

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Navigating sexual consent in Cambodia

A feminist
participatory action
research study
2024



CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

2 METHODOLOGY

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

4 PERCEPTIONS & ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUAL CONSENT

4.1 Understanding of consent 4.2 Consent within marriage vs outside marriage 4.3 Roots of perception & attitudes towards consent

5 COMMUNICATING SEXUAL CONSENT

5.1 Perceived barriers 5.2 Limited spaces to discuss consent

6 NAVIGATING THE IMPACTS OF SEXUAL CONSENT

6.1 Impacts of non-consensual sex 6.2 Impacts of consensual sex

7 DIVERSE EXPERIENCES ON SEXUAL CONSENT

7.1 Voices of minorities on consent 7.2 Demographic & age-based variations

8 CONCLUSION

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

Klahaan Team Members

Mao Map
Jade Sainte-Rose
Pich Phearak
Moun liza
Chhem Seakmey

Action Research Team Members

Levin Marisa	Chuon Udom
Soun Sreydet	Phonn Sophy
Sar Dalis	Vath Bank
Kim Sodaneth	Hey Channy
Kam Nanitsara	Pech Keonetra
Phoeung Sovansere	Hong Sopheak Vatanak

We would like to thank all those who took part in this project and generously gave their time to make this research possible. This includes the many respondents who shared their experience and perception of sexual consent as well as the women's rights specialists in Phnom Penh.

The Klahaan team would also like to give special thanks and commendation to the action research team. These local researchers invested their time and showed an unwavering dedication and enthusiasm that greatly enriched the experience of this research.

This research was made possible through the generous support from our donors.

people
change
the World

Diakonia



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
PHNOM PENH
Cambodia



Women's Fund Asia



1

INTRODUCTION



1. INTRODUCTION

In Cambodia, as in many parts of the world, sexual consent remains a taboo subject, deeply ingrained in social norms and narratives that discourage open dialogue around sexuality. Yet sexuality is an intrinsic part of life (including for young, unmarried individuals), that intersects with critical women's rights issues such as sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), bodily autonomy and the pursuit of healthy sexual relationships. (1) Despite its profound importance, discussions around consent are often conspicuously absent, leaving significant gaps in understanding and awareness.

This research seeks to break the silence surrounding sexual consent, particularly in a culture where women are pressured to remain virgins until marriage and are frequently blamed when they fall victims of sexual violence. As highlighted in our previous publications, this pressure perpetuates harmful double standards, reinforces restrictive gender norms, and contributes to the continued prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV). (2)

Feminist scholars like Robertson have long argued that the erasure of female sexuality is a fundamental driver of GBV. By denying women the rights to their own sexuality - which includes the right to decide when to have sex, with whom and how, societies create environments where violence against women remains pervasive and unchallenged. (3)

Feminist research further emphasises that normalising conversations about women's sexuality is crucial for challenging these entrenched norms. By openly discussing women's desires and sexual rights beyond the confines of marriage and heterosexual relationships, we can begin dismantling the notion that sex is something that merely "happens" to women and is controlled by men. (4) If sex continues to be defined on men's terms, concepts like consent and mutual desire become blurred, and the "grey areas" of implicit consent remain difficult to navigate.

In Cambodia, those perceptions and attitudes are compounded by widespread misconceptions and gender stereotypes about sexual violence and the nature of consensual sex. All too often, statements like "they didn't say no," or "she was asking for it because of her clothes," are used to justify sexual violence, reinforcing the harmful myth that consent is either implied or automatically granted.(5) These misconceptions not only perpetuate violence but also silence survivors, forcing them to internalise blame, avoid reporting their experiences, and suffer lasting psychological harm. Even those who seek justice often face re-traumatisation, as myths persist within the criminal justice system, and the continued reliance on mediation and conciliation between married couples, often resolved through out-of-court settlements, further reinforces this issue. (5)

This participatory research aims to ignite much-needed conversations about consent, exploring how it is understood and practised in Cambodia, and examining the far-reaching impacts of consensual and non-consensual sex. We seek to normalise discussions about sexuality for all women - including those living with disabilities and indigenous women - as well as individuals with diverse SOGIESC. We also hope that a clearer understanding of sexual consent can help prevent rape and other sexual abuses. By fostering open, inclusive discussions, we can ensure that when it comes to sex, there are no blurred lines: all sex begins with consent.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

Our research team developed the following research objectives to set out what we hoped to discover by undertaking this study:

- *To explore the **current perceptions and attitudes** toward consent within different relationships (both within and outside marriage) by women, men and people in all their diversity.*
- *To understand the **current practices** of consent and **its impacts** on individuals, particularly women in all their diversity.*

1.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. Sexual consent is widely acknowledged as important in Cambodia, with nearly all research participants recognising its value and wishing for the normalisation of conversations around it. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding what consent truly entails, including which actions require consent and how it is practiced.

2. Participants described consent through various dimensions: the principle of reciprocity, the necessity of both verbal and physical agreement, and the importance of ensuring that verbal consent aligns with physical consent. They stressed that consent must be specific, freely given, and revocable at any time, while highlighting harmful assumptions about consent and the critical need to respect a refusal or “no.”

3. Consent is often neglected within heterosexual marriages due to the assumption that marriage implies perpetual consent. Many participants noted that women are frequently coerced into sexual activities under this premise. In contrast, discussions about consent appear more normalised in non-marital, committed relationships, and hookup culture, particularly outside heterosexual contexts.

4. Virginity culture, Chbab Srey, and traditional gender norms significantly shape attitudes towards consent, pressuring women to confine sexual activity to marriage, defer to men initiating sex, and suppress talks around their sexuality.

5. Barriers to openly discussing consent include its taboo and stigmatised nature, lack of understanding, and limited spaces for dialogue, particularly within families and schools. Participants noted that discussions about consent primarily occur between partners, friends, and within the NGO sector.

6. Beyond being sexual violence, non-consensual sex results in physical harm, diminished opportunities, social stigma, increased risk of further violence, mental health challenges, and strained relationships. These effects are exacerbated by the lack of support for survivors of sexual violence.

7. Consensual sex has positive impacts, including empowering individuals to assert their rights over their bodies, improving mental and sexual health, and fostering healthy relationships. At the community level, discussions and practices around consent reduce cases of sexual violence and normalise respectful sexual relationships.

8. Testimonies revealed unique challenges faced by different communities:

- LGBTQIA+ individuals often encounter more open discussions about consent, but can face the threat of forced marriage and are at a higher risk of sexual violence and harassment.
- Indigenous people experience early marriage and rigid gender norms, with a high risk of coercion, particularly within marriage. These challenges are further compounded by limited education and lack of access to information.
- People with disabilities face heightened vulnerability to violence, challenges in asserting bodily autonomy, and barriers to seeking justice, with experiences varying by type of disability.

9. Urban residents are generally perceived to have a better understanding of consent than those in rural areas, although the gap is narrowing due to increased access to information through social media. Younger people are similarly seen as having a better grasp of consent than older generations. However, factors such as level of education, identity, and access to support systems seem to have a more significant impact than geography or age on understanding and practicing consent.



2

METHODOLOGY



2. METHODOLOGY

This research study applied Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) principles in its design and development. According to the APWLD, who have pioneered FPAR research praxis in the region, FPAR is a method of investigating social issues that directly involves the participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving.

It is a "way for researchers and participants to join in solidarity to take collective action, both short and long term, for social change" [6]. FPAR also thoroughly integrates feminist perspectives and processes, as well as capacity building and knowledge sharing.

To this end, a diverse team of 12 young local researchers with lived experience of sexuality and issues of consent was engaged to co-design the research. In an effort to address potential power dynamics within the research team, we made a deliberate decision to include only women and gender-diverse individuals as members of the ARs team, while involving men exclusively as research participants. This approach was chosen to mitigate power imbalances that could emerge as the research progresses, ensuring a safe space for sharing experiences and ideas on this sensitive topic.

The action research team comprised volunteers based in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap Province from various backgrounds, including young women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, an indigenous woman, and a married woman. The team were trained in ethical research principles and data collection techniques, and participated in the entire process of the study. Seven ARs contributed to the write-up of sections.

Methodology (Cont)

A primarily qualitative approach employed semistructured interviews with women, men, people with diverse SOGIESC, people living with disability and indigenous people allowing the researchers the opportunity for flexible and in-depth discussions. The 60 qualitative interviews were conducted in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Ratanakiri. Those interviews were supplemented with an online survey.

Finally, five participants from CSOs working on sexual and reproductive health rights issues, people living with disability and gender equality were interviewed to provide insights on sexual consent in Cambodia, as well as to share their own experiences and learnings.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER
NON MARRIED WOMEN	19
MARRIED WOMEN	6
NON MARRIED MEN	11
MARRIED MEN	4
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (PWD)	5
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE (IP)	5
LGBTIQ+ IDENTIFIED INDIVIDUALS	11
CSO WORKERS	5
TOTAL	60



Coding and analysis

A primarily qualitative approach [7] employed semistructured interviews with women, men, people with diverse SOGIESC, people living with disability and indigenous people allowing the researchers the opportunity for flexible and in-depth discussions. The 60 qualitative interviews were conducted in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Ratanakiri. Those interviews were supplemented with an online survey. Finally, five participants from CSOs working on sexual and reproductive health rights issues, people living with disability and gender equality were interviewed to provide insights on sexual consent in Cambodia, as well as to share their own experiences and learnings.

Extracts from participants are labelled with either the letter 'Y' for younger (millennials or gen Z), 'O' for older, and 'C' for CSO participants. The suffix 'W', 'M' and 'NB' denotes woman, man or non-binary. Other information after the hyphen (-) like 'M' for married, 'S' for single, 'I' for indigenous or 'LWD' for living with disability add further details on the identity of the participant. For example, OW1-M is an older woman participant that is married, while YM-SG2 is a younger male participant that is both single and gay, the 2nd interviewed. The five participants working for CSOs are labelled from C1 through to C5.

Online survey

In addition to interviews, an online survey was conducted to provide more quantitatively-oriented insights, and received **500** responses. The data was analysed using Excel and the findings are included throughout each section of this report. Because this is a qualitative study that seeks to explore the depth and richness of experiences, rather than a large-scale quantitative survey, it cannot and does not aim to be representative of the Cambodian population as a whole.





3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of sexual consent has its roots traced back to early feminist movements. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, women were viewed as their husbands' property. As Lévy-Guillain observes, "once married, partners (were) not on an equal footing: women (did) not have the freedom to choose the sexual acts to participate in; their sexuality merge(d) with marital duty"(8). Early feminists began challenging traditional gender norms, questioning the notion that women were simply the property of their husbands. They defended women's right to choose their partners and control their own bodies. While consent wasn't always the central focus, it was implicitly touched upon within broader discussions on women's autonomy and rights.

The 1960s to the 1980s marked a pivotal shift with the rise of second-wave feminism. While not always explicitly framed in terms of consent, these feminists advanced the idea of sexual autonomy, sexual rights and reproductive freedoms. They critiqued the ways in which patriarchy and power dynamics shaped sexual relationships, noting how consent was often ignored or coerced. Second-wave feminists emphasised that women had the right to say no, signaling a growing awareness that sexual violence was not just an infringement on a husband's property but an act of personal harm.

By the 1990s, third-wave feminism brought the issue of sexual consent to the forefront of public discourse. Third-wave feminists not only stressed the importance of women's agency over their bodies but also advocated for the need for explicit consent in all sexual encounters. The emphasis on individual agency and mutual consent grew stronger, framing sexual consent as a fundamental ethical principle.

The #MeToo movement, which gained momentum in the late 2010s, further propelled sexual consent into the public sphere, emphasising the necessity for clear affirmative consent as one of the means to counter and respond to the pervasive issues of sexual violence and harassment.

Despite widespread agreement that sexual activity must be consensual, debates persist over how consent is understood and practised. In fact, sexual consent is a complex and multifaceted concept, often shaped by social norms, power dynamics, and individual interpretations of a given situation. In Cambodia, as in many societies, ambiguity surrounds the definition of both sexual consent and sexual violence, making it difficult to address these issues effectively.

For instance, Hardt observes that women in various studies struggle to define sexual harassment, which includes behaviors like verbal abuse, stalking, and physical violence. (9) The boundaries often blur due to contextual factors like the perpetrator's intent, age, or socio-economic status, complicating the distinction between harassment and consensual interactions.(10)

Similarly, Abuya et al. highlight the challenges of understanding consent in relationships where significant age differences or transactional elements exist, further exacerbating power imbalances and undermining women's ability to freely consent. (11) These dynamics reflect broader societal trends in which structural gender inequality compromises women's bodily autonomy in sexual relationships.

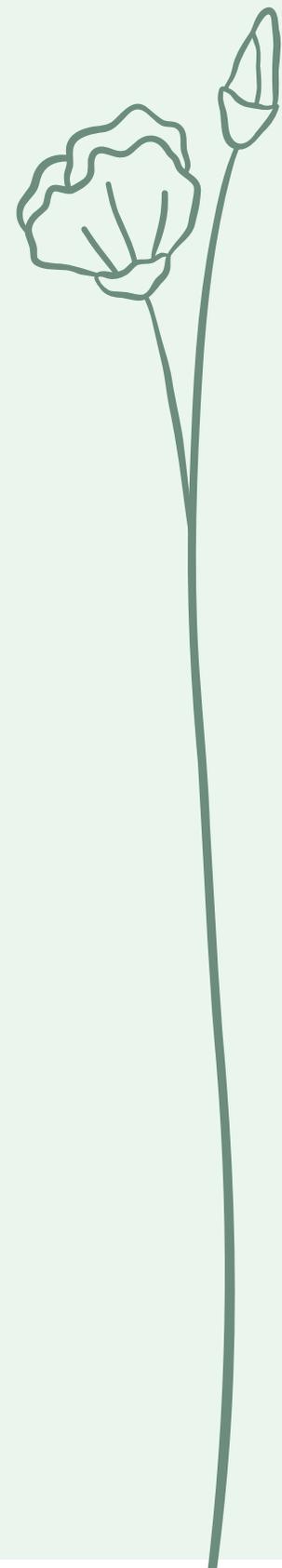
Finally, a study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) found that many young Cambodians lack access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education, with marginalized communities facing the greatest barriers. (12) This educational gap contributes to widespread misunderstandings about consent and can hamper efforts to promote respectful and consensual sexual relationships. (13)

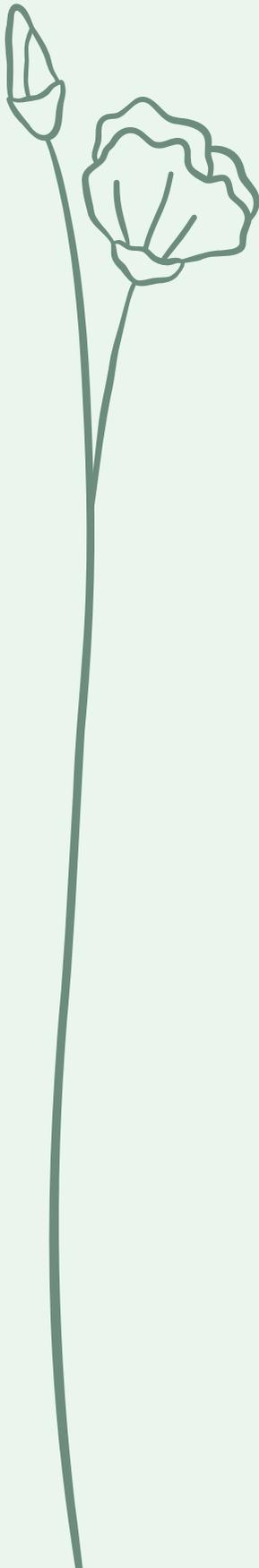
Misconceptions rooted in gender norms

The understanding of sexual consent in Cambodia is deeply influenced by social norms that obscure a clear definition of consent. These norms, particularly those tied to traditional gender roles around sexuality perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce power imbalances between sexual partners.

Robertson notes that discussions about sex, especially women's sexuality, are often considered taboo, contributing to a pervasive cultural silence (14). This reluctance to openly discuss sexuality limits women's ability to assert and exercise their sexual rights, as well as diminishes their agency to make informed decisions about their sexual autonomy.

A significant influence on Cambodian gender norms is found in the Chbab Srey and Chbab Bros, the traditional codes of conduct that dictate acceptable behaviour for women and men respectively.(15) The Chbab Srey urges women to be submissive, particularly within marriage, where they are expected to prioritise their husband's needs, including sexual ones, over their own. (16) This dynamic reinforces the belief that women are passive participants in sexual relationships, which restrict their ability to express sexual desire or refuse sex. As a result, sexual consent is often dismissed or misunderstood, especially in the context of marriage.





The blurred lines in marriage

Perceptions and expectations on marriage deeply complicate the practice of consent within those relationships in Cambodia. Marital rape is not legally recognised, and societal expectations often discourage open discussions about sex within marriage, particularly for women. Robertson describes how Cambodian women are often expected to comply with their husbands' sexual demands, regardless of their own desires. (17) This compromises women's bodily autonomy in marriage by negating the concept of consent in these relationships.

A 2022 report on violence against women in Cambodia highlights the prevalence of intimate partner violence, including marital rape, but notes that such acts are rarely prosecuted as criminal offenses (18). This is largely due to societal attitudes that view marriage as providing perpetual consent, making it often difficult for women to assert their right to refuse sex. These ingrained beliefs contribute to high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) and a culture of impunity against perpetrators.

Rainy Sang's thesis further highlights that many Cambodian women, particularly in rural areas, do not see themselves as victims of sexual coercion. Unaware of their sexual rights, they often comply with the rules of the Chbab Srey, especially when it comes to mild forms of coercion, such as verbal, psychological, or arousal coercion.(19) Despite enduring negative psychological and emotional impacts, these women frequently fail to recognise their experiences as forms of abuse. (20)

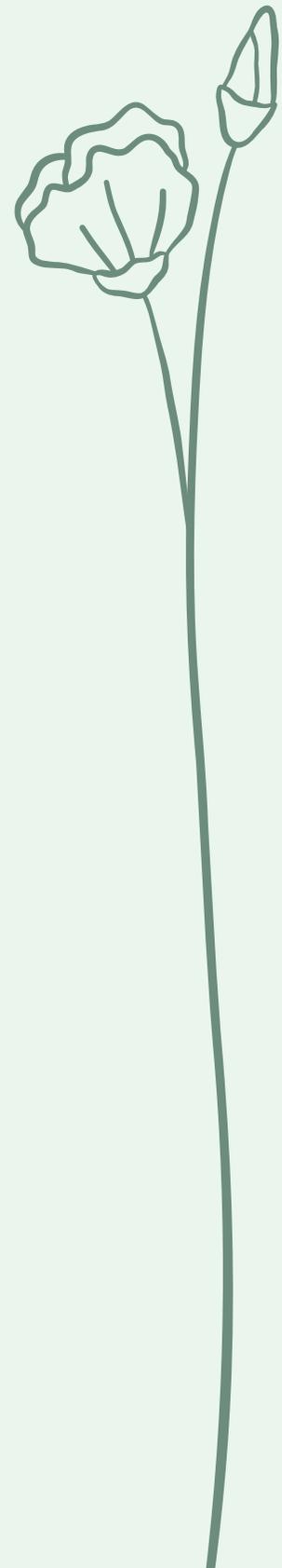
Finally, the lack of social and legal recognition of marital rape reinforces these harmful norms, leaving women without sufficient protection against sexual violence within their own homes. (21)

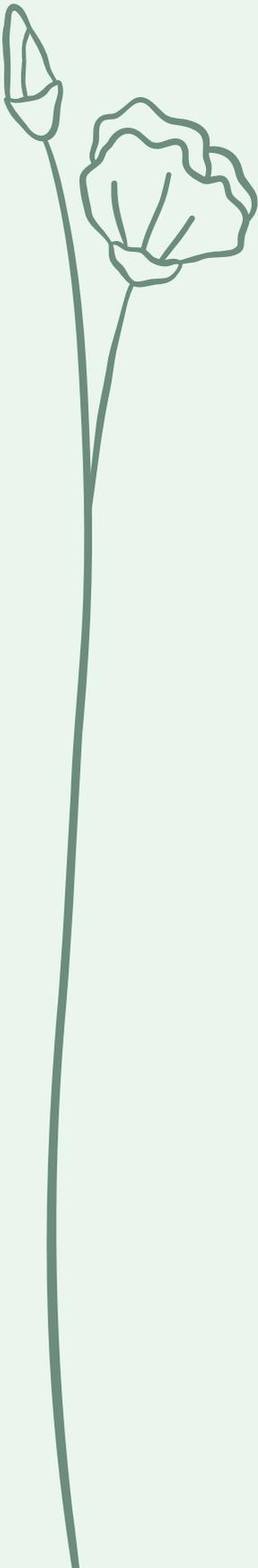
Gendered power dynamics and sexual coercion

Gender roles and power dynamics also shape how sexual consent is negotiated. In heterosexual relationships, men's sexual desires are often privileged over women's bodily autonomy. Jozkowski et al. (2017) and Hirsch et al. (2019) found that men are typically seen as sexual initiators, while women are expected to act as gatekeepers. This dynamic reinforces male entitlement to sex and can lead men to interpret a woman's lack of resistance as implicit consent. (22) Consequently, many women may feel pressured to comply with sexual advances, even when they do not fully consent, further complicating the boundaries of consensual sex.

Women also face significant external pressures and expectations. For instance, our research on virginity culture revealed that women are expected to remain "pure" or like a "white cloth" before marriage to preserve their value for their future husbands (23). These restrictions on women's sexuality are framed as matters of morality (24), associating sex with marriage and placing immense pressure on women to conform to rigid social norms.

In addition, our research on divorce and Rainy Sang's thesis, highlighted how cultural and familial expectations can compel women to meet their husbands' demands, including sexual ones. In many cases, women are blamed and shamed for an unsuccessful marriage, even when they are victims of violence (25). These societal norms perpetuate the idea that a woman's sexual autonomy is secondary to her role as a wife, making it difficult to challenge coercion within intimate relationships.





Limitations of legal frameworks

Victim-blaming is a common narrative surrounding sexual violence response in Cambodia. It consists in blaming the victim's appearance or behavior for sexual violence. By such, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and displaces the responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim.

Misconceptions about consent further exacerbate the issue. As reported by the *Khmer Times*, flawed assumptions often infiltrate law enforcement, where authorities struggle to clearly define sexual violence, leading to cases being dismissed or informally resolved (26). The lack of explicit mention of consent and various forms of sexual violence in the law leads to loopholes, victims not being taken seriously, and perpetrators escaping accountability.

Cambodia's legal framework on sexual violence and consent remains inadequate, with narrow definitions that fail to offer protection. The Criminal Code only references consent to set the age of consent at 15. It vaguely defines rape as involving "violence, coercion, threat" (Art.239), which tends to exclude non-violent forms of rape. Moreover, there is a lack of legal provisions to address the specific needs of men and LGBTQIA+ individuals facing sexual violence, with cases involving them being rare and rarely prosecuted. This creates significant gaps in both protection and justice.

These deficiencies are evident in the treatment of sexual violence cases within Cambodia's justice system, where marital rape and many forms of intimate partner violence are often not recognised as serious offenses by the law. Authority and law enforcement frequently fails to properly document and prosecute these crimes, portraying the problem as a private matter and leaving survivors without legal recourse or with a light conviction and/or short sentence. This failure of the legal framework to address sexual violence in all its forms reinforces societal attitudes that minimise its seriousness.



4

PERCEPTIONS & ATTITUDES

1. PERCEPTIONS & ATTITUDES

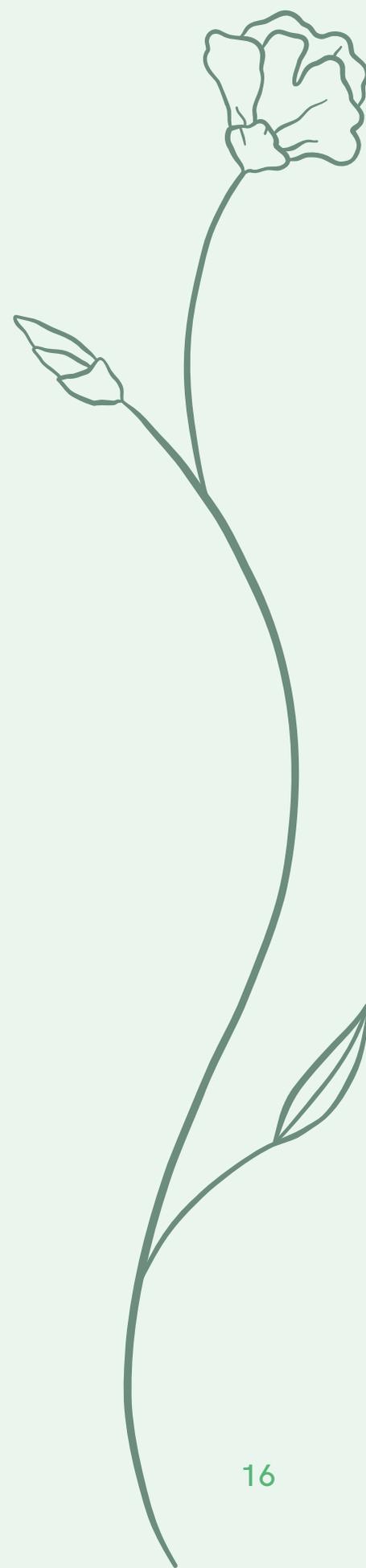
4.1 Understanding of sexual consent

Sexual consent appears to be highly valued in Cambodia. When asked about the importance of obtaining clear consent before engaging in sexual activity, 97.2% of survey participants responded that it was either important or very important, with 77.8% identifying it as very important (see graph 1, p17). However, despite this strong recognition of its importance, our research revealed that significant misconceptions, blind spots and stereotypes still surround the concept of consent.

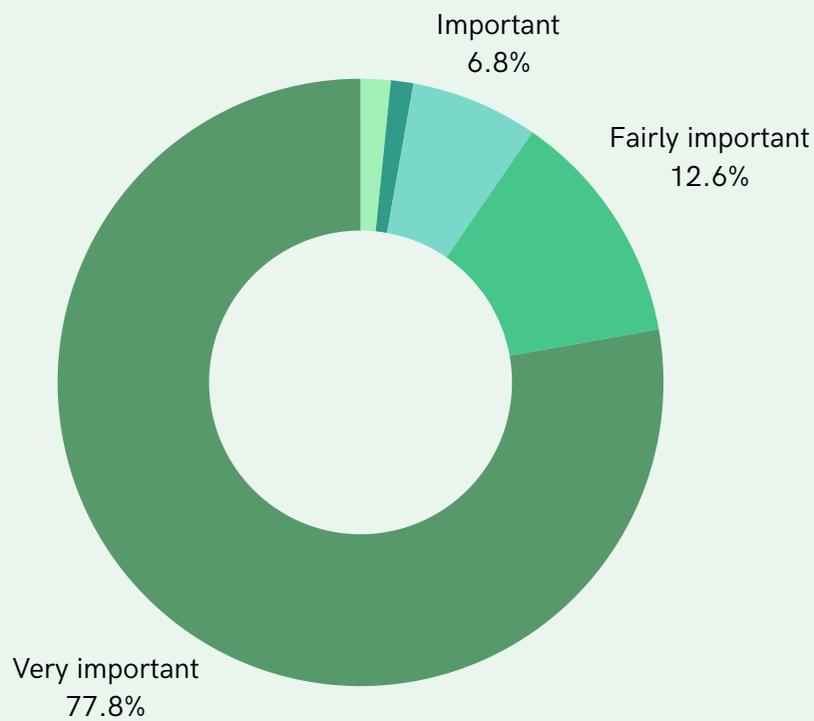
Indeed, our survey revealed that only 3.4% of respondents believe that Cambodian people have a "really clear" understanding of sexual consent, while more than half acknowledged that there is no clear understanding of the concept at all (see graph 2, p17).

Beyond the legal framework, which itself is often misunderstood, as only 11.1% of respondents were aware that the legal age of consent in Cambodia is 15, individual conceptions of consent tend to vary and lack clarity, particularly when it comes to its multiple dimensions. As a CSO worker explained:

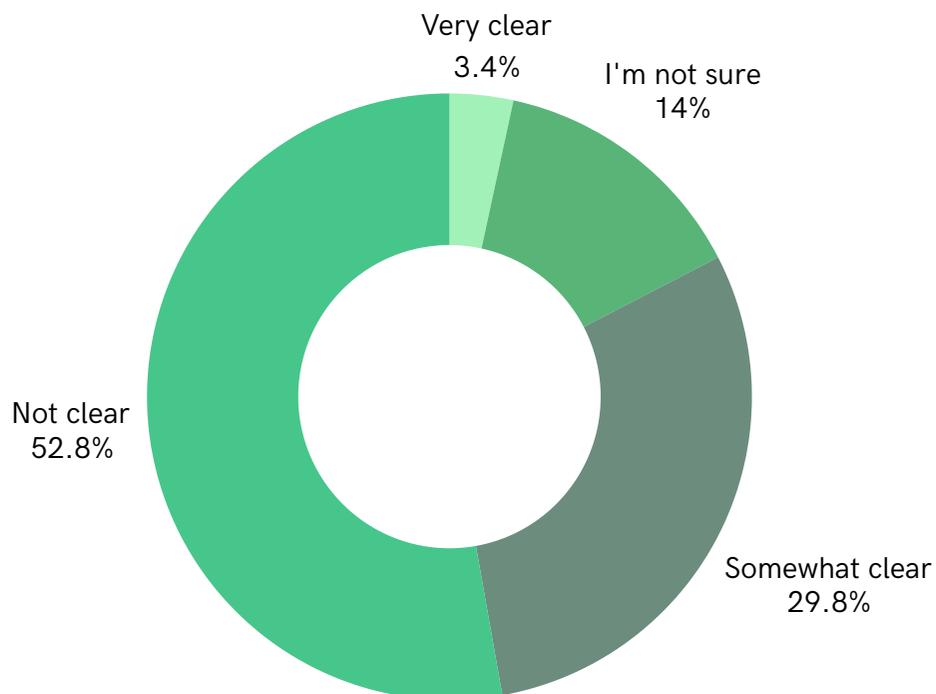
"Consent is not inherently complicated to understand—YES means YES, and the absence of YES means NO. However, the layers and nuances of sexual consent lead to confusion for many people, which is worsened by factors like patriarchy, misogyny, and victim-blaming culture. People find it hard to understand the concept ("what is consent and what is not consent?)" (YW-S-C1)



Graph 1: On a scale from 1 to 5, how important do you think it is to obtain clear consent before engaging in any sexual activity?



Graph 2: Do you think Cambodian people have a clear understanding of sexual consent?



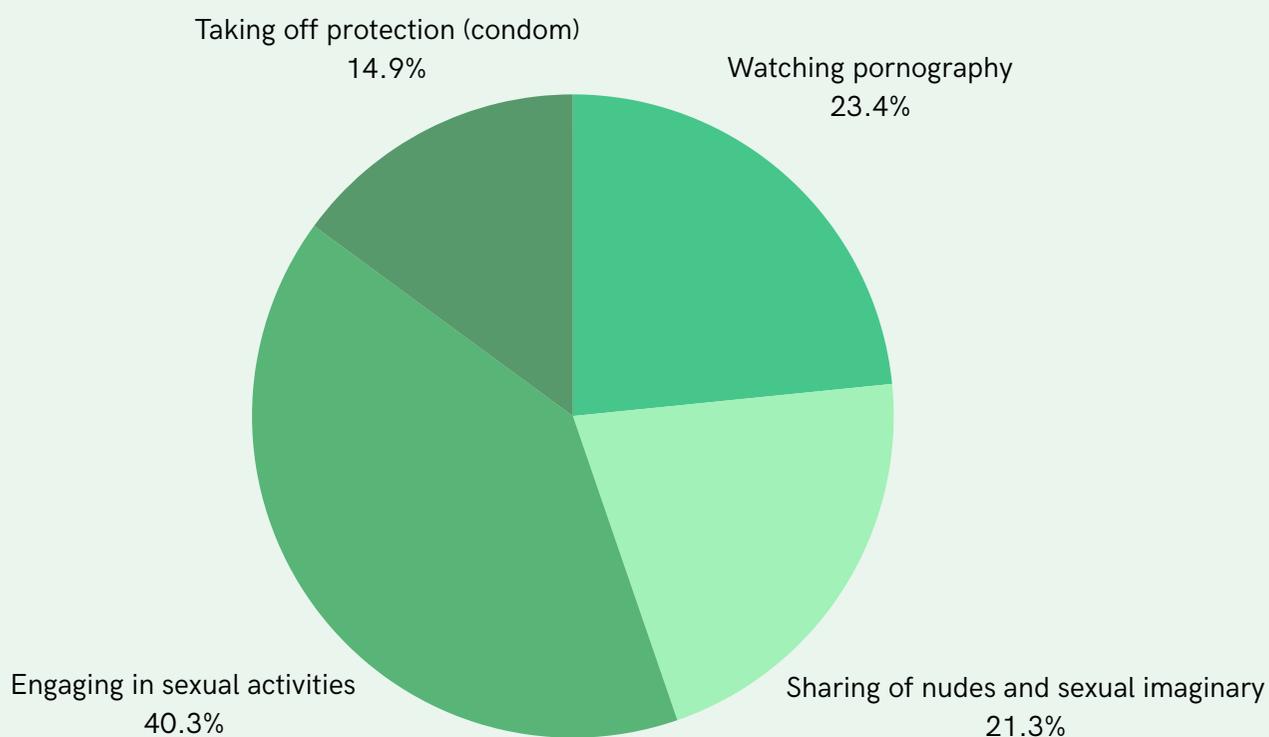
A major source of confusion lies in what actions require consent. While most respondents agreed that consent is necessary for engaging in sexual activity, only 21.3% believed it was required for sharing nudes, and just 14.9% thought consent was needed for removing condoms (see graph 3). Yet, sharing nudes, posting them online, or removing condoms without the other person's consent or knowledge constitutes sexual abuse.

When asked what consent means to them, many participants emphasised the idea of reciprocity. For instance, a young man defined consent as "***an agreement between two or more parties to engage in sexual activity***" (YM-S3), while a young woman described it as "taking into account what the other person feels" (YW-S17).

Interviewees also distinguished between **verbal and physical consent**, with most giving more importance to verbal consent. One key reason highlighted was that physical consent can be seen as not enough or potentially misleading. For example, silence - which can also be caused by shyness, discomfort or shock - can be misinterpreted. As a young woman explained:

"There are people who think that silence means YES, which I don't agree with. To me, unless the person says 'I Agree,' it's not a YES" (YW-SM1).

Graph 3: In your opinion, sexual consent covers:



Our survey reflected this confusion: when asked whether "silence or lack of resistance means consent," 32.4% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed, while 39.4% disagreed (see graph 4). This underscores the importance of clear, affirmative consent, as one young woman concluded:

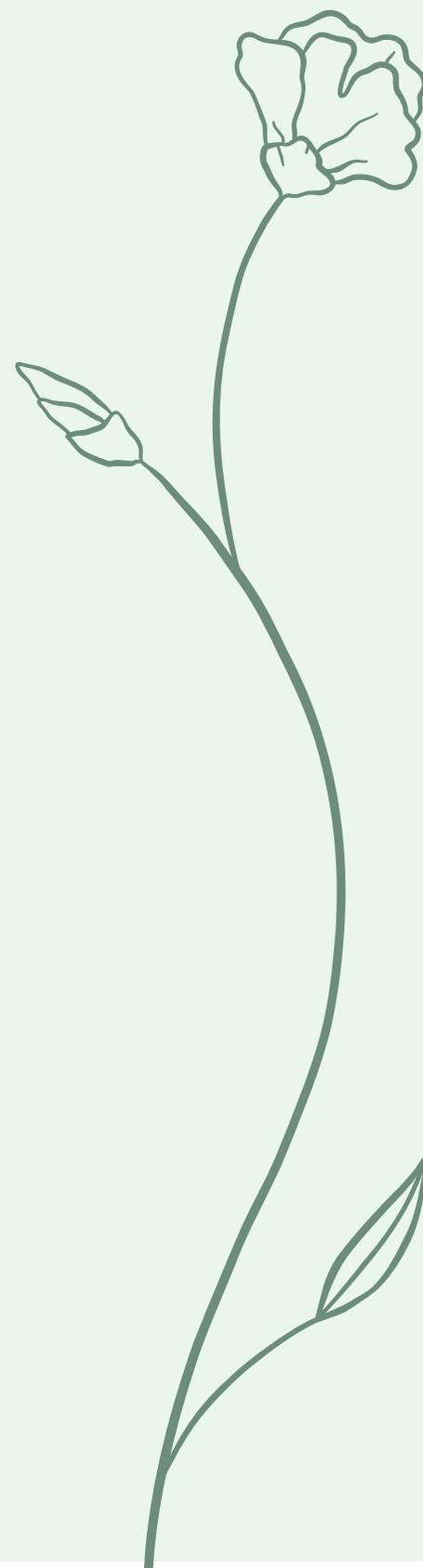
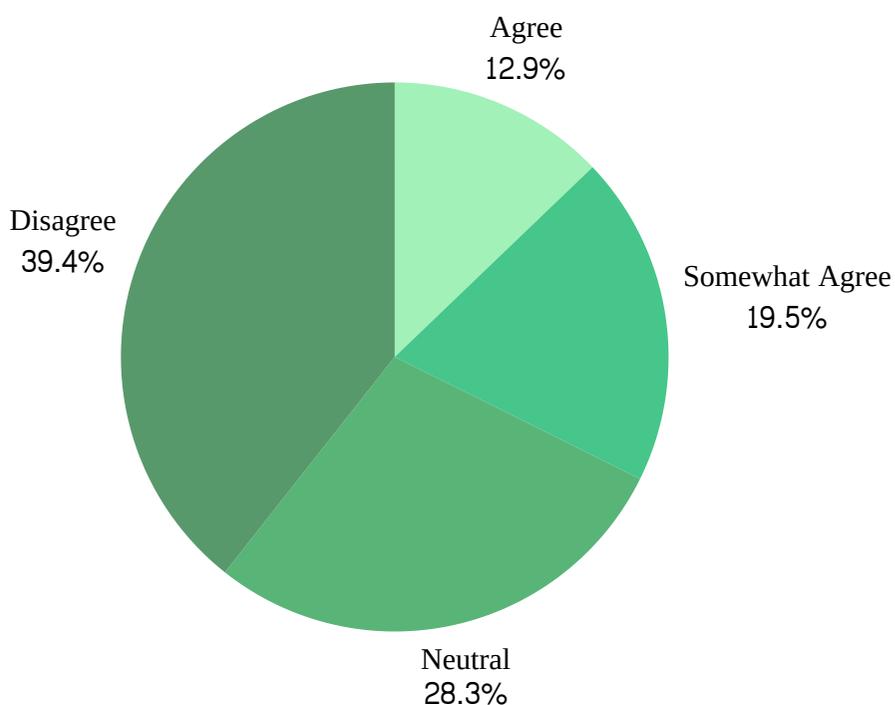
"Consent means both partners say 'YES' to sex"
(YW-SM2).

A few participants like a young married indigenous women, highlighted the importance of noticing the alignment of verbal and physical languages when interpreting consent.

She suggested:

"every couple should look whether body language aligns with verbal consent or not... consent should be both physical AND verbal not OR" (YW-SM-12)

**Graph 4: Do you agree with the following statement:
"Silence or lack of resistance means consent."**



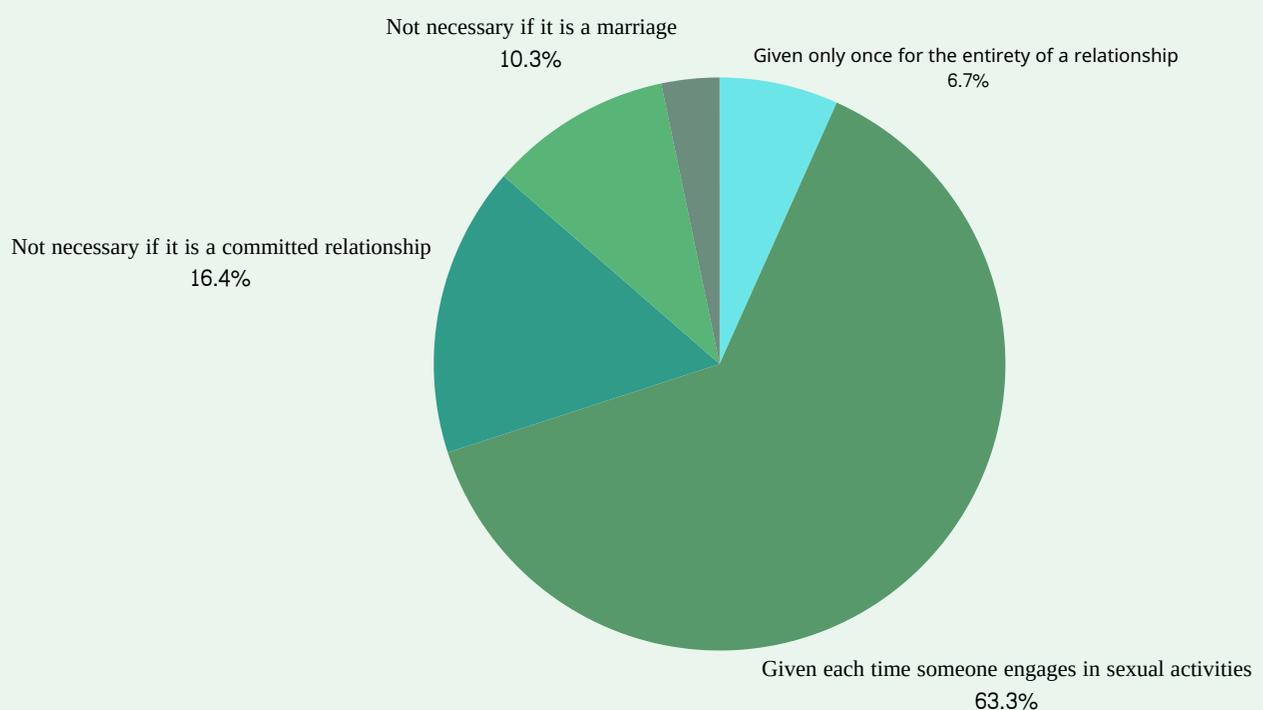
Additionally, 63.3% of survey respondents view consent as something that must be given each time individuals engage in sexual activity. However, 26.7% believe it is unnecessary within marriage or a committed relationship, and 6.7% think that consent is only required at the beginning of a relationship (see graph 5).

Most participants agreed that consent includes the right to withdraw it at any time. Some common myths were challenged, such as the notion that a woman agreeing to visit a man's home automatically implies consent. One young woman confronted this belief, questioning, *"Why is it considered rape when the woman agrees to go to a guest house with a guy? She agreed to go to the guest house, so it meant she agreed to sex too."* She added, *"To me, we can change our mind [withdraw consent] anytime after giving it. If the person says NO, it has to stop right there. We cannot continue and argue that they had already agreed"* (YW-SM1).

It's essential to clarify that a woman going somewhere with someone does not imply consent. Even if she initially planned or intended to engage in sex, she retains the right to change her mind at any point. Another young man emphasized, *"Consent can be given at the beginning of sex, but you can stop anytime during it. If you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to stop... continuing to engage in sex after the other person has withdrawn consent is rape"* (YM-S2).

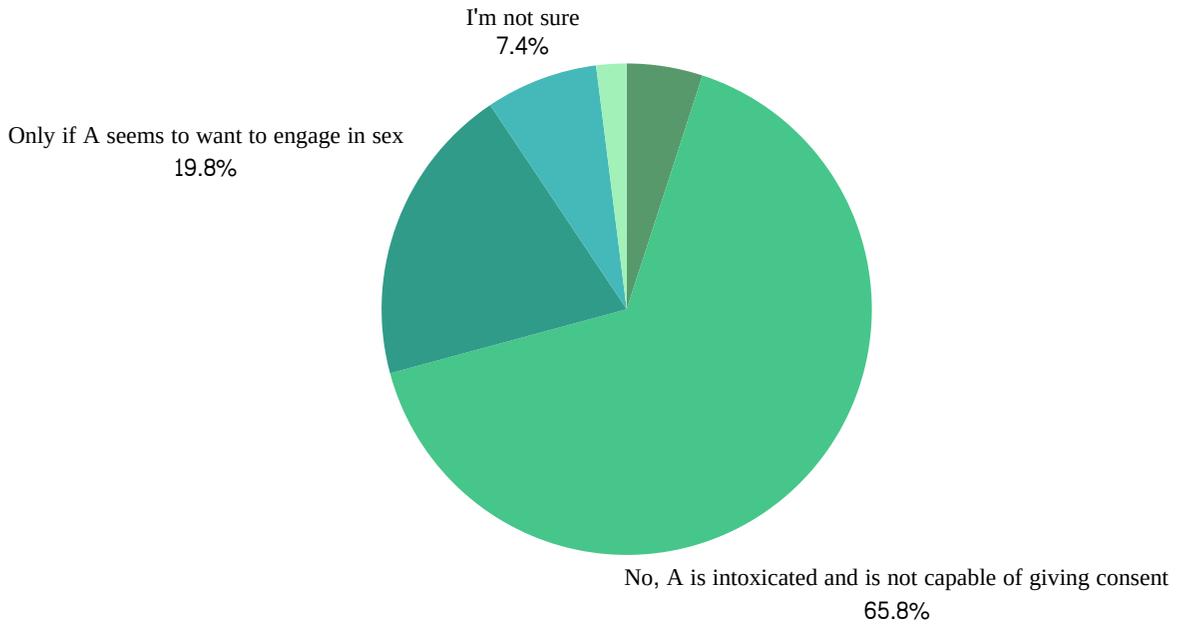
However, withdrawing consent is not always seen as straightforward, particularly if a partner reacts with frustration or misunderstanding. For example, a young single man admitted feeling uneasy about the concept of withdrawing consent mid-intercourse, saying, *"I agree with almost every part of this statement except the part about withdrawing consent at any stage of sexual intercourse. It could be beneficial, but it seems too immediate in practice and may feel unfair to men."* (YM-S8).

Graph 5: Do you believe that consent should be:

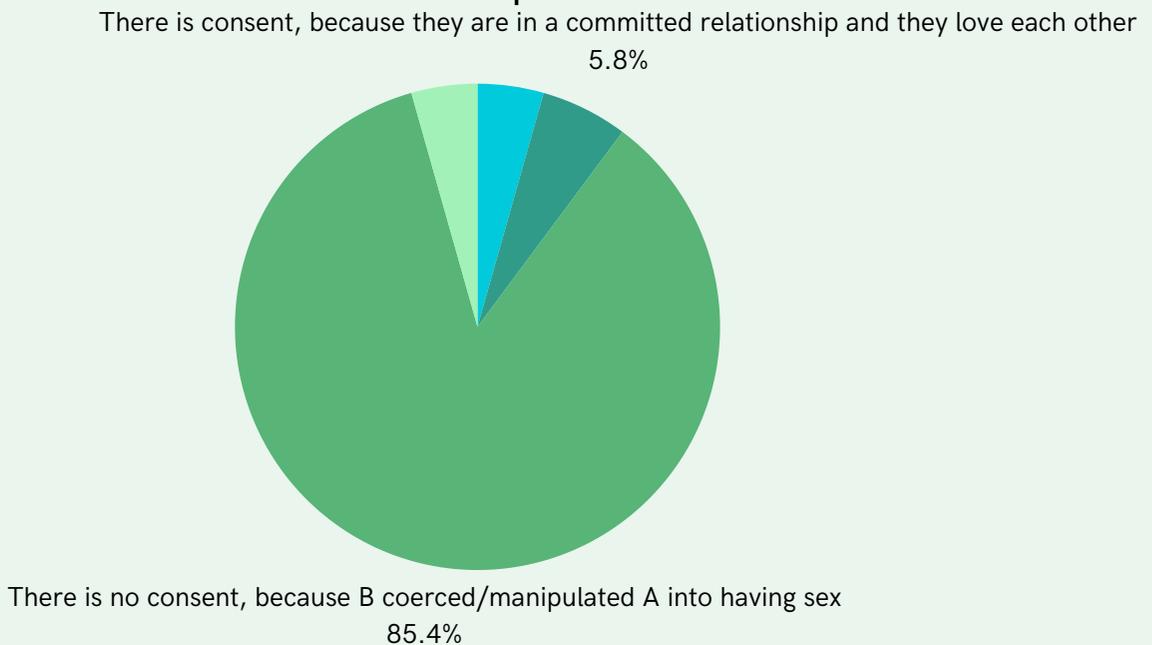


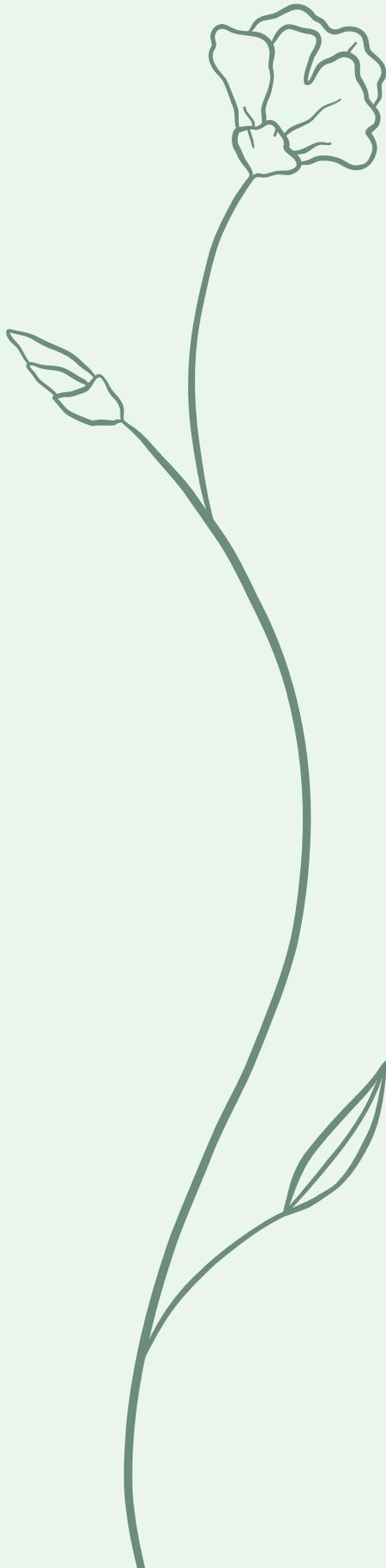
Consent is also understood as being freely given, meaning without any form of intoxication or coercion. Survey participants were presented with scenarios to assess the presence or absence of consent. In one scenario, more than half of the participants recognised that an intoxicated person could not provide free consent (see Graph 6). In another scenario, 85.5% identified that coercive acts, such as threatening to end a relationship, did not constitute free consent (see Graph 7).

Graph 6: "At a party, A and B talked and laughed together for a long time. A gets really drunk and can barely walk straight." Can B bring A home and engage in sex? (P1)



Graph 7: A and B have been in a committed relationship for six months. A is not ready to have sex. Then, B tells A that if A does not have sex, B will leave. A is afraid of losing B, so A accepts.





One young man described consent as "the agreement between two people to have sexual intercourse without any coercion or force." However, the survey did not specifically address pressures from authority figures, which remains an area for further exploration.

A young single woman insightfully added that consent is not only about having the right to say "no" but also about respecting and accepting a "no" from others. She explained:



"No matter how much we teach women and men to say no and learn how to say no, if the other person doesn't accept it, it's still difficult. Some people find the word 'no' very offensive. So I think respecting consent is both about the ability to say no and the willingness to accept it." (YW-S11).

4.2 Consent within marriage and outside marriage

4.2.1 Consent within marriage

"People see marriage as consent" (YM-G5).

In Cambodia, marriage is often viewed as implicit, ongoing consent to sexual activity, with many believing spouses have the obligation to fulfill each other's desires. For some, a wife is expected to meet her husband's needs even when she feels unwell or unwilling, seeing this as part of her *"duty."* One older woman expressed, "As a spouse, I believe that when we decide to have sex, it is an agreement between the husband and wife. Even if we occasionally argue because my husband wants it, I think that it is our duty as wives to fulfill our husband's needs" (OW-SM4). As a young woman noted:

"Society tells women that their life and body belong to their partner once they are married" (YW-SM1).



Thus, strong social norms suggest that, once married, a woman's body belongs to her husband, blurring the line between consent and obligation. These norms reinforce the belief that marriage serves as perpetual consent to sexual relations, making it difficult to recognize marital rape or coercion as possible.

Financial dependence can further impact women's ability to say *"no,"* as economically dependent wives may fear conflict or infidelity if they refuse. In contrast, women who contribute financially often feel somewhat freer to express their own needs. However, stereotypes suggesting that men have stronger sexual drives than women persist, making it socially acceptable for wives to prioritize their husband's desires over their own. One participant reflected, *"Although I can technically say 'no,' I feel pressure to agree to avoid upsetting my husband or to keep him faithful"* (OW-SM3).

While some participants argue that consent should remain explicit within marriage, social expectations overshadow this, often leaving women feeling they cannot refuse.

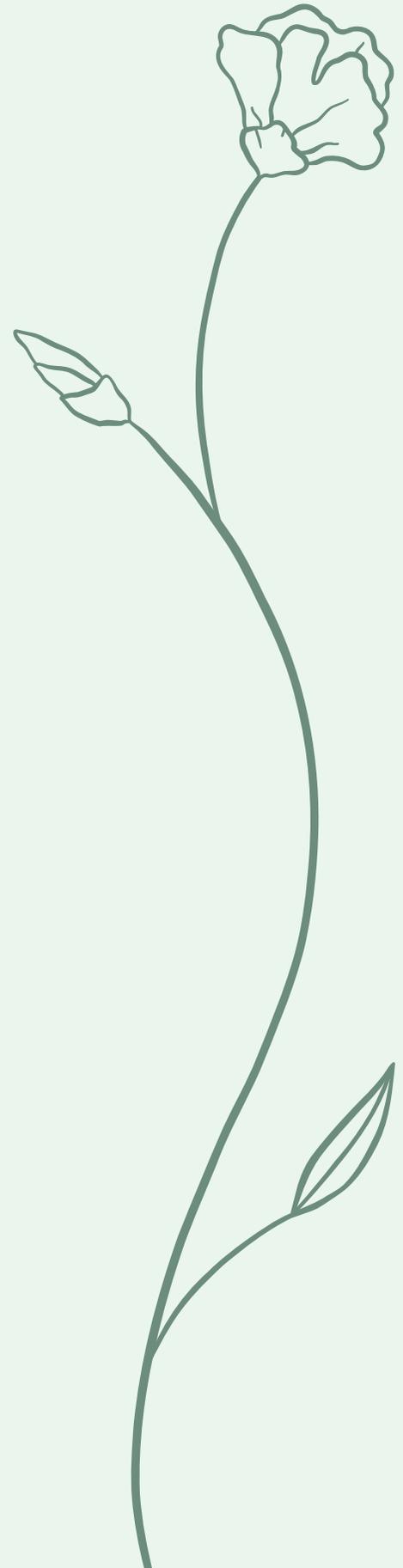
4.2.2 Consent outside marriage

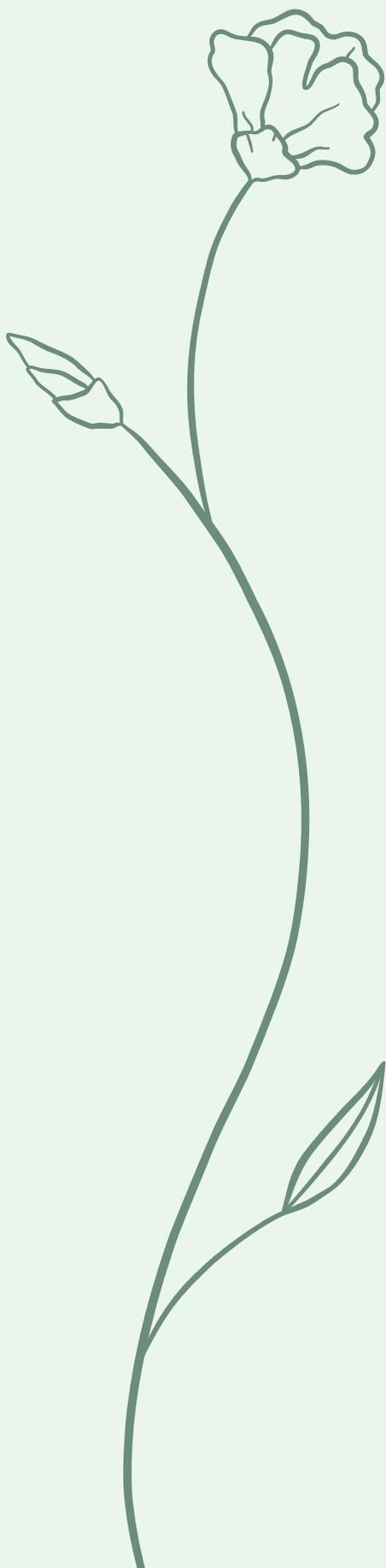
According to our research participants, consent outside marriage tends to be more openly discussed, although practices vary depending on the relationship type and individual characteristics. For those in intimate relationships, hookups, or casual dating, communication around sexual consent is typically more direct. Partners often engage in clear discussions about when and how they want to be involved in sexual activities, showing respect for each other's decisions.



"I think people in hookup culture or casual relationships discuss consent because they don't know each other well. They want to avoid confusion by ensuring that both have agreed before having sex. But for those in long-term relationships, they may assume consent without asking because they believe they know each other well" (YW-SM-12).

Among young couples, especially high school students, consent may be discussed but is not always respected. One partner may feel pressured to agree to sexual activity as a form of sacrifice for the relationship. A young woman shared, *"In high school, I heard people say, 'If we're lovers, we have to sacrifice [by having sex] for each other—that's love.' Young girls sometimes feel they need to prove their love this way"* (YW-S18). This reflects a lack of understanding about consent and the influence of social expectations on young people's choices.





In some cases, such as with sex workers, the concept of consent is explicit and formalized as part of the service agreement. Similarly, in “friends with benefits” or one-night stand relationships, consent is typically addressed openly, perhaps more so than in other types of relationships.



“For sex workers, there is an agreement with the client. Consent is part of the exchange, making it clear to both parties”
(YW-S4).

In Cambodia, discussing sexual consent remains a sensitive topic, yet people are beginning to recognise its importance in relationships outside of marriage. One reason for this shift is that partners in non-marital relationships often want to clarify their desires and expectations, ensure mutual respect, and protect themselves from unintended consequences, such as unwanted pregnancy.



“For those who are just dating, they know they need to use protection and discuss consent to avoid challenges related to culture and family expectations. Consent is important to avoid problems down the line”
(YW-S7).

4.3 Roots of perception

4.3.1 Gender Roles & Power Dynamics

"I think the idea of men being a leader in the family still influences heterosexual relationships. So, there are still beliefs and practices that if a man wants sex, the woman needs to agree to it." YW-SM2.

Strict gender roles in Cambodia reinforce harmful stereotypes, such as the belief that men have stronger sexual needs and that women must fulfill them to preserve their relationships. This creates pressure for women to push themselves to meet their partner's needs, often out of obligation. According to one participant, women feel that "if they (woman) can't satisfy him, he'll look elsewhere" (OW-S-LWD1), leaving them with little choice but to comply.

Cultural norms also perpetuate gender inequality, with men often viewed as the primary decision-makers, including when it comes to sex or women's bodies. This dynamic limits women's autonomy, as one participant shared an example, "When a woman wants an abortion, societal pressure makes her feel guilty for even considering it" (YW-S14). These norms restrict women's ability to make personal decisions and reinforce gender-based power imbalances.

”

"When a woman wants an abortion, societal pressure makes her feel guilty for even considering it" (YW-S14).

In many relationships, men are seen as the ones taking the lead in initiating sex, while women might feel pressured to comply, making it challenging to establish clear consent. One young woman described how "married women don't have power over it...you have no choice but to endure it" (YW-S16) highlighting how deeply ingrained societal expectations normalise male dominance.

”

"Married women don't have power over it...you have no choice but to endure it" (YW-S16).

4.3.2 Chbab Srey and the 'proper' Khmer woman

Our research indicates that many Cambodian women feel significant pressure to conform to traditional norms rooted in Chbab Srey, a long-standing moral code that imposes strict expectations on women's behavior, especially within marriage. Participants shared that Chbab Srey emphasises a woman's duty to serve her husband and fulfill his needs, establishing a societal expectation for women to adopt submissive roles and prioritise their husband's desires, including sexual ones. Although Chbab Srey is no longer extensively taught in schools, its values persist in societal attitudes, reinforcing the idea that a "proper" Khmer woman is self-sacrificing and obedient.

Women who do not conform to these ideals often face stigma, as defying these norms is seen as challenging Khmer culture itself. One queer woman explained:

"Chbab Srey (...) played a big role in shaping our mindset about sex. Even though I am open to it, I still feel hesitant and guilty when engaging in sexual activities. Growing up, I was always told not to do this or that" (YW-Q1).

While Chbab Srey teachings were traditionally intended to *"educate women to keep their value and worth"* (YM-S1), our research participants noted that these teachings tend to limit women's autonomy and self-expression, discouraging them from voicing their own feelings or establishing personal boundaries. This ingrained belief that a woman's respectability depends on embodying the *"proper"* woman described in Chbab Srey can hinder women from openly discussing consent or asserting their needs in relationships.

As one young man shared, *"If women discuss sexual topics, others may not consider them as proper women"* (YM-S8). Yet, another young woman emphasised that silencing women on issues related to sex impacts the broader understanding of consent:

"Gender, social, and cultural norms in Chbab Srey prevent people, especially women, from talking about sexual consent openly, which leads to a limited understanding of this issue—not just among women, but also men" (YW-SM1).

4.3.3 The Pressure of Virginity Culture

One young man illustrated this societal pressure by comparing women to *"prohok in a jar—if it breaks, it will smell very bad"* (YM-S9), a metaphor reflecting the stigma and social consequences associated with women's first experience of sex.

Virginity culture in Cambodia places pressure on women to remain virgins until marriage, tying their worth to sexual purity to preserve the family honor. This expectation subjects women to scrutiny, with any sign of premarital sexual activity often seen as shameful. The virginity culture leads women to fear judgment or ostracism if they openly discuss sexual matters and express consent, as they worry about harming their reputation. Virginity culture thus restricts women's freedom to discuss sexuality and assert their rights, reinforcing silence and shame.

An NGO staff highlighted how this stigma impacts women who have premarital sex, sharing *"If a woman has had sex [before marriage], people label her as Srey Khoch [a 'damaged woman']*. A 'good' woman doesn't do this. This means she no longer has the right to refuse sex or say 'no'" (YW-S-C1). She noted that this stereotype is especially damaging for sex workers, explaining *"the label of 'damaged' makes people think sex workers can't say 'no' at all. When a woman loses her virginity, she's seen as losing her autonomy and honor, along with her right to refuse anyone"* (YW-S-C1).

”

"If a woman has had sex [before marriage], people label her as Srey Khoch [a 'damaged woman']. A 'good' woman doesn't do this. This means she no longer has the right to refuse sex or say 'no'" (YW-S-C1).

The importance given to virginity can lead to further or lasting harm. One young man described an outdated but persistent notion: *"There is a belief that if women have sex, their families pressure them to marry that person to protect the family's reputation"* (YM-S2). For many women, these expectations follow them into their marriage. As one young woman shared, *"the pressure around virginity leaves many Cambodian women too embarrassed to talk about sex, entering marriage with little sexual education or experience. This silence makes it difficult to understand or assert consent later on"* (YW-S16).

”

"There is a belief that if women have sex, their families pressure them to marry that person to protect the family's reputation" (YM-S2).



5

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATING SEXUAL CONSENT

5. BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATING SEXUAL CONSENT

Almost all research participants emphasised the importance of communicating consent and normalising open discussions on the topic. Some also noted helpful facilitators for practicing consent, such as recognising signs of reluctance or discomfort and understanding how consent would look like in different scenarios. However, our findings reveal that communicating sexual consent remains a significant challenge for most participants. In fact, a notable number have either experienced non-consensual sex or sexual harassment or know someone close who has.

This chapter examines the challenges in practicing sexual consent, focusing on key barriers to open communication. These barriers include limited understanding and knowledge about consent and a lack of safe spaces for discussion due to its current taboo and stigmatising nature.

5.1 Perceived Barriers

5.1.1 Lack of understanding and knowledge of consent

A significant barrier to communicating consent is a widespread lack of understanding on consent and sexual rights. As one NGO staff member pointed out:

"The understanding of consent is still limited, and many people don't realise they have the right to say no" (YW-B-C4).



This gap in knowledge is deeply rooted in longstanding social and cultural norms, as discussed in the previous chapter, and is further compounded by a lack of comprehensive sex education, which will be explored later.

Many public awareness campaigns mainly focus on issues like HIV and STIs, leaving essential topics like consent largely unaddressed. One interviewee observed, *"I'm only familiar with HIV education. I don't know much about initiating consent"* (OM-SM1).

A queer woman added that while some resources on consent do exist, they are primarily in English and "not widely spread," highlighting an accessibility barrier for many Cambodians (YW-B1). Additionally, there is a clear lack of understanding of what abuse can look like. One interviewee highlighted some commonly overlooked facts:

"Abuse often comes from people we trust the most—whether intimate partners, family members, or close friends. Many people don't realise that men can also be victims of sexual violence" (YW-S14).



This limited awareness prevents individuals from recognising abusive dynamics and contributes to the silence surrounding victims who may not fit common representations.

Understanding of consent also varies across generations and educational backgrounds. A young man noted, *"In my community, people now have a better understanding of sexual consent due to increased education. In the past, with limited education, people didn't understand what sexual consent meant, which led to many cases of sexual violence"* (YM-S1). However, traditional views, particularly among older generations, reinforce gaps in understanding. Another interviewee explained, *"For older people, topics like this were never discussed. In Khmer society, it's expected that after marriage, a woman belongs to her husband, who can do as he wishes."* (YW-S16).

The lack of education and awareness about consent has concerning consequences. Without adequate knowledge, many people remain unaware of their right to refuse or how to respect another person's refusal. As one NGO staff member observed, *"Women, especially young women, are more likely to experience manipulation or coercion into having sex due to a lack of knowledge about their rights and insufficient confidence to set boundaries"* (YW-S-C1). She added that this issue is not confined to younger generations: *"Older women also struggle with understanding and establishing these boundaries"* (YW-S-C1).



"I think it was partly because I was so young at the time, and I didn't fully grasp what violating consent really meant. Back then, I thought non-consensual situations only involved arguments, screaming, or physical resistance, even though a part of me knew something wasn't right.

It was so stigmatised back then that it took me 5-6 years to look back and realise that I didn't actually consent to what happened. I was pressured into agreeing, and I even ended up gaslighting myself into thinking I was the one who consented.

With more experience in SRHR and a deeper understanding of consent, I've been able to look back on that time with a new perspective. Now, I see it clearly as a form of sexual violence. And even now, it's still unbelievable to me that I am a survivor of sexual violence." (YW-S-C1)

5.1.2 The taboo of discussing consent

In Cambodia, social and cultural norms make it difficult to openly discuss consent, even among partners. A young woman noted, *"In my surroundings, this topic is still avoided among peers and, especially, between partners. Many find it uncomfortable to talk about consent"* (YW-S12). Fear of judgement or rejection usually compounds this discomfort. Another young woman shared:

"People avoid talking about consent because they fear others will judge them or label them as immoral" (YW-S1).

Participants frequently described it as a "taboo", "dirty topic", "shameful," or a "topic women shouldn't bring up" (OM-SM1, YW-SM1). This is a particularly stigmatising topic for women; discussing topics related to sex openly often leads to assumptions that they are not "proper" women. One interviewee observed:

"If a woman talks openly about sexual activity, she's immediately labeled as improper. Men, however, can discuss sex without facing the same judgement" (YW-S-11).

This social pressure causes many women to shy away from or avoid these conversations entirely to protect both their reputation and their family's from shame and stigma. A staff member at an NGO elaborated, saying:

"They fear being harshly judged as 'bad' women simply for bringing up the topic, as discussing consent means discussing sex—something that 'good' women are traditionally not supposed to talk about" (YW-S-C1).

This societal pressure is reinforced by the ways sexual violence is addressed in the media and society at large, where victim-blaming is common. As a result, women are often blamed for the violence they endure, further pushing them to conform to the image of a "good woman" who avoids situations where she might express her sexuality or be sexualised.



This taboo also affects those who seek to educate or write about consent. Even individuals knowledgeable in sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) encounter significant barriers when addressing these subjects publicly. The cultural stigma limits open dialogue, discouraging journalists from covering the topic. One participant in journalism training noted, *“None of my fellow trainees write about sexual harassment or consent. Most prefer topics like economics, politics, and education.”* (YW-S4).

Similarly, a feminist advocate that addresses SRHR on social media, faces regular backlash. A young woman explained:



“Whenever she posts new content on SRHR, it receives a flood of negative and shaming comments. This is a clear example of how social norms suppress open discussion and reinforce women’s oppression.” (YW-S-I1).

The deeply ingrained belief that discussing sexual activity is improper sustains a pervasive silence around consent, leaving few opportunities for open and honest conversations.

5.2 Limited spaces to discuss consent

Our research reveals that spaces for discussing consent are extremely limited in Cambodia, particularly at the community level, where these conversations tend to be nonexistent. As one young woman shared:

"Honestly, since I was born and living in my community, there was not a single person who talked about sexual consent—no older people ever mention it. This is just my experience, but even when I came to Phnom Penh, I never heard people discussing consent, perhaps because I'm not working in that field." (YW-S4).

This section examines the various social spaces in Cambodia, exploring how each interacts with consent and identifying the main obstacles and challenges that inhibit open dialogue on the topic.

Family

In Cambodian families, discussions about sexual consent are rare, with many parents feeling unprepared or uncertain about how to approach the topic. One young woman shared, *"even in my family, we never talk about this, and if you want to bring it up, we don't know how or where to start"* (YW-S12). Another young man observed:

"Parents rarely discuss this matter with their children; even if their child is 15 years old and capable of understanding consent, they usually focus on STI prevention instead" (YM-S7).

This communication gap is often rooted in discomfort or a lack of understanding, as many parents remain uninformed or uneasy about discussing broader aspects of sexual and reproductive health, including sensitive topics like abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights. An NGO worker described these challenges:

"When I work with parents and teachers on SRHR topics, many disagree with the approach. Some ask questions like, 'Why are there people loving the same sex?' Male teachers, in particular, often view it negatively, which makes our work challenging." (YW-S-C2).

Addressing consent education, another NGO staff member emphasized the critical role parents could play in equipping their children to communicate confidently about consent, yet she also stressed that wider societal involvement is necessary:



"Parents can create a foundation of knowledge and confidence for kids to communicate consent, but it requires the support of the whole society—teachers, mentors, and friends—to ensure that young people and teenagers have a better understanding of consent" (YW-S-C1).

School

In Cambodian schools, sex education is often limited or omitted due to cultural and social norms as well as parental resistance, leaving significant gaps in students' understanding of sexual consent and rights. One young man noted, *"I believe it is a lack of understanding and education; I am not well-informed on sex education... Our curriculum does not yet cover sex education. As a result, today's kids are unsure where to get sexual health care and are unable to distinguish between sexual consent and rape"* (YM-S2). Although some content is included in high school curricula, teachers often feel pressured to skip these lessons, as another young man explained: *"Due to cultural restrictions, teachers are unable to teach students clearly and they may skip lessons."* (YM-S7).

The taboo surrounding discussions of sexuality also impacts how openly students and teachers can discuss these topics. A young woman recalled:

"When we were in school... we didn't have a lesson on how to protect ourselves or what sexual rights and consent mean. I think it's because it is not included in the school curriculum; they think this topic shouldn't be taught or talked about in public spaces" (YW-S16).

Efforts to include sexual consent education in schools have faced significant pushback from parents. As one NGO staff member shared, *"Some parents don't want us to talk about sexual consent, so there is a pressure. But if we don't talk about consent, they (students) will continue to misunderstand the concept."* (YW-S-C2).

Teachers themselves often feel uncomfortable teaching these subjects, with one NGO staff member noting that many teachers *"are not confident and shy to teach these lessons, which include how to use condoms, infectious diseases, human anatomy, menstruation, and pregnancy... Teachers feel pressure coming from the community too, but we try to boost their confidence."* (YW-S-C2).

This resistance also extends to policymakers, who hesitate to include topics on sex education in school materials due to social sensitivities. As the staff member explained, *"When we work with policymakers... they feel those words are not right."* (YW-S-C2).

Similarly, an indigenous woman reflected on how her community first resisted the SRHR education they received from NGOs, *"In the past, when they delivered workshops about STIs, contraception, and sexual health, people barely wanted to learn because they thought the topic was not appropriate to discuss openly in society"*. (YW-SM-12).

"When we were in school... we didn't have a lesson on how to protect ourselves or what sexual rights and consent mean. I think it's because it is not included in the school curriculum. They think this topic shouldn't be taught or talked about in public spaces." (YW-S16)

Yet, the large majority of our research participants do believe that normalising sex education is essential for fostering a better understanding of sexual rights among youth. These testimonies highlight the need for a broader societal shift to support comprehensive sex education in schools, helping young people make informed decisions about their sexual rights.

Partners

In Cambodia, couples are beginning to discuss sexual consent more openly with their partners, though these conversations tend to remain private. As one interviewee shared, *"couples are more openly discussing sexual consent with their partner rather than among groups or in public"* (YM-S5).

However, according to our research participants, opening up to one's partner can require time, patience, and persistence in overcoming ingrained cultural taboos and social norms. One young woman described her own experience:

"In the early stages of our relationship, it seemed he couldn't accept 'no'... but through communication, explanations, and talking to each other, I could see changes. It was difficult at first... But the more we tried to talk and explain, the closer and stronger our relationship became" (YW-S11).

Her story illustrates how improved communication around consent can help partners grow more comfortable and understanding of each other's needs.

Despite these positive changes, coercion is still common in relationships, especially among younger couples, as they often view consent as a gesture of love rather than as a practice of setting boundaries. *"At first, coercion is more common because, first, sex is for pleasure, and second, consent is seen as an expression of love. People are willing to sacrifice everything for the person they love, even if it means going against tradition"*, explained a young man (YM-S1).

These perceptions show how consent can be blurred and intertwined with ideas of love and sacrifice within early relationships, sometimes at the expense of clear communication.

Friends

For young people in Cambodia, friendship circles have become one of the few open spaces to discuss sexual consent. While Cambodian society at large rarely addresses this topic due to cultural taboos, small, trusted groups of friends often provide a safe environment for these conversations. One participant noted, *"Sexual consent is not being discussed openly in Cambodian society. From my personal experience, only my [friend] circle is talking and understanding this kind of topic, while other Cambodians are still limited in talking about this, and the education system does not include it"* (YM-G2).

Friends who share a mutual interest in understanding consent often initiate discussions within their circles, creating an informal support system. *"My source of information comes from my group of friends as we are curious about the topic of sexual consent, so we started to talk about it,"* explained one young woman (YW-B1). Another participant observed:

"I think young people are open to talking about this, and understanding consent can help them a lot in terms of protecting themselves and learning about themselves" (OW-SM2).

However, even within friendship circles, discussions about consent are selective and carefully navigated. *"We normally discuss this kind of topic with our close friends, but even among close friends, we choose carefully. Some don't judge, but others might,"* shared a young woman. (YW-S16).

This highlights both the importance of friendships in fostering dialogue on consent and the cautious approach many still take to avoid potential stigma, even among friends.



NGOs

For individuals working in the NGO sector in Cambodia, there is often more openness and knowledge on sexual consent due to the nature of their work and exposure to educational initiatives. As one participant explained, *"Because I work in an environment full of knowledge and information, I work in an education field so I listen, my colleague shares with me and I follow on social media. In a school I work with, they also teach about this topic. Therefore, I know well about this matter."* (YW-S3). The access to specialised training and resources equips NGO workers with a better understanding of consent compared to the general public.

Many youth working with NGOs working on SRHR also gain direct knowledge from the projects they participate in. *"I've learned about sexual consent and sex education through attending training as a youth who works at a SRHR NGO. I am currently working on a project about HIV, and that's why I know about it a lot,"* shared a young man (YM-S9). The NGO sector's focus on health and human rights topics creates an environment where conversations about consent are normalised and explored from diverse perspectives.

Moreover, the influence of more progressive values within the NGO sector seems to have contributed to a gradual shift in attitudes among younger generations. *"In this current generation, people tend to open their hearts and minds to learn about sex education. Even though it is not that much, people have started to talk about it more than before. I think the influence of Western culture plays a big role in bringing this topic up for Cambodians,"* explained a young man (YM-S9).

This exposure to global perspectives on consent and sexual rights helps NGO workers to promote openness and understanding on these topics.

6

NAVIGATING THE IMPACTS OF SEXUAL CONSENT



6. NAVIGATING THE IMPACTS OF SEXUAL CONSENT

This part of the report moves to look at women's experiences of navigating the impacts of both non-consensual sex and consensual sex. On one hand, it explores the profound consequences of sexual violence, analysing its life-altering effects based on the responses of our research participants. On the other hand, it highlights the positive impacts of consensual sex, emphasising its role in fostering personal well-being and strengthening relationships.

6.1 Impacts of non-consensual sex

Non-consensual sex constitutes sexual violence and, by definition, rape. As a young man clearly stated: "sex without consent is rape" (YM-B1) Engaging in sexual activity without clear consent violates a person's bodily autonomy and subjects them to physical and emotional harm.

Participants shared personal stories and accounts of people they knew who had experienced non-consensual sex. These stories depicted clear acts of violence which will not be disclosed in this report to protect the privacy and dignity of the victims. However, this section will delve into the impacts of these experiences as described by our interviewees.

Physical harm

Non-consensual sex can lead to severe physical consequences, including injuries, unintended pregnancies, and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Participants in this study highlighted these physical harms and the broader social impacts they entail.

Unintended pregnancies were frequently cited by young participants as a major concern, not only in relation to consent but as a general issue compounded by limited sexual education. A young woman shared, "*I have seen many unintended pregnancies among teenagers. The knowledge of contraception is still low in our society, even about using condoms. I think STIs are still spreading because there are still people who do not practice safe sex.*" (YW-SM2). This lack of education around contraception and safe sex significantly increases the risks of both unintended pregnancies and STIs in particular in cases of non-consensual sex.

In addition to these health risks, societal judgment often leaves survivors isolated and hesitant to seek support or medical assistance. One NGO worker revealed:

"Women surrounded by tradition will face judgment, so they are scared to talk with others, and can take the risk of performing an abortion without proper information. This can lead to unsafe abortions or even suicide, which severely impacts their health" (YW-S-C2).



13

Indeed, fear of stigma can pressure survivors into unsafe decisions, such as seeking clandestine abortions without proper medical guidance, further endangering themselves.

Moreover, the prevalent lack of protection in non-consensual situations often leads to higher rates of infection, including HIV, which remains prevalent, particularly among adults. As an NGO worker noted, "contracting an incurable disease brings lifelong (...) impacts" (YW-S-C2).

Decreased opportunities and social stigma

Women who experience non-consensual sex (and unintended pregnancies or contract sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as a result), outside of marriage, particularly at a young age, often encounter severe social stigma. This stigma can lead to significant life disruptions, including dropping out of school, sacrificing career prospects, and in some cases, being pressured into marriage—even to their perpetrators. One young woman shared, *"Women who get pregnant before marriage and at a very young age lose their opportunity to pursue their studies and careers"* (YM-S5).

Those life changes often create long-term financial instability and limited future prospects, particularly for women who tend to receive minimal emotional and practical support. One participant highlighted the gendered nature of blame: *"Women are always the ones who are blamed, shamed, and disgraced"* (YW-S4). This reality underscores how the social and economic burdens of non-consensual sex disproportionately fall on women, further entrenching gender inequality. The weight of these barriers adds to the physical and mental harm that women endure, reinforcing societal limitations that prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Ultimately, the social stigma surrounding unintended pregnancies following non-consensual sex not only damages women's immediate opportunities but also has lasting effects on their emotional well-being and self-worth, thereby entrenching gendered inequities within the community.

Increased risk of further violence

The lack of respect for consent fosters environments where violence can reoccur or escalate.

For example, victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) are often trapped in abusive relationships that expose them to recurring physical, psychological, or economic abuse. This cycle of coercion makes it particularly challenging for many women to break free. As an older woman observed, *"This is coercion. It happens a lot to women who are dependent on their husbands financially"* (OW-SM3). Financial dependency can keep victims bound to abusive partners, preventing them from escaping or seeking safety.

One young woman shared her experience in an abusive relationship: *"In my previous relationship, when I encountered manipulation or coercion, I would just let it go. But now I've learned my lesson, and whenever I encounter this situation, I speak up immediately and explain to my partner the consequences of his behavior"* (YW-S12). Her story highlights that it is possible to break free from an abusive relationship and learn to re-asserts one's rights.

Furthermore, sex workers face heightened risks of non-consensual sex due to their dehumanisation by society. As an NGO staff member pointed out, *"Sex workers are devalued as members of society... They are not respected in society as other everyday people... When we don't see someone as a fellow human being, we disregard their voice and choices, including their right to say 'no'"* (YW-S-C1). This dehumanisation diminishes sex workers' bodily autonomy, leaving them vulnerable to coercion and violence. Without societal respect for their consent, sex workers are frequently exposed to situations where their right to refuse is ignored, increasing their exposure to both exploitation and violence.

Mental health

The mental health consequences of non-consensual sex are profound and lasting, with victims often experiencing guilt, depression and shame. As one woman shared, *"The impact on a victim's sense of honor and mental well-being is profound. For some, rape or sexual assault can lead to severe mental health issues, even thoughts of suicide"* (OW-S-13). Stigma around non-consensual sex deepens this distress, as victims may fear judgement from their communities, leading to isolation and further mental health struggles. These issues can appear as low self-esteem, anxiety, and enduring trauma. Another participant noted:

"The negative impact would lead to low self-esteem and depression because they didn't feel respected by their partner" (YW-S9). Trauma can persist for years, with some victims struggling to forgive both their abusers and themselves. One young woman said, *"After that moment, I felt like I hated myself for years"* (YW-S-11).

In cultures where virginity is tied to a woman's worth, non-consensual sex can have especially devastating psychological effects. Women who lose their virginity outside of marriage may feel they've lost their value in society. While the journey is difficult and challenging, many find strength in solidarity with others or within their own support systems, and discover that recovery is possible.

Impact on relationships

Non-consensual sex can also deeply affect relationships, including within families and marriages. In some cases, it leads to broken relationships and a loss of trust. An older woman recounted her experience, saying *"I felt very uncomfortable because it seemed like my ex-partner didn't respect me or my decision, and I believe that counts as being coerced into having sex"* (OW-S-12). Married couples may face health risks and psychological damage if consent is not respected, leading to strained relationships and even divorce.

In some cases, the societal stigma of non-consensual sex can damage the reputation of the victim and her family. As a young man explained:

"Women may feel that losing their virginity means they won't be 'proper' for their future husbands. What's even worse is that society often places all the blame on her for being raped, believing she has lost her purity." (YM-S9).

This social stigma can cause families to ostracise women, leaving victims feeling isolated and rejected.

Worsening factor: lack of support for victims

The lack of support and justice for victims of non-consensual sex creates serious barriers to healing and recovery. Without emotional and mental health support, victims often face lasting psychological harm. An older woman noted, *"if they are alone, with no emotional support, it can lead to serious mental health issues, including suicide."* (OW-SM3). According to a young queer woman, resources are scarce, especially in rural areas, and many victims face discrimination when seeking help, adding to their isolation and trauma (YW-L1). *"For those living in rural areas, it is even harder to get support and justice,"* she shared (YW-L1).

Social stigma also discourages victims from reporting, as they fear judgment and shame. A young woman observed, *"Society tends to ask, 'why would a woman report that? It will ruin her reputation, and no man will want to marry her'"* (YW-S2). This pressure to stay silent prevents many from accessing support or justice.

Awareness of existing resources is also limited. One participant noted, *"There are NGOs that support victims, but not many people know about them. We need more awareness"* (YW-SM2). Some groups, such as women with disabilities, face added barriers, often requiring family and social worker support to even begin the process. *"Without family support, pursuing justice is nearly impossible" admitted an NGO staff living with disability.*" (OW-M-C1-LWD).

Law enforcement also often fails victims, with cases of non-consensual sex within marriage sometimes handled through reconciliation rather than justice. *"I've seen cases where non-consensual sex in marriages is addressed through reconciliation instead of justice. Authorities often believe that a husband and wife should reconcile rather than pursue legal action,"* shared an indigenous women (YW-SM-I2). This approach dismisses the seriousness of non-consensual sex, especially within marriage, and pressures victims into silence

Furthermore, gaps in the legal system and weak enforcement significantly undermine the effectiveness of authorities' responses. Although some legal frameworks exist, they are rarely implemented effectively. As one NGO worker observed, *"There have been some positive changes in policy, but in practice, there is still a lot of work to be done. If laws aren't enforced, they're essentially useless"* (OW-M-LWD-C1). This disconnect between legislation and enforcement can leave victims without reliable pathways to justice, and perpetuates a sense of impunity among offenders.





6.2 Impacts of consensual sex

Empowerment

Practising consensual sex empowers individuals by helping them understand, protect, and assert their rights over their bodies and sexuality. This awareness strengthens their ability to stand up for themselves and others when those rights are violated. As one young indigenous woman shared:

"When people are informed, violations such as harassment and rape are reduced because they're more confident in asserting their boundaries" (YW-SM-12).

Thus, affirming consent also fosters confidence, encouraging people to communicate openly about their needs without shame. A respondent noted, *"practising consent empowers people, allowing them to live freely and talk about sensitive topics without fear."* (YW-S12). This newfound confidence extends beyond relationships, enabling individuals to face other life challenges and normalising the expression of needs and boundaries. *"It's freeing,"* a young woman reflected. *"It makes everyone happier because we no longer see it as a taboo topic."* (YW-SM-12).

Furthermore, consensual sex is fundamental to bodily autonomy, which is central to self-respect and personal empowerment. By making decisions about their bodies without external pressure, individuals experience true autonomy. As one young man explained:

"Bodily autonomy means having the right to make choices about your body, life, and future, free from coercion or violence" (YM-G2).

Mental and sexual health

Practising consent has profound positive effects on both mental and sexual health, creating a foundation for healthier relationships and personal well-being. A young woman describes how clear consent promotes overall well-being: *"When NO truly means NO, it benefits our mental health and sexual health"* (YW-SM-I2). This clarity not only empowers individuals to feel in control of their bodies, but it also cultivates a sense of security, reducing anxiety and emotional distress.

Another participant highlights the importance of consensual sex in promoting physical health: *"When we have consensual sex, it's safer. We can talk openly about contraception, reducing unwanted pregnancies and STIs"* (YW-SM2). Open discussions about sexual health allow partners to make informed decisions that protect both their bodies and feelings, leading to a healthier sexual experience overall.

These practices also support mental health by fostering a safe and respectful space. By ensuring mutual understanding and agreement, consensual sex lowers the chances of emotional trauma, regret, and feelings of violation after sexual experiences. As one participant noted, *"When consent is practiced, it creates a safer space for both parties, promoting trust and emotional security"* (YW-Q1). This foundation of trust and respect not only enhances sexual health but also nurtures emotional well-being and builds stronger relationships.

Healthy relationships

Practising consent is essential for fostering mutual respect, understanding, and trust in relationships. When both partners openly communicate their boundaries, it creates a foundation of love and security. As an older woman shared, *"Consent means communicating with our partner. We ask each other how we feel. My husband always asks if I want to have sex, and when I say no, he respects that and even encourages me to rest"* (OW-SM3). This respect helps build a healthier relationship, where *"happiness comes along with a deeper understanding of each other"* (OW-SM-I1). By respecting boundaries, couples can reduce conflicts and strengthen their bond, creating stability and preventing issues that could lead to violence or divorce (YW-S4).

When consent is practiced, it not only ensures harm-free and respectful sexual relationships but also benefits society as a whole. One participant explained, *"None of us will be violated, and there won't be any problems"* (YW-SM1), emphasizing the importance of consent in preventing harm. Another shared:



"On the community level, practicing consent benefits everyone, creating a more equal society where men, women, and people with disabilities feel respected."
(OW-M-C1-LWD)

Open communication about consent fosters healthier relationships and enhances the sexual experience itself. When partners can openly express their desires and boundaries, it leads to a more fulfilling and enjoyable connection. As a young man shared, "*We talk about what we want and what we don't like in sex. I think this is how we fulfill each other's pleasures as partners*" (YW-SM2). This openness about preferences helps enhance intimacy and creates a stronger bond between partners. Another respondent added:



If I feel like having sex, I tell my partner, and we communicate it directly. When we're both in agreement, the experience is so much more enjoyable." (YM-S5).

Benefits at the community level

On a larger scale, discussing and practicing consent reduces cases of sexual violence and fosters equality within communities. "*Consent needs to become normalised,*" an older man shared, adding that it should be a "*topic that is not hidden or shied away from*" (OM-SM4). Community members echoed the importance of beginning these conversations in families, schools, and public campaigns, saying, "*If we educate people from all backgrounds, consent will be seen as natural.*" (YM-G6). As a respondent noted, "*The more we talk about it, the more it becomes normalised, and people won't shy away from it anymore.*" (YW-S18)



"If we educate people from all backgrounds, consent will be seen as natural." (YM-G6)

"The more we talk about it, the more it becomes normalised, and people won't shy away from it anymore." (YW-S18)

7

**DIVERSE
EXPERIENCES**



7. DIVERSE EXPERIENCES ON SEXUAL CONSENT

This report intends to include the lived experience of women in all their diversity. Indeed, the sexual experiences of different communities (LGBTQIA+, indigenous, people living with disability) are equally as important and valid, and present an interesting area for future research into how Cambodian women from diverse backgrounds perceive and navigate these issues.

To ensure inclusivity, the research team included members from these communities, and participants with diverse SOGIESC identities, those living with disabilities, and individuals from Indigenous communities were actively engaged to share their perspectives. Additionally, non-identifying participants and survey respondents were asked about their perceptions of these communities, further broadening the scope of understanding.

7.1 Voices of minorities

LGBTQIA+ Individuals

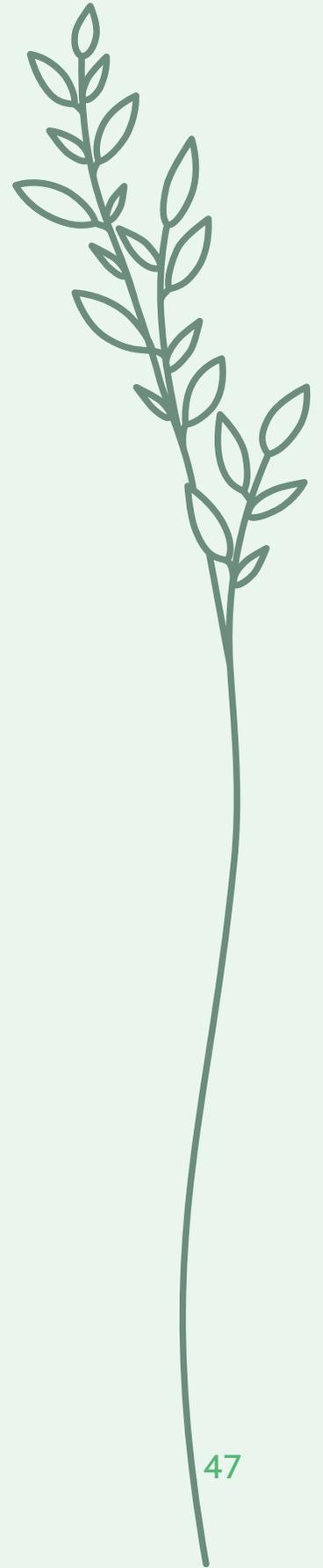
Sexual consent appears to be more widely practiced and openly discussed within the LGBTQIA+ community compared to heterosexual relationships. Indeed, a young man remarked, *"For the LGBTQIA+ community, I think people talk about sexual consent more openly than in heterosexual relationships."* (YM-G6).

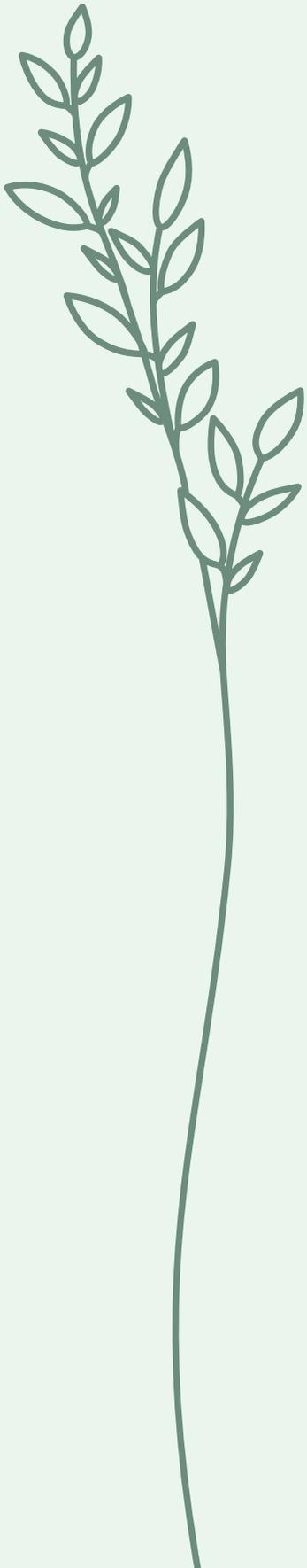
In addition, the same respondent noted that sexual consent might be understood or practiced differently within various relationship groups, stating,

"For LGBTQIA+ individuals, there may be no significant difference in how consent is practiced, whereas heterosexual couples may approach consent differently." (YM-G6)

However, people with diverse SOGIESC or individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community face heightened risks of sexual violence and harassment. These individuals often experience harm from those closest to them, including family members. An NGO staff reported that:

"sometimes, their family let a man rape their homosexual daughter, believing that she can be 'turned straight' after a man touches her. This is called 'corrective rape'" (YW-S-C1).





In Cambodia, it is common for parents to pressure or even force their children into marriage, regardless of whether they live in rural or urban areas, or come from poor, middle-class, or wealthy families. In some cases, parents force their LGBTQIA+ children into marriages with partners they do not love, which implies even coercing them into sex. A queer women described this, stating: *"When children reach marriageable age, parents often pressure them to marry someone they do not love. They are told, 'You will love them after marriage or after sex,' stripping them of their right to consent."* (YW-B-S4). Those cases also appeared in a research by RoCK called Family Violence towards Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) people in Cambodia (27).

Additionally, some parents take their children to shamans, believing that their queerness can be 'taken away' [មើលគ្រូ រំដោះពីការត្រូវអំពើគេ និងផ្លូវជីវិត]. When they are forced into sex, their parents often pressure them to marry that person, believing that "the rice seed has already turned into rice [អង្ករក្លាយជាបាយ]," a proverb implying that once something is done, it cannot be undone. (YW-B-S4). It is also a common belief that love will grow after marriage, simply by being together. This mindset often leads parents to assume that it is acceptable to pressure their children into marriage, believing that love and attraction will develop over time.

Furthermore, one respondent highlighted that lesbians, like other women, are at high risks of sexual harassment and violence. One respondent explained, *"A lesbian woman could be raped because, despite her sexual orientation, she still appears as a woman."* (YW-S6).

LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly trans and gay people, often face sexual violence due to societal stereotypes that depict them as inherently sexually active, which can lead others to believe they have the right to touch, harass, or flirt with them at will. This also results in frequent victim-blaming when LGBTQIA+ people experience harassment or assault. A young man shared, *"As a gay man myself, we are seen as sexually active people even when we are not. Compared to cisgender people, we are often perceived as less careful about consent when, in fact, we do care about consent."* (YM-G5).

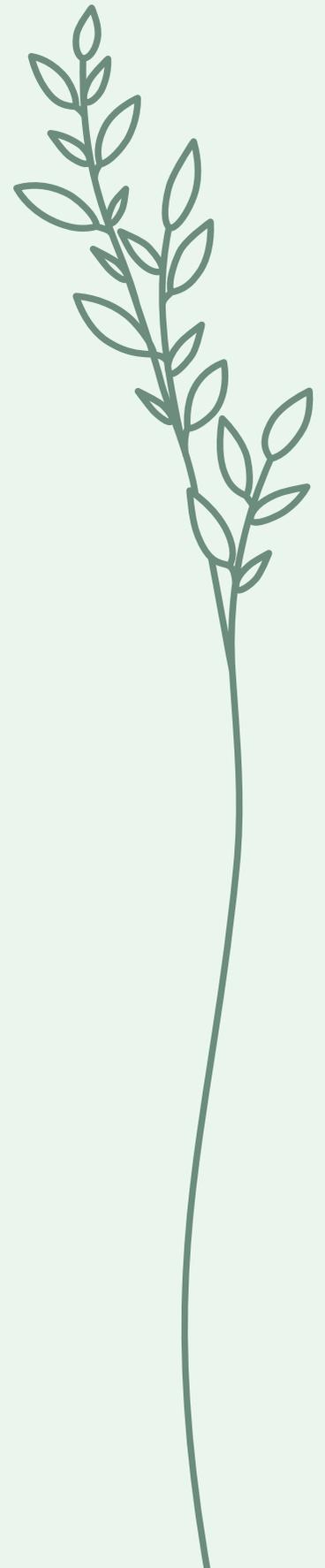
People living with Disabilities (PwD)

The understanding and awareness of sexual consent among people with disabilities (PWD) often depend on the severity of their disability. For instance, individuals with visual impairments may have better access to resources and information about sexual consent compared to those with auditory impairments. However, many respondents highlighted significant barriers to accessing information, especially for those with more severe disabilities. An NGO staff noted, *"For people with disabilities, if their condition is not severe—meaning they can still listen to information and attend sharing sessions—they are more likely to be informed about sexual health and consent. However, those who are unable to attend school or receive education due to their disability often lack access to this knowledge and follow what tradition says"* (OW-M-C1-LWD).

PWD, particularly young girls and women, face numerous challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive rights, including their right to bodily autonomy. As one respondent shared, *"In general, when women with disabilities are denied their bodily autonomy or sexual rights, they often assume that it's not abuse because they are disabled. They feel they don't have the right to speak up for themselves."* (OW-M-C1-LWD). Many individuals with disabilities, even if they have sexual desires, are frequently ignored or dismissed, highlighting a disregard for their rights and needs.

Furthermore, PWD, especially those with neurodiversity or cognitive impairments, are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence due to their heightened vulnerability and difficulty standing up for themselves. An other NGO staff emphasised, *"Women living with disabilities (WLWD) are often victims of rape and harassment because their choices are not respected, and they are in vulnerable positions. Many reports show that the perpetrators are often close family members or people they know. When the abuse occurs, it happens in their home, and they have no way to escape."* (YW-S-C1).

Individuals with cognitive impairments, especially women, are often targeted by perpetrators who exploit their vulnerability, assuming they cannot seek justice or report abuse. One respondent noted that such cases frequently surface on social media, where women with mental disabilities face sexual assault, as perpetrators believe they will not pursue legal recourse. This exploitation highlights the urgent need to address the unique experiences of persons with disabilities (PWD) and to ensure their rights and autonomy are fully protected.



Indigenous People

Early marriage is common in many Indigenous communities, which shapes perceptions of consent in intimate relationships. One participant noted, *"Indigenous people (...) tend to get married at a very young age."* (OW-SM2). Young individuals in these marriages often lack proper sexual health education and awareness about consent, leaving them inexperienced in setting boundaries and vulnerable to coercion.

Our interviews with indigenous people (IP) in Ratanakiri revealed that the social norms and gender dynamics discussed earlier in this research are especially strong within their communities, and particularly in the context of marriage.

A strong emphasis on virginity before marriage, particularly for women, persist with women facing stigma and blame for premarital sex. This double standard increases social pressure on women, making them more vulnerable to social repercussions than men (YW-S-11).

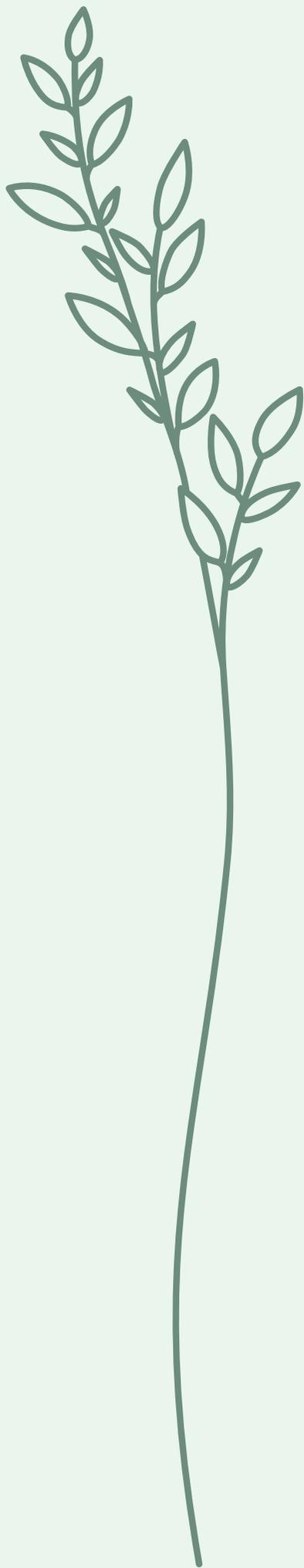
Some participants shared the common perception that once married, consent is no longer needed, with some men believing they are entitled to sex regardless of their wife's willingness. As one young woman shared, *"Whenever a wife is sick or doesn't want to engage in any sexual activity... the husband is more likely to force her."* (YW-S-11). This reflects a lack of understanding of marital consent, with many believing that marriage implies perpetual consent.

Most sexual violence in Indigenous communities seem to occur within marriages or relationships, often through manipulation by husbands or more "privileged men", which means that status with the community can influence power dynamics. (OW-SM-13) The community often views this as "normal" rather than as a form of violence.

A lack of education and open dialogue about consent and sexual rights exacerbates these issues. As an older woman explained, *"People here have very limited access to knowledge in general, and especially to sexual education and consent, unlike people in the city."* (OW-SM-12). According to an other indigenous women, this limited awareness leaves young women vulnerable to coercion by more privileged men. (OW-SM-13)

Cultural silence around consent extends to family interactions, where unwanted physical contact from relatives is often dismissed as harmless or "funny." This makes it difficult for young Indigenous individuals to recognize these behaviors as violations or to assert their boundaries (YW-S-11).

Despite these challenges, some indigenous participants highlighted good practices and stressed the importance of promoting affirmative consent within their communities. An older woman shared *"for married couples, I think consent should be practiced before engaging in sexual intercourse. In my relationship, we usually talk and give consent every time."* (OW-SM-11)



7.2 Demographic and age-based variations

Rural vs Urban

Our survey revealed that approximately half of respondents believe people in urban areas have a better understanding of consent, compared to just 2.2% for rural areas. However, a significant portion (43.8%) feels that geography does not affect the understanding of consent (see graph 8) Despite these shared perceptions, many interviewees noted differences between urban and rural areas, though some gaps appear to be narrowing. According to an NGO staff member:

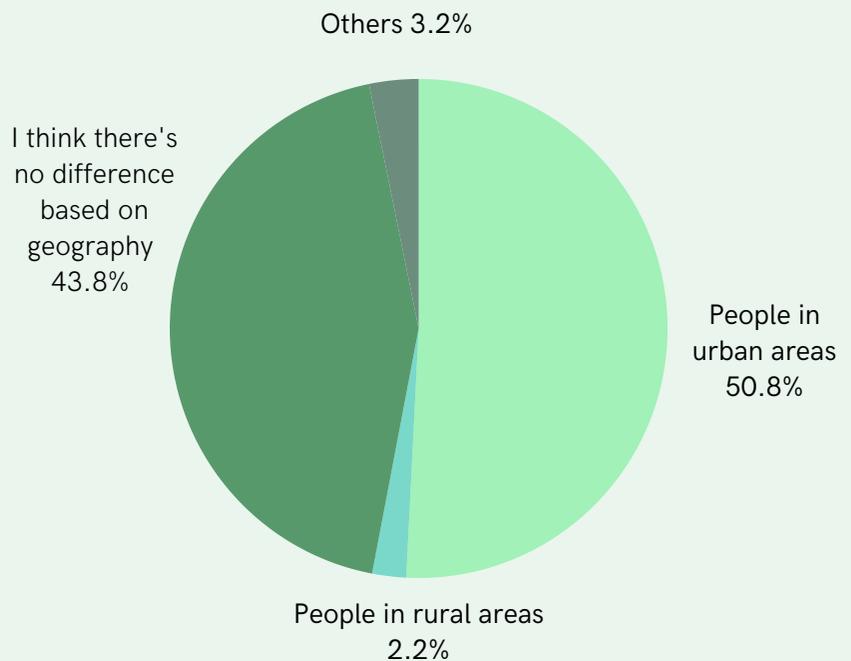
"People in urban areas like Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and other large cities generally have a better understanding of sexual consent. This is due to the availability of awareness campaigns and educational resources. In rural areas, such campaigns are limited, and much depends on the local education system. Urban areas are more likely to include topics on sexual rights in their curricula, but younger people still have a more limited understanding compared to older generations. Despite lessons on sexual health, stigma and shame often prevent open discussions about sex and consent" (OW-M-C1-LWD)

A young woman also commented:

"People in the countryside generally don't understand sexual consent as well as those in the city. There is greater awareness in urban areas than in rural ones." (YW-L1).

In urban centers like Phnom Penh, there is greater access to sexual and reproductive health events and resources, attracting diverse communities, including LGBTQIA+ individuals. In contrast, rural areas such as Ratanakiri face significant gaps in sexual consent education, with fewer initiatives and limited access to resources and support services, creating disparities between urban and rural areas.

Graph 8: Who do you think have better understanding of sexual consent?



Furthermore, women from rural areas face additional challenges in asserting their bodily autonomy, as communities tend to be more conservative and protective of tradition. One participant shared, *"If a (rural) woman says no, something will likely happen within the family. If she can't meet her husband's needs, she risks facing consequences for rejecting him."* (YW-S17). Our research revealed that many rural women struggle to assert their right to consent due to a lack of sexual education and deeply ingrained cultural norms. These factors create a culture of silence and fear, making it difficult for women to reject unwanted advances or assert their sexual autonomy.

Respondents highlighted a geographic divide in understanding consent but noted the growing influence of social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram in narrowing this gap. Many content creators and influencers are raising awareness about consent, making the information more accessible even in rural areas.

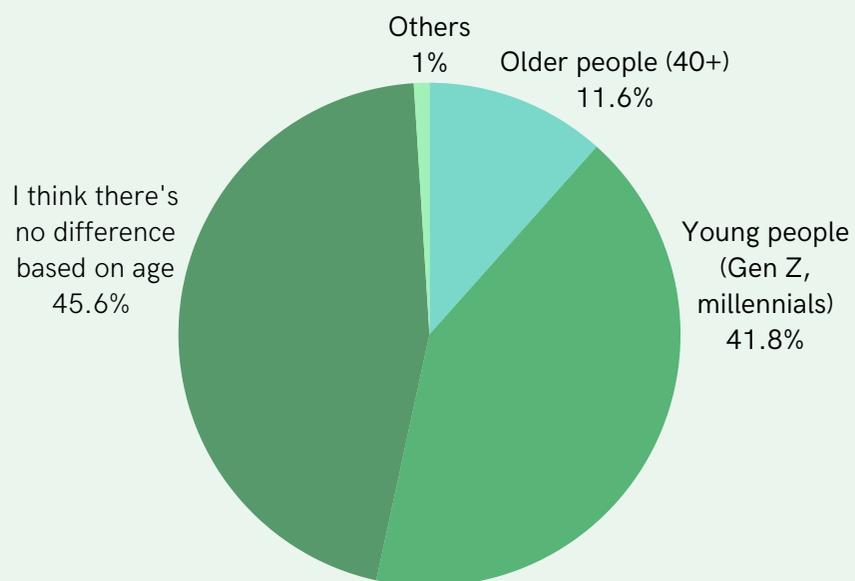
Old vs Young

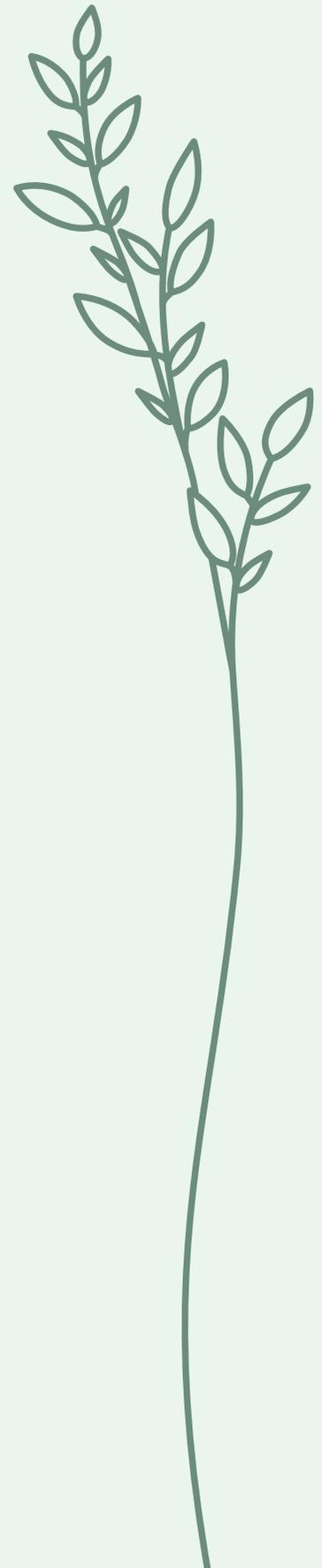
The perception of sexual consent appears to be strongly shaped by generational differences, with notable variations in how different age groups approach the topic. While most survey respondents believe that age does not significantly impact one's willingness to discuss sexual consent, 41.8% feel that younger people are more open to engage in such conversations, compared to only 11.6% who believe the same about individuals over 40 (see graph 9). This suggests that while the majority perceive no generational divide, there remains a belief that younger people are more open to discuss sexual consent. Reflecting on this generational shift, one interviewee noted:

"In the past, older generations didn't talk about these things and discouraged their children from discussing them. But today, it's different. Young people are standing up for themselves and talking to their partners about consent, influenced by the education and information they have access to. Older generations often viewed these topics as private matters, shaped by cultural shyness."

Despite progress, challenges persist. A young man pointed out, *"Younger people in the city have a better understanding of consent, but this sometimes leads them down the wrong path [ភ្លើងភ្លើង]. In rural areas, youth are still more conservative and hesitant to engage in conversations or activities related to sexual consent."* (MY-G4). This also underscores the divide between urban and rural populations, with urban youth benefiting from more education and awareness on the topic.

Graph 9: Who do you think is more likely to be more open towards the discussion of sexual consent?





Further, some participants noted that parents, especially from older generations, often avoid discussing sex education with their children, treating it as a private matter until marriage. One young woman remarked, *"When young people try to bring up these issues with older generations, they're often reminded to listen to their elders. It's challenging to address sexual consent with older people because their views on sexual life have changed so significantly. But starting with less controversial topics, like STI prevention, could be a good entry point."* (YW-SM2).

This generational divide is also influenced by factors like geography, language, and education. One respondent observed, *"If you look at the group of young people in Phnom Penh, I don't think men and women understand sexual consent differently due to their circle of friends and social media education. However, elders may interpret and view sexual consent differently. The differences are not based on gender or biological sex, but on geography, the language they speak, and their level of education. For example, young indigenous people who are not fluent in the Khmer language may struggle to understand consent-related materials."* (YM-S7). This highlights the importance of an intersectional approach to sexual consent education that considers not only generational differences but also linguistic, cultural, and educational factors.

One NGO staff member pointed out, *"Women, especially young women, are more likely to experience manipulation or coercion into having sex due to a lack of knowledge about their rights and insufficient confidence to set boundaries."* (YW-S-C1). Yet, she emphasised that this issue isn't limited to younger generations, noting, *"In Cambodia, where discussions about sexual consent and boundaries are limited, older women also struggle with understanding and establishing these boundaries."* (YW-S-C1). Thus, the experience of sexual consent is not solely influenced by age but also by one's intersecting identities and access to resources and a support system.

Changing Times: the role of social media

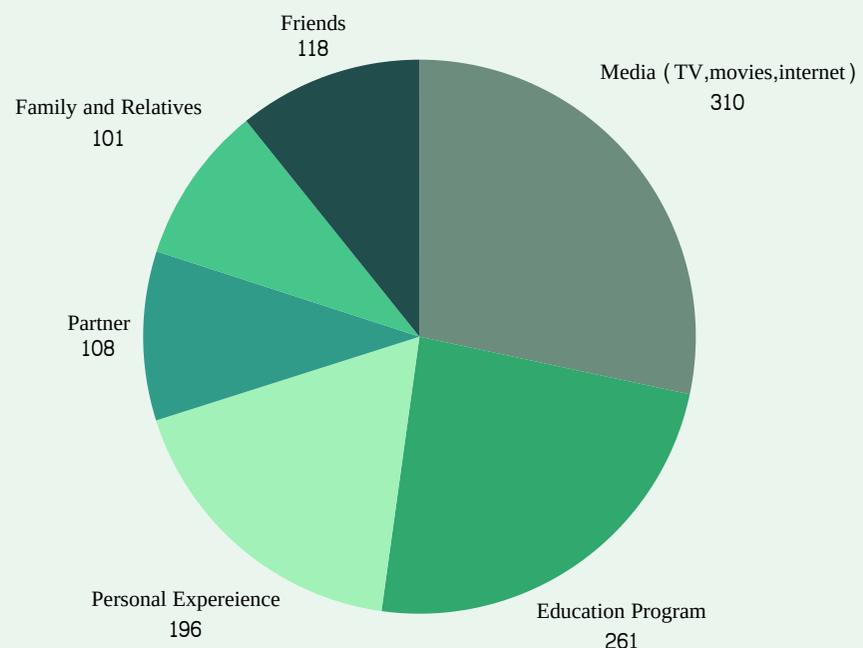
"Young people are growing up in a digitalised world where they don't need to seek out information externally; they can simply find it online. However, this only works for those who are allowed the freedom to explore these topics without family pressure. For those who are expected to follow family norms and remain obedient, discussing these topics is difficult." (YW-S-LWD1).

This research found that many participants have learned about sexual consent through the internet, TV and social media. As shown in Graph 10, 62% of participants felt that their understanding of sexual consent has been shaped by media. Several respondents noted, *"I think younger people have better access to information about sexual consent compared to older generations. In 2024, we have social media, but before, information about sexual consent was not widely available. Now, we see these topics on social media and even dating apps."* (YM-G6). This underscores the growing influence of social media in shaping public understanding, in contrast to the past when such topics were less accessible. Additionally, the digital literacy gap between generations amplifies differences in understanding issues like consent.

Several participants turned to self-learning due to limited family discussions about these topics. One respondent shared, *"This is general information I need to know, so I learned it from the internet and YouTube. I've never learned about this from my family. We rarely talk about sex-related topics at home."* (YW-SM2).

Another added, *"I follow social media content on how parents should teach their children about consent from a young age, and the importance of teaching children bodily autonomy. I can honestly say I've learned more from the internet than from anyone around me."* (YW-S11). These responses highlight changing times and the crucial role of social media and the internet in bridging the knowledge gap around sexual consent, particularly for younger generations.

Graph 10: Do you think your OWN understanding of sexual consent has been influenced by:





8

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

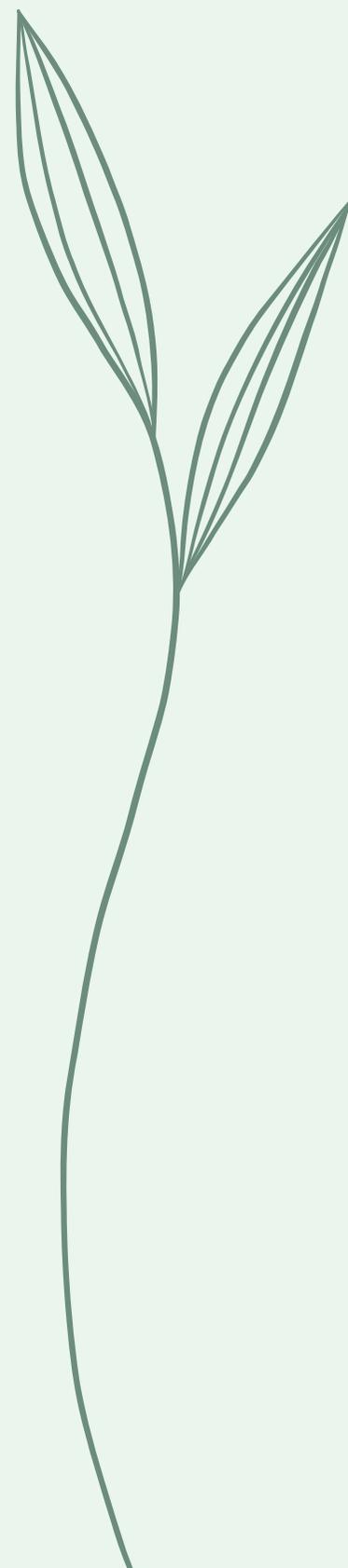
This research reveals a growing interest in sexual consent and a willingness to normalise discussions about it at the societal level. While the recognition of consent as *very important* is nearly universal among participants, significant gaps remain in its understanding and practice.

Chbab Srey, virginity culture, and restrictive cultural norms continue to shape and constrain women's sexual rights in Cambodia. These pressures make it challenging for women to openly discuss sexuality, assert their rights, or advocate for their bodily autonomy, in particular within heterosexual marriages. Addressing these deep-seated beliefs is essential to create an environment where women can freely discuss, affirm their sexual rights and challenge the cultural expectations that confine them.

Experiences of consent can vary depending on individual's identity. LGBTQIA+ individuals often encounter more open discussions about consent, but can face the threat of forced marriage and are at a higher risk of sexual violence and harassment. Indigenous people experience early marriage and rigid gender norms, with a high risk of coercion, particularly within marriage. These challenges are further compounded by limited education and lack of access to information. People with disabilities face heightened vulnerability to violence, challenges in asserting bodily autonomy, and barriers to seeking justice, with experiences varying by type of disability. Further research is needed to explore further the experiences of people from marginalised communities, looking at how intersecting identities can influence perceptions and practices of consent.

Finally, the research highlights the transformative power of consensual sexual relationships in empowering individuals, fostering healthy relationships, and promoting community well-being. Normalising discussions about consent and building a deeper understanding have the potential to drive societal change, reduce sexual violence, and affirm respect for bodily autonomy.

This project aims to serve as a starting point for conversations about sexual consent. Moving forward, it is essential to address gaps in understanding and practice through targeted efforts in education and advocacy, centering the voices of marginalised communities who are at heightened risks of sexual violence. By fostering a culture of consent, we can make meaningful steps toward a more equitable and respectful society for all.



9

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrating sex education in schools: A majority (80.8%) of survey respondents expressed a strong need for sex education in Cambodian schools and universities. Current gaps in the curriculum leave young people ill-informed about sexual consent, sexual rights, and the distinction between consent and coercion. Comprehensive sex education should include practical knowledge about consent, healthy relationships, and access to sexual and reproductive health services. Parents also play a critical role, and programs should support them in having open conversations with their children about these topics.

2. Challenging cultural norms and misconceptions: Deeply ingrained norms like virginity culture, Chbab Srey, and gender expectations in marriage perpetuate myths around consent and silence survivors. Public education campaigns and safe spaces should deconstruct these harmful narratives, promoting feminist values that empower individuals to assert their rights and challenge discriminations. This cultural shift is critical to dismantle barriers that prevent open discussions and support for consent.

3. Raising awareness through social media: Social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook have become vital tools for learning about sexual consent, as noted by many participants. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are already utilising these platforms to disseminate information. Expanding online campaigns with engaging, accessible content on consent and sexual rights can further normalise these discussions and reach wider audiences, especially young people. Digital campaigns can help challenge taboos and promote open conversations about consent and sexual rights.

4. Strengthening support systems for victims: Strengthening support systems for victims is crucial, as many face limited access to services, particularly in rural areas. While some CSOs offer legal and social support, awareness remains low. Increasing outreach and visibility of these services is essential. Additionally, gaps in law enforcement and policy must be addressed through stricter enforcement and comprehensive training on sexual violence, gender equality, and intersectionality, ensuring survivor-centered approaches and more effective responses. Creating safe spaces for reporting can also help build trust and encourage victims to come forward.

5. Legal and policy reforms: Empowering individuals to assert their rights requires stronger legal and policy frameworks. Reforms must address gaps in laws related to sexual violence and explicitly mention consent, ensuring these laws are consistently enforced, including in the context of marriage. Advocacy efforts should focus on inclusivity and intersectionality in policymaking, ensuring that the varied experiences of marginalized communities are fully acknowledged and addressed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (April 2021), EXCLAIM!: Young people's guide to 'sexual rights: and IPPF declaration', online: https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/ippf_exclaim_lores.pdf
2. Klahaan (June 2022), Report on GBV against Indigenous Women in Three Provinces of Cambodia, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/1165ef_9bc74b743ef44021bf5f908a5dc79dab.pdf
3. Klahaan (2021), Virginity Culture in Cambodia, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/091c7d_bd4ddf8581824780b90865e6381ebf50.pdf
4. Robertson, E. (2019), The Taboo of Sex within gender-based violence prevention: localising the gender and development paradigm in Cambodia, *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol.20(3), Art.8.
5. Amnesty (9 June 2021), This is consent: how to talk (and think) about consent, online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2021/06/ltay-toolkit-blog-how-to-talk-and-think-about-consent/?;NGO-CEDAW> (2022), CEDAW Monitoring Report for Cambodia, online: <https://ngocedaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2022-CEDAW-Monitoring-Report-EN.pdf>; Klahaan (2020), Preserving harmony, or preventing justice?, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/1165ef_5fc45ef6707346428b6c5752a3421027.pdf Sreylin, Y. (15 November 2022), Khmer Times: Ministry prepares guideline to define sexual harassment, online: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501184820/ministry-prepares-guidelines-to-define-sexual-harassment/>
6. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) (2018), Feminist Participatory Action Research, online: <https://apwld.org/feminist-%20participatory-action-research-fpar/>
7. Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013), *Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners*, SAGE Publication, London.
8. Lévy-Guillain, R., (2021), Let's talk about consent, online: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-recherche/en/news/let-s-talk-about-consent/>; Grady, C. (2018) The waves of feminism and why people keep fighting over them, explained, *The Vox*, online: <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth>
9. Hardt et al. (2023), Sexual harassment in low- and middle-income countries: a qualitative systematic review, Vol.24(5), online: <https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Hardt-et-al.-2023-Sexual-Harassment-in-Low-and-Middle-Income-Countr.pdf>
10. Wamoyi et al. (2021), Male and female conceptualizations of sexual harassment in Tanzania. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol.37(19-20), online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211028309>
11. Abuya et al. (2012), A phenomenological study of sexual harassment and violence among girls attending high schools in urban slums, Nairobi, Kenya. *Journal of School Violence*, Vol.11(4), 323-344, online: doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.706874
12. UNFPA (December 2020), Youth situation analysis in Cambodia, online: https://cambodia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2_youth_situation_analysis_report_english_version_23_august_2021_1.pdf
13. Ibid; Mealeatey, M. (22 December 2020), The importance of sex education for Cambodian students, online: <https://cefcambodia.com/2020/12/22/the-importance-of-sex-education-for-cambodian-students/>
14. Robertson, E. (2019), The Taboo of Sex Within Gender-Based Violence Prevention: Localising The Gender and Development Paradigm in Cambodia, *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 8, online: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss3/8/>
15. Klahaan (2023), The good daughters of Cambodia: a perception study of Chbab Srey, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/091c7d_dfd19f25f93243d7a434ea4a55844f8a.pdf
16. Robertson, E. (2019), The Taboo of Sex Within Gender-Based Violence Prevention: Localising The Gender and Development Paradigm in Cambodia, *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 8, online: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss3/8/>
17. Ibid
18. NGO-CEDAW (2022), CEDAW Monitoring Report for Cambodia, online: <https://ngocedaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2022-CEDAW-Monitoring-Report-EN.pdf>; National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Health & ICF, (2023), Cambodia demographic and health survey 2021-2022 final report, online: https://www.nis.gov.kh/nis/CDHS/2021-22/Cambodia_DHS2021-2022_Final_Report_EN.pdf
19. Rany, S. (2018), Exploring sexual coercion within marriage in Cambodia, online: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Exploring-sexual-coercion-within-marriage-in-rural-Saing/d057b99c4e9d1bfc7dbcf5d1d8117a0a311dbbe2>; Farvid, P. & Rany, S. (2021), "If I don't allow him to have sex with me, our relationship will be broken": rape, sexual coercion, and sexual compliance within marriage in rural Cambodia, *Journal of Violence Against Women*, Vol.28(6-7), online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10778012211021130>
20. bid
21. Fahmida, R. & Donkeys, P. (2013), Sexual coercion within marriage in Bangladesh, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.38, 117-124.
22. Jozkowski et al. (2017), College students' sexual consent communication and perceptions of sexual double standards: A qualitative investigation, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol.49(4), 237-244, online: <https://doi.org/10.1363/psrh.12041>; Hirsch et al. (2019), Social dimensions of sexual consent among cisgender heterosexual college students: Insights from ethnographic research. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol.64(1), 26-35, online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.06.011>; Davis et al. (2021), "Consent is f#@king required": hashtag feminism surrounding sexual consent in a culture of postfeminist contradiction, *SAGE Journal of Social Media + Society*, Vol.7(4), online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20563051211062915#bibr16-20563051211062915>
23. Klahaan (2021), Virginity Culture in Cambodia, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/091c7d_bd4ddf8581824780b90865e6381ebf50.pdf
24. Klahaan (2020), Policy snapshot: Cambodian sexual and reproductive health rights, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/1165ef_4ba707364e8d4b21bea64333cba9afe5.pdf
25. Klahaan (2023), Separate ways: a study of attitudes towards separation, divorce and women's rights in Cambodia, online: https://www.klahaan.org/_files/ugd/091c7d_a0b9b080b1aa499abd48dea4246f81b1.pdf; Rainy, S. (2018), Exploring sexual coercion within marriage in Cambodia, master thesis, online: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Exploring-sexual-coercion-within-marriage-in-rural-Saing/d057b99c4e9d1bfc7dbcf5d1d8117a0a311dbbe2>
26. Sreylin, Y. (15 November 2022), Khmer Times: Ministry prepares guideline to define sexual harassment, online: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501184820/ministry-prepares-guidelines-to-define-sexual-harassment/>
27. RoCK (2019), Family Violence towards Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) people in Cambodia, online: https://www.rockcambodia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Family-Violence-LBT_ENG-19.06.2019.pdf



For more information, reach out to info@klahaan.org