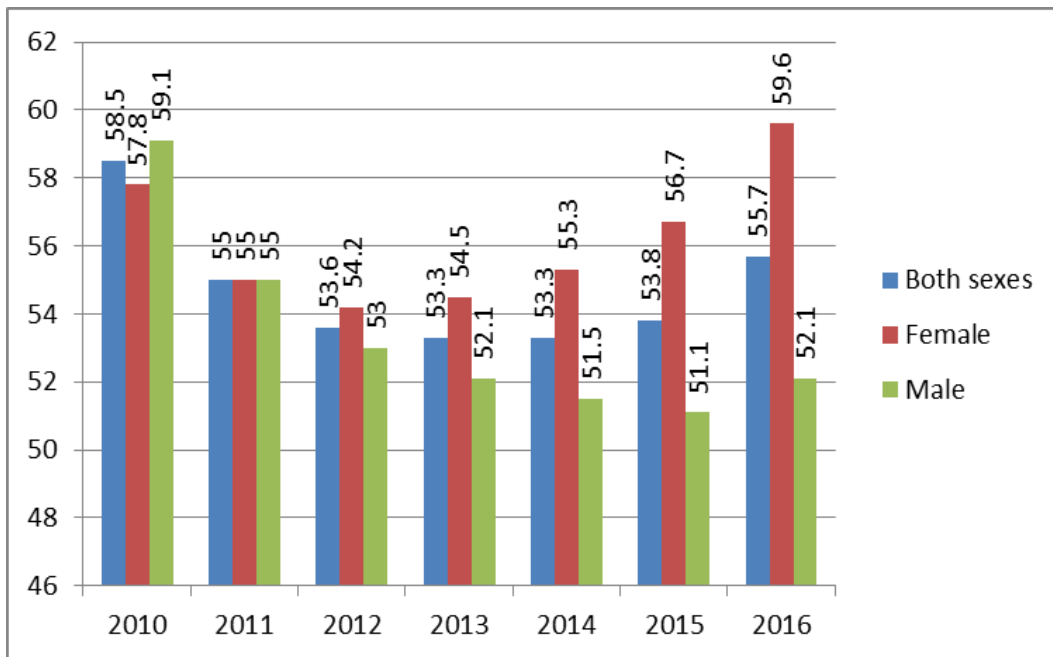
2.2. New student intake in lower secondary school-age

According to MoEYS, the total number of new students in LSE in the in-take for AY 2010-2011 was 560,868; 48 percent of whom were girls. Student enrolment increased until 2016-2017 with a change in the ratio of gender aggregate as the percentage of male students (48 percent) became lower than that of female students (52 percent) [18, pp.20-21] (see the Appendix 3, Figure 4).

2.3. Gross enrolment ratio in lower secondary education

Gross Enrolment Ratio (hereinafter “GER) refers to the number of students who have enrolled in particular levels of education, unrelatedly the school-age groups^{vi} in percentage [18, pp.41-42]. From AY 2010-2017, GERs in LSE do not change significantly year to year, although the transition rates are definitely high. In AY 2010-2011, the transition rate to LSE was 79.3 percent, although total GER was only 58.5 percent (GER of female students: 57.8 percent, GER of male: 59.1 percent). In AY 2016-2017, total GER in LSE was 55.7 percent (GER of female students: 59.6 percent, GER of male: 52.1 percent), while the transition rate to LSE was 85.5 percent. The rate of transition to LSE therefore increased, meanwhile the GER gross enrolment has remained more or less the same from one year to the next (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Gross enrolment ratio of students in lower secondary education



Source: Education statistic and indicators, MoEYS

GER in LSE was low year to year due to students who have passed the final grade of PE, repetition in LSE, and OOSAs who do not enroll to LSE in particular years. Just to have some comparative information: Malaysian GER was 88.69% in 2016 and Thai GER was 121%4 in 2015 [19, 20].

^{vi} The school age is the age range of children normally attending school, if the children began to attend school at the age set by law and they did not repeat before.
See: <http://www.yourdictionary.com/school-age> and <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/school+age>

2.4.School dropout rates in lower secondary education

A significant number of students, both girls and boys, are still leaving school before completing their academic term for several reasons. In Cambodia, the school dropout rate continues to be high. In AY 2010-2011, the dropout rate of pupils in the whole country was 21.7 percent of the total number of students, both boys and girls. The dropout rate for female students was 21.9 percent, while the rate for male students was 21.6 percent [16, p.47]. In AY 2015-2016, the school dropout rate remained high at 17 percent of all students, 15.5 percent for females and 18.5 for males. see Appendix 3, Figure 6) [17, p.46]. As a result, the number of girls dropping out of school has decreased.

Nonetheless, the dropout rate remains high compared to other countries in the region, such as Thailand (9.03 percent in 2014) [21] and Malaysia (6.76 percent in 2015) [22].

Student progress is a specific indicator of the challenges that remain to be overcome. According to MoEYS, the challenges noted above include the fact that many girls and boys do not have access to FSE or that young students, girls and boys, still drop out of school before completing FSE. The Government has worked to reduce the dropout rate in lower secondary education from 20 percent in AY 2012-2013 to 3 percent in AY 2016-2017 [1, p.31], and has set policies and strategies to address all these issues, as discussed in the following section. As indicated above, however, the school dropout rate remained at very high levels in AY 2015-2016. No figures are currently available for this rate in AY 2016-2017.

3. Existing measures to address issues on gender equality in accessing formal secondary education

The Government has adopted a cooperative approach with development partners such as international organizations, non-government organizations, and communities [1, pp.14,34]. While the Government is responsible for laws, regulations and policies that promote equal opportunities in education, parents, students and communities also have roles to play in ensuring accessibility and attendance [23, p.47].

3.1. Stakeholders' initiatives for gender equality in accessing formal secondary education

3.1.1. Activities of students, parents and teachers to promote accessibility

The Government, students, parents, and teachers are together responsible for promoting access to education [24]. They all play an important role to encourage and support in accessing and staying in school [25]. In previous decades, many teachers did not value communication between home and school, and they considered parental interaction as the worst part of their job [26]. Meanwhile, according to some researches, parents' role is significant in supporting their children, both girls and boys, in accessing secondary education [2, p.47]. On the other hand, according to a number of studies, many parents still think that some teachers lack discipline and professionalism, and the curricula lack updated and relevant content for students [2, p.47]. According to United Kingdom (UK) report in 2005, parents are responsible to encourage girls in completing their basic education through the upper secondary education [27, p.6].

3.1.2. Activities of non-governmental organizations involved in promoting accessibility

Civil society is a part of country development cooperation. For example, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have contributed to the education sector in Cambodia. According to the Council for the Development of Cambodia, in 2017, the NGO Education Partnership represented 142 members, including 92 local NGOs and 50 international NGOs [28, pp.134-148]. They contribute to training, resources and financial support. Many NGOs are working on the secondary education level, however, only few of them provide gender neutral environment. [28, pp.134-148].

3.1.3. Activities of international organizations involved in promoting accessibility

Since 2003, MoEYS has been involved in the inclusive platform of UNESCO "Education For All", ensuring that all children and youth have equal access to education by 2015 [2, p.43]. MoEYS adopted a development cooperation approach with development partners under the Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 (hereinafter "ESP 2014-2018") principle called "*Mobilize the involvement of all stakeholders and development partners*" [28, p.92]. For instance, EU/SIDA/UNICEF have donated almost 24 million US dollars to develop education staff capacity and also gender equity and diversity in education technical and organizational leadership (2018-2021), UNESCO donated

250,000 US dollars to support gender-responsive implementation from 2016-2018, and VVOB^{vii} donated nearly four million US dollars in 2017 to improve quality of education including a gender-sensitive environment [28, pp.134-148].

3.2. International and domestic law

This section provides an overview of international treaties, Cambodian domestic legislation, government regulations and policies concerning the fundamental right to education which shall be free and compulsory [10, p.19].

3.2.1. International treaties ratified by Cambodia and other international instruments related to access to education

Cambodia has ratified two international treaties related to gender equality in education: the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women (hereinafter “CEDAW”) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereinafter “ICESCR”) [29]. Educational rights have been incorporated into national law, which outlines what, how and when citizens should exercise their rights to education [4, p.20]. However, Cambodia has not yet ratified the Convention against Discrimination in Education of 1960 [23, p.57].

3.2.1.1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979

(CEDAW): Cambodia became a State Party to CEDAW on 15 October 1992 [29]. This convention requires State Parties to eliminate all gender stereotyping, bias and inequitable practices (art. 5) and provides fundamental principles of gender equality in education, a clear definition of discrimination against women (art. 1) as well as procedures the States shall take to eliminate discrimination (arts. 2 and 3). CEDAW calls on states to draft and implement gender equality policies and laws (art. 7). Article 10 sets out the obligations of the States including equality of access and quality of education, reduction of female dropout rates, programs for women and girls who leave school early and access to health information education and household development. Article 16 disallows child marriages as it causes school dropout or less opportunity to access to secondary education [23, p.57].

^{vii} VVOB (*Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance*) is a non-profit organization and was founded in 1982. Commissioned by the Flemish and Belgian governments they contribute to the quality of education in developing countries. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VVOB> (retrieved on 19 November 2018).

3.2.1.2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 (ICESCR): Cambodia ratified the ICESCR on 26 May 1992 [30]. This treaty is considered to be the foundation of the legal right to education which is stated in articles 13^{viii} and 14^{ix}. Regarding the guarantee of education for all without discrimination as laid out in Article 13; the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)^x sets out the State's practices necessary to eliminate discrimination, all of which require close monitoring and disaggregated data to identify patterns of discrimination [23, p.57].

3.2.2. Cambodian domestic law related to access to education

The Education Law was enacted in 2007 and intends to set national measures and criteria for creating a comprehensive and uniform education system to ensure the principle of rights and freedom of education in conformity with the Constitution [31].

3.2.2.1. Constitutional framework regarding access to education: The Cambodian Constitution adopted in 1993 [32] contains a number of articles regarding education, which calls for the State to assure the principles of educational freedom and rights and to launch the standard system with quality of education for all citizens with equal opportunities for access to education at all levels (art. 66). The State shall provide for citizens' education with free primary until secondary education for at least nine years (art.68) [33].

^{viii} Article 13 provides that "1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. 2. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of this right: (...) (b) Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education (...)"

^{ix} Article 14 states that "Each State Party to the present Covenant which, at the time of becoming a Party, has not been able to secure in its metropolitan territory or other territories under its jurisdiction compulsory primary education, free of charge, undertakes, within two years, to work out and adopt a detailed plan of action for the progressive implementation, within a reasonable number of years, to be fixed in the plan, of the principle of compulsory education free of charge for all".

^x The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) was established under ECOSOC Resolution 1985/17 of 28 May 1985 to carry out the monitoring functions assigned to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in Part IV of the Covenant. This committee, body of 18 independent experts, monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by its States parties.

See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cescr/pages/cescrindex.aspx>

3.2.2.2. Legal and regulatory framework

3.2.2.2.1. List of educational rights: As provided by the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action [34], the rights-based approach that ensures girls and boys and men and women have equal access to education terms and complete them, is pursued by the Cambodian Education Law of 2007, especially in its chapter VII [7] (see Appendix 2, Table 5).

3.2.2.2.2. Complaints' rights and mechanism: In case students or their parents suffer from any unusual activities in education, they have the right to request, protest, complain, and find a solution (art. 40) [7].

3.3. Government policies

The Cambodian Government has adopted policies and strategies with key features for developing human resource capacity through the national development plan which is guided by specific purpose or vision [28]. It also spent about 2 percent of country's Growth Domestic Product (hereinafter "GDP") in 2014 on education, according to World Bank (see Appendix 2, Table 3).

3.3.1. National strategies

3.3.1.1. National Strategic Development Plan 2014-2018: The National Strategic Development Plan 2014-2018 (NSDP) provides the statement that human resource development will target capacity building without gender discrimination. In addition, the Government has shown its commitment to increase access to equitable education by promoting the construction of primary schools in remote villages, and at least one secondary school in each commune [35, p.174].

3.3.1.2. Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018: ESP 2014-2018, prepared by the MoEYS, extended access to quality education, and to secondary and post-secondary education [1, p.14]. ESP 2014-2018 aims to ensure equitable access for all to education services, to enhance quality and relevance of learning, and to ensure effective leadership and management of education staff at all levels [1, p.59]. MoEYS is responsible for expanding secondary education and focusing on reducing gender gaps and ensuring the completion of secondary education by increasing the number of scholarships for students from poor families, especially girls, and expanding the number of secondary schools, especially, ensuring 12 years education completion with quality for youth [1, p.13].

3.3.1.3. New generation school: The New Generation School^{xi} (hereinafter “NGS”) program was inaugurated in 2014 by MoEYS, and it is opened for selected students now [36]. This program aims to improve quality of education throughout the entire education system. NGS program policy has provided a new standard of education in the public schools to prepare Cambodian youth for the 21st Century. Moreover, the NGS program will focus on Science and Technology instruction as central themes, with more hours of instruction for these themes (chemistry, physics, biology, and information technology) [37, pp.2,4]. The teachers will be selected competitively to ensure high professional standards [37, p.2]. Relating to the principle of Youth Empowerment, MoEYS has adopted the National Youth Development Policy which will play a key role in the NGS model. NGS policy provides new student services including student counseling service [37, p.4].

3.3.2. Human resource development

The Government’s strategy, the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV 2018, is still in need of qualified human resources with knowledge, skills and professionalism to achieve sustainable development and strong economic growth^{xii}. MoEYS will improve teaching capacity, improve school management, update curricula, create a well-developed learning environment, and eliminate gender disparity in education [3, pp.20-26].

3.3.2.1. Strengthening education quality: The Government plans to develop capacity of teachers and education staff, to enhance quality of education, to construct more schools, at least one secondary school in each commune^{xiii}, to provide scholarships to poor students, and prevent school dropout for all children and youth to have equal access to education. It also aims to improve capacity of youth, with at least one specialized skill for each youth [3, pp.20-21].

3.3.2.2. Technical training: In the perspective of one specialized skill for each youth, the Government plans to enhance technical skills training by establishing the National Fund for Skills Department, supplying various skills to meet the labor market, inserting vocational orientation in

^{xi} NGS will also provide new student services that will never see in normal public schools including: (i) 21st Century e-Library, (ii) Counseling Service, (iii) Subject Clubs, (iv) Life Skills Education, (v) Electronic Assessment, and (vi) Software-based Learning. This initiative is starting at Sisowath High School in Phnom Penh, based on a successful example piloted at the demonstration school in Kampong Cham province, and the project is funded directly by MoEYS with implementation by an NGO called “Kampuchean Action for Primary Education” (KAPE).

^{xii} According to the Rectangular Strategy phase VI of the Royal Government of Cambodia and the report of Asian Development Bank with International Labor Organization.

^{xiii} There are totally 1,646 communes in Cambodia in 2017.

the secondary education system and raising-awareness of the importance and the necessity of technical and vocational skill for building the future of youth [3, pp.22-23].

3.3.2.3. Public healthcare service and nutrition enhancement: To ensure good health among children and youth and improve students' school performance, the Government plans to enhance the quality effectiveness and equity of health service, to provide universal health coverage nationwide, to enhance nutrition, and to enhance health research development [3, pp.23-24]. According to USAID's report in 2014, about 40 percent of the 1.7 million children who were under 5 years of age were stunted. This malnutrition has caused children's poor academic performance, intellectual weaknesses, high risk of death, illness and infections, and delayed development [38, pp.1-7]. This lack of nutrition has led to school dropout among primary school children and also prevented them from accessing secondary education.

3.3.2.4. Strengthening gender equity: Cambodia ratified almost all human rights conventions. Currently, Cambodia follows the SDGs and converted some of them into national policies or national legislation. In fact, gender equality is one of 17 SDGs – it is SDG5 [39] – and the Cambodian Government has made the strengthening of gender equity as one of its strategic goals. The Government continues to mainstream gender in the development policies and plans in all sectors and at all levels through “*Neary Rattanak Strategic Plan*”^{xiv}. Nevertheless, Cambodia still faces some challenges including discrimination against women [3, pp.25-26], which will be presented in depth in the subsequent section 4.

4. Remaining challenges of gender equality in accessing formal secondary education

While enrolment of children in primary education is high, the number of pupils who attend and stay in school until the end of lower secondary education is low due to low enrolment and drop-out rates in secondary education [8]. That is why development partners and civil society state that access to FSE secondary education still faces significant barriers related to capacity, access, and financial constraints; economic and academic problems; cultural norms and social stereotypes; and problems related to early marriage, which have an impact on the drop-out of girls and boys.

^{xiv} *Neary Rattanak Strategic Plan* is the five-year strategy plan for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Woman in Cambodia.

4.1. Review of the remaining barriers of female/male students' access to formal secondary education

Although the World Bank has reported that the OOSA rate (both female and male) has decreased from over 84 percent in 1998 to 17 percent in 2015, the government still faces some issues related to access to secondary education. These issues are mainly due to the following reasons.

4.1.1. Parent unawareness of schooling and non-use of mother tongue in teaching

The impact of the civil war before 1998 left many parents in the 1990s uneducated, particularly parents who lived in the countryside [5, p.7]. In addition, illiterate parents would have had a bad school experience: they do not value school. Some parents therefore think that sending their children to school would be a waste of time and limit financial support for the family [40]. Another essential point is that the Cambodian population is mixture of Khmer ethnic origin and about 30 ethnic minority groups living in the highlands, including indigenous, Cham, Vietnamese and Chinese populations [28]. Children from these ethnic groups, especially indigenous people, have greater learning difficulties because they are learning in a language that is not their mother tongue [8].

4.1.2. Inaccessibility of schools due to distance and safety issues

The distance of school is another barrier for students and make it generally more difficult for girls to have access to education [12]. In urban areas many schools exist, while there are not enough in rural areas [12]. UNICEF Cambodia reports that the children living in the North-East of Cambodia are facing this problem [8]. For example, according to CARE^{xv}, some students have to walk more than 12 km from their houses to their schools in some remote areas of Ratanakiri province[41]. Furthermore, due to the long distance, some students have to walk for hours to reach their school[42]. Safety along the road is not completely assured for the students, especially for girls [12]. According to LICADHO report 2016, there are 282 cases of rape or attempted rape. The above-mentioned cases involved 292 victims, 217 of whom were children under the age of 18 [43].

^{xv} CARE Cambodia is an international development organization fighting global poverty with a special focus on working with women & girls to bring sustainable changes to their communities.

4.1.3. Family migration

According to UNICEF, Cambodia has experienced in 2017 increasing levels of domestic and international migration. Between 1998-2012, the number of residents in Phnom Penh has risen from 567,860 to 1,237,600 with an average annual growth rate of about 8 percent [44, p.3]. As for international migration, Cambodians also move to neighboring countries and some countries in East Asia and the Pacific [44, p.3]. Some parents take their children along while they migrate to other countries, some choose for their young children to stay behind, while children over 15 years old are more likely to move with their parents or other relatives. As the result, many children are forced to quit their schooling and move with their parents. Currently, there is very little data about child migration both at the domestic and international levels [44, p.3].

4.1.4. Poverty and family demand

Based on the report of the Asian Development Bank, 72 percent of Cambodians were nearly poor or poor in 2011 [45, p.4]. Children who are from better living standard families have more opportunity to access secondary education; in contrast, children who are from poor families struggle to access secondary education [13]. Moreover, children/adolescents from poor families seem to leave secondary school before completion in order to find a job to support their families, and the work burden is normally borne by girls [13]. According to the Voluntary Service Overseas^{xvi} (VSO) report in 2011, 52 percent of over 1.4 million Cambodian children aged 7-14 years old are economically active [11].

It should be added that although the 2007 Education Law declares that children have the right to quality education free of charge and to complete at least nine years of education as seen above^{xvii}, unofficial fees still exist in the schools [12].

^{xvi} Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is a federation of member organizations that all contribute volunteers and resources from Canada, India, Ireland, Kenya, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the UK to fight poverty in more than 40 developing countries. It is working on Education, Healthcare, and Food.

^{xvii} See more detail in the rights section 3.2.2.2.1.

4.2. Overview of issues influencing female/male student dropouts in formal secondary education

4.2.1. Lack of educational materials

Students in both urban and rural schools feel uncomfortable and have a higher rate of absenteeism in school due to insufficient educational materials including textbooks, library, laboratory, computer room etc. For instance, students have to share a textbook between three to five persons due to the scarcity of resources. On the other hand, some students from rich families are able to buy all textbooks from private libraries [46, p.12]. According to the Education Congress 2017, MoEYS is responsible for developing, printing, supplying, and delivering core textbooks for learning and teaching to nationwide schools. This strategy has been set up due to the lack of reading materials [47, p.25].

4.2.2. Lack of teacher motivation and limited capacity of teachers

While the Government focuses on the quality of the teacher, teacher motivation has been paid little attention. Teachers are a vital education resource, and teachers are playing a critical role in promoting a positive learning environment [48, p.1-10]. Some teachers who have low motivation are unwilling to participate in school activities, are often absent, and have little teaching creativity etc. [49]. According to the Cambodian education system (see Appendix 3, Figure 7), students who have only completed grade 9 or 12 can apply to be a primary teacher or lower secondary teacher [50]. For that reason, some teachers, mostly in the rural schools, do not perform well at transferring knowledge to young generations, and they just tend to complete classroom-hours because of school regulation [51, pp.344-348].

4.2.3. Inadequate classrooms and lack of proper infrastructure

Currently, students must deal with inadequate facilities and over-crowded classrooms [52]. According to MoEYS in AY 2016-2017, the average number of students in each classroom of lower secondary education was at least 45 students [18]. Moreover, the lack of proper infrastructure in schools is also an issue for girls who do not want to attend school [12]. School facilities can be inadequate and lack water, sanitation and hygiene. Older girls of primary and secondary school-age will miss a large part of school or are unlikely to continue to attend school after their period begins if sanitary facilities are poor or non-existent [12]. According to MoEYS, in 2017, 34.1 percent of schools in urban areas and 37.9 percent in rural areas have unclean toilets [18, p.32].

4.2.4. Cultural norms and gender-based violence in school

The Khmer traditional code of conduct (*Chbab Srey*) was an official part of the teaching curriculum until 2007 and some parts still remain today. Some parts of the *Chbab Srey* seem to value males more than females. For example, it states that wives must be respectful towards their husband, serve him well and nurture the relationship, and to not make any external or internal disputes. These statements affect gender equality in education [53]. In school, traditional gender norms have an impact on gender-based violence including sexualized bullying, sexual harassment and forced sexual activity, and male aggression [54]. Generally, existing gender-based violence in school leads female students having lower performance and self-esteem [55].

4.2.5. Early marriage issues

Many students leave school for marriage in northeast Cambodia. To illustrate this point, according to UNICEF, during the first 10 months of 2016 in Keh Chong Health Center in Borkeo district in Ratanakiri province, 22 percent of childbirth deliveries were from mothers between 13 and 18 years old. This is a sign of a continuing high rate of young pregnant women in this area. Moreover, UNICEF reported that in the whole country one in three women in the 15-19 age group who have never attended school have begun childbearing [56].

5. Lesson learned and policy option

5.1. Parent Engagement Program

A Parent Engagement Program is strongly suggested by experts [25]. Parents are recommended to participate in their children's learning progress by motivating their children to achieve education outcomes. Additionally, a Parent Engagement Program is a tool for parent/teacher to evaluate their child/student's performance and achievement. This program is designed for connecting home to school, communicating between parent and school, and making a close relationship among parent-child/student-teacher or home/school community. Singapore has successfully implemented such a program. This program is called in different ways [25] (see Appendix 2, Table 6).

5.2. Awareness-raising campaigns on gender equality in reading materials and teaching practices

UNICEF recommends that, in order to achieve greater gender equality in society, particularly in school, gender bias must be eliminated from textbooks and learning materials [57, p.2]. As a result of Cambodia's tradition and culture, some textbook illustrations show men as doctors, lawyers, engineers and managers and women as receptionists, weavers, housekeepers, farmers, and shop assistants [2, p.45]. In order to value girls and women through textbook and learning materials, the Vietnamese Government has established new gender-sensitive teacher-training modules for promoting gender balance in textbooks. It has also provided gender and children's rights training to teachers and education staff at all levels and also members of local parent-teacher associations[57, p.2].

6. Conclusion

The Cambodian Government wishes to transform its economy from lower-middle income to upper middle income by 2030, and to a developed country by 2050 [3, p.32]. Along the way to reach sustainable development and economic growth, the Cambodian Government is in need of qualified human resources, both men and women, with knowledge, skills, and professionalism. However, the Cambodian education system is still facing challenges in developing human resource for the domestic and ASEAN labor market. It is known that the Cambodian education system was completely destroyed due to decades of civil war. Since 1986, the Government had made a series of reforms^{xviii} to improve the amount of student enrolment and to promote quality of education at all levels.

Presently, the Government is involved with the support of UNESCO and other development partners to ensure that all children and youth have equal access to education at all levels, and at least complete secondary education. Cambodia is also implementing gender equality in education. Even though MoEYS is working to increase the level of student enrolment, to enhance the quality of education, and to eliminate gender disparity in education, challenges remain in the education system itself and in the education environment. Although the enrolment is remarkably high in primary education, it is still low in secondary education. Students still drop out of school for a variety of reasons.

^{xviii} See Appendix 2, Table 1.

The Government strives to solve the problems by adopting policies and cooperating with development partners but is still facing capacity, access, financial, economic and academic problems, as well as issues related to cultural norms, social protection and early marriage.

This paper has illustrated lessons learned from some ASEAN countries and policy options recommended by UN agencies to address these challenges, as requested by the client.

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Appendix 1: Terminology

Gender equality in education

Gender equality in education refers to girls/women and boys/men who have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities to access to quality of education at all levels. Equally importance, gender disparity should be eliminated in the education. [58]

Equal access to education

Equal access to education refers to the ability of all people to have equal opportunity to access quality of education at all levels, without discrimination against anyone or a particular group including social ranking, gender/sex, races, religion, political perspective or physical and mental disabilities.[59]

Formal secondary education

Formal secondary education refers to an education system which is excluded primary education and higher education. Furthermore, school-ages of students are between 12-17 years old [60] (See the Appendix 3, Figure 7).

School dropout

School dropout refers to students who leave education or training before terminating for any reason without transferring to any other school.[61]

Appendix 2: Tables

Table 1: Education system reforms in Cambodia

Periods	Formula	Duration of education at all levels		
		Primary education	Lower secondary education	Upper secondary education
1979-1986	4+3+3	4 years	3 years	3 years
1986-1996	5+3+3	5 years	3 years	3 years
1996-Present	6+3+3	6 years	3 years	3 years

Source: The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)

Table 2: Cambodian education system: Teacher Training Model

Current stated		
Graduation level	Level of teacher	Institutions
12+2/9+2	Pre-school	Pre-school Teacher Training Center
12+2/9+2	Primary school	Provincial Teacher Training Center
Bac II+2	Lower secondary school	Regional Teacher Training Center
Bachelor+1	Upper secondary school	National Institute of Education
Current addition		
Long term training		Teacher Training Center
Short term training		Teacher Training Center
On-site training		School

Source: The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)

Table 3: Government expenditures on Education

Years	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Expenditure on secondary education (% of government expenditure on education)	41.04	42.46	43.28	44.08	41.53	44.05
Government expenditure on education, total (% of government expenditure)	8.38	7.70	7.68	7.53	9.91	9.09
Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)	1.66	1.53	1.51	1.56	2.02	1.90

Source: World Bank Data[62]

Table 4: Public investment program 2013-2019 (in USD Thousands)

Year	Total No. of Assistance Project		On-going Projects				Projects being negotiated	
	Projects	Amount	Investment Project		Technical Assistance Project		Projects	Planned Budget
			Project	Amount	Project	Amount		
	Project	Amount	Project	Amount	Project	Amount	Projects	Planned Budget
2013-2015	41	231,833	1	1,190	22	141,972	18	88,671
2014-2016	29	266,571	2	21,500	14	116,792	13	128,278
2015-2017	27	198,292	5	49,570	13	98,109	9	50,619
2016-2018	27	186,291	7	57,975	13	37,969	7	90,369
2017-2019	27	208,481	14	157,055	7	5,540	6	45,885

Source: the education congress, MoEYS

Table 5: The rights to education in Cambodia

The rights to education in chapter VII of the 2007 Education Law			
N ^o	Articles	Titles	Descriptions
1.	Article 31	Right to access to education	Every citizen has the right to access qualitative education of at least 9 years in public schools free of charge. The Ministry in charge of education shall gradually prepare the policy and strategic plans to ensure the all citizens obtain qualitative education as stipulated by this law.
2.	Article 32	Right of enrolment for grade one of the general education program	Enrolment of the children for grade one of the formal general education program shall be set at an age of six years or at least 70 months on the date of the beginning of the school year.
3.	Article 35	Rights and Obligations of learners	<p>The learner's rights concerning education are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The right to free expression of academic views, - The right to freedom of study, - The right to access the quality of education, - The right to assemble as groups or clubs of the learners for educational purposes, - The right to examine and make own note about educations, - The right to participate actively and fully in order to develop educational standards at institutional and national levels, directly or through their representatives, - The right to be respected and paid attention on human rights, especially the right to dignity, the right to be free from any form of torture or from physical and mental punishment. <p>A learner shall have the following obligations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respect regulations of the educational

			<p>institutions, the gender equity values by exercising their rights with the spirit of responsibility and the respect for other person's rights,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To make their best efforts to learn in order to develop their knowledge, skills, capacity, mentality and dignity.
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Source: The 2007 Education Law: Royal Government of Cambodia[7]

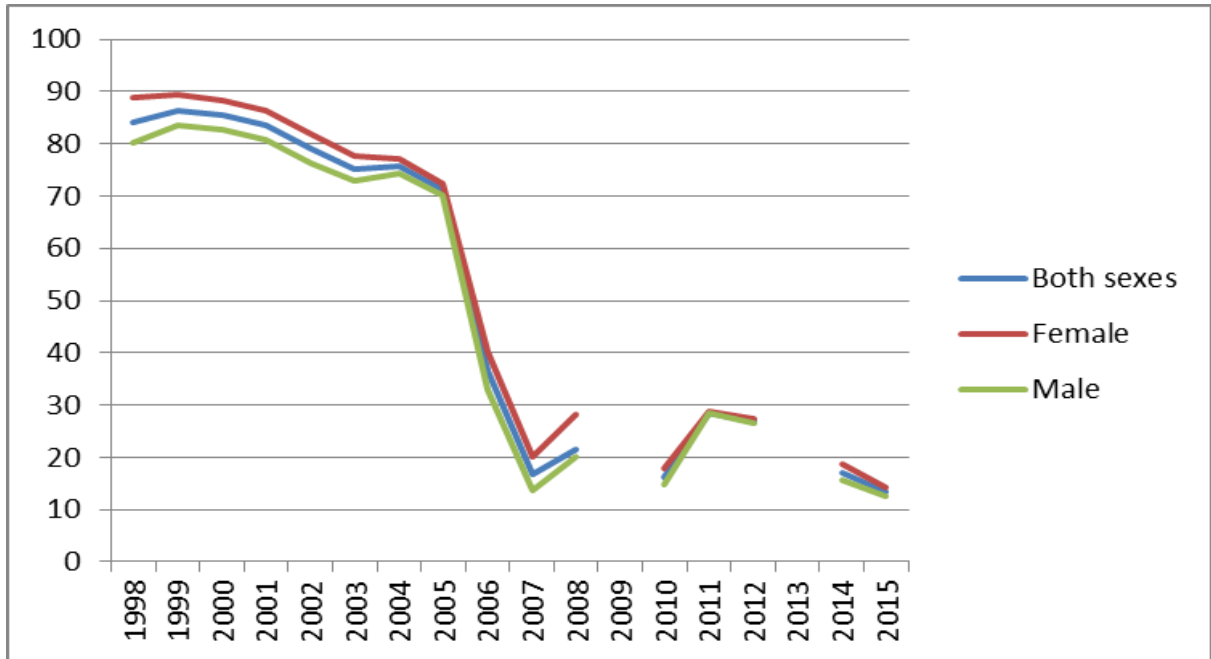
Table 6: Rationales of Parent Engagement Program

Government perspectives	School perspectives	Parent perspectives
Democracy/consumer choice		Competition for best places
Accountability/ decentralization		Communication
Raise standards	Support holistic education	Improve child's achievement Influence on values
Resource mobilization	Resource mobilization	Financial support
Equity/social problems	Equity/social problems	Support from school
Image communication	Image communication	
<p>The parent engagement program is called different ways: Singapore "School-Home partnership", Hong Kong in 1993 "Home-School Cooperation", Japan "Monsters Parents", South Korea in 1995 "The School Governing Committee" interrelation with "The Parents Association", Australia in 2014 "The Australia Parents Council", Canada in 2010 "Parent Involvement Committee", European Union in 2014 "European Parents' Association".</p>		

Source: National Institute of Education, Singapore

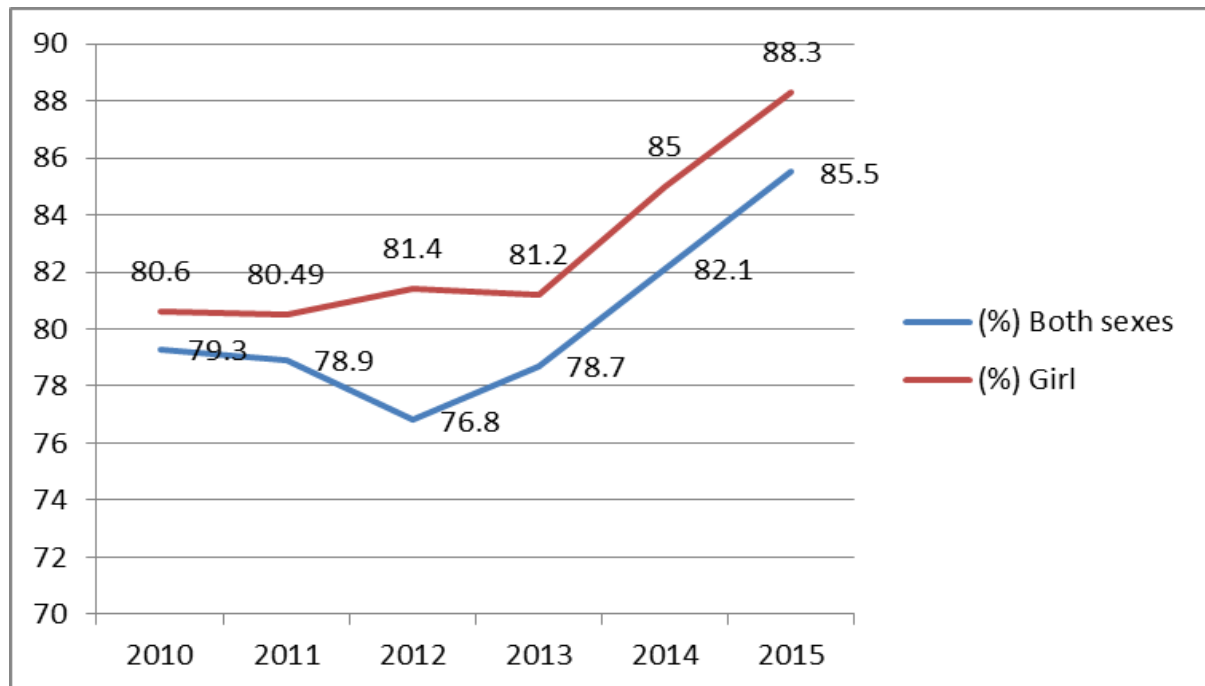
Appendix 3: Figures

Figure 2: Adolescents out of lower secondary school-age 1998-2015



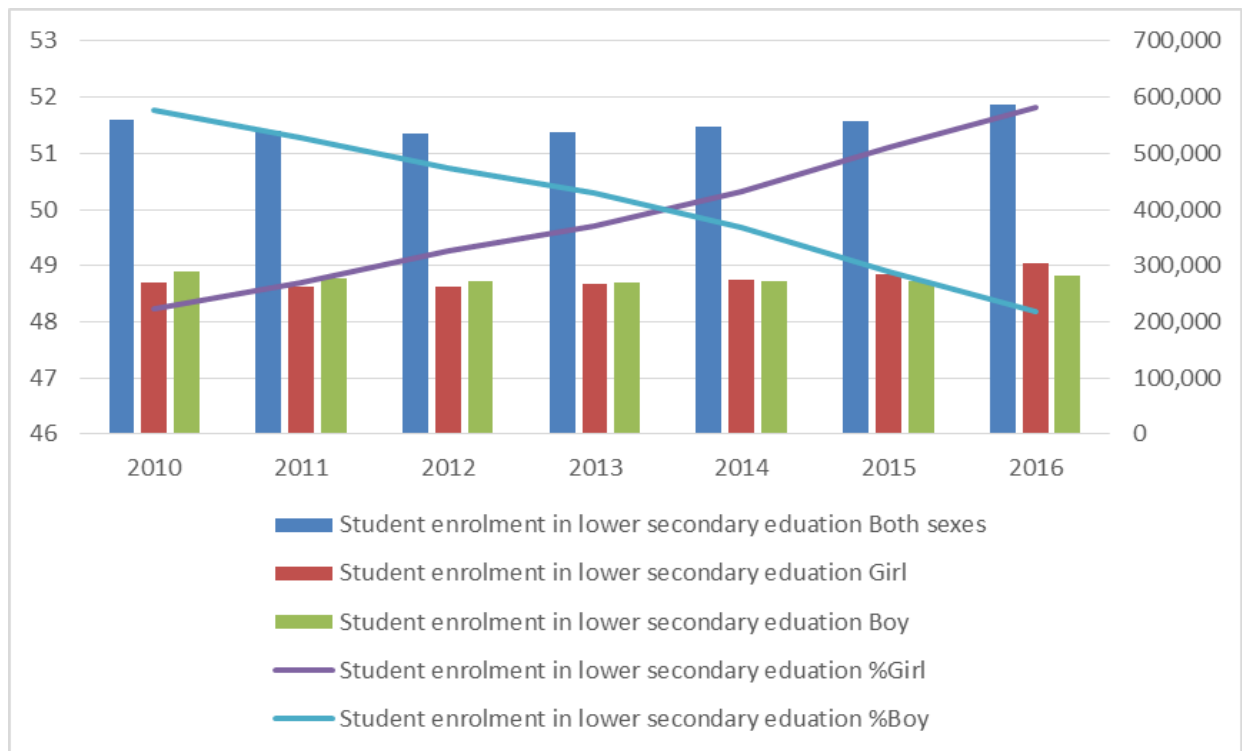
Source: World Bank data

Figure 3: Transition rate to lower secondary education



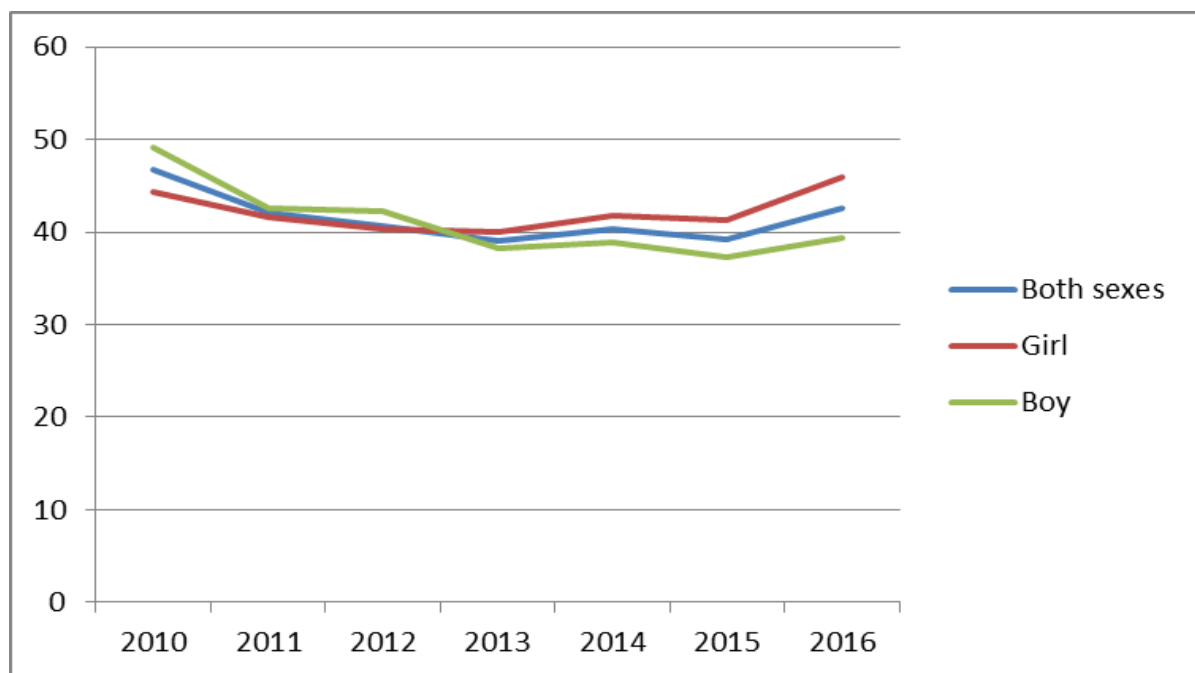
Source: Education Statistics and Indicators, MoEYS

Figure 4: Number of new intake of students in lower secondary school-age and compare both sexes by percent



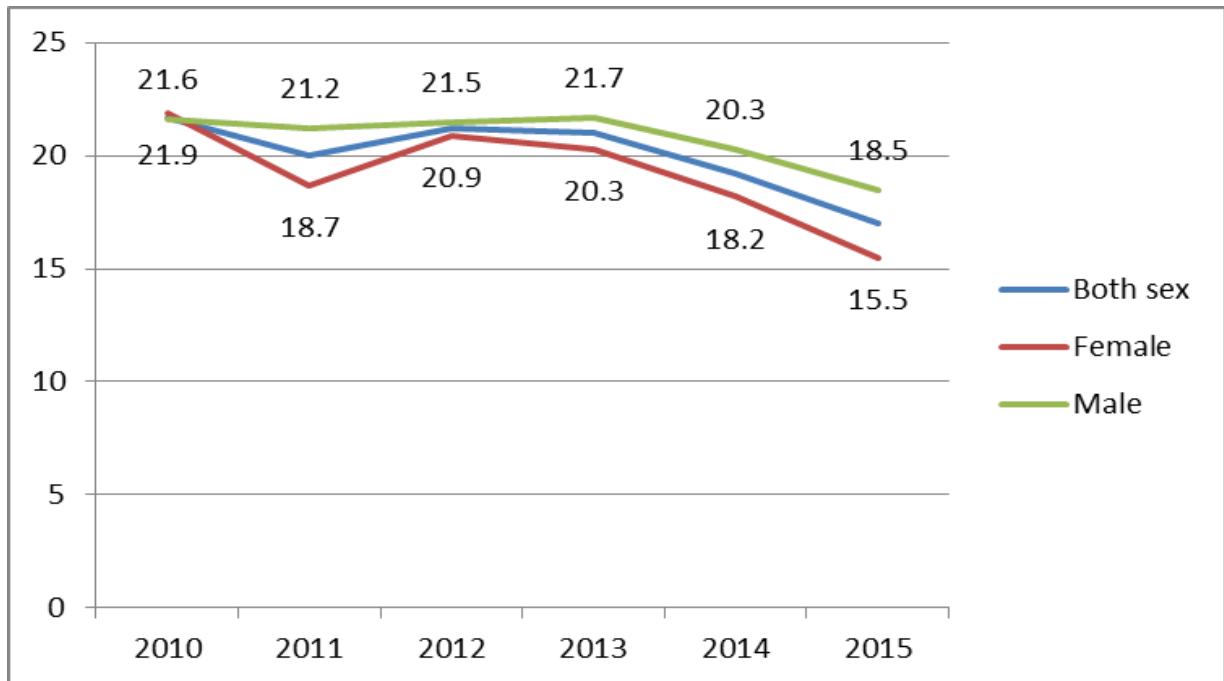
Source: Education statistic and indicators, MoEYS

Figure 5: Completion rate of students on lower secondary education



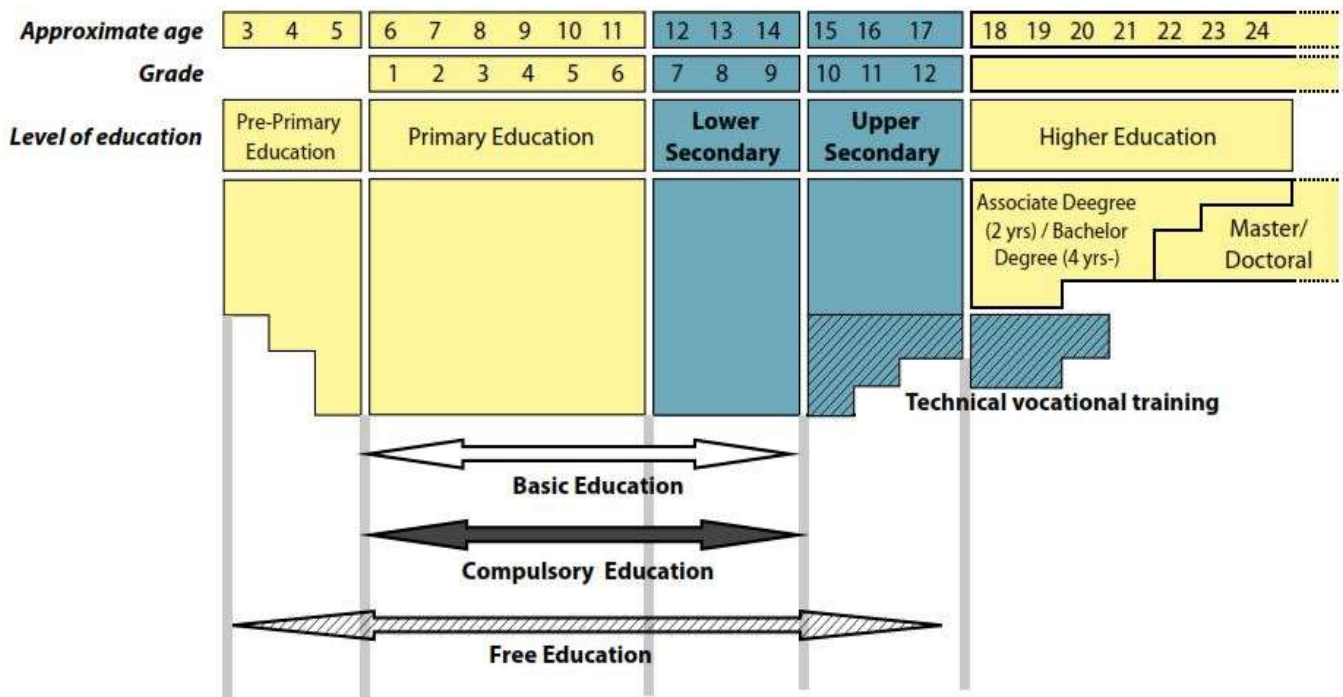
Source: Education statistic and indicators, MoEYS

Figure 6: School dropout in lower secondary education



Source: Public education statistic and indicators, MoEYS

Figure 7: Education structure: Official school-ages and duration



Source: UNESCO: Secondary education regional information base: Country profile Cambodia

Appendix 4: Executive Summary

The Cambodia Government aspires to move the country's economy from a lower middle income country to an upper middle income country by 2030 and to a developed country by 2050. Since 2003, Cambodia has been involved with the UNESCO agenda of MDGs including "Education For All" by 2015. After that, the Government followed the successor of the MDGs; the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to ensure that all children and youth, both girls and boys, have equal access to education at all levels and at least complete secondary education.

Currently, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport strives to strengthen the quality of education and to ensure that young people have specialized skills to meet the needs of local and regional markets. Gender equality issues are also given attention in the formal secondary education system. Gender aggregate data in education is provided every academic year. However, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport still faces challenges related to the education system itself and the education environment. Recently, the enrolment has been remarkably high in primary education, but it is lower in secondary education. Students still dropout of school for many reasons.

This paper presented lesson learned from neighboring countries, especially in the ASEAN region, and also the policy options which were introduced by UN agencies to address the remaining challenges.