

CHAPTER 5

LITERACY AND EDUCATION

5.1 Introduction

Literacy and other cognitive and emotional skills acquired through formal education are essential for full participation in modern society. Those without these capabilities are excluded from any but the lowliest employment in the modern economy and, since the benefits of wage-labor have positive flow-on effects to many aspects of well-being, they are among the most vulnerable in the population. As MOWA (2008: 73) points out,

The education of girls and women has a powerful trans-generational effect and is a key determinant of social development and women's empowerment. There is increasing awareness globally that gender inequalities in education have a broad effect of household well-being as well as constrain the ability of women to contribute to economic growth and invest in human resource development, thus constraining overall macroeconomic outcomes. There are strong positive correlations between a mother's schooling and her children's birth weight, health and nutritional status.

The Government of Cambodia has made impressive gains in public education in recent years, including narrowing the gap in educational attainment between males and females. There are nonetheless still major shortcomings to be overcome and significant regional disparities. The Cambodia Census 2008 asked a number of questions regarding literacy, educational enrolment, and educational attainment. The results provide a snapshot of the population's current educational capabilities and help us understand the underlying social dynamics which determine how those capabilities are distributed.

5.2 Literacy

The 2008 Census asked of every person 7 years and over whether they can read and write in the Khmer language, and in any other language. The Census records 6,891,035 persons age 15 years and over as literate (in any language), giving an adult literacy rate (i.e. for the population 15 years and above) of 77.6 percent, compared with 67.3 percent in 1998. The number of literate persons over 15 years has increased from 4,390,755 in 1998. Table 5.1 summarizes the 2008 findings for the adult population 15 years of age and over.²⁷

Table 5.1 discloses the impressive gains in literacy the country has made in the last 10 years: The literacy rate for the age group 15-24 years is 87.5 percent in 2008, compared with 76.3 percent in 1998. Literacy is largely acquired during childhood, hence the literacy rate for the 25-34 age group – i.e. the same people who comprised the 15-24 age group in 1998 – is only 78.8 percent.²⁸ The table shows the gains in literacy are especially impressive in rural areas, with the rural literacy rate for the 15-24 age group at 85.1 per cent in 2008 compared to 74.5 percent for the 25-34 age group. There are gains too in urban areas, but literacy was already high in urban areas in 1998, as indicated by the relatively high literacy rates for older age groups in 2008. Figure 5.1 gives a graphical representation of how literacy levels are lower for higher ages.

²⁷ Adult literacy is here defined as in terms of the population 15 years and older, and general literacy in terms of the population 7 years and over (NIS 2009a: 47-51). The general literacy rate has increased from 62.8 percent in 1998 to 78.4 in 2008.

²⁸ This confirms, if the measures are accurate, that once an age cohort enters adulthood its literacy rate can be expected to increase little over time, if at all.

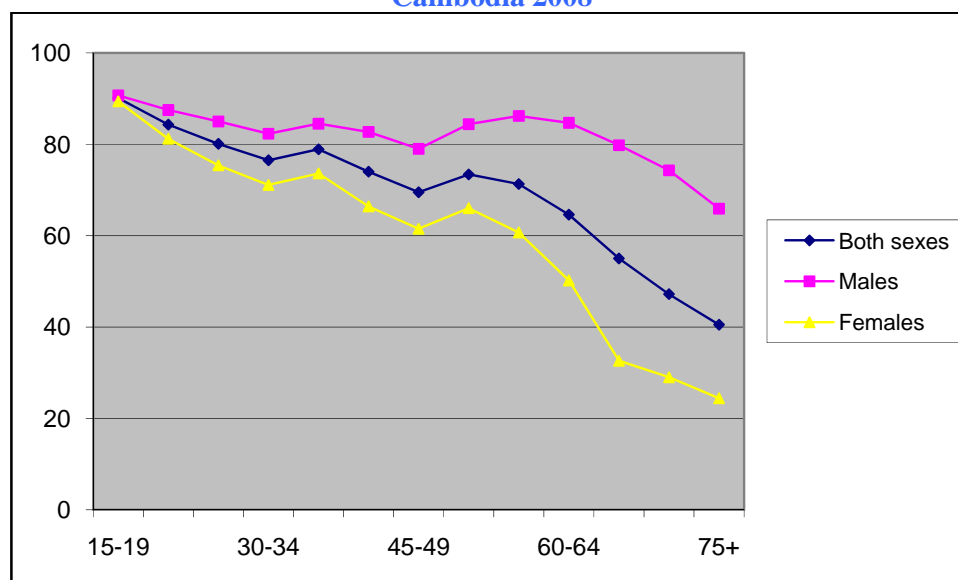
Table 5.1 Literacy rate (percent) in any language of adult population 15 years and over by age group and sex, for total, rural and urban populations, Cambodia 1998 and 2008

Age	1998			2008								
	Rural + urban			Rural + urban			Rural			Urban		
	BS	M	F	BS	M	F	BS	M	F	BS	M	F
15-24	76.3	81.9	71.1	87.5	89.4	85.5	85.1	87.5	82.5	95.1	96.0	94.3
25-34	73.4	81.5	66.0	78.8	84.0	73.8	74.5	80.6	68.6	92.6	94.9	90.4
35-44	66.7	78.0	57.8	76.6	83.7	70.2	73.2	80.9	66.3	90.3	94.4	86.2
45-54	63.7	83.8	49.0	71.2	81.2	63.5	67.2	78.0	59.1	86.7	92.7	81.7
55-64	43.8	73.7	21.6	68.5	85.4	56.4	64.8	83.4	51.7	83.9	93.8	76.4
65+	30.5	58.7	10.4	47.9	73.7	30.5	44.9	71.6	26.7	63.0	85.1	49.3
Total 15+	67.3	79.5	57.0	77.6	85.1	70.9	74.0	82.5	66.3	90.4	94.5	86.8

Source: NIS (2009a: Table 4.4) and B1.

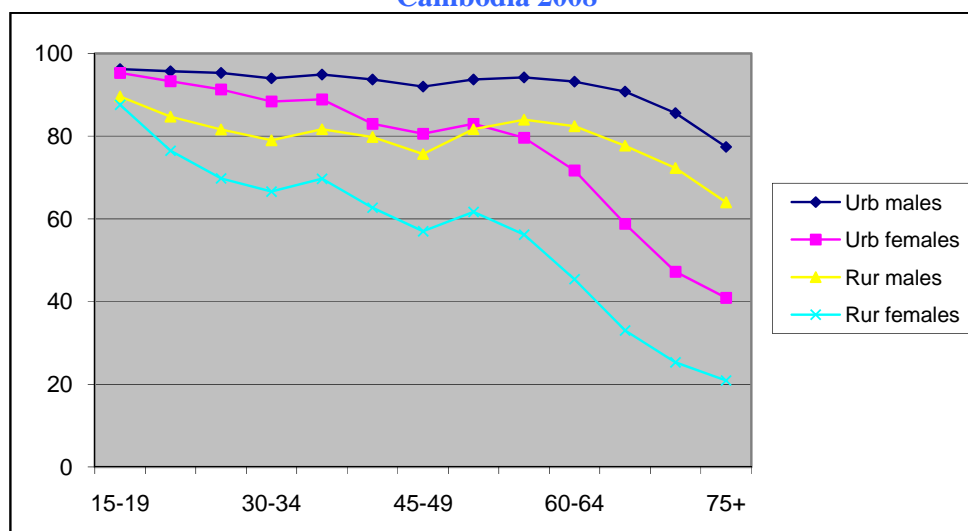
Table 5.1 also shows the differences in literacy rates between males and females. In the past there was a significant gap between literacy rates for males and females; this is reflected today in the differences between males and females in older age groups (Figure 5.1). The literacy rate for people 65 years and over is more than twice as high for males (at 73.7 percent) as females (30.5 percent). However the gap has almost disappeared for the 15-24 age group (89.4 percent for males and 85.5 percent for females).

Figure 5.1 Percent literate (any language) by age group and sex, Cambodia 2008



Source: Using data from B1.

Figure 5.2 Percent literate (any language) by age group and residence, Cambodia 2008

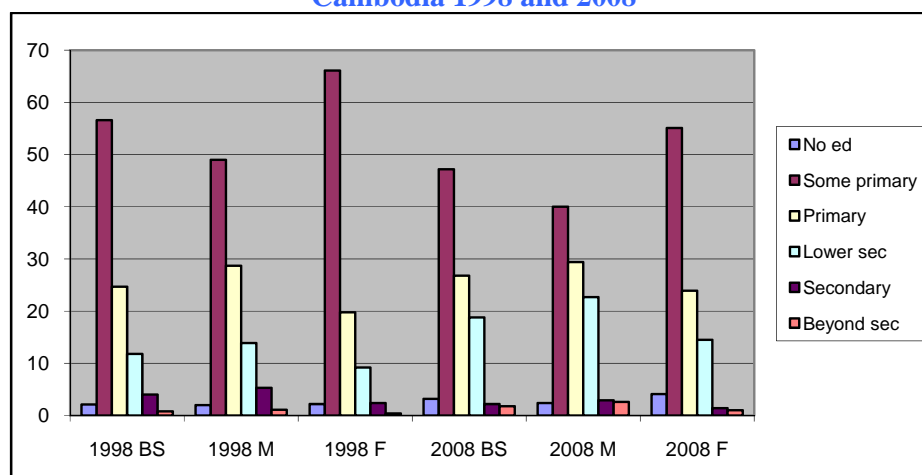


Source: Using data from B1.

5.3 Educational Attainment

Not only has the number and percent of adult literates increased impressively since 1998 but the educational attainment of the literate population has too. Figure 5.3 displays the percentage distribution of literates (25 years and older) by highest educational level attained in 1998 and 2008, for both sexes combined and separately. The levels of education are (i) no formal education received, (ii) some primary school, but not completed, (iii) primary school completed, (iv) lower secondary school completed, (v) higher secondary school completed (baccalaureate or technical diploma), and (vi) some higher education beyond secondary.²⁹

Figure 5.3 Educational attainment of literate persons 25 years and over (percent), for both sexes (BS), males (M) and females (F), Cambodia 1998 and 2008



Source: Based on NIS (2009a: Table 4.8).

²⁹ There was some change in definition of lower secondary and secondary in the education system during 1998-2008 which makes precise comparison over time difficult (NIS 2009a: 54).

Looking first at both sexes combined we see in 1998 almost 60 percent of literate persons (58.7 percent) had either no schooling or had not finished primary; this figure is close to 50 percent (50.4 percent) by 2008. Correspondingly the percent completed primary and secondary increases, although even in 2008 those who have completed secondary school still comprise only 4.0 percent of literate persons aged 25 years and older.

Comparing males and females we can see how the percent who have not completed primary school declines for both sexes and the percent completed primary and secondary increases for both sexes. Looking at differences between these distributions in educational attainment for males and females respectively, however, is not an effective way to monitor the gender gap in education. Consider for example, the percent of literates in 1998 who had completed lower secondary school or higher was 20.3 percent for males and 12.0 percent for females; in 2008 the figures are 28.2 percent and 16.9 percent, respectively. There has been improvement for both males and females, but to describe the gender gap as 7.7 percentage points in 1998 and 11.3 percentage points in 2008 would be misleading, because these distributions only look at the literate population and the female literate population has increased more impressively during 1998-2008 than the male. The absolute increase in female literates is 799,141 persons (from 1,245,787 to 2,044,928, an increase of 64.2 percent), while for male literates it is 678,649 (from 1,548,235 to 2,226,884, an increase of 43.8 percent). The gender gap in education has narrowed more than we can infer from Figure 5.3 alone.

Table 5.2 Adult population 20 and over (number and percent) by literacy, level of educational attainment and sex, for total, rural and urban populations, Cambodia 2008

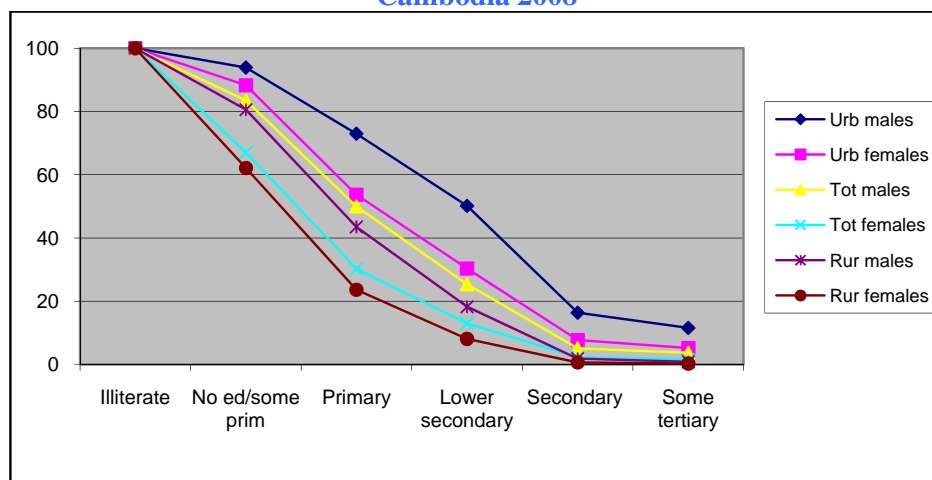
Educational attainment	Rural + urban		Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Illiterates	550,504 16.4	1,280,631 32.9	505,779 19.4	1,152,833 37.9	44,425 5.9	127,798 15.0
Literates	2,816,256 83.6	2,615,073 67.1	2,106,174 80.6	1,890,048 62.1	710,082 94.1	725,025 85.0
No schooling or some primary	1,126,795 (33.5)	1,435,507 (36.8)	969,320 (37.1)	1,170,771 (38.5)	157,475 (20.9)	264,736 (34.6)
Finished primary	829,484 (24.6)	672,768 (17.3)	657,129 (25.2)	473,963 (15.6)	172,355 (22.8)	198,805 (23.3)
Finished lower secondary	682,097 (20.3)	417,743 (10.7)	427,371 (16.4)	224,622 (7.4)	254,726 (33.8)	193,121 (22.6)
Finished higher secondary	47,670 (1.4)	26,128 (0.7)	25,470 (1.0)	11,159 (0.4)	36,059 (4.8)	22,596 (2.6)
Some tertiary	126,283 (3.7)	61,008 (1.6)	25,043 (0.9)	8,700 (0.3)	87,381 (11.6)	44,681 (5.2)
Other/Not reported	3,927 (0.1)	1,919 (<0.1)	1,841 (<0.1)	833 (<0.1)	2,086 (0.3)	1,086 (0.1)
Total	3,366,760 100.0	3,895,704 100.0	2,611,953 100.0	3,042,881 100.0	754,507 100.0	852,823 100.0

Source: B1.

Table 5.2 gives a better sense of the remaining gender gap in 2008 since it includes both literates and illiterates. The table gives cross-sectional data at a point in time (the year 2008) but it can be interpreted as presenting the history of a “synthetic cohort” passing through the educational system prevailing in the country at that point in time. Figure 5.3 takes the data of Table 5.2 and represents it in this way. We can imagine a birth cohort of 3,895,704 females (for example) growing up together and passing through the educational system. They all (100.0 percent) start off illiterate: at birth that is their “highest level of educational attainment.” Then, at the prevailing “transition rates” from one level to the next, 1,280,631 (32.9 percent) remain illiterate and the rest

(2,615,073 or 67.1 percent) move to the literate level. Of these 1,435,507 (36.8 percent of the initial cohort) stay at the level of no schooling or some primary, and 1,179,566 move on. Of these 672,728 stop at the finishing primary school level, and 506,798 move on. Of the latter, 417,743 finish lower secondary and stay at that level, and the remaining 89,055 move on. Of these 26,128 finish (higher) secondary school and stay at that level, and 62,927 move on. These – ignoring the 1,919 for whom we do not have adequate data to classify clearly – go on to enter some kind of tertiary education. This latest group is just 1.6 percent of the initial cohort. Figure 5.3 shows how this profile in educational attainment compares for males and females. More than twice as many males as females reach the tertiary level, but the percent is still very small for males (3.7 percent).

Figure 5.4 Percent of population 20 years and over by highest educational attainment for males and females, total population and urban population, Cambodia 2008



Source: Data from Table 5.1.

Table 5.2 and Figure 5.4 also show the difference between urban and rural profiles. There are more urban literate females 20 years and over (725,025) than males (710,082), although the literacy rate is still a little higher for males (94.1 percent compared to 85.0 percent for females). 5.2 percent of the urban females have some tertiary education experience compared to 11.2 percent for males.

Figure 5.4 makes it clear the educational attainment of urban females is now higher than that of rural males. There is still a significant gender gap in education which needs further attention from policymakers but the residency gap in education needs further attention too.

5.4 School Enrolment

Improvements in overall levels of literacy and educational attainment are largely brought about by formal education of children and youth. The educational experience of young people today determines the educational level of adults tomorrow. It is important therefore to monitor school enrolment.

Table 5.3 shows the percent of children and young adults attending school (or some other educational institution). The significant increases in the proportions enrolled are apparent: in 1998 only 3 in every 5 children aged 6-14 were in school (59.7 percent); in 2008 it is 4 in every 5 (80.2 percent). The increase is more than 10 percentage points for teenagers aged 15-19 as well. The gender gap is decreasing too, beginning with the younger ages: for ages 6-14 the gender gap was 3.6 percentage points in 1998 but had disappeared in 2008 (with percent females enrolled slightly higher than for males); for ages 15-19 the gender gap was 21.5 percentage points in 1998, and 9.6 points in 2008.

Table 5.3 Percent of population (6 years and over) who are attending school/educational institution by sex, broad age, and residency, Cambodia 1998 and 2008

Age	1998			2008								
	Rural + urban			Rural + urban			Rural			Urban		
	BS	M	F	BS	M	F	BS	M	F	BS	M	F
6-14	59.7	61.4	57.8	80.2	80.0	80.4	79.1	78.8	79.4	86.6	87.0	86.1
15-19	40.6	51.4	30.0	51.8	56.5	46.9	49.7	53.9	45.1	59.8	67.4	53.0
20-24	8.3	11.6	5.4	14.4	18.5	10.4	9.8	13.2	6.6	26.6	33.8	20.2
25+	1.4	1.7	1.1	1.2	1.6	0.9	0.8	1.0	0.7	2.8	3.8	1.9
Total 6+	26.0	30.1	22.2	28.9	31.9	26.1	28.8	31.6	26.1	29.5	33.2	26.1

Source: NIS (2009a: Table 4.11).

Enrolment reached 86.6 percent for ages 6-14 in urban areas in 2008, up from 74.8 percent in 1998.³⁰ There is no significant gender gap for these ages in either urban or rural areas. The residency gap is still significant in 2008, however, with enrolments in rural areas lagging 7-8 points behind those in urban areas for ages 6-14. Nevertheless the residency gap is narrowing too, since the difference in enrolments for ages 6-14 was 18.1 percentage points (both sexes) in 1998.

5.5 Regional Differences

Table 5.4 show there is still a significant gender gap in adult literacy throughout the country, ranging from about 6 percentage points in Phnom Penh to close to 20 points in Ratanak Kiri and Svay Rieng. At the same time we can see why literacy rates are improving in the country and the gender gap disappearing: When we look at school enrolments in 2008 we see there is no significant gender gap in the proportion of boys and girls enrolled in the 6-14 age group. There is still a significant gap for children enrolled in the 15-19 age group. The policy challenges are to improve overall school enrolments, especially in rural areas, and to keep girls enrolled for as long as boys.

³⁰ The breakdown by residency in 1998 is not included in the table.

Table 5.4 Selected literacy and school enrolment variables by province, Cambodia 2008

Province	Adult literacy rate (percent population 7 & over)		School enrolment rate (percent population 6 & over)			
			6-14 years		15-19 years	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Bantey Meanchey	85.1	69.0	82.4	82.9	47.7	41.3
Battambang	85.9	72.3	79.0	80.1	50.1	45.8
Kampong Cham	82.4	67.3	80.3	80.7	52.6	45.7
Kampong Chhnang	83.5	68.6	79.1	79.7	53.3	47.1
Kampong Speu	85.1	67.0	79.4	80.0	60.0	46.5
Kampong Thom	75.8	60.7	77.0	78.8	51.8	48.9
Kampot	85.5	69.3	82.2	82.1	60.1	51.0
Kandal	89.2	77.8	82.8	83.1	57.6	45.2
Koh Kong	83.5	66.8	77.3	77.2	51.8	43.5
Kratie	80.1	67.5	72.3	73.7	49.4	43.1
Mondul Kiri	72.4	48.7	62.4	60.6	48.5	36.9
Phnom Penh	96.2	90.6	88.1	86.7	69.2	49.8
Preah Vihear	72.3	55.0	68.1	70.5	50.3	43.2
Prey Veng	88.6	71.4	85.4	85.3	61.9	51.8
Pursat	84.9	70.0	74.4	74.9	50.1	45.2
Ratanak Kiri	55.2	36.6	43.3	41.9	39.0	28.9
Siem Reap	76.2	61.8	75.3	76.3	48.2	42.3
Preah Sihanouk	87.7	73.4	78.9	79.6	59.2	47.4
Stung Treng	70.0	53.1	67.1	69.3	55.6	47.5
Svay Rieng	90.0	69.0	86.6	86.1	66.1	52.7
Takeo	87.5	68.6	85.7	85.5	70.4	57.9
Otdar Meanchey	73.7	53.9	72.9	72.8	43.7	35.0
Kep	81.9	64.5	83.8	84.8	54.6	47.5
Pailin	83.4	67.2	72.5	72.4	44.4	35.1
Cambodia Total	85.1	70.9	80.0	80.4	56.5	46.9

Source: NIS (2009a: Table PT10, Table PT11).