



Country Report

Towards Safer Schools for Children: Cambodia

Preventing Violence Against Children in
Schools in South and Southeast Asia



Coalition for
Good Schools





About Coalition for Good Schools

The Coalition for Good Schools is a collection of leading Global South practitioners committed to preventing violence against children (VAC) in and through schools across Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Coalition elevates insights and evidence-based interventions in order to provide critical tools, data and best practices for sustainable, local solutions. This ten-country document review series has been initiated by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools, coordinated by Samya Development Resources Private Limited (SAMYA).

The Asia Hub commissioned 10 country reports on the state of VAC in and around schools in the broader region, in collaboration with core partners in each context. Each report provides an overview of how violence manifests in educational settings, explores contributing social, cultural and economic factors for VAC in each context, and provides a brief review of the policy landscape, national leadership and strategy for ending violence. While school violence is the primary focus, violence in other physical and online settings is explored. These reports are thus developed for all those working on the issue of VAC, particularly for those who see schools as an ideal entry point for its prevention.

In the absence of systematic data collection on VAC in Asia's schools, these reports highlight data that are indicative of trends and point attention to existing gaps. These 10 reports are developed to stand alone, and are summarized in a scene-setting "Synthesis Report" which can be found on our website at www.coalitionforgoodschools.org.

Acknowledgements

This series of reports, produced by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools presents background information, infographics and key resources that aim to foster change and development in both schools' settings and communities in the field of prevention of Violence Against Children across Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. This would not be possible without the diverse inputs of practitioners and researchers throughout each context. The Asia Hub is grateful to the following people for their contributions:

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Country Profile

CAMBODIA



Cambodia Population



17.03
Million

Languages



Khmer

Main ethnic group



95.4%
Khmer

4.2%
Cham

1.5%
Chinese

0.7%
Other races

Age Structure



28.9%
0-14 years

65.8%
15-64 years

5.3%
65 years and over

5.3% (2024 ¹ est.)
65 years and over

GDP per capita



\$4,500
(2022 est.)

Poverty Rate



16.5%
(2024)²

Literacy rate



83.8%
(2022 est.)

Key Findings

- ❖ Two-thirds of Cambodian children experience some form of violence, with high rates of sexual and emotional abuse, and half have experienced physical violence.
- ❖ Teachers are the highest perpetrators of violence against children outside the home and are significant perpetrators of corporal punishment in schools. 17% of students also report being physically attacked at school.
- ❖ Over 85% of youth face high risks of cyberbullying due to growing internet use in Cambodia, and 11% of internet-using children (12-17 years) have faced online sexual exploitation.
- ❖ Sexual violence affects both boys (5.2%) and girls (6.4%), with girls and young women at higher risk. 5% of adults (18-24 years) report experiencing sexual abuse before 18.

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/cambodia/#people-and-society>

² UNDP Country Programme Document 2024-2028

Overall snapshot of violence against children (VAC) in Cambodia

Cambodia has made progress in understanding and addressing violence against children (VAC) through national surveys and policy measures. Yet despite some improvements, VAC remains prevalent in schools, in homes, and online spaces, posing significant risks to children's well-being.

In 2013, Cambodia became the first country in the Asia-Pacific region to conduct a national survey on VAC, which revealed that 50% of children had experienced physical violence. The new data on VAC collected by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) in 5 provinces in 2017 showed a decrease in physical violence experienced by children. The Economic Burden of the Health Consequences of VAC study launched in 2015 showed that Cambodia lost at least US \$168 million in 2013 or 1.1% of its GDP because of the health consequences of violence experienced by children. The Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2021-22 (CDHS 2021-22) indicates high overall prevalence of VAC; 66% of children aged 1–14 experienced some violent form of discipline.

In other sources, according to UNICEF (2017), one in two children has experienced severe beating, one in four has suffered from emotional abuse and one in twenty has been sexually assaulted. The prevalence of LGBTQIA+-directed violence is 42.02%³. With increased access to the internet, evidence suggests Cambodian youth are at increased risk of different forms of online violence including cyberbullying; according to one estimate, 87% of Cambodian youth between 15 and 25 are in danger of online violence.⁴ These data suggest that no settings are providing the safe and enabling environment that children need to thrive.

Prevalence of different forms of VAC

1. Corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is a common practice in Cambodian classrooms. A 2013 Cambodia VAC Study found that teachers are the most common perpetrators of VAC outside children's homes and such disciplinary measures are considered to be socially acceptable throughout Cambodian society. Overall, 66% of children aged 1–14 experienced some form of violent disciplining. Furthermore, 27% of adult respondents believe that a child needs physical punishment to be raised or appropriately educated. As per the latest CDHS (2021-22)⁵ data, 43% of children experienced physical punishment and 5% experienced severe physical punishment. About 30.5% of school-going adolescents from urban schools reported receiving some form of corporal punishment. School violence occurs within a broader ecosystem of norms that allow violence to persist in childhood across multiple settings

How parents and other caregivers discipline their children can have long-term effects on their growth and development. Overall, two-thirds of children aged 1-14 experienced some form of violent discipline method in the month before the 2021-22 DHS survey; this includes 59% of children who experienced psychological aggression, 43% who experienced any physical punishment and 5% who experienced severe physical punishment. Fewer than 1 in 4 children (23%) experienced only nonviolent discipline (DHS 2021-22). According to another study, an estimated one-quarter of Cambodian children have been emotionally abused by a parent, caregiver, or other adult relatives (UNICEF, Cambodia, 2014).

The Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al. (2014), in a 2013 survey on VAC, reported mothers were found to be the most frequent perpetrators of the first instance of physical and emotional abuse against children. UNICEF (2018) data, 60% of parents use corporal punishment

³ <https://theaseanpost.com/article/cambodias-cyberbullied-children>

⁴ These findings are derived from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the results of a five-week poll (2018-19) involving one million young people and suggestions from a series of student-led #ENDviolence Youth Talks, which were held in more than 160 countries, including Cambodia.

⁵ <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR377/FR377.pdf>

to discipline their children. Interestingly, the CDHS (2021-22) data indicated that in comparison to urban areas, a higher percentage of respondents in rural areas support physically punishing children as a form of discipline. With rising household wealth, the percentage of respondents who support physical punishment as a teaching tool drops from 30% among the lowest and second wealth quintiles to 21% among those in the highest income quintile. In 2022, UNICEF reported that 43% of children had been disciplined using physical violence at home⁶. Children reported feeling sad, depressed and unmotivated to study because of the violence from caregivers at home⁷.

2. Peer violence and bullying

Bullying or peer violence, including online violence and cyberbullying in schools, was found to be prevalent in Cambodia. 17% of students in grades 7 to 12 reported being physically attacked by peers once or more at school, according to GSHS 2013 data⁸. It is also widespread in schools in urban poor communities: 26% of students reported having faced bullying at school (UNICEF, 2018). As per a probe by the Khmer Times conducted at some schools in Phnom Penh, severe forms of bullying have been reported, with some children describing a climate of fear while attending school⁹. Children often receive little support or protection from teachers and physical violence as a disciplinary measure is still accepted within the education system. This perpetuates the normalisation of physical violence in the school environment.

3. Sexual violence and harassment

In Cambodia, available evidence suggests that young women and girls face a greater risk of experiencing sexual violence compared to young men and boys (Stark et al., 2019). In Cambodia, approximately 5% of males and females aged 18–24 reported at least one experience of sexual abuse before the age of 18. Of the children aged between 13–17, 6.4% of girls and 5.2% of boys said that they had experienced at least one incident of sexual abuse¹⁰. According to Stark et al. (2019), women's risk of sexual violence in Cambodia is stable throughout childhood and adolescence, whereas young men's risk increases with age. Gendered social norms could impact this sex-specific exposure to violent childhood environments. Normative expectations for women's and men's behaviours in Cambodia are shaped by gendered rules of conduct known as '*chbab proh*' for men and '*chbab srey*' for women (Jacobsen, 2012).

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of children is another issue plaguing Cambodia. According to a 2014 study, there may be up to 100,000 individuals engaged in sex work in the country, with UNICEF estimating that between 30% and 35% of those are minors.¹¹ Another study estimated that in 332 facilities such as massage parlours, karaoke parlours, beer gardens, brothels and hostess bars, there was an 8% prevalence rate of commercial sexual exploitation among minors aged 17 or below. Also, girls of ethnic Khmer origin are trafficked into the sex industry in Thailand, often aged 7–14 years¹². Because of their lack of education, insufficient public child protection, increased Internet access and involvement in online gaming, girls in Cambodia are particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation and abuse.¹³ However, another study (Miles, 2016) with 1,314 students

⁶ <http://www.unicef.org/cambodia/press-releases/evaluation-cambodias-violence-against-children-action-plan-reveals-progress-royal>

⁷ <https://fxb.harvard.edu/2015/03/20/violence-against-children-in-cambodia-findings-of-a-national-study/>

⁸ WHO, CDC, MoEYS, MoH, Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) in Cambodia, 2013.

⁹ <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501067200/hoodlums-not-teachers-reign-in-some-schools/>

¹⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270789675_Findings_from_Cambodia%27s_Violence_Against_Children_Survey_2013_Qualitative_Research_Khmer

¹¹ Defence for Children & ECPAT Netherlands: Reducing VAC, 2014.

¹² Deanna Davy: Understanding the complexities of responding to child sex trafficking in Thailand and Cambodia, 2014, 34 (11) International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy 793, 799.

¹³ World Vision, 2014: Sex, Abuse and Childhood, 53.

between 13 and 16 years old found that the gender gap in prevalence of sexual exploitation and abuse is not as large as is often believed. This study in particular additionally found that 1.8% of boys and 0.6% of girls were raped by an adult.

4. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is defined in Cambodia as the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. Online threats and mean, aggressive, or rude texts, tweets, posts, or messages all count, so does posting personal information, pictures, or videos designed to hurt or embarrass someone else. With the increasing internet penetration rate in Cambodia, incidents of cyberbullying have risen substantially among children. A poll on one million youth across 160 countries, including Cambodia, indicated that 86% of young Cambodians between the age group of 15-25 were bullied and harassed in online environments (UNICEF, 2019).

The rapid increase of social media use among Cambodian students requires enhanced cybersecurity and digital education nationally to ensure safe access and use of the internet. In 2021, UNICEF said that more than 150 reports were made to Cambodian authorities each year of suspected cases of child sex abuse materials such as child pornography and sextortion¹⁴. Further, the recent ground-breaking report called *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia*, launched by the Cambodian National Council for Children, part of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth (MoSVY) and partners including UNICEF Cambodia revealed that 11% of internet-using children aged 12-17 had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed. If scaled to Cambodia's population within this age group, this represents an estimated 160,000 children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

The *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia* report also found that¹⁵: 16% of children were subjected to sexual comments that made them feel uncomfortable, with one-third reporting this happened on social media; 16% were sent unwanted sexual images, of whom 36% said they received the images on social media; 9% of children surveyed received unwanted requests to share sexual images of themselves; and more boys than girls were subjected to clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse, such as receiving unwanted requests to share images or videos showing their private parts and being threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities.

Drivers of VAC in schools in Cambodia

1. Normative influence

There is a strong normative and cultural normalisation of corporal violent punishment of children in both public and private spaces. In qualitative interviews, Cambodian youth described the perpetration of physical violence by teachers as a form of discipline (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014). High rates of violent punishment in schools showcase how these normative influences continue to prevent Cambodia's learners from accessing safe learning environments.

At home, parents are expected to discipline their children for their bad behaviour, especially when they are believed to have damaged the family's reputation or shown disrespect for their elders. There have also been cases of parents advising their children's teachers to beat their children if they misbehave in the classroom¹⁶. In a 2017 study¹⁷ with 2,585 male and female participants on the

¹⁴ <http://www.unicef.org/cambodia/press-releases/official-launch-national-action-plan-prevent-and-respond-online-child-sexual>

¹⁵ <https://www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm#country-reports>

¹⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2019.1613344>

¹⁷ Reported in "Study explores Cambodia's use of corporal punishment", The Phnom Penh Post, 1 March 2017 <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/study-explores-cambodias-use-corporal-punishment>

socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence parents' acceptance of corporal punishment of children, mothers were more likely than fathers to accept it and both were more likely to accept it for boys than girls. Overall, mothers accepted physical punishment of boys at a rate of 74% versus 57% for fathers; mothers accepted physical punishment of their daughters at a rate of 70% versus 47% for fathers. The survey also revealed cultural disparities in the justifications for punishment. For example, parents were more likely to agree that sons should be punished more than daughters for "disobedience," "being impolite," and "embarrassing the family".

2. Sexuality

Schools can be challenging places for students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity; for LGBTQIA+ children, however, the schoolyard can carry added risks. UNGEI (2015) data¹⁸ shows that LGBTQIA+ learners experience bullying based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expressions (SOGIE). UNGEI draws attention to the fact that bullying based on SOGIE is more common inside schools than outside, indicating that while LGBTQIA+ people face discrimination in Cambodian society, schools are falling short of their responsibility to create a space free from SOGIE-based prejudice.

There remains a lack of sufficient policies and practices to protect LGBTQIA+ youth from violence and discrimination; where they do exist, they are often not sufficiently implemented. This results in many LGBTQIA+ students being bullied, excluded and discriminated against while at school, which can lead to physical and psychological harm and limit their education¹⁹. In another study, 64% of LGBTQIA+ respondents believed that being excluded from the family is the main problem LGBTQIA+ faces (RoCK, 2015)²⁰. This often led to such children stop going to school and engaging in harmful behaviour.

3. Poverty

In Cambodia, where schooling is free until Grade 9, but not compulsory, poverty forces many students to give up their education²¹. According to KAPE²², 33% of students from low-income families drop out of school, and in that same year, 13% of students who should have been in primary school were not enrolled.²³ Children under the age of fifteen are especially susceptible to child labour due to the absence of compulsory education since they are not legally allowed to work nor legally obligated to attend school. Out-of-school children are often subjected to the worst forms of child labour, including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking and forced labour in brickmaking.²⁴ Before COVID-19, 17% of children aged between 5 and 17 years were involved in labour activities (at home, in informal, or with falsified documents in formal employment). This percentage has likely risen dramatically due to the pandemic (Plan 2021, p. 29). In 2021, UNDP estimated that the poverty rate had almost doubled as families lost sources of income and took loans. Compared with other risk factors, poverty and low socio-economic status are consistently associated with child maltreatment and the most severe abuse cases were found among the poorest people²⁵ (Baywaters et al., 2016).

¹⁸ <https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/LGBTQIA+-bullying-in-Cambodia%27s-schools-2015-eng.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/news/cambodia-group-uses-facts-and-football-promote-teacher-tolerance>

²⁰ Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK), a local NGO based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, promotes LGBTQIA+ rights. They conducted a baseline survey of *Opinions, Attitudes and Behavior toward the LGBTQIA+ Population in Cambodia* (2015)

²¹ Government of Cambodia. The Law on Education. Enacted: November 21, 2007. <http://www.moeys.gov.kh/en/laws-and-legislations/law/>

²² <http://schooldropoutprevention.com/country-data-activities/cambodia/>

²³ U.S. Embassy- Phnom Penh. Reporting. February 8, 2022.

²⁴ 2021 Findings on the worst forms of child labour. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2021/cambodia.pdf ព្យាបាល ក្នុង ការ អប់រំ

²⁵ Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress. 2010. cited 2017 Nov,26.

4. Conflict

Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia suffered from a conflict with the Khmer Rouge, led by the Communist nationalist dictator Pol Pot. This significantly impacted the education system, as an estimated 90% of schools were destroyed and education was discouraged. For children who were born during or after the conflict, they missed out on education entirely, which has continued to have an impact on Cambodia today²⁶. This generational disruption to education and history of national, systemic violence remains an issue that those working to uphold children's rights and the right to safety in education in Cambodia must continue to bear in mind.

Prevention and Response to VAC

Despite the prevalence of VAC in Cambodia's schools and communities, there is a growing civil society and governmental effort to respond to and prevent violence in children's lives. In 2013, Cambodia became the first country in the Asia-Pacific region to conduct a national survey on VAC, which revealed that 50% of children had experienced physical violence. These findings informed the development of a five-year Action Plan to address the issue at multiple levels, from the village level to the provincial authorities²⁸. Such action plans are an essential starting point to frame government commitment and leadership to ending all forms of violence in schools.

Policy and national action against VAC

Cambodia's Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) led the development of the five-year Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children 2017-2021²⁹. MoWA established a Steering Committee which included representatives from 13 Cambodian Government Ministries and non-governmental partners, including UNICEF and key NGOs. Other partners, including the Government of Japan, USAID and the Global Partnership to End VAC, were integral to its delivery.

This was the first time such a coalition had been formed to work together towards ending VAC in Cambodia. It included a commitment to banning all forms of VAC, strengthening child protection data and monitoring, enabling parents and caregivers to keep children safe, making the internet safe for children, and making schools safe, non-violent and inclusive.

Initial efforts were promising. In 2017, the European Union, together with the University KU Leuven in Belgium, implemented a capacity development program at the Teacher Education College in Battambang to assist teachers in creating safer environments in classrooms. They also worked with public school teachers to increase their awareness about gender-based violence and abuse in Cambodian schools²⁸. The program highlighted the absence of sufficient gender-based violence prevention regulations at schools, and found that Cambodia's teachers are attached to traditional gender roles, which further perpetuates gender stereotypes in their schools. Three years after the launch of UNICEF's positive discipline programme, more than 3,400 teachers and 120,300 students across 409 schools had participated in this preliminary programme across Cambodia (UNICEF, 2019).

²⁶ <http://www.paddydowling.co.uk/collaborations/cambodia-khmer-rouge-war-on-education>

²⁷ <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270789675>

²⁸ <https://hiva.kuleuven.be/nl/nieuws/docs/zl730338-paper-eind-en-web.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/reports/action-plan-prevent-and-respond-violence-against-children-2017-2021>

Institutional Mapping of the country to deal with VAC



Priority and strategy for the way forward

Some concerns still remain following the implementation of the Action Plan regarding Cambodia's progress towards protecting all children from violence in schools. An inspection carried out by the UN Human Rights Committee³⁰, for example, found that insufficient action had been taken to protect children from violence in schools, specifically children with disabilities, adolescent health and social justice. Despite the introduction of a 2008 Policy on Education for Children with Disabilities and the 2009 Law on Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, much of the data on children with disabilities is not accurate. The government also has not yet taken sufficient responsibility for providing support to children with disabilities, with this responsibility instead falling primarily on non-government organisations.

Concerns have also been expressed about the lack of action from the Cambodian government to stop corporal punishment. While a law prohibits corporal punishment in Cambodia, a loophole in Article 1045 of the Civil Code allows 'the holder of parental power to discipline the child to the extent necessary personally'. In addition, article 8 of the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of the Victims allows the corporal punishment of children for disciplinary purposes.

However, an increasingly vibrant civil society is taking the issue of VAC at school as their own, with both international and national NGOs committed to this work. It is also encouraging to note that the Education Ministry, in cooperation with UNICEF, has set up policy and training systems on gender equality, VAC and teacher training to eliminate corporal punishment in schools. Further commitments have been made to accelerate endorsement of the draft Child Protection Law and National Action Plan to Prevent & Respond to VAC 2024-2028. UNICEF Cambodia's Child Friendly Schools Initiative is also supporting a pagoda-based initiative run by the religious ministry to prevent child abuse and encourage healthy discipline. By improving monks' knowledge and abilities, the programme helps families change their attitudes against violence and create safer homes, schools and community environments.

At the Global Ministerial Conference to End Violence Against Children in 2024, additional pledges were made to strengthen and expand Cambodia's Positive Discipline in School and Child Protection Pagoda programs as well as child online protection. Ongoing, active collaboration is required government, civil society and school levels to ensure these pledges are translated into action.

³⁰ https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-KHM-2-3_en.pdf

Suggestions on the Way Forward

As the understanding of safety in educational environments continues to evolve, there is increasing recognition of schools as spaces where non-violent and just societies can be co-created. The findings presented here aim to inform a growing network of national and regional practitioners, policymakers, civil society groups, researchers and funders committed to preventing all forms of violence within Cambodia's schools.

While the Coalition for Good Schools encourages stakeholders to review the full recommendations outlined in the regional synthesis report, insights from the Asia Hub highlight key areas for action:

- **Education delivery system as an entry-point:** *The education system offers a strategic avenue for the prevention of violence against children. Effective multi-sectoral government action at the national level is crucial for catalysing these interventions.*
- **Children's experience and agency:** *Prioritising children's lived experiences within schools and fostering their agency should be central in education policies and interventions.*
- **Whole-school approach:** *Implementing a comprehensive, whole-school strategy that nurtures a positive school culture and upholds the inherent dignity of every child can produce long-term outcomes. Meaningful engagement with teachers, school staff, and the local community is essential for the success of such initiatives.*
- **Knowledge generation and dissemination:** *Ongoing documentation, sharing, and expansion of knowledge and evidence is vital for deepening understanding of effective interventions, strengthening local efforts and supporting scale through the education sector.*

There are proven solutions to end violence, and with collective effort, violence can be prevented within our lifetime. For instance, "This Life Without Violence" by This Life Cambodia provides secondary school students with training on understanding VAC and fostering healthy relationships. The programme also supports Student Councils and communities in identifying and addressing risk factors through their "Reach Out, Check In, and ACT" initiative. Other examples include First Step Cambodia's prevention-focused child and youth clubs and Save the Children's work on corporal punishment. These efforts reflect a robust and expanding civil society dedicated to violence prevention in Cambodia.

Effective foundational interventions should incorporate several core elements:

- **Recognising schools' role in nurturing and developing children's potential.**
- **Promoting justice, equality, and empathy as foundational school values.**
- **Affirming children's rights and agency within the educational context.**
- **Supporting progressive pedagogies that encourage positive change.**
- **Honouring the dignity of every child, irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, caste, creed, or other categorisations.**

Prevention programmes must also adopt an intersectional perspective that acknowledges the overlapping and reinforcing characteristics that shape children's unique experiences of violence. This approach recognises that certain groups of children may face increased risks and that the severity and frequency of violence can vary considerably.

While sometimes sites of violence, schools also hold significant potential as primary sites for learning and implementing strategies to prevent it. School-based initiatives can yield multiple positive outcomes, serving as catalysts for broader change.

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