

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Navigating Sexual Consent in Cambodia



- Empowers individuals to assert their rights over their bodies and speak out on their sexual rights
- Prevents sexual violence
- Fights against norms that equate marriage with consent
- Combats misconception rooted in gender norms that perpetuate power imbalances between sexual partners.

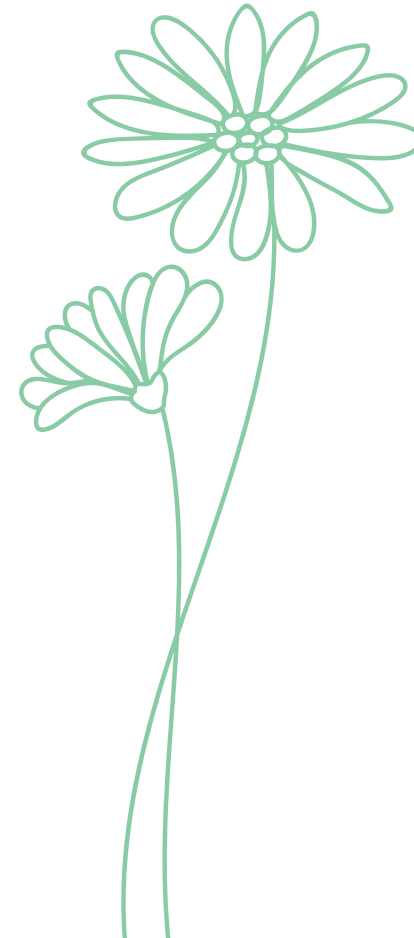


*“Consent can be given at the beginning of sex, but you can stop anytime during it. If you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to stop [...] **continuing to engage in sex after the other person has withdrawn consent is rape.**”*

(Young single man)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrating sex education in schools
2. Challenging cultural norms and misconceptions
3. Raising awareness through social media
4. Strengthening support systems for victims
5. Legal and policy reforms



CONSENT IS A RIGHT!

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUAL CONSENT

UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL CONSENT

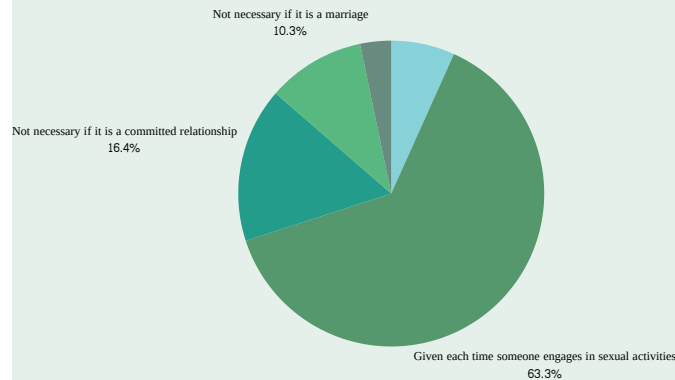
Our survey revealed that:

Only 3.4% of respondents believe that Cambodian people have a “really clear” understanding of sexual consent.

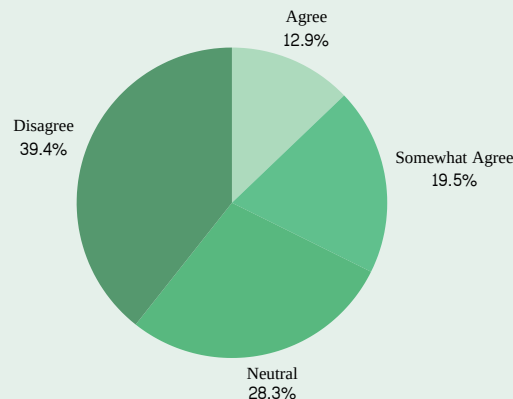
Most respondents agreed that consent is necessary for engaging in sexual activity, however

Only 21.3% believed it was required for sharing nudes, posting them online, or removing condoms.

In the context of relationships, 26.7% of survey participants think consent is unnecessary in marriage or committed relationships.



On the statement "Silence or lack of resistance means consent", we received mixed responses as highlighted in this graph:



CONSENT WITHIN MARRIAGE

Multiple testimonies shared how strong social norms blur the line between consent and obligation, making it difficult to recognize marital rape. Within marriage, society reinforces the belief that:

- Women’s life and body belong to their husband
- Financial dependence limits women's ability to say ‘no’
- Women are pressured to agree to avoid upsetting their husbands and preserve the relationship

CONSENT OUTSIDE MARRIAGE

According to our research participants, consent outside marriage is more openly discussed, although practices can vary:

- In hookups and casual dating, communication about sexual consent tend to be more direct
- In long-term relationships, consent may be assumed without explicit discussion



1. Chbab Srey and the proper Khmer women

Our research revealed that many women continue to feel significant pressure to conform to traditional norms of the **'proper Khmer women' rooted in Chbab Srey**. The code of conduct can shape how they perceive and approach their sexuality.

A young queer woman shared:

*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 [...]"*
(Young queer woman).



ROOTS OF PERCEPTION

2. Gender roles and power dynamic

In Cambodia, strict gender roles, harmful stereotypes and power dynamics limit women's autonomy over sexual consent, often pressuring them to prioritize their partner's needs over their own.

A young married woman added:

*"I think the idea of men being a leader in the family still influences [...] beliefs and practices that if a **man wants sex**, the **woman needs to agree to it.**"* (Young married woman)



3. The pressure of virginity culture

Virginity culture pressures women to **remain virgins until marriage**, tying their worth to **sexual purity** in order to preserve family honor. This expectation subjects women to intense scrutiny, with any indication of **premarital sexual activity often viewed as shameful**.

A young woman working in a NGO explained:

*"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'.**"*
(Young single woman working in CSO)

PERCEIVED BARRIERS

1. Lacks of understanding and knowledge of consent

Almost all research participants emphasised the importance of communicating consent, but a **lack of understanding and awareness of their right to say 'no'** creates a barrier, leading to cases of **sexual violence due to limited education** and **insufficient confidence to set boundaries**.

The taboo of discussing consent

Participants frequently described consent as “taboo”, “a dirty topic”, “shameful,” or “a topic women shouldn’t bring up”. This a particularly stigmatizing topic for women because discussing topics related to sex openly often leads to assumptions that they are not “proper”.

“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” (Young single woman working in CSO).

2. Limited space to discuss consent

Our research reveals that there are not a lot of spaces to talk about consent.

“Honestly, since I was born [...], there was not a single person who talked about sexual consent [...].” (Young single woman)

3. Family

Discussions about consent within families are rare in Cambodia, with many parents feeling uncomfortable, unprepared or unsure how to approach the topic.

4. School

Schools often provide limited or no sex education due to cultural and social norms, along with teacher and parental resistance, who can view the topic as inappropriate.

A young woman reflected:

“When we were in school [...] we didn’t have a lesson on [...] sexual rights and consent [...] they think this topic shouldn’t be taught or talked about in public spaces.” (Young single woman)

5. Partners

Our report revealed that while some couples engage in private discussions about sexual consent, coercion still persists in certain relationships.

A young woman shared her evolving experience:

“In early stages of our relationship, it seemed he couldn’t accept no [...], but the more we tried to talk and explain, the closer and stronger our relationship became.” (Young single woman)

6. Friends

Friendship circles have become one of the few open spaces to discuss sexual consent. Yet, some participants shared that even within friendship circles, discussions about consent can be selective and carefully navigated.

7. NGOs

Individuals working in the NGO sector often have greater openness and understanding of sexual consent, thanks to their work and exposure to research and campaign initiatives.

IMPACTS OF SEXUAL CONSENT 3

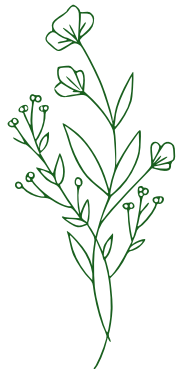
IMPACTS ON NON-CONSENSUAL SEX

Engaging in sexual activity without clear consent **violates a person's bodily autonomy** and subjects them to **physical and emotional harm**.

"Sex without consent is Rape"
(Young bisexual man)

1. Physical harm

Testimonies highlighted **severe physical consequences of non-consensual sex**, including injuries, the spread of sexually transmitted infections (and the lifelong impacts of incurable diseases), unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions or even suicide.



2. Decreased opportunities and social stigma

Our research showed that non-consensual sex disproportionately affects women's lives. Social stigma can lead to life-altering consequences such as dropping out of school, sacrificing career opportunities, and being forced into marriage with perpetrators.

"Women are always the ones who are blamed, shamed, and disgraced" (Young single woman)

3. Increased risk of further violence

Respondents also reported cycles of violence in cases of intimate partner violence, where victims are trapped in abusive relationships and recurrent lack of respect for consent and bodily autonomy. Sex workers are also at high risks.

A young CSO worker described how sex worker tend to be dehumanized:

"[...] when we don't see someone as a fellow human being, we disregard their voice and choices, including their right to say no"
(Young single woman working in CSO)

4. Mental health

Respondents highlighted **emotional distress** and **mental health issues** as negative impacts of non-consensual sex, including suicidal thoughts, low self-esteem, depression and trauma.

5. Impact on relationships

Non-consensual sex can deeply affect relationships. In some cases, it leads to broken relationships and a loss of trust, including with unsupportive families and communities.

6. Worsening factor: lack of support for victims

Respondents in our research expressed concerns about the lack of justice and support for victims, leading to lasting psychological harm. The fear of judgment from authorities and societal pressure often forces women to remain silent instead of seeking justice.

In addition, law enforcement is weak, with some cases referred to avenues for reconciliation, as a young indigenous woman noted:

"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" (Young married indigenous woman)

IMPACTS ON CONSENSUAL SEX

Almost all participants recognized the positive impacts of consensual sex.

1. 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.



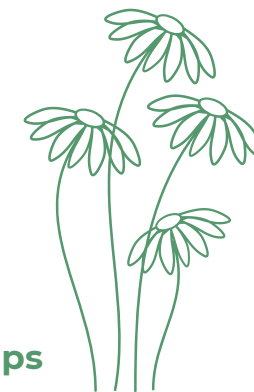
A young woman admitted:

“It’s freeing. It makes everyone happier because we no longer see it as a taboo topic” (Young indigenous married woman)



2. Mental and sexual health

Practicing consent enables partners to make informed decisions, benefiting both their mental and sexual health, leading to safer and more enjoyable sexual experiences overall.



3. Healthy relationships

Practicing consent is essential for fostering mutual respect, understanding, and trust in relationships.

“When consent is practiced, it creates a safer space for both parties, promoting trust and emotional security” (Young queer woman)

4. Benefits at the community level

Our participants mentioned that on a larger scale, discussing and practicing consent should reduce cases of sexual violence by normalizing its practice within communities.

“The more we talk about it, the more it becomes normalized, and people won’t shy away from it anymore.” (Young single woman)

DIVERSE EXPERIENCES ON SEXUAL CONSENT 4

VOICES OF MINORITIES

1. LGBTIQ+ Individuals

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**.



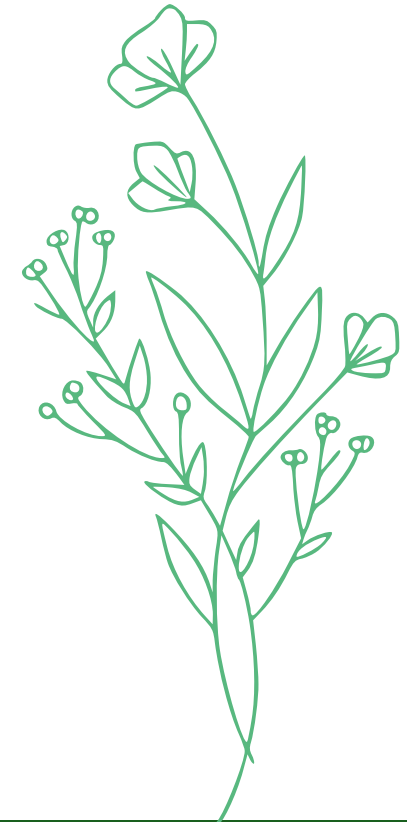
2. PWD Experiences

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.

“Women living with disabilities are often victims of rape and harassment because their choices are not respected. [...] When the abuse occurs, it happens in their home, and they have no way to escape” (Young single woman working in CSO)

3. Indigenous Experiences

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.



DIVERSE EXPERIENCES ON SEXUAL CONSENT 4

DEMOGRAPHIC AND AGE-BASED VARIATIONS

1. Rural vs. Urban

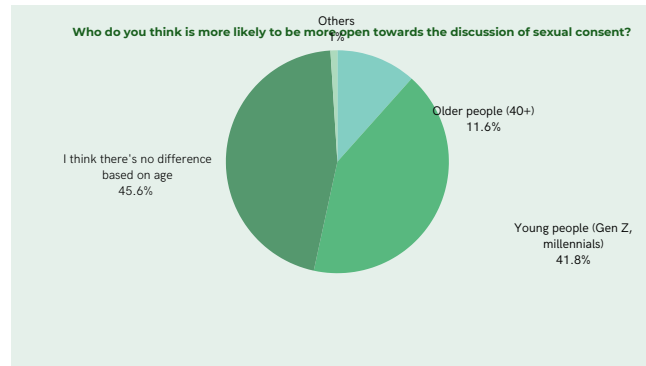
Urban residents are generally perceived to have a **better understanding of consent** than those in rural areas, although a considerable number of survey participants believe there is no difference based on geography. Despite these shared perceptions, many interviewees noted differences between urban and rural areas and **existing gaps narrowing thanks to social media.**

Who do you think has a better understanding of sexual consent?.

- **50.8%:** People in urban areas
- **43.8%:** I think there's no difference based on geography

2. Old vs. Young

Our survey and interviews revealed that younger people are generally 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 age or geography** on understanding and practicing consent.

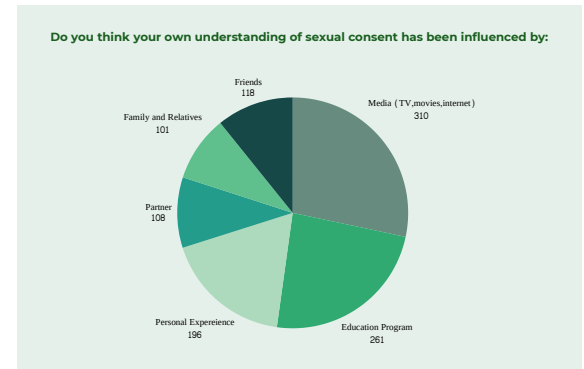


3. Changing times: the role of social media

This research found that many participants have **learned about sexual consent through the internet, TV and social media**, underscoring a shift in how the topics can be approached in modern times.



"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." (Young woman)



To read the full report, visit www.klahaan.org/publications

