



# Housework: *Whose work?*

An exploration of gender roles, unpaid care work and the mental load in Cambodia.

A feminist  
participatory action  
research study

2022





People  
Change  
the World



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# Glossary

## **Cisgender**

Individuals whose gender identity and/or expression aligns with their assigned sex at birth. This is a gender identity, not a sexual orientation.

## **ESCAP**

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

## **Gender Identity**

An individual's own internal feelings and experiences of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex that individual was assigned at birth.

## **Heterosexual/Straight**

Terms used to describe female-identified people who are attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to male identified people, and vice versa.

## **Husband, wife**

For ease of reading, and because unmarried de facto couples remain statistically unusual in Cambodia, we have used the terms 'husband' and 'wife' rather than 'partner' throughout the study. This is not meant to imply that de facto relationships of any genders are less valid than those where a (customary or legal) marriage has taken place.

## **LGBTQ+**

An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more. This acronym and variations thereof have been used since the 1980s to describe the diverse community of people whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity differs from those of 'heterosexual' and 'cisgender.'

## **Mental load/Cognitive labour**

The mental load is the invisible (thinking and feeling) labour that is performed in order for a household or family unit to run smoothly. It comprises the constant organising, planning and remembering that is needed to manage one's life and those of their dependents. In heterosexual couples, the mental load has been consistently shown to be borne overwhelmingly by women.

## **Sexual Orientation**

An individual's physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to a specific gender or genders.

## **Transgender**

Individuals whose gender identity and/or expression is not typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. This is a gender identity, not a sexual orientation (see: [RoCK, 2015](#)).

## **UCW**

Unpaid care work: The ILO defines UCW as non-remunerated activities entailing everyday routine household maintenance work such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry, caring for children, etc. It refers to "activities and relations involved in meeting the physical, psychological and emotional needs of adults and children, old and young, frail and able-bodied" (see: [ILO, 2018](#)).

# 1

## Introduction

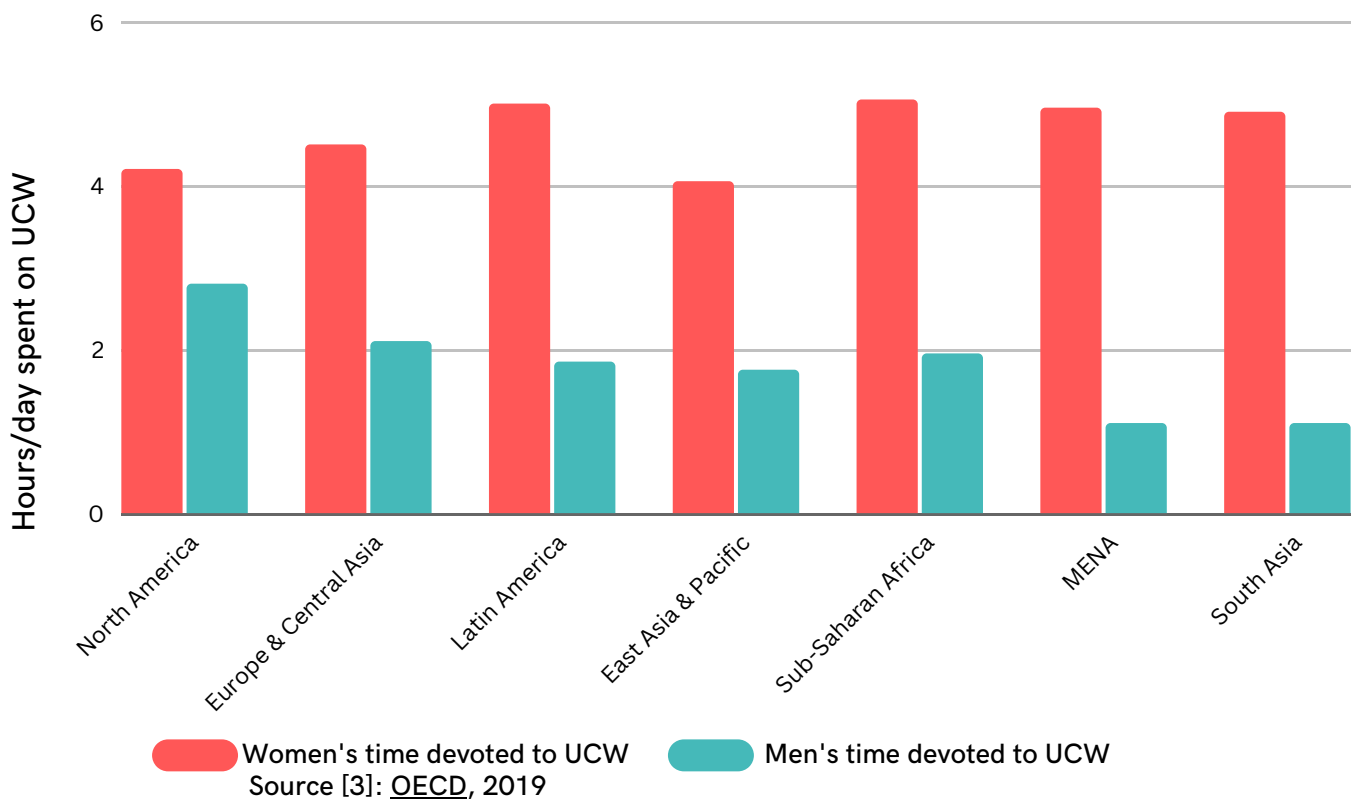


# 1

## Introduction

In Cambodia, as in many countries around the world, prescribed gender roles continue to shape household and family dynamics. These roles are both informed by and serve to further entrench social norms that influence how members of a family interact. In turn, such norms influence family members' expectations of one another and inform how they share tasks, costs and decision-making on a daily basis.

It is already well-established across the literature that unpaid care work (UCW) has a disproportionately burdensome impact on women and girls globally. For instance, UCW is the main barrier preventing women from joining, remaining and progressing in the labour force [1]. Despite the fact that a majority of women and men globally report a preference for paid employment, 2018 research from the ILO showed that some 606 million working age women said that they were not able to do so because of UCW. Meanwhile, only 41 million men said they were not in the labour force for the same reason [2].



As highlighted by ActionAid International, an unequal distribution of care work leads to violations of human rights recognised in national and international law [4]. For instance:

*"...the inability to develop an autonomous livelihood relates to the violation of the right to work... Equally, feeling sick and tired as a result of being overworked relates to the violation of the right to free time and to rest... or the right to a dignified standard of living.*

*A rights-based perspective allows us to analyse how care work overload impacts on other individual and collective rights such as the right to health, education or to political participation, since the overworked caregiver has no time, mobility, health, energy or capacity to enjoy them" [5]*

Given the known human rights impacts resulting from the unfair distribution of UCW, why do many still hold the view that women simply 'opt in' to the management and performance of the vast majority of this work, or even that they are somehow naturally predisposed to it?

One may question whether women are truly '*opting in*,' perhaps influenced by powerful notions of inherent female altruism instilled in them since birth, or, in a country with high rates of intimate partner violence, whether the reality may be more acutely coercive [6].

Another contributing factor, on a practical level, may be that these tasks are taken on by women because such essential work will otherwise go unperformed. In this case, how can men in heterosexual partnerships finally be compelled to *lean in* and take on their share?

The answers to such questions are incredibly complex, so intricate and dynamic are the issues at play. This study, therefore, does not attempt to answer them in full. Rather, it offers limited but important new evidence about the current reality of household labour distribution in Cambodia: namely, the *perceptions of* and *attitudes towards* these roles.

According to a recent study by UN ESCAP, "*...patriarchal attitudes [in Cambodia] remain dominant, and the general awareness in society about the importance of women's economic empowerment is low*" [7]. Further, in a 2013 UN survey, 82% of men and 92% per cent of women reported that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family [8]. This study builds on and updates this work, probing deeper into the currently held attitudes towards UCW distribution by Cambodian women and men across different generations, backgrounds and sexual orientations.



Applying a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology, this research was co-created with Cambodian community members with lived experience of the relevant issues.

It provides an evidence base from which gender equality advocates and policy makers may more effectively tailor their messaging and interventions. Such tailoring is important, whether advocates seek to promote the value of UCW as crucial work that is worthy of respect, or to encourage men to challenge patriarchal norms by taking on more of this work – without being asked.

The research also examines the important issue of the 'mental load,' a topic rapidly rising to prominence across global feminist discourse [9] in recent years but one that has not yet been studied in detail in the Cambodian context. The mental load refers to the invisible, cognitive tasks (i.e. involving thinking and remembering) involved in running a household: "*[Cambodian women's] minds are full of thoughts, worries and strategies for how to manage and support the daily functioning of the household and all the people in it*" [10].

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research team also developed the following research questions:

1. How do Cambodians of different ages, genders and sexual orientations feel that housework *is currently* divided between family members?
2. How do Cambodians of different ages, genders and sexual orientations think housework *should be* divided between family members?
3. To what extent is the '*mental load*' (of organising tasks and people in the home) disproportionately carried out by women, and what is the impact of this?

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. The survey data in Figure 1, (p.14) indicates that overall, a vast majority of respondents (88%) feel that women usually perform more housework.
2. Three quarters of survey respondents (75%) felt that housework is viewed by society as being less important than paid jobs, while the remainder disagreed (Figure 2, p. 15).
3. Some interview participants perceived there to be a risk of domestic violence where women fail to perform UCW for their husband and family (p.16, 37);
4. Just 33% of survey respondents felt that men and women share the 'mental load' equally, with less than a per cent (0.4%) indicating that men perform most of this work (Figure 6, p. 27).
5. LGBTQ+ couples were perceived as significantly more progressive in their sharing of UCW labour, by both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ participants (p. 24, 25);
4. That women should perform a household's UCW for the sake of family 'happiness' and 'harmony,' is a norm that may be shifting, with numerous participants asserting that an equitable division of UCW between partners improves relationship quality and family happiness (p. 36);
5. While many older women participants supported and welcomed a more equal division of UCW between partners, several respondents indicated that they are happy to and take pride in the performance of this work (p. 36);
6. Men conducting UCW is reportedly still far from the norm in Cambodian society, with participants advising this is often viewed as either embarrassing or admirable (Figure 9, p.41);
7. Participants reported the view that women living in rural areas faced a much higher UCW burden than in cities (p.44);
8. While the UCW burden remains heavily borne by women, the data overwhelmingly indicated that Cambodians feel this work should be shared equitably among partners, especially where both work outside the home (p. 48-52);
9. Participants also felt that girls and boys should share a more equal household responsibilities (p. 51). However, just 1.2% of respondents felt that boys perform more housework, versus 16% perceiving it to be equally split, 1.2% unsure - compared to 81.6% indicating that usually daughters complete this work (Figure 3, p. 17).
10. Similarly, an overwhelming number of survey respondents in Figure 14 (p. 57) reported that grandmothers in their household conduct more work (80.3%) compared to grandfathers (3.5) and 'equal' (16.2%) were overwhelmingly reported to conduct more household chores
11. When asked whether younger couples (under 35) share household tasks more equally than their own parents did, only 3.6% felt that it has remained the same, against 6.4% unsure; 22% who feel that young couples now share housework equally; and 68% who feel that while younger couples seem to be sharing housework more equally, women still do more (Figure 15, p. 58).
12. When asked: In your family, is housework being shared fairly? (Figure 8, p. 31), some 31% of women selected 'yes' while 42% men selected 'yes', suggesting a potential discrepancy between men's and women's perceptions of UCW division.

# 2

## Methodology



# 2

## Methodology

This research applied Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) principles at all stages of 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" [11]. FPAR also thoroughly integrates feminist perspectives and processes, as well as capacity building and knowledge sharing. To this end, a team of local researchers was engaged to co-design the research.

The action research team was composed of eleven young Cambodians based in Phnom Penh, Kandal and Pursat. The team were trained in ethical research principles and data collection techniques, and participated in the entire process of the study.

A primarily qualitative approach employed semistructured interviews with women and men (all in married or de facto relationships), allowing the researchers the opportunity for flexible in-depth discussions. The 60 qualitative interviews and two focus group discussions in Phnom Penh and rural areas of Kampong Chhang were supplemented with an online survey.



## CODING & ANALYSIS

The participatory action research team members were actively involved in all stages, rather than as 'enumerators' who might only be handed surveys to conduct and resubmit.

In coding the qualitative data, a practical training on thematic data analysis as per Braun & Clarke (2013) was conducted in Phnom Penh [12]. The interview data was subsequently analysed and coded by the young researchers themselves.

Extracts from participants are labelled with either the letter 'Y' for younger (married millennials or gen Z), 'O' for older, and 'C' for CSO participants. The suffix 'M' or 'F' denotes male or female. For example, O11 Woman is an older woman participant, while M38 Man is a younger male participant, the 38th interviewed. Unless denoted otherwise, participants identified as heterosexual.

## ONLINE SURVEY

In addition to interviews, an online survey was conducted to provide more quantitatively-oriented insights, and received 250 responses. The data was analysed using Excel and the findings are included throughout each section of this report.



### INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

NUMBER

CODE

TOTAL = 60

CSO WORKERS (GENDER ADVOCATES)

5

'C'

YOUNGER RESPONDENTS (MAINLY MILLENNIALS 25-39)

29

'Y'

OLDER RESPONDENTS (GEN X, BABY BOOMERS)

26

'O'

# 3

## Literature Review



# 3

## Literature Review

*'Manus srey mouch min chrov tov min chhngay'*  
**'Women cannot dive deep, nor go far'**

- Traditional Khmer proverb

As mentioned in the previous section, there is a range of existing literature discussing the impact of unpaid care work on women in Cambodia, as well as across the ASEAN region and globally. This increasing array of literature reflects a growing recognition that UCW is having an enormous impact on the lives of women [13], a fact that has only worsened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, UN Women estimate that as a result of the virus and subsequent lockdowns, women are shouldering an even larger share of the care work at home - "at least three times as many hours as men, which led to women doing an additional 512 billion hours of unpaid care at home." [14]

From grey literature in form of local and international news articles [15, 16], NGO and UN analyses [17] and blogs [18]; to academic literature from feminist, sociological, economic and other disciplines [19, 20], the topic of UCW is being increasingly analysed from a variety of lenses.

In the Cambodian context, many of these previous studies have examined these issues in a quantitative sense, for instance through large-scale demographic [21] or time-use surveys [22] which are crucial for setting out empirically that the problem exists.

This research builds on those studies as well as the important policy research initiatives being undertaken by organisations like CDRI [23] Oxfam Cambodia [24] and ESCAP [25], with a view to enhancing social protection systems and women's labour force participation.

*"[UCW] limits the time women have to build skills, knowledge and network outside the home, affecting their potential for starting and/or developing their businesses, and oftentimes forcing them to stop or reduce their paid work" [Oxfam Cambodia, 26].*

## LITERATURE REVIEW (cont)

Other studies, notably those by academic Katherine Brickell [27, 28, 29] and Kasumi Nakagawa [30] have delved into the traditional and cultural influences behind intra-household inequality: a phenomenon Brickell calls "a 'stubborn stain' on development achievements and aspirations."

This study is informed by, and to an extent also expands upon and updates these works, to unpack the discursive (narrative, spoken) constructions (phrasing) used by participants to explain the world around them - including gender roles and norms.

For example, Brickell's 2011 study on the gendered meanings of housework (non-)participation in Cambodia is now more than a decade old. The 2010s were a transformational decade for the entire world, but perhaps particularly so for Cambodia: internet access skyrocketed from just 1.2% of the population in 2010 to 78.8% in 2020 [31] and a generation of digital natives (millennials and older Gen Zs) are entering the workforce and beginning their own families.

This calls for a new examination of current perceptions towards UCW among these younger couples, as well as whether attitudes and ideas have begun shifting even among older generations.

In addition, unlike previous studies that could be located, this research is deliberately inclusive of LGBTQ+ couples, and includes analysis of invisible cognitive labour in the form of the 'mental load.'

While it provides some insight into the perceptions of and attitudes towards unpaid care work among Cambodians of different ages, backgrounds and sexual orientations, it is a qualitative study (with only a small complementary survey component) and as such cannot and should not be considered as representative of the entire population.

We hope that it complements and contributes towards ongoing efforts to better understand the particularities of UCW in the Cambodian context, and the efforts to realise a more equitable distribution of this essential labour upon which we all as humans rely.



# 4

**Whose Work?  
The Current Status Quo**



# 4

## The Current Status Quo

This is the first of four thematic sections of this report that explore participants' perceptions of and attitudes towards the gendered distribution of UCW in Cambodia.

This first section examines how participants perceive and describe the current distribution of housework and the mental load. It also discusses whether there are key differences between participants based on their own gender or age, and is split roughly in half.

The first half explores participant responses that capture what is currently happening. How much time are women seen as spending on this type of UCW compared to their male counterparts? What is the perceived impact of this? What perspectives are offered by LGBTQ+ couples?

The second half expands on this analysis by looking specifically at the Mental Load, referring to the cognitive labour (i.e. the effort required to constantly think and remember household-related tasks) and how this is perceived to be shared between members of a couple.

### 4.0 *Whose work? The Current Status Quo*

- 4.1 Perceptions of *what*
- 4.2 The mental load

### 5.0 *Perceptions of Why: Influencing Factors*

- 5.1 Cultural
- 5.2 Social
- 5.3 Intergenerational
- 5.2 Geographical

### 6.0 *In an Ideal World... Perceptions of What Should Be*

### 7.0 *Changing Times... Perceptions of Generational Shifts*

## 4.1 WHAT IS HAPPENING

*"I do the housework - cooking, cleaning, washing the dishes - before I go to work. When I come back, I cook for the family... this is the most time-consuming task because I do it alone. I need to cook it as fast as I can because... the meal must be ready for [my children] because they're hungry. Women have to ask [men] for help. Without asking, he won't help... For example, I ask my husband to put the rice on the plate" (Y17 Woman).*

This part of the report will help to set the scene in relation to how everyday Cambodians describe the current distribution of UCW, with a focus on household chores.

Firstly, women were reported to be carrying out the vast majority of household chores. This was the prevailing view among almost all participants of all ages and genders, and reflects the findings of previous research on this subject, as discussed in the previous literature review section:

*"Based on my personal observation, in both rural areas and cities, women including wives, mothers, daughters even granddaughters, are responsible for doing most of the housework" (Y6 Man).*

Many men, however, did report being responsible for some form of UCW at least some of the time. This often involved one or more of the following tasks: bathing young children; sweeping and cleaning the house; household repairs and maintenance; 'helping' a wife with tasks when needed.

While in the minority, it is important to note that some respondent men and women reported doing equal UCW to their partners. In these cases, work was often divided according to different tasks, or each partner would report simply taking on 'their share' of all tasks.

***"What has not changed is how managing household chores is still a woman's main duty.***

***Even though there are men who help, it is still up to women to take control.***

***This kind of mindset has not changed. Men can help but it is a woman's duty - even if she is employed - she still has to take control over her children and the house"***

**(Y5 Woman).**

*"Honestly speaking, as a woman, I'd definitely say it's us who are responsible for managing most of the housework... For example, as a woman, if we don't do any housework, then we would be blamed. So it's women who bear this burden" (Y1 Woman).*

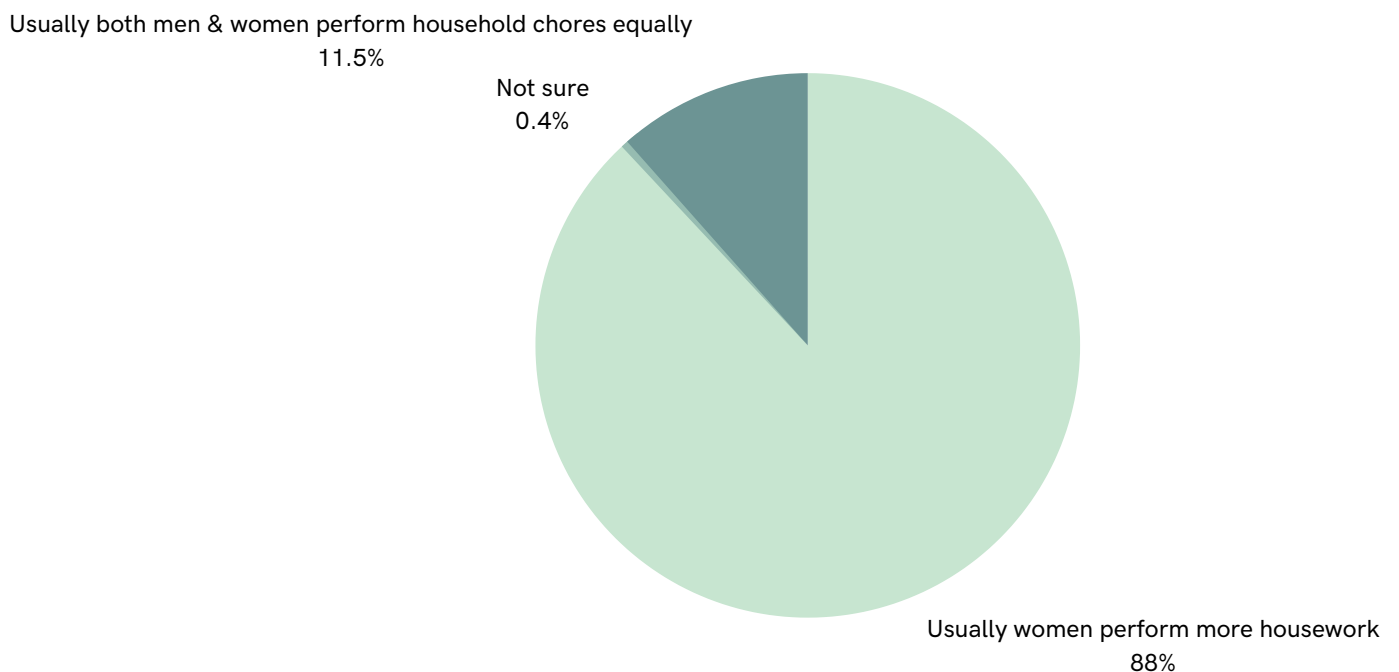
While some interview participants reported their own family situation as being more or less equal in terms of the distribution of household chores and other UCW, the overwhelming perception was that in Cambodian society generally, women perform the majority of this work. The extent of this imbalance was said to be influenced by certain variables. For instance, some participants reported that women tend to perform more (or all) of the chores where:

- the family lives in a rural area;
- women are not working outside the home or are only working part-time; or
- among older generations.

These and other variables will be explored in greater detail later in this section, and in subsequent sections. Nonetheless, the below graph (Figure 1) shows that a vast majority of survey respondents (88%) feel that overall, women are performing more housework.

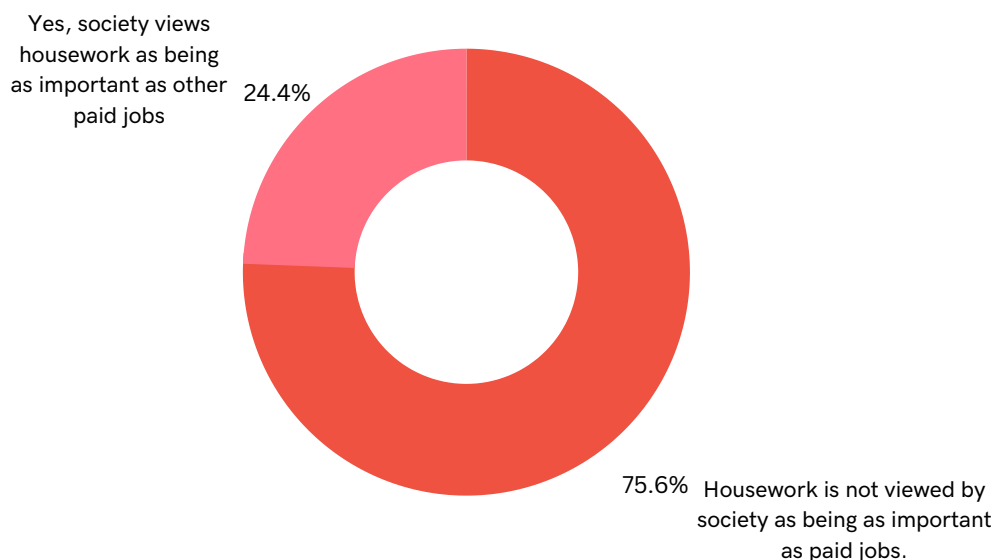
While the survey sample size was small with 250 responses, the discrepancy among women and men is significant: among women, 90.5% felt that women perform more housework. Among men respondents, this perception dropped to 78.3%. While further research is needed, this finding indicates that there may be a perception among Cambodian men that UCW is distributed more equitably than as perceived by women.

**Figure 1: In Cambodian married couples, who do you think performs more household chores in the family?**



## UNDERVALUING UCW

**Figure 2: Do you think that Cambodian society perceives housework as important as paid work?**



As many feminist scholars and activists have observed, care work is essential work that is fundamental to the successful functioning of any society [32]. This report does not seek to undermine the notion of care-work-as-work, nor to imply that women who undertake UCW duties as their primary occupation are necessarily unfulfilled or repressed in some way.

As ActionAid's helpful model from 2015 reminds us:

**The enjoyment of rights for all can be reached by:**

- a) **recognising that care work exists and is important;**
- b) **reducing care work through policies (i.e. free water);**
- c) **redistributing or sharing care work [33].**

In order to achieve a **reduction** in women's care work burden and a **redistribution** of UCW responsibilities, it is also necessary to achieve progress towards a societal **recognition** that care work exists and is important. The above graph (Figure 2) demonstrates that there remains more work to be done in this area, with some three quarters of survey respondents reporting a perception that housework is not viewed by society as being as important as paid work.

After all, it is not just that women are performing and managing these tasks, but their 'thankless' and relentless nature that is at play: *"It's not only that we [wives] are not getting paid, we're not being praised for fulfilling this duty, and we are dimmed down by the men also"* (O17 woman). A lack of prestige associated with UCW, combined with the lack of economic reward and recognition as to the importance and voluminous workload of this work contributes to a global preference among women and men for paid employment over full-time UCW [34].

## UNDERVALUING UCW (cont)

One participant also discussed not just a lack of appreciation by some male partners for their domestic needs being catered for by their spouse, but the potential for negative ramifications if women resist doing it, do it poorly, or speak up about inequality in the household UCW division:

*"We had a discussion [about the inequality of housework], but he didn't listen... he would just reply back with a harsh word and tell me to do my job properly"* (Y4 Woman).

During the focus group discussion, another woman participant even raised the prospect of violence:

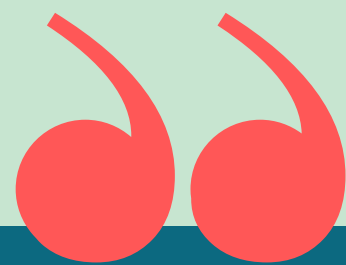
*"We want to discuss it but some partners, when we bring it up, tend to commit domestic violence, or they say that there is nothing to discuss - it is nonsense. Some men listen but some don't listen - they think that we're trying to control them, or they tell us that we talk a lot"* (OFGD Woman).

It may be worth highlighting here that some men participating in this study reported having progressive views about the importance of sharing household labour (though as will be discussed, most of these were couched in terms of 'helping' rather than doing). While of course *not all men* expect their wives to take on an unfair UCW burden, the experiences of the many women who report living with such a burden are valid, and the reasons behind this inequality are worthy of interrogation.

This is especially the case when considering that the ILO reported in 2018 [35] that Cambodian women perform some 188 minutes of UCW per day, while men on average do just 18 minutes, and almost 90% of survey respondents in this study (Figure 1) feel that a gender imbalance does exist across Cambodia in relation to UCW.

***"Sometimes, [playing the role as a good employee and partner] is hard. Sometimes he asks me: "Just one pot of soup and rice? Why'd you take so long to do it?"***

***I tell him the tasks that I do, like washing the children's clothes, dishes, and cooking - these are small tasks, but women need to do them from morning till the afternoon... He does not say anything"*** (Y10 Woman).



## THE PERCEIVED OPPORTUNITY COST

*"There is an impact on girls' education [if they are completing more tasks than boys]. When I was 10 years old, I only attended school three days per week... I had to work in our rice field, drive the bullock cart, and deliver vegetables. That's the reason I am illiterate" (O15 Woman).*

*"[Assigning daughters UCW instead of sons] is unfair. We are all human, why do we need to assign people to do this or that so the others can avoid doing housework?"*

*It is very inappropriate, and unfair to women, daughters, and granddaughters.*

*Girls and women need to be educated, communicate with others, and build a network for themselves. They can't stay at home – this is like blocking them"*

*(LGBTQ+ Y1, Lesbian Woman).*

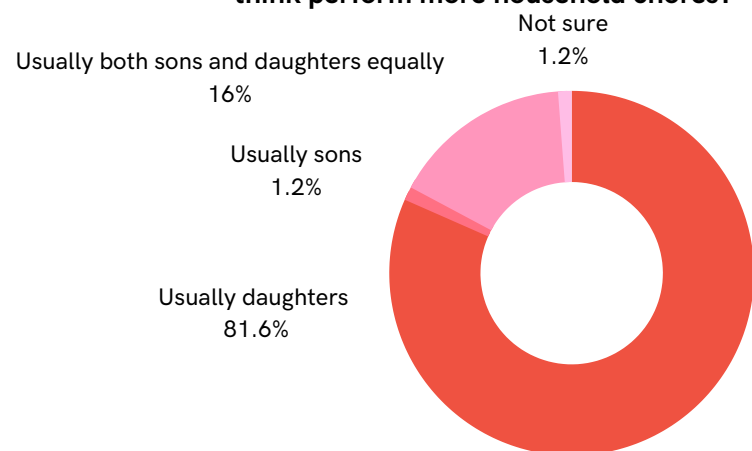
As women spend more time on unpaid care work than men, two main opportunity costs affecting women and girls emerged from the data: education and employment.

### Education

As mentioned in the literature review, the impact of UCW on girls' education outcomes is already well set out across a wide range of research. This study supports those findings, with qualitative testimonies highlighting the deeply personal impact of having been pushed to take on UCW while brothers were free to 'hang out' (Y4 Woman), 'rest' (Y11 Woman) 'review lessons' (Y1 Woman), or 'play football with friends' (LGBTQ+ Y4, Tomboy).<sup>1</sup>

As well as these qualitative stories from women affected by a disproportionate UCW burden during their girlhoods, the quantitative survey data also provides insight into the current imbalance of UCW assigned to children: Over four in five respondents believe that where Cambodian children are performing housework, it is usually daughters who undertake this work rather than sons. Just 1.2% perceived that sons usually perform more UCW than daughters.

**Figure 3: In Cambodian households, which children do you think perform more household chores?**



<sup>1</sup> When asked what pronouns and terminology they would like used to refer to them, of the four LGBTQ-identifying individuals, two identify as lesbian women (pronouns she/her), while their respective partners identify themselves as tomboys and use he/him pronouns. In the Cambodian context, the term tomboy (or tom) is used by some persons to identify themselves referring to their sexual orientation and/or gender expression and/or gender identities. For instance:

- Tomboy (or tom) can be a term used to identify themselves by cisgender women who prefer to adopt clothing, haircuts or behaviours considered masculine, and who are attracted to women (they may also sometimes identify as 'butch lesbian' or 'masculine lesbian').
- Tomboy (or tom) can also be a term used to identify themselves by persons who were assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is a man (they may also sometimes identify as transgender man), and who are attracted to feminine women.

The term tomboy (or tom) in Cambodia can be used differently by different persons in different geographical areas. Its usage can also differ from that in other countries like Thailand. It is best to ask people how they identify themselves before externally assuming or labelling their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

## THE PERCEIVED OPPORTUNITY COST (cont)

*"There are many impacts when we divide responsibilities unequally. When society divides it so that when women grow up, they don't need to study hard because they will still be responsible for care work, and they will still be responsible for household chores, [this mindset] makes them lose out on opportunities, and affects their will as well as their dreams"*  
(C2 Woman).

With the limited time available to advance themselves, participants reported that women are not able to fully equip themselves with a good education and as a result, are left with little choice other than being housewives, excluded from employment in the formal sector.<sup>2</sup>

As one young male participant articulated, *"If a family embraces the mindset that the daughter should do housework, it will impact them because... their education will decline. In the future, if they get married, they will continue this mindset"* (M6 Man).

As well as the impact on education through a reduction in class attendance and revision time, others reflected on the impact of a high UCW burden on girls' capacity for personal development, happiness and societal engagement: *"the daughter has to wash all the dishes, cook, take care of younger brothers before going to school. The son does not, he only reviews lessons, and goes to school. So it affects their leisure time and their happiness"* (Y1 Woman). As another put it, *"Girls will not get to explore society... or the outside world [and so] their happiness will decrease"* (M5 Man).

In contrast, some participants reported a belief that unpaid care work does not lead to any opportunity cost for girls' education and outlook. They expressed that household chores are in themselves a means of learning, as one young male participant argued: *"doing housework makes girls and women be smarter as they know the process and how to do those tasks,"* (Y1 Man). Another, older woman participant argued that a care work burden on girls *"teaches them to be responsible in the future"* (O12 Woman).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth again observing that full-time UCW as an alternative life path to formal employment is not a problem if genuinely chosen by an individual woman (or person of any gender). Full-time primary caregiving can be a meaningful and rewarding life choice, and should not be undermined or disparaged. However, if gendered social norms and lack of access to education or support have reduced a woman's agency and self-determination to the extent that she cannot or struggles to pursue her own life goals outside providing full-time UCW, then this is highly problematic and comprises a human rights violation.



## THE PERCEIVED OPPORTUNITY COST (cont)

As well as having an impact on girl's education outcomes, an unfair UCW burden can carry through to their later careers, where they may be unable to participate in further education for professional development purposes. For instance, consider the following two cases:

*"I had to drop out of my English class provided by my company, because I was called back home by my husband. He couldn't look after the baby by himself."* (Y17 Woman).

*"I am a mother and I want to pursue a master's degree, but I'd need to study on the weekend, and I wouldn't have time to do the housework and look after my children. [So UCW] impacts [women's] time which prevents them from developing their career path. The men do not care about this: if they want to do it, they will do it"* (Y16 Woman).

This idea, that women sacrifice first and most often in the pursuit of higher education for career progression, is also seen in the testimonies of (formally employed) women discussing their ability to fulfil work commitments without interruption by care work duties:

*"...sometimes I have to take some days off of my business to spend with my children when they are sick. But for my husband, it's a hard no, he sure will do the business instead"* (Y2 Woman).

UCW is a key barrier preventing women from entering and progressing in the labor force [36]. In Cambodia, women's contribution to the economy is vital, and 80% of Cambodian women are employed either part-time or full-time [37]. Yet women are systematically prevented from progressing into more senior roles due to the responsibility of unpaid care work [38]. Many women participants expressed that their own disproportionate caring responsibilities had affected their ability to take on or retain the employment of their choosing or capacity.

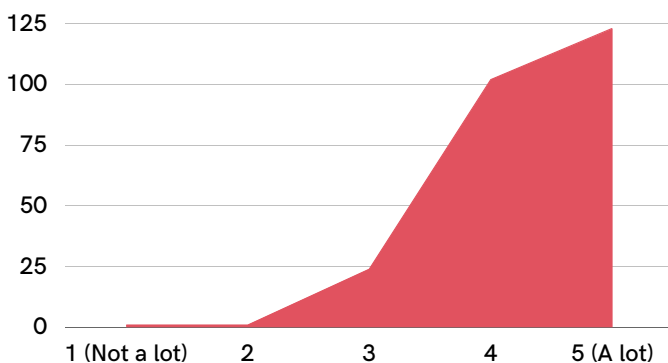
As discussed further in the next section on the 'double burden,' the relentless nature of UCW requires a lot of time and is energy-consuming, which prevents women from accessing more lucrative or otherwise desirable roles in the labour market. Even if they are employed (as most Cambodian women are), they can also face the problem of "occupational downgrading" whereby they take on employment that is below their skill level and/or with poor conditions. One male CSO participant reiterated the above testimonies from women in this regard, highlighting that *"UCW causes women difficulties in obtaining professional opportunities, making it hard for them to build a career for themselves"* (C1 Man). Thus, many women have no choice but to accept any employment that is available to them.

## THE DOUBLE BURDEN

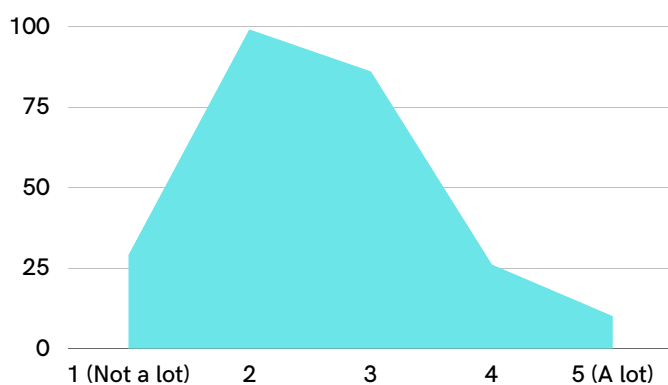
*"It is hard and tiring to be a good employee and a good partner at the same time. But if I don't do it, then who will? It is our duty - even if it's tiring, women still need to work through it" (O2 Woman).*

Following on from the previous section, many of the qualitative responses during interviews centred around the struggles that women face while trying to juggle their employment responsibilities with heavy and disproportionate UCW burdens at home. Of course, not every person who performs UCW is employed outside the home - a good number of responses discussed that where a man works outside the home and the woman is 'unemployed,' it is fair that she handles the UCW (though, it could be argued that this would only be fair if her duties were limited to working hours).

Leaving aside those minority of women who do not work at all outside the household, a great number of the personal testimonies from women in both urban and rural areas and from various class backgrounds described the challenges and frustrations of living with this perpetual 'double burden' of paid and unpaid work.



**Figure 4: To what extent do most wives spend time each day caring for the family?**



**Figure 5: To what extent do most husbands spend time each day caring for the family?**

*"Even if we both go to work, when we come back, I still do the housework.*

*For example, we both work at the construction site. When we come back home, I have to cook but he can rest, and once the food is ready, we all have a meal together.*

*After finishing the meal, it's already time for us to go back to the construction site. So I don't have time to rest" (M11 Woman).*

## THE DOUBLE BURDEN (cont)

*"Whether employed or unemployed, [UCW] is still women's obligation more than men's because... women have experience in doing housework - when you're used to it, you'll continue to do it. Women are used to cleaning the house, so they still do it even though they have a job.*

*When women come back from work, they'll cook the meal and so on - it's still their responsibility"* (Y4 Man).

Many women reflected on the challenges that the double burden poses for their mental health and wellbeing, and a sense of guilt that they feel neither proficient at work nor capable of sustaining the UCW workload at home. This was said to lead to 'exhaustion' and 'worry' for multiple participants, including the following older woman participant:

*"At the workplace, I need to focus... I can't let my emotions impact my work. We have to separate it - even if we're not happy with what's happening at home.*

*There's a lot of pressure, and it's very exhausting... After finishing work, we need to come back to do the housework. I feel like there are a hundred tasks for me to complete"* (O8 Woman).

Another participant highlighted that this exhaustion and negatively affects women's ability to perform at work:

*"The quality of [women's] outside work declines because they're tired from... housework, [from being] in charge of everything... For example, if she's on a mission and has to be away from home... her work quality goes down due to the worry about no one doing the housework"*

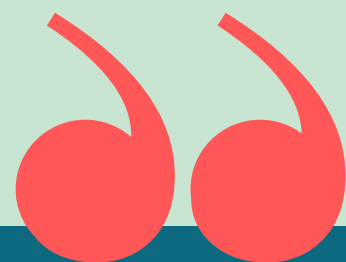
This constant presence of feelings of worry and responsibility for UCW task management is discussed further in the later section (4.2) on the 'mental load.'

*Women can work outside to make a living like men and sometimes, they earn more than men.*

*They're both exhausted from the outside work, but women are responsible for other tasks that are for the benefit of the family as a whole.*

*Why does the burden fall on them alone? It's very unfair and unequal - there is no equality"*

(LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).



## MANAGEMENT OF HOUSEHOLD FINANCES

Household financial management was one element of UCW/mental load that did not feature specifically in the interview questionnaire, but arose among numerous participant responses. As previous researchers [39] have noted, in the Cambodian context this responsibility usually falls on women to manage.

This fact is often described in positive terms, in that despite usually earning less than their husbands, by managing household finances women may enjoy some decision-making capacity [40]. Further, it is often remarked that women are more responsible in ensuring household income spent on essentials like food and healthcare.

What is less often discussed is the fact that household financial management is yet another form of unpaid, time-consuming and gendered labour that women find themselves burdened with, often without receiving support from their husbands. For many male participants, this 'life admin' task being performed constantly by their partners on their behalf did not appear seen as overly problematic:

*"For me, I think women are the ones who do it because they know how... and [are] good at it. If the man does it, he doesn't know where to start because he has never done it before"*(Y6 Man).

For some women participants, however, they described this additional task as a burden requiring constant organisation and needing to keep track of *"everything that happens in the house"* (O8 Woman). As another put it, *"Even though men are called the breadwinner... women are the ones who manage all this money, along with many other small household chores - so they are under more pressure"* (Y5 Woman).

*"The main caretaker is, women, in my opinion.*

*Because women are the main budget manager, so when it comes to budget management, they have to be organised, they need to manage everything successfully.*

*In other words, most women have to manage all of the general affairs in the family"*

(O1 Woman).

## PARENTING & GRANDPARENTING ROLES

*"In the morning, I get up at 4 and then I do some exercise. Then I make a fire to cook the rice. I cook breakfast for my children and grandchildren...*

*Then my children go to work, so I need to bring my grandchildren to school. After that, I go to the market to buy food and cook lunch at 11.*

*I think looking after my grandchildren consumes a lot of time because I have to comb their hair for them, bathe them, prepare them for bedtime as well as teach them. In the afternoon, I teach them to write and memorise the multiplication table"*

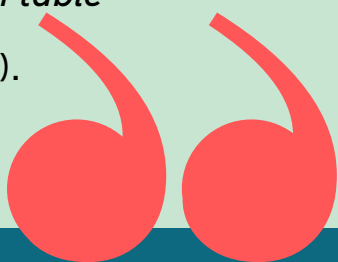
(O15 Woman).

While this research focus primarily on the aspects of UCW involving household chores, many participants understandably raised points about the distribution of childcare responsibilities between women and men (and girls and boys) in the household.

While some participants were able to send their children to paid childcare services, responses indicated that most parents rely heavily on the support of family members – especially a child's grandmother, their aunt, or an older sister – to support with childcare. Many expressed that without such support, they would not have been able to return to work outside the home: *"If there is a grandmother who helps look after their kids, then both husband and wife can work..."* (Y9 Women).

This speaks to a need for accessible, affordable childcare services so that parents have greater flexibility in returning to work, and so grandparents – especially grandmothers – are not automatically faced with the prospect of becoming full-time primary caregivers of their grandchildren without choosing to be. After all, caring for young children, while it may be rewarding and admirable, is tiring and physical work, and should not have to be taken on by elderly women because of a lack of accessible alternatives.

Notably, the role of grandfathers in caring for grandchildren did not feature in the data among responses. This indicates a likely imbalance in the distribution of childcare responsibilities between grandparents.



## PERCEPTIONS OF STRAIGHT PARTICIPANTS ON LGBTQ+ COUPLES' UCW DISTRIBUTION

Perspectives among straight-identifying participants towards the distribution of UCW in LGBTQ+ couples varied, but most centred around two main themes.

The first group expressed the view that LGBTQ+ couples living together were more likely to be progressive in their sharing of UCW than straight couples: *"From my opinion, the division is better than in straight couples because of the old mindset that women need to do all this work... so they may come up with a better role division than straight couples"* (C2 Woman).

Indeed, numerous participants reflected that straight couples have *"a lot to learn"* (C1 Man) from LGBTQ+ couples in this regard, and that *"if they can share [UCW] between each other, so can we."*

The second theme that arose was the idea that while LGBTQ+ couples are likely to be more equal in the distribution of UCW, there may be some residual inequality because of the notion that one member of the couple takes on a more traditionally masculine role, and the other a more feminine one: *"I have observed that, when it comes to household chores, [LGBTQ+ couples] help each other - even the women who have the role of a husband"* (C5 Man). This perception featured throughout several responses and speaks to the specificity of queer identities and their expression in the Cambodian context - or at least the popular perception thereof.

*"From LGBTQ+ couples, we can learn that we should be open minded and understand that doing household chores is not related to our gender."*

*"It is not something that's carved onto a stone wall"*

(C3 Woman).

## LGBTQ+ PERSPECTIVES

As for LGBTQ+ participants themselves, perspectives also varied. Unfortunately, the data was limited as no gay cisgender men or transgender women in de facto relationships could be recruited for the study. However, two LGBTQ+ couples did generously participate in in-depth interviews and provided detailed insights into how they and their partner arrange the distribution of UCW in their households. Within the couples, two identify as cis lesbian women (pronouns she/her) and their partners identify themselves as Tomboys and use he/him pronouns.

***"It is completely different [from heterosexual couples]. Actually, in our family, like my parents, when the father arrives home, and the food is not cooked, he will complain.***

***But actually, my partner is not like that.***

***Sometimes, my partner is tired, and the food isn't cooked so I will do it [and vice versa].***

***For buying food, we will think together"***

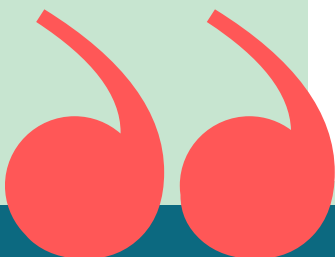
**(LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).**

Each of the four LGBTQ-identifying participants expressed the view that they (and LGBTQ+ couples generally) have a more progressive UCW distribution than straight couples: *"Some heterosexuals, they never know how tired women are... They are men; they see women as someone who does housework, and that it's not tiring at all"* (LGBTQ+ Y2 Tomboy). Further, *"[LGBTQ+ people] tend to try to understand our partner's feelings. Only this way can we live together happily and for a very long time"* (LGBTQ+ Y3 Woman).

As for the notion among straight respondents (that there are gendered roles within some LGBTQ+ couples that inform their division of UCW), this featured again in one LGBTQ+ interview, with one lesbian woman participant mentioning discussing a scenario where one partner might have *"the role of a wife"* (LGBTQ+ Y3 Woman). Crucially, however, it should be noted that this participant used this term in discussing how LGBTQ+ people tend *not* to expect one partner to do an unequal share:

*"Some people, they love their partner so they wouldn't let her do anything alone even if she has a role of a wife... For example, one might do the dishes and the other might prepare the meal... The chores are more equally divided than most heterosexual couples"* (LGBTQ+ Y3 Woman).

This shows that assumptions about any discursive expressions of apparent heteronormativity within LGBTQ+ couples should be approached with caution. Or, to put it another way, an LGBTQ+ couple referring to one having the 'role of a wife/husband' does not necessarily result in there being gendered expectations or oppressive UCW norms within the relationship.



## 4.2 THE MENTAL LOAD

*"Women need to think about spending and tidying up the house, cooking, and celebrating, we think about all of these things, so I called it a daily duty of women... Women must do it; if we don't do it, our house is not clean" (Y3 Woman).*

Having set out that women in Cambodia are perceived to be conducting vastly more than their equal share of household labour and caring responsibilities, this report turns now to examine the additional burden of the 'mental load.' The mental load refers to the psychological weight of household project management, which has long been the domain of women.

As a form of invisible labour, the mental load often goes unnoticed by those who benefit from their partners performing it on their behalf. It is the weight of constant remembering, checking, scheduling and assigning that has been shown to affect women's mental health and wellbeing, as Dean et al [2022, 41] has discussed and as the testimonies in this section will show.





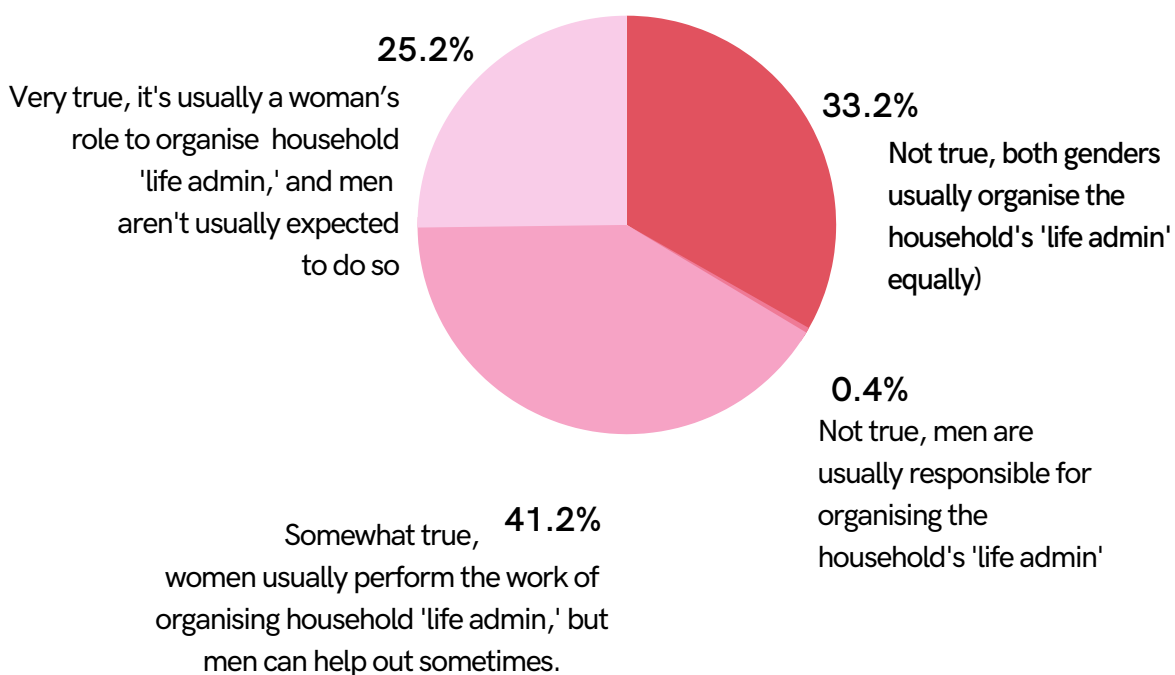
## THE MENTAL LOAD (cont)

Many men participating in the study reported the view that the actual performance of household tasks should be shared more equally. However, many of the same men did *not* appear to view the unequal distribution of cognitive labour (mental load) critically: *"I think it is a good idea for women to **manage** the housework. But for doing it, we should divide the task among the family members"* (Y6 Man).

What these accounts portray are perceptions that women are the natural project managers of the domestic sphere, and that men should be responsible for conducting tasks only where these have been considered, scheduled, and allocated to them and other family members by their wives: As another echoed, *"For housework... we all need to help each other. But if we talk about **checking in** and **assigning** the housework, it is women's responsibility"* (O1 Man).

However, as will be discussed in later sections, being assigned the role of manager is fraught with challenges - there is 'strategic incompetence,' where men are said to perform tasks inadequately so that they will not be assigned them in future (some women reported it being simply easier to do tasks themselves or they will be done poorly or not at all)<sup>3</sup>. There is also the burden of having to remember what tasks need doing at what times, of following up, and alone facing the consequences (from family criticism to societal shame) if they are not carried out.

**Figure 6: How true is the following statement: Women are seen as primarily responsible for ORGANISING the 'life admin' tasks in the home** (booking children's appointments, buying detergent, making shopping lists, remembering parents' birthdays, organising family travel)



<sup>3</sup> *"If we ask others to do it, it will be harder than me doing it on my own, and I don't want to talk too much"* (M3 Woman).

## 4.2.1 MEN AS '**HELPING**' VS '**DOING.**'

*"You ask me whether I agree or not... I agree that women should be project managers and man is the helper" (Y3 Man).*

One common term used by both men and women to describe men's performance of UCW is worthy of analysis: the notion that women 'do' housework, but men 'help' featured widely across the qualitative dataset: *"It makes her happy to see us helping her"* (Y1 Man).

As covered earlier, a majority of Cambodian women work outside the home in some capacity, be it full-time or part-time, in the formal or informal sector. However, many women participants noted that they were tasked with project management of UCW whether they were employed or not: *"...in Cambodia, most people see the organising of tasks and people in the home as being women's duty, regardless of their employment status"* (O6 Woman).

The role of organising and assigning tasks is extended further by the fact that women are also reportedly *"responsible for checking whether the task is done properly or not"* (O10 Woman). And, as one woman put it, there is the knowledge that *"The women have to ask men for help. Without asking, he won't help"* (Y17 Woman).

As another woman reflected on this reported need to constantly 'ask,' 'guide' or 'assign' their partners to participate in the performance of UCW is in itself detrimental to marital equality: *"I think we don't have equal division. I really want to achieve a work-life balance, but... I can say that men are more careless when it comes to doing the housework; women pay attention to it... if we want our partner to help, we need to guide them to the task that they are supposed to complete"* (Y17 Woman).

*"We eat the meal together. So after finishing the meal, why do women need to do the dishes, why do men not need to do it?"*

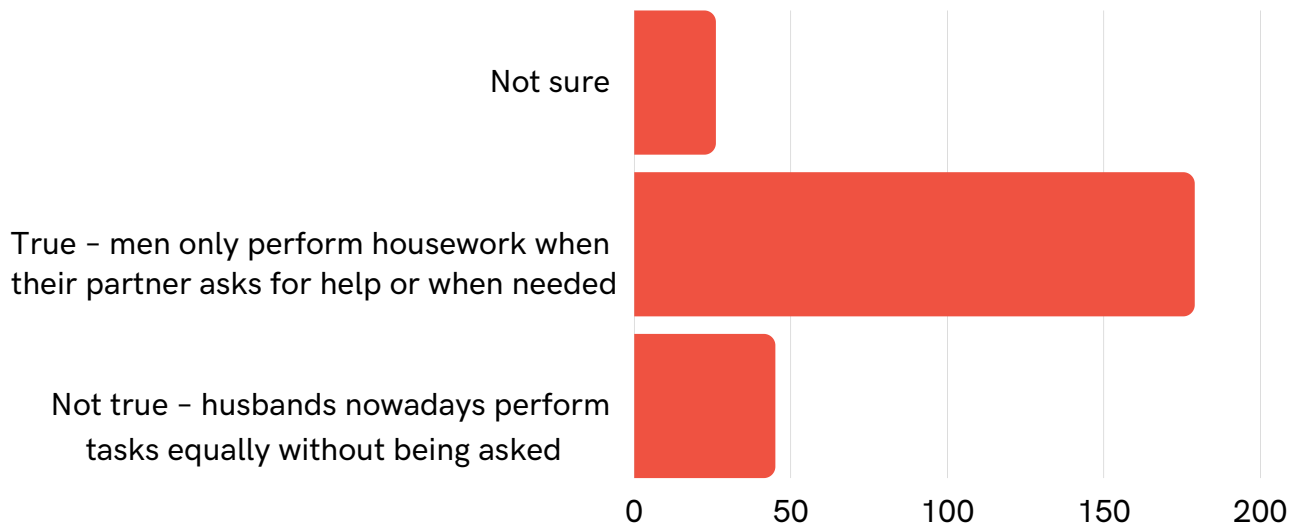
*Why do we need to use the word "help" when we eat it together?"*

*For example, if the woman cooks the meal, and then she also needs to wash the dishes, this is very unreasonable and unfair"*

(LGBTQ+ Y1 Woman).

## MEN AS 'HELPING' VS 'DOING' (cont)

*"Actually, a man doing the housework does not mean that he 'helps,' nor do we have to praise him that he is good – it is a common duty. [Using the term 'helps'] is because our common mindset has nurtured him that it is a woman's work" (C3 Woman).*



**Figure 7: How true is following the statement: "Wives are seen as the ones who project manage the household chores, while men/husbands are seen as helpers"?**

Contrastingly, while many men were clear that they do carry out (or 'help with') UCW, some reflected on not having to 'think about' this in the same way as their partners: *"If talking about what should we cook today, I don't think about this. My wife always asks what food I want. Sometimes I don't answer because I don't know what I want to eat"* (Y3 Man).

The use of the term 'help,' while certainly not limited to the Cambodian context, is telling in that it shows that many men perceive essential adult survival skills – cooking, cleaning, washing clothes – to be outside the purview of their personal activities, unless assigned such a task by their spouse (a person usually around the same age as them). As the remainder of this section will show, bearing most of the cognitive burden for an entire family is a form of unpaid and highly gendered labour that can affect a person's wellbeing as well as their right to leisure time and rest.

*"In Cambodian society, generally the person considered responsible for managing [UCW] mostly is a woman. [This is] because the father never thinks about this kind of work, only the mother, who tells everyone what to do" (Y8 Woman).*

## 4.2.2 MENTAL HEALTH & STRESS

As discussed, a majority of participants in this study report the view that in contemporary Cambodia, part of marital life and motherhood for heterosexual women is constant worry about their family. As in perhaps all contexts, motherhood is linked closely with powerful notions of self-sacrifice and 'giving up,' in ways that fatherhood arguably is not.

Of course, persons who put the needs of others – including family members – above their own, are worthy of praise. However, the testimonies in this section show that for some women, the expectations placed on them can be psychologically and physically overwhelming. Some women report being laden with unrealistic expectations that they will, upon marriage, provide round-the-clock care work in addition to their ongoing paid work, and perform a large proportion of the cognitive and emotional labour required to keep a household functioning: *"...When I'm happy, [the mental load] doesn't affect me... But when I'm not in the mood, I feel stressed and burdened. I feel like since I was young until now, I cannot escape from the kitchen; sometimes I feel irritated"* (O7 Woman).

Echoing this sentiment, another older woman participant (O6) pointed out that *"...We are tired, moody, and easily get angry due to overwork"* and another (O13) added that *"...Mental load affects [mental well-being] indirectly. I'm sure it does. I find it very stressful. But I have to tell myself it is my responsibility."*

Unfortunately, the psychological impacts of bearing the majority of UCW and the mental load are not limited to women of older age, as one young woman respondent gave the following alarming account: *"...The effects are insomnia, and that I can't eat anything. I lose weight, and I often do not feel well. This happens every time I think a lot and haven't slept for days"* (Y4 Woman).

*"...When we are falling behind in our plans, we [become] stressed.*

*When problems occur after one another, we have to think about the solutions.*

*So, the main source of mental loads comes from constantly thinking.*

*If there is a problem, we, as women, take responsibility, and therefore we are stressed and worried a lot"*

(Y5 Woman).

# SECTION 4

## CONCLUSION

This section of the report has set out the 'lay of the land' in terms of how Cambodians perceive the current distribution of unpaid care work, both across society generally and within their own households.

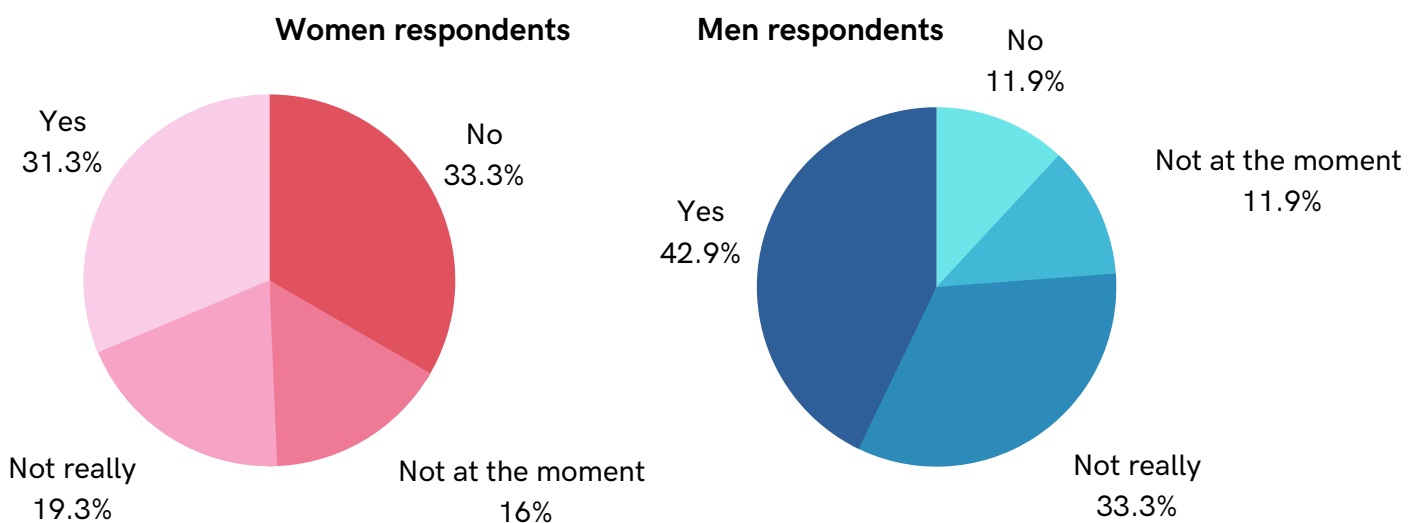
It has found that while some couples (especially LGBTQ+ couples) share the division of UCW equally, in many (especially straight couples), the burden reportedly continues to fall disproportionately on women's shoulders whether or not they are employed.

In addition, it found that the 'mental load' of constantly remembering, scheduling and arranging tasks and household members consumes time and energy, adding additional stress, and reportedly is also held by women more than men. Interestingly, it appears from the below graph that men perceive the gap in housework to be narrower than women do, with some 33.3% of women reporting that housework was not being shared fairly, while only 11.9% of men reported the same.

Despite these findings, two things should be noted: that some women and men interviewed felt the UCW and mental load division in their home was equal or close to equal, and some felt it was unequal but that it worked well for them in their own family dynamic and personal situation.

This report moves now from the 'what' (what participants perceive is happening in relation to UCW) to look at 'why' this is the case.

**Figure 8: In your family, is housework being shared fairly among family members?**



# 5

## **Perceived Influences & Causes of UCW Division**



# 5

## Perceived Influences & Causes

This part of the report explores the factors that participants perceived to influence the division of unpaid care work in contemporary Cambodian households.

It begins with an examination of how participants view the impact of cultural and historical traditions, including the gendered 'codes of conduct' for women and men (the *chhabab srey* and *chhabab pros* respectively).

It then moves to look at the social factors that are perceived to influence the amount of UCW that each partner in a heterosexual relationship performs. These include societal perceptions of gender roles as being inherently innate, and the perceived capacities of men and women to conduct and manage UCW.

Thirdly, the perceived impact of raising sons and daughters from early childhood with varying levels of responsibilities is explored.

Finally, the question of whether urban couples distribute UCW differently from rural ones is briefly explored, along with perceived dynamics of class and education.

**Cultural & Historical Factors**

**Social & Policy Factors**

**Intergenerational Factors**

**Geographical Factors**

## 5.1 CULTURAL & HISTORICAL FACTORS

***"I think, according to our tradition, there is a phrase that literally means women will never escape from the kitchen."***

***As for men, in the past they would go out to earn money and women would stay at home to do household chores."***

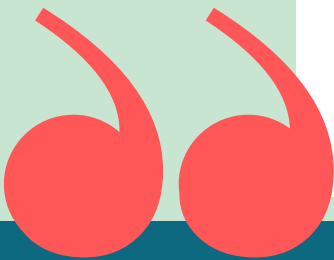
***Now, the percentage of this mindset is still very high"***

**(LGBTQ+ M3 Woman).**

*"Women belong to the kitchen stove," and "women cannot dive deep or go far,"* are two traditional and historically influential proverbs that are still well-known throughout Cambodian society today. Each proverb stresses the static nature of the gender roles that women have historically inherited: if women belong to the kitchen, then no matter how far they can progress in life, they will still end up in the kitchen performing household chores.

These sayings have been passed from one generation to another for hundreds of years, and have historically served as tools that - alongside the code of conduct for women, the *chhabab srey* - have taught girls and women their place in society. The *chhabab srey* is a "poem that was orally passed down from the 14th to 19th centuries, and then codified in written form," and consists of advice from a mother to her newly-married daughter, including that she should "maintain peace within the home, walk and talk softly, and obey and respect her husband" [42].

In discussing the contributing factors behind women's unequal UCW burden, numerous participants reflected on the *chhabab srey* and other traditional teachings found in Khmer literature and Buddhist teachings. A particular legacy of the *chhabab srey* is that in its persistent application as a tool for girls' education (only formally removed from the national curriculum in 2007 [43], it has reportedly instilled the mindset that girls simply are taught to undertake and manage UCW, while boys are not.





## CULTURAL & HISTORICAL FACTORS (cont)

This and other aspects of Cambodia's culture and history were raised in detail by one participant: *"The first reason [for unequal UCW division] is education. For example, under French colonial rule, only boys were able to go to the pagoda to learn, while girls stayed behind at home. This is why people still hold the view that men are more educated than women and so are able to fulfil the role of earning money. We can also see an example in Buddhism which is our national religion: monks are usually looked after by women, no matter how old the monk is and in Cambodia there is no female monks"* (C2 Man).

It should be noted that the influence of similar texts or 'conduct manuals'<sup>4</sup> can be readily found in Western contexts (particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries) as well as in other parts of the world. Nonetheless, the prevalence throughout participant responses of cultural, religious and historical teachings that are specific to the Khmer context means they are important to consider as influential factors behind the persistent lack of equality in the distribution of UCW in Cambodia today.

Indeed, the same participant later reflected that: *"Some literature in our education system also embeds this kind of mindset. One examples is that of "Ream Ke" where the story tells of a woman who will never escape the control of the king, a man"* (C2 Man).

***"I think [the unequal distribution of UCW] can be linked back to Cambodian culture.***

***From the past until the present, there has been the definition that housework belongs to women.***

***But now, men also can do it. But there is only a minority that do it"***

**(Y12 Woman).**

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Fordyce's popular 1766 *Sermons for Women*, where English women are instructed to be dutiful, submissive, highly sensitive and modest in their dress and behaviour: *"Meekness, cultivated on Christian principles, is the... highest finishing of female excellence."* Simultaneously, Fordyce instructed that women should appear as elegant and attractive as possible, since beauty is a gift from God [44].

## 5.2 SOCIAL FACTORS

### 5.2.1 PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER ROLES AS 'INNATE'

This section discusses the notion reported by some participants, that women are inherently predisposed to taking on the majority of UCW. This was said to be due to women being wired to care more about the wellbeing of the family than men do, and therefore more inclined to take on this type of unpaid labour.

Participants reflected on this notion either by sharing their own personal view that women are 'naturally' predisposed to taking on UCW, or they shared that this belief is widely prevalent in society (while their own perspectives were different).

As discussed by academic Brickell [45], Khmer women are charged with preserving the harmony and happiness within the household. Further, "women are consistently deemed more 'caring' than men by both sexes, with 'care' defined... as 'thinking about the family a lot'. Conversely, a perceived lack of care shown by men was implied..." (p. 1363).

Many participant responses echoed this view of preserving household harmony and happiness through the performance of UCW for others, including the following account by an older woman:

*"I am happy to do that housework. I do it everyday and I am happy about it, because I can cook for my family. I am happy when I see that my family enjoys my cooking"* (O7 Woman).

This shows the importance of recognising the pleasure and pride that many women take in cooking and performing other forms of care work for those they love.

## PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER ROLES AS 'INNATE' (cont)

*"...men are not good at taking care of the children; they are easily irritated, they don't know how to comfort [them]. Mostly they use rage... they don't know how to use the words to calm the child down as the mother does. I think men are more aggressive than we are. Women can control their feelings more than men can" (Y9 Woman).*

Other accounts, however, appear to convey a more complex UCW situation and allow for a more critical reading. For instance, one young woman provided the following account: *"We as women, sometimes don't want to eat [a certain meal], but the husband wants it so we must cook it to make them happy"* (Y3 Woman). It should be noted that this participant also emphasised her own autonomy in carrying out UCW, highlighting that *"We want to cook it for them, even though we don't want to eat it... we need to do it, me and others who think the same way"* (Y3). However, this autonomy is somewhat undermined by her later reflection that *"If we use the time for personal purposes, we are afraid that he will be mad."*

While there is room for interpretation, her account may bring into question the various motivations for women who conduct significant, daily unpaid labour for their male partners: in a context where rates of intimate partner violence are very high [46], there is the potential for some degree of real or perceived coercion. This in turn calls into question whether some level of self-preservation may be at play in the performance of this role. As one older man said: *"...in my community, when the wife does not perform housework to meet the family's expectations, she will suffer domestic violence by her partner"* (OFGD Man).

***"[The unequal division of UCW] has a strong impact on women's mental health. Some women don't bring the issue to the table, they continue to do it alone because they're afraid that to raise the issue will result in family conflict.***

***Some women demand equal rights, [and when they] bring this issue for discussion, there will be family conflict and it can lead to a breakup.***

***Some women dare not to raise it, because they are afraid of breaking up. This is the reason behind the struggle of women"***

**(C1 Woman).**



## PERCEIVED CAPACITIES OF WOMEN (GOOD AT UCW?)

While some participants reflected that women may perform disproportionate levels of UCW due to their being inherently more caring or nurturing, others shared a slightly different perspective. The idea that women are simply *'just better'* at housework was prevalent throughout the data, among both age groups of straight men and straight women participants: "...women are good at doing the housework... so they have to do the housework. This is because they are very good at organising the house" (Y4 Man).

This likely speaks to the processes of normalisation that occur when intergenerationally, one group is assigned certain roles and behaviours [47]. The notion of women being inherently 'better' at UCW also extended to the mental load, where women were said to be experts in remembering family-centric events and dates. Some men participants put this down to their wife's own personality traits and skills, which simply happened to be inclined towards family management: "If we use the word *"manage"*, my wife is the manager of the family. She is very good at remembering dates such as holidays, or any celebration" (C5 Man).

However, as another echoes this sentiment using slightly different phrasing, it potentially conveys an underlying notion behind the reason that women seem to become 'very good at' remembering and organising family activities: "Eating, appointments, sleepovers, birthdays and so on are women's business, so she can handle it" (O1 Man). This tension between notions of free choice, skill, personality traits and assigned roles are deeply complex and fluid, and more research should be done to unpack these intersecting concepts than is possible here.

***"[...] If we're comparing human characteristics between a woman and a man, a woman has a natural character... that means when she is assigned to do housework, she will be more suitable than men.***

***For example, in cooking... men can also make delicious food, but women know how to manage things; to go to the market, to buy vegetables or other things related to cooking. She knows how to clean neatly... better than a man, but for a man, he doesn't know how to do these small things"***

**(Y1 Woman).**

## PERCEIVED CAPACITIES OF WOMEN (LIMITED OTHERWISE?)

The flip side, as it were, of the perception that women are inherently better at UCW, was that their capacities to perform other types of work are limited. This perception was prevalent in both age groups of straight men and women participants. As put by a young woman participant, "[...] *women lacked a high education or status... so all they could do was stay at home, doing housework, looking after the children*" (Y2 Woman).

Other women participants also pointed to women's physical strength, saying that "*Some work requires more labor; women can't lift heavy things... or endure heavy work, and the men are stronger*" (YSW 9). Indeed, throughout interviews, the notion that women have limited capacity beyond housework was closely related to women being weak. As one participant put it:

*"...some people believe... women are weak - they can't do any job besides staying at home, doing the dishes, cooking, and taking care of the children. This results in pressure between men and women since work inside the house is for women and work outside the house is for men. This is because they think we cannot do anything besides taking care of children or cooking, cleaning, and mopping the floor."* (O3 Woman).

The interviews also reveal a perception among some participants that women having limited capacity beyond houseworks is strongly related to their educational attainment. A young male participant said "*women [perform UCW] because they are not well-educated and they don't have an opportunity to develop themselves...*" (Y6 Man). An older male participant, however, said that "*when we teach [only girls] to do the dishes and clean the kitchen, they can't escape these tasks. They will think that no matter how high a degree they have pursued, they are still women and must become a housewife for their children*" (O2 Man).

Throughout the discussion, it can be seen that many interview participants reported a societal perception that women have limited capacity beyond housework. On the question of how educational attainment influences the outcomes for women in this regard, some reported the perception that higher educational attainment would lead to a more equal distribution of housework while others argued that higher education does not change anything since the mindset is already instilled throughout each generation since childhood.

## PERCEIVED CAPACITIES OF MEN (LESS CAPABLE AT UCW?)

*"No. I don't know how [to do household chores] without the help of my wife. I am not skillful like a woman" (O1 Man).*

While participants reported that women are seen in society as being 'better' at housework, conversely, men were reportedly perceived in society as being less capable and less confident when performing any form of UCW.

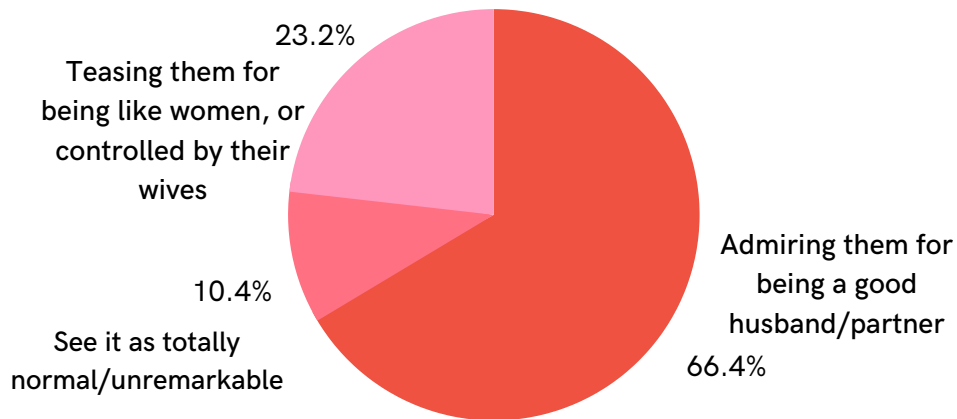
Some male participants themselves, for instance, reported being able to do UCW work, but *'not as well'* as women. As put by one of the participants of the male focus group participants, *"Even though we can do all the [house]work, we cannot do it 100%. Like taking care of the kids"* (Men's FGD). One reported perceived reason for men's supposed lack of capacity in performing UCW is their lack of experience and previous involvement in doing it. One young man participant said that:

*"I think a woman is the one who does [UCW] because they know how to divide tasks effectively and she is good at it. If the man does it, he doesn't know where to start because he's never done it before"* (Y6 Man).

Similarly, some women participants also reported the same perceptions, believing that men have limited capacity at housework. When asked whether she thinks her partner is capable of performing housework by himself, an older straight woman participant answered *"No. If I don't do the housework, the family will be chaotic because my husband does not know how to buy stuff at the market"* (OSW7).

## PERCEIVED APPROPRIATENESS OF MEN PERFORMING UCW

Figure 9: What do people think when they see men performing housework?



Another aspect that emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative data was the societal perception that men performing UCW is out of the ordinary: indeed, just 10.4% of survey respondents indicated that men doing housework is seen as totally normal or unremarkable. Of the remainder, a significant number (66.4%) felt that men who perform housework are admired for being good partners: one interview participant (C3 Man) highlighted the trend of Cambodian men posting to Facebook when they complete housework tasks, in an attempt to garner likes and praise.

However, almost a quarter (23.2%) also reported that such men can be teased by others for being effeminate or doing housework because they're controlled by their wives. This perception may reflect social norms valuing displays of traditional masculinity, whereby men exhibiting traits such as power, strength, rationality, heterosexuality, risk-taking, dominance, leadership, control, and repression of emotions are considered masculine or the notion of real men [42]. For men seen to step outside these rigid boundaries by taking on UCW, social consequences were said by participants to include gossip, shame and being considered of lesser value: "My experience is that when my neighbour sees me drying my clothes pretty often, they kind of look down on me, and I can feel that" (Y5 Man).

This pressure was said to work so systematically that many men will stop doing housework as they feel apprehensive about judgement from their relatives and neighbours.

*"If men help with women's duties, they would be looked down on, such as being seen as weak or women-like."*

*"For example, people can say, 'why would you not try to earn much money instead of helping your wife with her duties, such a weak man'"*

(Y5 Woman).

## 5.3 INTERGENERATIONAL FACTORS

*"Girls do most of the housework, because they are kind and they want to help... I don't think there is any negative impact since they can learn (household chores) for their future family" (O14 woman).*

As set out in Section 4.1 of this report, parenting and grandparenting roles are important determinant factors in how household work is shared in the family. Parents and grandparents act as examples for children to follow and set the norms in the family which their children will continue after them. The unequal participation in UCW by young children was repeatedly raised as an influencing factor for the continuation of disproportionate UCW burdens borne by women later in life.

Many participants also reflected that where repetitive actions are being shown everyday, there is the high possibility of normalisation. Seeing mothers and grandmothers being in charge of the household duties, daughters reportedly grow up thinking that it is normal and one day they too will bear this responsibility: "...they... think that this work [household work] belongs to women, and this mindset [passes] from one generation to the next" (Y4 Man).

On the other hand, boys reportedly follow the roles and behaviours that they see performed by their fathers and grandfathers. Notions of men being a 'breadwinner for the family,' and providing financially for the family are seen as core duties of men. Boys are therefore reportedly assigned significantly less UCW than their sisters. Boys were also said to be afforded greater leisure time outside their formal education hours than girls, which was perceived to be linked to men's later reluctance to take on UCW at the end of the working day. As one participant observed:

*"When it comes to housework... whether a woman has a job, or a girl has to study, when she comes back, she has to know and learn to do all the work in the house. But the boys are free from responsibility. When they come back, they can go to play football with friends. But if the girl comes back, she has to be responsible for housework and sometimes she goes to cook with her mom" (LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).*



## INTERGENERATIONAL FACTORS (cont)

*"I think the division can be [caused by] from what we have seen. We see our mother - in a family with a son and daughter... we as women will follow our mothers as we grow up.*

*At the same time, if our husband grows up in a family where the mother does [UCW] like this, he will remember that the wife is the one who does it when he grows up - the wife needs to do the work like his mother. So, the division is gender-based.*

*Cambodians always say that when a kid sees the same things again and again, they will remember it as their duty"*

(Y3 Woman).

While many indicated that generational shifts in the division of UCW are definitely happening (as will be discussed in Section 7), some participants put forward that men and women can still be fundamentally influenced by and later channel the ways that their parents interacted during their childhood.

For example, one young woman participant explained that in her own relationship, "We follow what happened in the past. Like, how we saw our parents: 'they are like this,' so we think in the same way. My husband, when he was young, he [saw things done a certain way], so when he became an adult, he [took on] that same personality so that when he had a family, it's still the same" (Y3 Woman).

Some men participants said that they had successfully encouraged their own sons or nephews to take on more UCW than they had carried out as children. Others had experienced mixed results, leading one young woman participant to the conclusion that: "Overall, boys are not good at doing housework although their parents have taught them- some pay attention to doing it but some don't. Normally, girls, grow up helping their mother or their mother ask them to or without asking; they still understand the task that they need to help their mother." (Y8 Woman).

## 5.4 GEOGRAPHICAL & CLASS FACTORS

During interviews, many participants raised the notion that women living in rural areas may face higher burdens of UCW than their urban counterparts. Unfortunately, this study's datasets are too small to 'prove' this hypothesis one way or another.<sup>3</sup> What can be explored are the perceptions that Cambodian participants have as to the performance of UCW in rural versus urban areas. It is to that exploration that this report now turns.

Participants, whether young or old, men or women, consistently reported the perception that there remains a strong link between households in rural areas and the maintenance of more traditional roles of women as performers and managers of UCW.

One older male participant even stated that he had tried to shift the mindset of his own wife away from providing disproportionate levels of UCW in their relationship, stating that she had felt responsible for it because she "lived in a rural area before we got married" (O2 Man).

However, despite the popular consensus appearing to view rural areas as more conservative and traditional, and therefore continuing to embrace women performing most of the UCW, some participants took a different view. For example, one male CSO respondent argued that: *"I don't think there are many differences between people who live in the city and people who live in the rural area, though in the rural area there might be some stand out cases. What I have seen is that even for powerful people, they still hold this kind of mindset.."* (C3 Man).

*"Normally, the norm or mindset of Cambodian people... is that women are the housewives. They always say that women belong to the kitchen, so they don't have time to go out.*

*This is the Cambodian perspective that has been embraced, especially for those who live in the rural areas; they always implement this mindset, which they always follow.*

*Most of the women in the rural areas always accept this and never go beyond it.*

*For men, they use their labour to do heavy work but for tasks such as cooking... and taking care of the children - all of these... are women's work"*

(O2 Man).

<sup>5</sup> The survey data did not reveal any significant discrepancies between views held by rural and city-based respondents. This subject provides an opportunity for more in-depth research to learn the extent to which geographic location and class play a role in UCW perceptions and experiences.

*"Women must do it; if we don't do it, our house is not clean; we can't just hire a maid" (Y3 Woman).*

*"In particular, in rural areas, the [women as housewife and men as breadwinner] mindset is more [prevalent], but in the city, it is less.*

*Especially in contexts where there are a lot of poor people, they put it into practice. This is because they are poor, they cannot afford for girls or daughters to go to school or to go far away from home. They [use UCW] as a reason not to send them to school – they just stay at home and do the housework.*

*It depends on geographical factors and their livelihood. If most of them have a good livelihood, if they are well-educated, the practice of this mindset won't happen much"*

(LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).

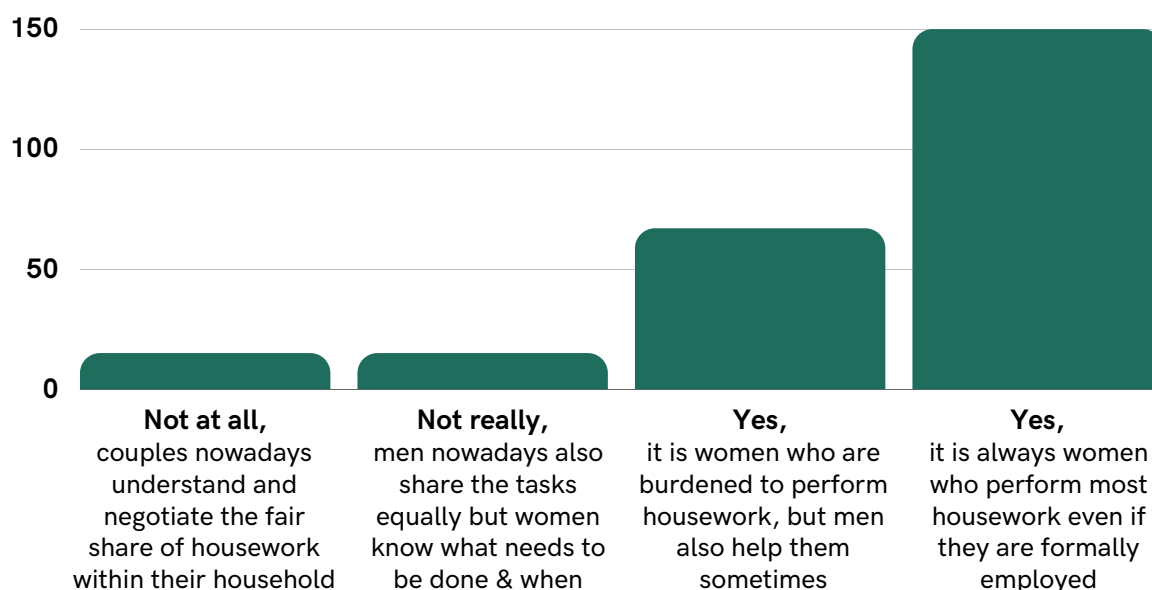
Some rural women discussed how their performance of UCW worked for them because they carried out work at home and on the farm, while their husbands conducted labour elsewhere. For instance one woman from a village in Kampong Chhnang province said: *"I think if we don't divide it like this, we won't be like a family... He works hard and when he comes back, he will be happy if the meal is ready for him and the children"* (Y10 Woman).

Another, older woman living rurally said that her husband was a migrant worker, and so she faced the entire UCW burden alone: *"I'm the one looking after my family. My husband has his own job, he comes home only 2-3 days a month. [I make] meals, do laundry, go to the market, look after the house – everything, every day, including my children's education"*

These accounts, when contrasted with some interviews conducted in Phnom Penh, further bring into question the relevance of class and economic background. For example, some urban participants suggested that if women were unhappy with having to do housework or care for young children, then *"there are many schools where women can send their children, or they can hire a caregiver to look after them"* (YSW 16). Obviously, paid support with childcare or housework is something out of reach for a majority of Cambodian families: the gap in affordability of childcare services was mentioned by some participants as a policy issue that should be addressed to reduce women's UCW burden.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

**Figure 10: Do you think that there is an unfair division of housework between family members generally in Cambodia?**

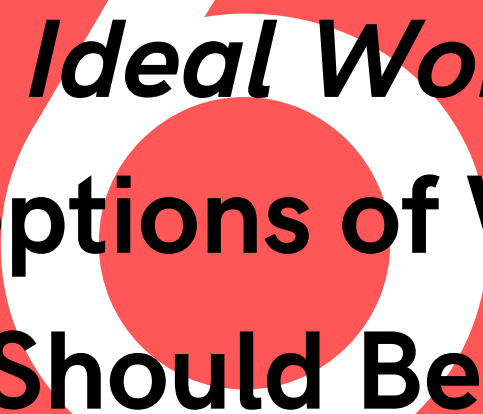


This part of the report has explored factors reported by participants to influence the division of unpaid care work in contemporary Cambodian households. It began with an examination of how participants view the impact of cultural and historical traditions, before looking at the social factors said to be influencing the amount of UCW that each partner performs.

Next, the perceived impact of raising sons and daughters from early childhood with varying levels of responsibilities was examined, before a brief final section explored perceptions of whether living rurally and having a certain income affected UCW division.

On a final note, it is important to highlight again that (despite the findings in the above graph), not all participants reported having an unequal division of UCW in their household, and not all participants perceived unequally distributed UCW duties in a negative light. For instance, one male participant shared the following account: *"For my family, one task that she cannot let anyone else do is kitchen work. Because I do not dare to do it as she does not think my food is delicious"* (Men's FGD).

This reminds us that for many women, cooking and other forms of UCW are important tasks which they take great pride in performing well. From a feminist and human rights perspective, the issue is not in the performance of UCW itself. Rather, it lies in the lack of agency to fairly share those tasks with other household members, where for instance a woman does not enjoy cooking and/or finds she is not particularly good at it, or finds it limits her time for other pursuits which she would find more meaningful or simply enjoy more.



*In an Ideal World...*  
**Perceptions of What  
Should Be**



## 6

### In an ideal world...

*"I think housework should be shared, it's not work for one person only. If we live under the same roof, we should do it together. I think of it as shared work... Housework is the responsibility of both wife and husband; it is just not 'helping'" (Y8 Woman).*

Thus far, this study's findings sections have focused on the current status quo – Section 4 asked participants to reflect on **what is currently happening** in relation to UCW division, and Section 5 asked them to reflect on **why** that might be the case. These sections found, respectively, that despite some progress the UCW burden is still perceived to fall disproportionately on women, and that factors influencing this trend include those cultural, social, intergenerational, and geographical in nature.

In this section, the report moves to explore participant perceptions as to what they feel **should be happening** in relation to UCW in Cambodia today.

These responses, regardless of gender, age or sexual orientation, were overwhelmingly supportive of the UCW burden becoming more equal.

As one young male summarised: *"I don't think [the current division of the housework in Cambodian society] is good because all the work should be done by both men and women. Both husband and wife are responsible to manage together – either business or housework. Even... dishwashing and cooking, the husband can help do it... We shouldn't let the work fall on one person, it's not good" (Y7 Man).*

*"It is important to educate men that doing housework does not affect their masculinity, but is everyone's responsibility..."*

*They have to understand that doing household chores is a huge responsibility and it should not be dumped on just one person. In society, there should be more advocating amongst families to eliminate the old traditional beliefs that men should only earn money to support his family.*

*This mindset should be changed, especially for men to know the importance of helping his wife with household chores"*

(Y5 Woman).

## IN AN IDEAL WORLD (cont)

### Relationship health, harmony

*"We should not divide any duty based on gender... we have to help each other because we're living under the same roof. [If you think that you] support the family financially so you don't have to lift a finger with household chores, having this mindset would not allow you to live happily as a family with someone... This will only lead to anger or even separation... If we want to live in a long-lasting marriage with our wife, we need to help her with her chores" (Y1 Man).*

*"Men and women should be equal.*

*We need to help each other, so we will all be happy; we can then have the meal happily together.*

*My message to you all is that the division that women should do the housework should reach an end, and women also should be able to go out and communicate and get educated like men.*

*Don't think that women are behind men, this reflects the inequality [that shows up] when we step on the scale and it leans heavily to one side - to the women's side, while the men's side is getting lighter. I want you all to divide it clearly: don't think that doing this work will devalue you, or you'll be like a woman when you do it; don't think like this"*

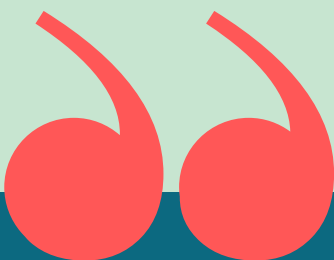
(LGBTQ+ Y1 Woman).

Earlier in this report, the notion on women's disproportionate UCW allocation was rationalised by the fact that it forms part of women's duty to maintain the 'harmony' and 'happiness' of the family.

However, many participants argued - to the contrary - that the family's happiness was best served by couples equally sharing the household chores and other care work duties. One participant even suggested that finding this balance was so crucial to a successful relationship that *"before getting married, a couple should discuss what housework each of them should do"* (C1 Woman).

The responses suggesting that a fair UCW division promotes marital happiness also came from many men, and especially from younger male participants. However, even some older men expressed this sentiment, as the following example demonstrates: *"Nowadays, I think the responsibility should be shared between members of the family. What I mean is, we should not expect others to do chores. Making a division can sometimes turn into a heated discussion within the family when the division is based on our traditional mindset and one party is fully responsible for the housework alone"* (O7 Man).

This finding is important, showing that perceptions of the best strategies to promote family happiness, harmony and wellbeing are shifting, and may no longer be as predicated on notions of women's self-sacrifice.

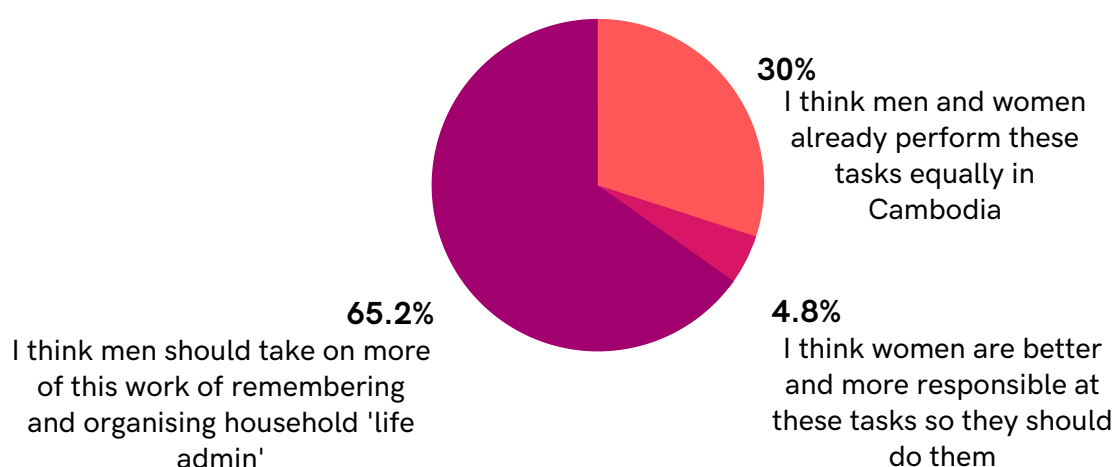


## IN AN IDEAL WORLD (cont)

### Mental load

*"Actually, that people [see the organising of tasks and people in the home as a woman's duty] is true. But I don't agree with that. I don't agree that women should manage all of these because everyone in the house should know what they are supposed to do" (LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).*

**Figure 11: Do you think that men should take on more of the 'mental load' in planning the 'life admin' of the family (arranging children's appointments, remembering what toiletries need to be replaced etc.)**



Many participants also reflected that there should be a shift in the amount of mental load that is disproportionately borne by women in the form of UCW allocation and management. In addition, the survey data showed that less than 5% felt that women should be the ones managing these tasks without help, while almost two-thirds felt that men should take on more of this cognitive labour. It was argued that women should not need to go around asking their husbands to complete essential tasks, and then having to monitor their performance and remember to follow up to ensure completion: *"Actually, we should not need the request from women for helping to do it"* (LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).

Men participants, too, recognised and emphasised the link between women's unfair UCW burden and their ability to enjoy leisure time and rest, highlighting that *"we [husbands] need to help them [wives] with housework... because they also need time to relax"* (O2 Man).

Finally, some women participants balked at the use of the term 'helper' that was so prevalent across the dataset to refer to men performing UCW in their homes. As one young woman put it, *"we [both] have to know how to do this work together, not as a helper - a helper means that someone helps from time to time. We need to share this work equally"* (Y4 Woman).



## IN AN IDEAL WORLD (cont)

### Intergenerational

*"When it comes to housework responsibility, if I have my own children, I wouldn't divide them based on gender, like: the boy shouldn't do the dishes, focusing on school only, while the girls must do the dishes. I don't want this scenario to happen. I'd want them to learn how to do these things and share with each other. So, when they have their own family there is no mindset of 'this chore is for boys and that chore is for girls'" (LGBTQ+ Y4 Tomboy).*

Another area where participants expressed a strong desire for change was in the division of unpaid care work among children, to break the intergenerational learning that household chores, cooking and childcare are solely for girls and women to perform.

*"I want men to be responsible, which is why I teach all of my children about housework.*

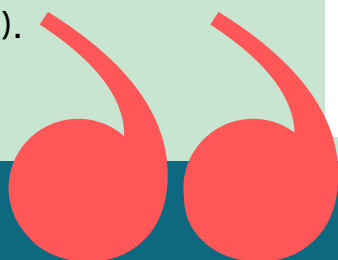
*No matter what gender you are, you can do these things, so all of my children are responsible for their own chores.*

*For me, I want an equal amount of responsibility because, in society nowadays, women also go to work just like men"*  
(O13 Woman).

Participants across the data argued that teaching all children how to be responsible with household chores and helping each other – regardless of gender – should be instilled in new generations of boys and girls. As one said, *"If I had a daughter, I wouldn't let her stay at home and carry on with the housework. I would set her outside in society, since society is moving [so] fast"* (O5 Woman).

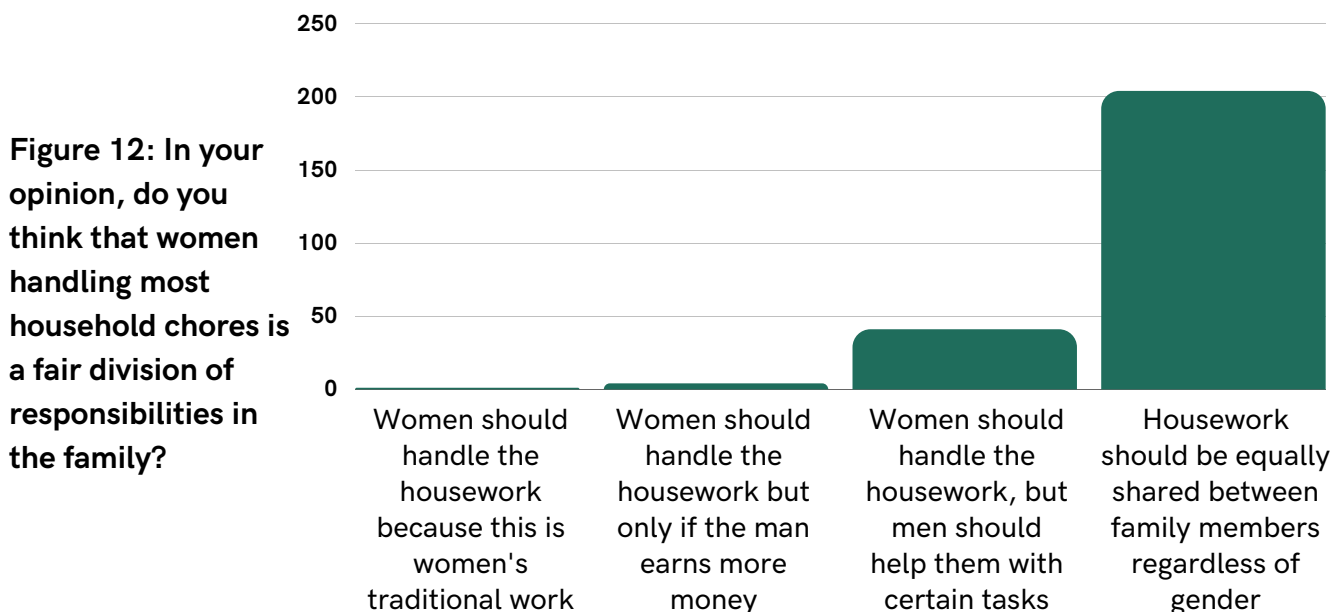
Many male participants also agreed that children should be taught that chores are a shared responsibility and not gender-specific. Simple tasks such as sweeping the floor were raised as being valuable for children because they can start learning at a young age. Participants emphasised that it is important for children to understand the true value of household duties that it is done together and not gender-based: *"We should ask both sons and daughters to do the housework, regardless of their gender"* (O1 Man).

Finally, one participant highlighted the important link between UCW and the enjoyment of human rights, arguing that: *"...we should assign them tasks that they can do, whether they're boys or girls; this gives them equal rights"* (O9 Woman).



## IN AN IDEAL WORLD (cont)

### Conclusion



This section has explored the perceptions of participants and survey respondents in relation to what they feel the UCW division in Cambodia today *should* look like. It found that participants overwhelmingly feel there should be a fair division of this work between family members of different genders, especially where both a husband and wife are working outside the home. This finding is supported by the above graph, where a vast majority of respondents indicated that housework should be equally shared between family members, regardless of gender.

However, some participants did report the perception that certain aspects of the current UCW division should remain in place. For example, several felt that while men should 'help,' women should remain the household project managers: *"women should still take the lead"* (O16 Woman); *"I think women are project managers, but... when I am busy or need to go to the paddy field, he should help... The work belongs to the women, but the men can also do it"* (O10 Woman).

Finally, one participant advised that the traditional, historical aspect of women's performance of UCW meant that it retained inherent value: *"For me, I think the way of dividing work in Cambodian society is not good. But I don't reject it because it is what has been done in the past - we have this routine"* (O2 Man).

Thus, while differences of opinion remain, a majority of those surveyed and interviewed reported that there should be a shift towards greater equity in the delivery and management of this work. The next, final section examines how much of a shift is perceived to have already taken place, and what the perceived outcomes have been thus far.



*Changing Times...*  
**Perceptions of  
Generational Shifts**



# 7

## Changing times

*"For... women like my older sister, she has the opportunity to work outside and to meet up with her friends, as well as run a business and communicate with others... Now, most women have these rights. Even if we are not yet equal to men, it is still better than before" (LGBTQ+ Y1 Woman).*

In the final section of this report, participants were asked to reflect on whether they felt that there had already been shifts in the distribution of UCW between men and women in Cambodia.

As with the previous section, the general perception was clear: a majority of respondents reported that there have been significant changes in the way that couples divide household chores and other forms of care work. Many expressed this in terms of there being different expectations in couples of different generations, with one specifying that for *"For young families whose partners were born in the 90s, usually everyone in the family helps each other doing the housework. But for elderly [couples] like grandparents, mostly they think that women are the responsible person for doing most of the housework"* (Y14 Woman).

Along with survey data, the findings in related to the perceived rapidly changing times are presented over the next several pages. For clarity, they have been split between those responses indicating in the negative (UCW remains the same) and those in the affirmative, who argued that times and marital expectations have indeed changed, even if there is more work to be done.

## INTER GENERA TIONAL SHIFTS?

## CHANGING TIMES (cont)

### Views in the negative

*"I think it is still the same; the men work outside, women work inside" (O6 Woman).*

While a majority of interview participants and survey respondents reported the view that the times are indeed changing and that Cambodian couples nowadays are more fairly sharing the UCW load with one another, there were again some who shared differing views.

*"According to my overall observations as well as the experience of working with women victims of violence, we see that the division of labor between inside and outside work between men and women has not yet been divided equally.*

*In general, domestic work remains a heavy burden on women, especially in rural areas.*

*There has been a lot of changes, with stakeholder engagement by civil society, and schools also mainstreaming it – it is just not yet widespread at the grassroots level"*

*(C2 Woman).*

Many of these participants reflected that there may have been some level of redistribution, but that it was grossly insufficient. For example, one young male participant expressed that there was only a "small percentage" of Cambodians who distributed UCW equally: *"I think people still think this way [that men are the breadwinners and women the housewives]. There is a small percentage who value women equal to the man in task division, [but] women still do more housework than men"* (Y4 Man).

Other participants stipulated that "no matter how much the education system has evolved," it remains the case that *"this mindset still exists."* The same participant reported that *"many people still hold the mindset that women should be housewives,"* while *"Only a small number of people have changed this view on women"* (O7 Man).

Finally, one woman participant reported that traditional social norms were not so easily disregarded, and that *[Women do most of the housework] because of the people's mindset that has been embraced since the past, [where] men defined or labeled that housework belongs to women. Although society has changed, people still think that it is women's work"* (O1 Woman).



## CHANGING TIMES (cont)

### Views in the affirmative: 'capacity development' & mindset

*"For my family, when we had just got married, he did not help to do any housework. But three or four years later, he started to help with the housework because I explained to him what family life is - that we should help each other. So, he changed his behaviour by helping me to do the housework. I explained to him that if he comes home first, he should help to cook the rice or cook the food and I will do it when I come first" (Women's FGD).*

For those who argued that there had been a noticeable shift towards greater fairness in UCW division between Cambodian women and men, many discussed the development of new forms of knowledge by each gender: For example, women had of course enjoyed greater access to education and skills training (explored overleaf), but, crucially, men had also developed increased their own capacities relevant to UCW: *"In the past, women... had to be responsible for all the housework. But now men have more knowledge, and they've learned how to share housework. So now men can also do laundry and taking care of children just like women do" (Men's FGD)*

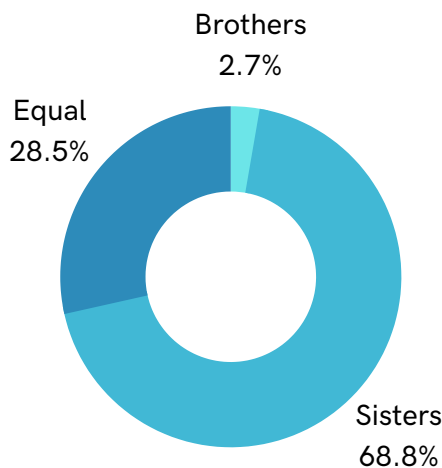
Similarly, others argued that what had taken place was a fundamental shift in mindset. This was either in relation to women: *"[What] leads to change is the increase in women's awareness" (Women's FGD)*, or men: *"In today's context, I think people especially men do not think that it is a women's job when it comes to housework. This is because men are more open and broad-minded. I can say that only 50% of them still think this way" (Y16 Woman).*

One male respondent reflected on the impact that a gender equality training had had on his own outlook, which to him *"normalised men doing housework," (C5 Man)*, while another explained that women doing all of the UCW *"...was an old mindset from ancient times, but in modern society we don't have to only depend on women to do housework, men can also do it" (O5 Man).*

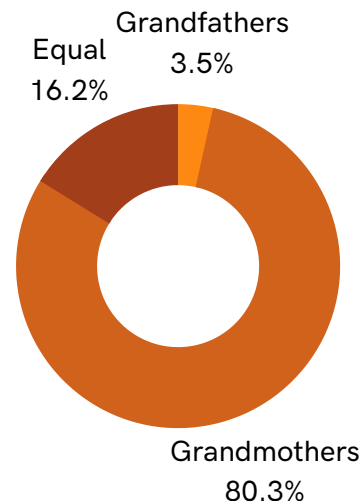
## CHANGING TIMES (cont)

### Views in the affirmative: education

*"Women have rights. It has changed... in my generation, we weren't educated so we stayed at home... But now, women are educated, they can make money on their own... the young women can go to work at the factory, but for old women, we stay at home" (O6 Woman).*



**Figure 13: Who does the most household chores in your family, between siblings?**



**Figure 14: Who does the most household chores in your family, between grandparents?**

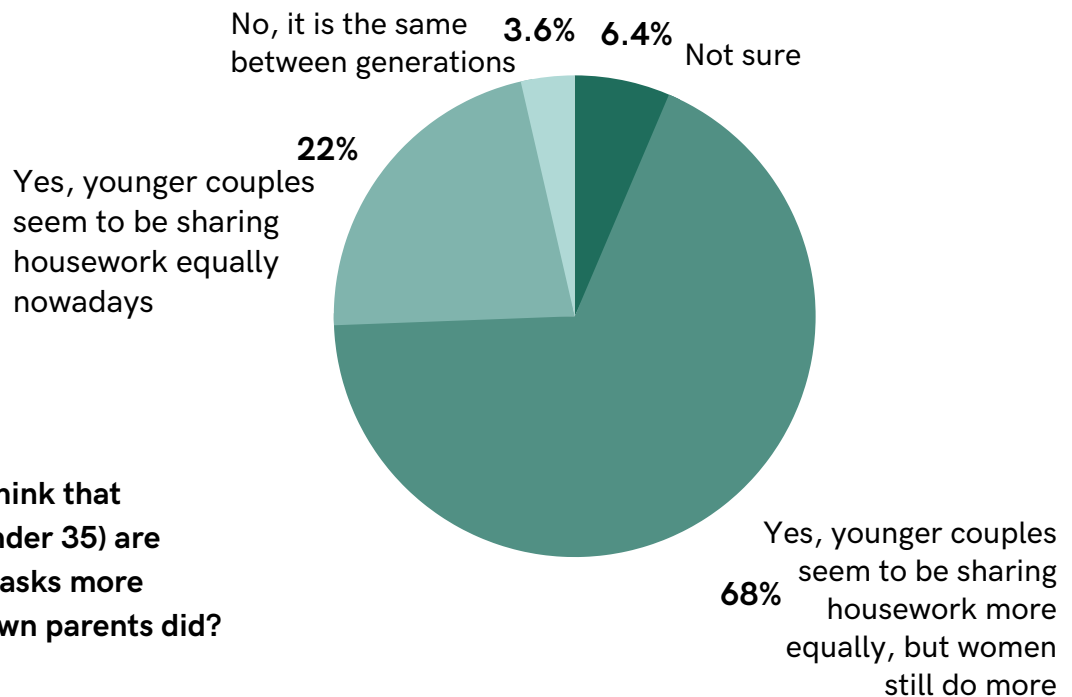
A significant number of respondents argued that men were taking on perceptibly more housework than they had in previous generations, due to women's and girls' increased access to education. Some reflected on their mother's loss of education having resulted in them performing full-time care work without the opportunity to explore alternatives: *"Now, it is different; women have the right and access to education. Women can go out to work like men. [But] my mother's generation, they're illiterate. My mother just stays at home, and she can't read or write. I don't judge my mother - at that time, she didn't have the right to go to school and she just stayed at home to do the housework. However, it has improved in my generation"* (Y8 Woman).

Male participants also emphasised the role of education in shifting the relationship dynamic towards a fairer balance of paid and unpaid work: *"In the past, women focused on doing the housework, [but] now both men and women are well-educated"* (O4 Man).

Nonetheless, while participants perceived that progress has been made, and *"the younger generation seem to help more with... family responsibilities"* (O1 Woman), the above graph indicates that girls are still seen as vastly more responsible for performing chores than boys.

## CHANGING TIMES (cont)

### Views in the affirmative: Employment



**Figure 15: Do you think that younger couples (under 35) are sharing household tasks more equally than their own parents did?**

Along with shifts in mindset and access to education, the third theme discussed by participants who argued that Cambodian couples were sharing UCW more fairly, was that of employment. For instance, one older woman interview participant reported that: *"nowadays, we see that even women find jobs and opportunities... [they] can get quality education, training, and other capacity enhancement opportunities. So, there is change without a doubt... even women in rural areas are looking for work. So I think there's some change [away from the idea that] women should be housewives and men the breadwinner"* (O1 Woman).

This was viewed as a positive trend even by women who viewed themselves as too old to benefit from it: *"People nowadays have it better, women also can earn money, which is different from my generation; we just worked in the kitchen"* (O6 Woman).

Again, however, it is important to note that while most participants reported that times are quickly changing in relation to fair UCW division, this is still far off, with over two-thirds (68%) of survey respondents indicating that in young Cambodian couples, women are still performing more unpaid care work than their male partners.



# 8

## Conclusion



# 8

## Conclusion

This report has set out to explore the current perceptions of Cambodian men and women, of different ages, genders, economic backgrounds and sexual orientations, to the distribution of unpaid care work and the mental load.

While previous literature and large quantitative studies have already well established that women in heterosexual relationships are grossly outperforming their male partners in terms of the hours spent daily performing UCW, this study set out to discover how Cambodian people perceive this issue. Is the unfair share of UCW among women and girls considered a problem? How *should* housework be shared between family members, in an ideal world? What impact does the mental load have on Cambodian women, and do men recognise cognitive labour as a gendered issue?

These and many more questions in relation to perceptions of unpaid care work and the mental load have been explored throughout this report. While participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that UCW is not currently being shared fairly between couples, they also reported the perception that younger generations have been shifting towards a more equal balance, and that this is a good thing.

Participants described the primary influencing factors that they perceive to be maintaining the current imbalance in UCW division as being cultural, social, intergenerational, and/or geographic in nature. However, when asked, only very few indicated a sense of ongoing support for maintaining the UCW status quo. This was also the case in relation to the mental load, when participants were asked opinions on women's role of 'project manager' - while some felt this role should be retained, others vehemently disagreed, as the following excerpt summarises:

*"Housework is housework: it's not gender specific, it's not for one gender to do and the other just to 'help'. Normally, the manager is more exhausted than the helper which is why I want this belief to change. I want men to do housework too, not just as a helper. I want an equal division" (Y2 Woman).*

## CONCLUSION (cont)

So, given that this study has set out clearly that a majority of Cambodian people are supportive of there being a more equal distribution of UCW, what can be done? Male CSO participants shared a range of ideas in this regard, ranging from government-initiated *"men champions, [who can] help to push the gender equality agenda, [and] will tremendously change men's behaviour,"* (C5 Man), to a more comprehensive suite of measures:

*"I think we should raise the value of education and set a good example for the next generation to ensure they understand that housework is not one gender's responsibility. We as men should normalise doing household chores... and [as advocates], develop advertisements for educational videos or community group discussions. I myself raised a group discussion with my university friends before, and it was so impactful to change their actions as we shared honest and truthful advice to one another"* (C3 Man).

Another male CSO respondent highlighted that it is crucial not only to encourage women to pursue their dreams – either inside or outside the home – but, for those women who do work as full-time UCW providers, advocates should work to ensure that those women are able to hold as much power in themselves and in their households as to avoid exploitation and vulnerability.

Women CSO respondents, too, gave detailed ideas about how gender equality advocates can push for change, including encouraging duty bearers like the Ministry of Women's Affairs to develop, monitor and implement actions to shift attitudes and mindsets about UCW. Education providers and relevant government actors should also *"provide education from kindergarten to change the mindset of the young generation so that children understand these responsibilities and the value of both paid and unpaid work... in the curriculum, all roles must be explained to them as a common obligation... [because] there must be a change"* (C2 Woman).

The same participant advised that as well as men leaning in and taking on UCW, women must share and communicate with their partners. This is because of the internalisation of social norms that can lead to women proactively taking on the majority of UCW, despite their busy schedules: *"If we don't talk about our concerns with our partners, and we still carry a sense of self-responsibility, [a woman can] weigh herself down. Sometimes, discussing with a partner can make a husband see the real situation, can see why we are raising our specific needs, and can change the way we think."*

Finally, the following final, simple quote serves to summarise many of the responses by women participants to the question of how equity in UCW division can finally be achieved:

***"We just need people to give up on the belief of there being 'women's work' and 'men's work'"*** (Y8 Woman).

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