

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

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Contents

- > Introduction
- > Marginalisation and exclusion at the country level
- > The impacts of pollution on marginalised and excluded groups
- > Social exclusion and marginalisation within the agriculture sector
- > Social exclusion and marginalisation within the waste management sector
- > Risks of addressing these inequalities

Introduction

The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has requested the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk to develop a Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Factsheet in Cambodia, with a specific focus on waste management and agriculture sectors. This will inform the work plan for the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Environmental Pollution Programme, alongside DEFRA's internal decisions for the next few years. The factsheet seeks to answer the following research questions:

- > Who are the most marginalised, vulnerable, or socially excluded people and groups in Cambodia's urban and rural areas, and what are the key drivers of inequalities, including within the waste management and agricultural sectors? How do intersecting identities and forms of discrimination intensify their exclusion and disadvantage?
- > How are these excluded groups affected by the adverse health and environmental impacts of air, waste, and chemical pollution in Cambodia's urban and rural communities, and what are the implications of this exclusion on their well-being and livelihoods?
- > What are the risks, including safeguarding and SEAH risks, to working with these groups or addressing drivers of inequalities? How are these risks best mitigated?

Marginalisation and social exclusion – country level

Gender equality

Legislation and women's political participation

- > **Cambodia has made notable strides in establishing a comprehensive legal and policy environment to advance gender equality.** Cambodia's legal and policy framework for gender equality is anchored in the [Constitution \(Article 31\)](#) and reinforced by international commitments such as the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#), which was acceded to in 1992. Key national strategies—including the [Neary Rattanak](#) plans (notably [Neary Rattanak V](#) and the latest [Neary Rattanak VI 2024–2028](#)) and the [Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals \(CSDGs\)](#)—prioritise gender

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

mainstreaming across economic, educational, and climate policies. The [Pentagonal Strategy Phase I](#) for growth, employment, equity, efficiency, and sustainability, released in 2023, further reaffirms the government's commitment to gender equality as a cornerstone of resilient, sustainable, and inclusive development. Together, these frameworks promote women's empowerment through legal and institutional reforms, capacity-building initiatives led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), and efforts to challenge harmful social norms, such as the removal of *Chbab Srei* (Women's Code of Conduct) from school curricula. Despite these advances, deeply entrenched gender norms continue to pose significant barriers to achieving fully inclusive and equitable development.

- **The government's commitment to gender equality is also evident in key sectoral policies, particularly in the areas of climate change and disaster risk.** Instruments such as the [Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan \(2014–2023\)](#), the [Master plan on Gender and Climate Change \(2018-2030\)](#), and the [Nationally Determined Contribution \(2020\)](#) embed gender considerations across mitigation and adaptation efforts. In addition, [the Ministry of Women's Affairs' Gender and Climate Change Strategy Plan \(2013–2023\)](#) seeks to institutionalise gender-responsive climate policy across government. Despite these commitments, implementation remains constrained by limited gender-disaggregated data on climate and disaster vulnerabilities and insufficient understanding of how gender relations shape local coping strategies and resilience.
- **According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Cambodia's political empowerment gap remains large.** Women hold 15.7% of parliamentary seats, 12.5% of ministerial posts, and the country has had no female head of state in the last five decades. These indicators contribute to a low overall political empowerment score of 0.080, placing Cambodia at 127th globally ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.137).
- **Despite modest gains, women remain significantly under-represented in government institutions.** In contexts where entrenched social hierarchies persist and social change is uneven, women in politics continue to face substantial barriers. While political systems are evolving, progress towards gender-equal inclusion, participation, and fair treatment remains constrained by deeply embedded patriarchal norms within patrimonial governance structures, electoral processes, and party politics ([Pen et. al., 2024](#)).

Economic opportunities and rights

- **In Cambodia, women's social status is closely tied to conformity with traditional gender norms, which shape expectations around mobility, marriage, and domestic roles.** These norms restrict young women's independence and place a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities on married women, with direct implications for their access to the labour market and career progression. As a result, deeply entrenched gender roles continue to influence both women's and men's patterns of employment and the benefits they derive from work ([Weimann-Sandig and Chenda Sem, 2022](#)).
- **According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Cambodia has made incremental gains in economic participation and opportunity, though notable gender gaps persist.** In the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index, Cambodia recorded a score of 0.721, ranking 57th globally in economic participation and opportunity. This marks an improvement from 0.717 and a rank of 59th in 2024, indicating gradual progress in narrowing gender gaps in the labour market ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.137).
- **Economic participation evidence shows active involvement of women but persistent gaps:** Women's labour force participation is 73.73%, compared with 85.82% for men, and

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

women's estimated earned income (5,80 international dollars) remains below men's (7,61) ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.137).

- **Women's representation in different types of work remains uneven:** Women make up 43.98% of professional and technical workers but hold only 29.23% of senior leadership roles, whereas men account for 56.02% of technical roles and 70.77% of senior positions ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.137). Leadership advancement shows mixed progress, with advancement into leadership scored at 5.12 ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.138).
- **Women continue to face structural barriers to economic leadership, particularly in business ownership and top management roles.** Women own 33.80% of firms and serve as top managers in 33.70% of firms ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.138).
 - Women leaders often navigate the dual pressures of gender norms—feeling compelled to be exceptionally well prepared to avoid being perceived as uninformed, while simultaneously moderating their assertiveness to prevent being judged negatively for speaking out ([Beban et. al., 2024](#), p.3).
- **Employment patterns show both high informality and low unemployment:** Women's informal employment stands at 88.98% compared with 89.81% for men, while unemployment remains low overall, at 0.44% for women and 0.40% for men. Further, 37.62% of women and 27.26% of men are employed part-time ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.138).
- **Vulnerable employment among women in Cambodia has declined since the early 1990s, yet it remains a significant concern.** Workers in vulnerable employment—typically lacking formal contracts, social protection, and adequate safety nets—are at greater risk of economic insecurity and poverty. In 2023, 58.3% of women and 47.3% of men in Cambodia were in vulnerable employment, indicating a persistent gender gap. Moreover, vulnerable employment rates for both women and men remain higher than the regional average for East Asia and the Pacific ([World Bank, 2025a](#)).
- **Legal frameworks in Cambodia provide women with formal protections to access and own land on an equal basis with men.** Women have near-equal legal rights to access and own land assets compared to men ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p.138).
 - The draft Land Law of Cambodia was first shared with civil society organisations in January 2024 (dated 27 December 2023), with a [third draft released on 19 June 2024](#). While the law does not explicitly mention women, it implicitly reinforces gender equality through references to the Constitution and the Civil Code, particularly in its recognition of spousal rights to jointly owned property. The draft law establishes the principles, rules, and procedures governing the management of land and other immovable property, with the stated aim of supporting effective, sustainable, and environmentally responsible economic and social development ([Landesa, 2024](#)).
- **Women's digital access in Cambodia is approaching parity with that of men.** Approximately 78.3% of women own a mobile phone, compared to 84.8% of men. Meanwhile, 80.2% of women used the internet in the past 30 days, compared to 81.9% of men. Smartphone ownership reveals that more men (79.5%) than women (74.5%) own smartphones ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- **Mobile money is a key driver of financial inclusion, especially for women.** Among adults with an account, 13.7% of women use both a bank and mobile money account, and 21.9% rely on a bank account only, compared to 16.8% and 22.4% of men, respectively ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- **Use of digital tools for learning and skills development remains limited for both sexes.** Around 28% of women and 31.6% of men reported accessing online information for learning,

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

training, or education ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).

Gender-based violence (GBV)

- **The Royal Government of Cambodia has advanced efforts to prevent gender-based violence** through the National Action Plans to Prevent Violence against Women (NAPVAW), which emphasise prevention, essential services, and a strengthened legal and policy framework. National and qualitative studies, alongside initiatives led by government, civil society, and development partners, have expanded understanding of GBV and supported targeted prevention efforts. However, the evaluation of the most recent NAPVAW (2019–2023) highlights the need for more comprehensive prevention programming, underscoring that transformative change requires prioritising interventions that address harmful social and gender norms ([UNFPA Cambodia, 2023](#), p.4).
 - The [National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women \(NAPVAW\) III \(2019-2023\)](#) is the Royal Government of Cambodia's policy framework to prevent GBV. NAPVAW aims to “prioritise prevention of GBV, provision of quality essential services, and a strong legal and policy framework.”
- **GBV remains highly prevalent in Cambodia, driven by deeply entrenched gender norms that reinforce male dominance and prescribe women's subordination** ([UNDP, 2025](#), p.14). According to the 2021–2022 Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS), 10% of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and 3% have experienced sexual violence by any perpetrator. In addition, 21% of ever-partnered women reported having experienced emotional, physical, or sexual violence from their current or most recent husband, and 13% experienced such violence in the 12 months prior to the survey ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p.287).
 - Social norms that normalise or excuse harmful behaviours in men—including the widespread belief that it is acceptable for a husband to hit his wife in certain situations—continue to contribute to the persistence of gender-based violence against women. Compounding this, many women feel compelled to tolerate such violence to preserve family unity and social stability ([Sreynou, 2025](#)).
- **Women in Cambodia also face Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TF-GBV), including online harassment, extortion, stalking, and trolling.** A 2018 study found that 29% of women and girls aged 15–65 had experienced online harassment, compared with 23% of men. Gender differences are also evident in digital scams: women are more often targeted by online sellers, while men are more frequently targeted by romance or investment scams. As women typically manage household finances, evidence suggests they tend to be more risk-averse in digital financial decisions ([UNDP, 2025](#), p.12).

People with disabilities

Legislation, policy, and context

- **Cambodia has established a comprehensive legal and policy framework to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.** The country ratified the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) in 2012 and has committed to regional and global disability inclusion agendas, including the [Incheon Strategy](#) and the [Jakarta Declaration for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities \(2023–2032\)](#). These commitments align with the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals and the national development principle of “leaving no one behind.”
 - [Cambodia's 2009 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with](#)

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

[Disabilities](#) provides the national legal framework for safeguarding rights, preventing discrimination, and supporting rehabilitation and social inclusion. It also establishes key coordination bodies, including the Disability Action Council, the Disability Rights Administration, and the Persons with Disabilities Foundation. A revised disability law is currently being finalised to better align national legislation with the rights-based principles of the CRPD.

- The National Disability Strategic Plan has guided implementation since 2014, with a new phase ([2024–2028](#)). Recent advances include the introduction of a disability identification system, a Disability Information Management System, and a forthcoming social assistance package with cash transfers for persons with disabilities in poor households.
- **Disability is a significant aspect of Cambodia's demographic profile.** According to the 2021-22 CDHS ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p.371), 21% of household members aged 5 or above experience some level of difficulty in at least one functional domain, and 4% have a significant level of difficulty or are unable to function in at least one domain.
 - The proportion of household members experiencing functional difficulties increases sharply with age. Fewer than 2% of people under 40 report severe difficulty or inability in at least one domain, compared with 20% of those aged 60 and above.
 - Functional difficulties are more prevalent in rural areas. 7% of rural women and 6% of rural men report having severe difficulty or being unable to function in at least one domain, compared with 4% of urban women and 3% of urban men.

Education

- **Persons with disabilities are significantly more likely to have never attended school than those without disabilities:** According to the 2021-22 [CDHS](#), 31% of persons with disabilities report no schooling, compared with 16% of persons without disabilities. The rate increased to three times for persons with severe disabilities, among whom close to one-half (48%) reported having never attended school.
 - School-age children with disabilities are less likely to attend school than their peers without disabilities. Among children of primary school age (6–12 years), 68% of those with disabilities were enrolled in school, compared with 76% of children without disabilities.

Economic rights and opportunities

- **Persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to participate in paid work and more likely to be engaged in unpaid activities.** According to the 2021-22 [CDHS](#), in the past seven days, 59% of persons with severe disabilities reported having worked, compared with 73% of persons without disabilities, highlighting persistent employment disparities.
 - Among men, 72% of those with severe disabilities reported working, compared with 86% of men without disabilities. For women, the gap is even wider, with 51% of women with severe disabilities working compared to 66% of those without disabilities.
 - Disparities are greater in paid employment, with disability gaps of 22% for men and 25% for women. Both men and women with severe disabilities are also more likely to engage in unpaid work, particularly women, where the gap reaches 15 percentage points (58% versus 73%).
- **In Cambodia, persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the poorest segments of the population:** 26% fall within the poorest wealth quintile, compared with only 13% in the richest quintile ([Development pathways, 2022](#), p.21).

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

- > According to [Phnom Penh Center for Independent Living \(PPCIL\)](#)¹, rehabilitation services in Cambodia remain limited in both urban and rural areas, particularly those tailored to the needs of children and women with disabilities. Financial and human resource constraints continue to hinder the ability of systems to meet the extensive needs of persons with disabilities. While some NGOs provide essential support, significant gaps persist—especially in access to financial assistance and medical care. Key challenges faced by persons with disabilities include limited access to education, discrimination, barriers to employment, and inadequate physical and information accessibility.

Access to services and digital access

- > **To date, Cambodia lacks a specific law or legal framework that addresses access to information for persons with disabilities.** Existing policies provide only limited and vague guidance on this issue, offering little substantive protection or direction ([UNESCO and CDRI, 2024](#), p.61).
- > **Persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to access information through the internet and other communication channels.** According to the 2021-22 [CDHS](#), 55% of persons with disabilities use the internet, compared with 70% of persons without disabilities.
- > **Although policy guarantees free public healthcare for all persons with disabilities, access in practice remains limited.** Budget constraints and low awareness—both among persons with disabilities and healthcare providers—continue to hinder uptake of available services ([Development Pathways, 2022](#), p.29-30).

Exposure to violence

- > **Women with disabilities aged 15–49 are significantly more likely to experience intimate partner violence—including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse—than women without disabilities.** According to the 2021-22 [CDHS](#), in the past 12 months, 20% of women with disabilities reported experiencing domestic violence, compared with 12% of women without disabilities.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Other Identities (LGBT+)

- > **Cambodia's current Civil Code represents a more progressive legal framework than the 1989 Law on Marriage and Family**, which explicitly discriminated against LGBT+ individuals by prohibiting same-sex marriage. With the adoption of the Civil Code, these discriminatory provisions were repealed, removing earlier legal barriers to marriage rights. Under the Law on the Implementation of the Civil Code (2011), only a limited number of articles from the 1989 law remain in effect, marking a significant shift toward greater legal inclusion ([Seeklay, 2024](#), p.24).
- > **Currently, Cambodian law does not explicitly recognise same-sex marriage.** While some LGBT+ couples can hold unofficial traditional wedding ceremonies, same-sex partners cannot legally register their unions or obtain formal recognition of their relationship as spouses ([RoCK, 2023](#)).
- > **Data limitations:** In the absence of official studies and reliable statistical data, information on

¹ Phnom Penh Center for Independent Living (PPCIL) is the first IL movement in Cambodia, which is a non-governmental organisation established in September 2009.

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity remains fragmented and incomplete ([UN Independent Expert, End of mission statement, 2023](#)).

- **Stigma against openly gay and transgender people in Cambodia remains widespread, particularly outside major cities where social acceptance is more limited.** Many LGBT+ individuals face strong family and social pressures to conceal their identities, conform to traditional gender norms, and enter heterosexual marriages. These attitudes are often reinforced by media and popular culture, where stereotypes and subtle forms of prejudice continue to shape public perceptions ([Kem, 2022](#)).

Ethnic minorities

- **Indigenous Peoples are an integral part of Cambodia's cultural heritage and social fabric.** Cambodia is home to 24 distinct Indigenous Peoples, primarily speaking Mon-Khmer and Austronesian languages, who make up around 3% of the national population, or an estimated 250,000 to 400,000 people. Their traditional territories span the forested plateaus and highlands of north-eastern Cambodia, covering approximately 25% of the country's land area ([IWGIA, Cambodia](#)).
- **Securing land and resource rights for Indigenous Peoples remains a critical pillar of inclusive and equitable development in Cambodia.** Indigenous land and resource rights in Cambodia are supported by a legal framework that includes the [National Policy on the Development of Indigenous Peoples \(2009\)](#), the [2001 Land Law](#) provisions on communal land titling (Articles 23–28), and the [2009 sub-decree on indigenous land registration](#); however, progress has been slow due to a complex multi-step process involving recognition by the Ministry of Rural Development, legal registration by the Ministry of Interior, and land titling by the Ministry of Land Management, alongside complementary protections under the [Forestry Law \(2002\)](#) and the [Sub-decree on Community Forest Management \(2003\)](#) that recognise customary rights and promote community forestry ([Open Development, Cambodia, 2023](#)).
- **Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia continue to face discrimination and forced displacement from their lands, territories, and resources, threatening their survival as distinct communities.** These challenges are driven by state and transnational corporate activities—particularly in mining, logging, and agribusiness—alongside increasing in-migration from other regions. While Cambodia endorsed the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007](#) and has ratified key human rights treaties, including the [International Convention On The Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#) and the [Convention On The Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#), it has yet to ratify [ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples \(IWGIA, 2024\)](#).
- **Indigenous women in Cambodia face intersecting forms of marginalisation based on gender, ethnicity, and poverty, which limit their social and economic opportunities.** Alongside heavy domestic responsibilities, many engage in agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and informal work, yet continue to experience lower levels of education and limited access to healthcare. Barriers to land and resource rights, combined with the challenge of balancing unpaid care work and paid labour, further entrench poverty among Indigenous women ([IFAD and IWGIA, 2023](#), p.17).

Older people

- **Cambodia's population is ageing rapidly**, with the share of people aged 60 and above projected to more than double from 8.9% in 2019 to 21% by 2050. While much attention has focused on the country's youth bulge, far less policy emphasis has been placed on the

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

emerging challenges and needs of an ageing population ([Kruy and Horn, 2023](#)).

- **As demographic change accelerates, the need for a coherent and inclusive policy framework to address the rights and well-being of older persons in Cambodia has grown more urgent.** The Royal Government has reviewed and updated the 2003 Policy for the Elderly, resulting in the [National Ageing Policy 2017–2030 \(Action Plan 2021-2025 of The National Ageing Policy 2017-2030\)](#). This revised policy serves as an overarching roadmap to address the wide range of issues arising from Cambodia's changing demographic profile, aligned with the broader national development framework, including the Rectangular Strategy Phase III, the National Strategic Development Plan 2014–2018, and the National Population Policy 2016–2030.
 - Furthermore, the [National Social Protection Policy Framework 2016-2025](#) has also been adopted, highlighting the needs of vulnerable people, including the elderly, as they have little opportunity to earn a living and work ([Royal Government of Cambodia, 2022](#)).
- **Cambodia's social security system remains limited, with pension coverage largely restricted to former public-sector employees.** As a result, many older people lack financial security and continue working despite health challenges, often in physically demanding jobs ([Maiti, 2022](#)).
 - As people age, they increasingly rely on family support for their well-being. [A 2021 study by the National Institute of Social Affairs](#) found that 73% of older people receive remittances from family members. However, many older adults still bear healthcare costs themselves, often depleting their savings, and households headed by the elderly face heightened financial strain due to high out-of-pocket health expenses.
 - According to a [2019 report on the needs and challenges of older people](#), older women are less likely to participate in paid employment and are almost twice as dependent on family support for income compared to older men. Their unpaid work within the household occupies much of their time but generates no financial return, reflecting persistent gendered inequalities in later-life economic security.

Children and young people

- **Demographic trends place young people at the centre of Cambodia's social and economic future.** Young people under the age of 30 account for nearly 60% of Cambodia's population, with the majority living in rural areas ([World Vision, 2023, p.3](#)).
- **Young people in Cambodia continue to face unequal access to education and employment opportunities, particularly young women.** In 2021, 8.1% of young women and 4.3% of young men were not in education, employment, or training ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
 - Latest data from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport shows that 30% of five-year-old children are not enrolled in preschool, highlighting continued gaps in early childhood education ([UNICEF Cambodia, 2025](#)).
 - Of the approximately 3 million school-age children in Cambodia in 2023, around 300,000 children and adolescents were out of school. By 2024, 15.5% of students dropped out at the lower secondary level, and only 60% completed lower secondary education ([UNICEF Cambodia, 2025](#)). The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for primary education stands at 1.00, indicating equal enrolment of girls and boys in primary schools ([NIS et. al., 2023, p.13](#)).
 - In 2024, youth unemployment in Cambodia remained low, at 0.87% for young women and 0.66% for young men aged 15–24—below regional and global averages ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

- > **Early marriage remains a significant issue affecting young women in Cambodia.** According to the 2022 CDHS, 17.92% of Cambodian women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18 ([Le Bun et. al., 2024](#)).
- > **Adolescent fertility remains a significant concern in Cambodia.** In 2023, the adolescent fertility rate was 46.9 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19, considerably higher than the East Asia and Pacific average (14.6) and above the global average (39.1). ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- > **Undernutrition remains a serious public health concern**, with 22% of children under five stunted, 16% underweight, and 10% wasted. At the same time, micronutrient deficiencies are widespread, while rates of overweight and obesity are steadily increasing ([WFP Cambodia, 2025](#)).
- > **While Cambodia has strengthened its legal and institutional frameworks for child protection, significant challenges persist in translating these commitments into everyday safety for children.** As a signatory to key international instruments, the Royal Government of Cambodia has established a national development strategy supported by policies, laws, action plans, and strengthened multi-sectoral child protection mechanisms at both national and sub-national levels to prevent and respond to risks related to disasters, poverty, domestic violence, and migration ([Cambodian National Council for Children, 2025](#)).
 - The 2021–22 CDHS found that 66% of children aged 1–14 had experienced punitive discipline by adults in their household, while only 23% had never been subjected to such practices. Nearly 59% of children faced psychological punishment, 43% experienced physical punishment, and 5% were subjected to severe physical punishment, including being hit or slapped on the face or head ([Cambodian National Council for Children, 2025](#)).

Urban versus rural

- > **Rural livelihoods remain central to Cambodia's economy.** According to the 2023 Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey, labour force participation is high in rural areas, with 81% of women and 90% of men engaged in the labour force ([UNDP, 2025](#), p.10).
- > **Women and men in rural areas are far more likely to work in agriculture**—34% of women and 41% of men—compared with their urban counterparts, where only 5% of women and 9% of men are engaged in the sector ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p.34)
- > **Urban women are significantly more likely to be employed than rural women** (75% compared with 60%), while employment differences between urban and rural men are minimal ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p.33).
- > **Teenage pregnancy rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas** (10% compared with 8%). ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p.87).
- > **Rural–urban disparities continue to shape women's experiences of safety and violence in Cambodia.** Women in rural areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their current or most recent husband or intimate partner (23% versus 17%) ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p. 294). Similarly, 16% of rural women reported experiencing intimate partner violence in the past 12 months, compared with 9% of urban women ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p. 296).
- > **Access to financial services and digital tools varies significantly between urban and rural areas in Cambodia.** Bank account ownership and usage are higher among both women and men in urban areas than in rural areas, as are mobile phone and smartphone ownership and the use of mobile phones for financial transactions ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p. 323).
- > **Access to essential water and sanitation services remains uneven across Cambodia, with persistent rural–urban disparities.** During the dry season, 84% of households have

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

water on their premises or receive delivered water—93% in urban areas compared with 78% in rural areas ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p. 348). Similarly, 80% of the population has access to at least basic sanitation services, but coverage is significantly higher in urban areas (90%) than in rural communities (74%) ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p. 347).

Impacts of pollution on marginalised and excluded groups

- > **As climate risks intensify, Cambodia has steadily strengthened its commitment to global and national climate governance.** [Cambodia's Third Nationally Determined Contribution \(NDC 3.0\)](#) reaffirms the country's strong commitment to the Paris Agreement, demonstrating leadership in climate governance despite contributing less than 1% to global greenhouse gas emissions. This builds on Cambodia's earlier submissions, including its [Intended NDC \(2015\)](#), [Updated NDC \(2020\)](#), [Long-Term Strategy for Carbon Neutrality \(2021\)](#), and [first Biennial Transparency Report \(2024\)](#). NDC 3.0 aligns with key national frameworks—such as the [Pentagonal Strategy Phase I](#), [the Circular Strategy on Environment 2023–2028](#), and the [Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan 2024–2033](#)—ensuring climate action is integrated into national development priorities. In addition, Cambodia also has a [National Strategic Plan on Green Growth, 2013-2030](#), a transition to a greener and more inclusive economy.
 - Despite growing recognition of the importance of gender in climate change adaptation, implementation remains weak due to the lack of tailored activities, indicators, and resources to translate policy commitments into action. The absence of gender-specific indicators and milestones means that outcomes are rarely captured in monitoring and evaluation frameworks, while limited technical capacity for gender analysis further constrains systematic integration ([UN Women and CDRI, 2021](#), p.10).
 - Discriminatory gender norms limit women's access to skills and resources needed for climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction. As women shoulder both domestic and economic responsibilities, they are often more exposed to climate hazards and carry a heavier burden before, during, and after disasters—managing household assets, caring for family members, and securing food, fuel, and safe water. These pressures increase women's physical and psychological stress, reinforcing gendered vulnerabilities in times of crisis ([UN Women and CDRI, 2021](#), p.18).
 - According to the [2024 Gender and Environment Survey](#), although women and men face similar levels of exposure to environmental hazards, women generally have a lower capacity to cope with these risks, as they are less likely to own productive assets, access financial resources, or hold higher-income jobs.
- > **Air pollution remains a serious concern across Southeast Asia, with nine countries ranking among the world's 40 most polluted in 2023—including Cambodia, which placed 37th.** The World Health Organisation recommends an annual average PM2.5 level of 10 µg/m³, yet Cambodia's air quality continues to exceed this threshold. In 2023, the Air Quality Index ranked Cambodia 37th out of 134 countries, with pollution levels reaching 4.6 times the WHO guideline ([Niseiy, 2024](#)).
- > **Cambodia is a rapidly developing country in Southeast Asia—a region identified as a major source of plastic pollution entering the world's oceans**—yet to date, no large-scale assessment of plastic pollution in the country's environment has been conducted ([Roman et. al., 2024](#)).
 - In many urban and rural areas lacking waste collection services, waste is frequently burned in the open or dumped in streets and waterways, contributing to plastic pollution in rivers

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

and beyond. Addressing this challenge has become an urgent priority. Transitioning to a circular economy—focused on reducing and recycling the growing volume of plastic waste—offers a critical pathway forward ([UNDP, 2023](#)).

- In this context, Cambodia is embarking on a new chapter in its efforts to #BeatPlasticPollution with the launch of the [Circular Strategy on Environment 2023–2028](#). Complementing this, Cambodia's updated national climate plan commits to reducing emissions by 41.7% by 2030 compared to business-as-usual levels, including an 18% reduction in emissions from the waste sector ([UNDP, 2023](#)).
- > **The garment industry sits at the heart of Cambodia's economic growth yet also poses significant social and environmental challenges.** As one of the country's most important manufacturing sectors, it contributes around 19% of gross national product and 72% of export earnings, while providing large-scale formal employment—predominantly to women. However, alongside its economic importance, the sector is a major source of environmental pollution, generating air emissions from intensive energy use, solid and hazardous waste, noise pollution, and wastewater discharge. It has also faced persistent scrutiny for shortcomings in upholding labour rights, underscoring the need for more sustainable and equitable industry practices ([Chandath et. al., 2023](#)).

Marginalisation and social exclusion in the agriculture sector

Women

- > **Cambodia has adopted a range of sectoral policies that integrate gender equality into agriculture and rural development**, including the [Agriculture Strategic Development Plan 2019–2023](#), the [Gender Mainstreaming Policy and Strategic Framework in Agriculture \(2022–2026\)](#), alongside the [Action Plan for Gender Equality Promotion and Child Labour Elimination in Fisheries \(2016–2020\)](#). In the forestry sector, the [National Forest Programme 2010–2029](#) includes the participation of women in the management of the institutional structures and management of the Forestry Administration to make the forestry sector more efficient and effective ([FAO, 2023](#), p.18).
- At the national level, the [Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan 2014–2023](#), and the National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction 2019–2023² highlight gender-responsive approaches to climate resilience and disaster preparedness. These are complemented by the [Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan in the Environment Sector 2021–2025](#), which reinforces commitments to women's rights and leadership in environmental governance—together reflecting a coherent policy push towards inclusive, gender-responsive rural and environmental development ([FAO, 2023](#), p.18).
- > **While key agricultural policies recognise the importance of gender and include equality measures in action plans, these efforts remain insufficient to effectively support gender-responsive climate adaptation.** Gender-specific actions need strengthening—particularly through better integration in the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan and related action plans, backed by adequate resources. The absence of a dedicated gender analysis in agricultural strategies also limits understanding of how climate change affects women and men differently, and overlooks women's critical role as agents of change ([UN](#)

² The NAP-DRR 2019–2023 has been drafted, but it has not been published on the internet yet.

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

[Women and CDRI, 2021](#), p.124).

- > **Changing economic patterns are reshaping employment across Cambodia, particularly in the agricultural sector.** According to the 2021–2022 CDHS, the share of respondents working in agricultural occupations has declined markedly since 2014—from 44% to 21% among women and from 51% to 28% among men ([NIS et. al., 2023](#), p.29).
- > **Although women play a central role in agriculture in rural Cambodia, they remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces** such as agricultural cooperatives due to entrenched gender norms, unequal access to education and digital skills, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work—factors that continue to limit their leadership and influence over outcomes affecting their livelihoods and households ([Huot et. al., 2023](#)). Women also have more limited access than men to agricultural extension services and credit ([Scholtz et. al., 2025](#), p.16).

Older and younger people

- > **Demographic shifts are reshaping agricultural labour in Cambodia.** Rice farming is increasingly undertaken by older farmers, while most young people seek off-farm employment. Although this pattern may support household livelihoods in the short term, it raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of rice production ([Kinkong et. al., 2023](#)).
- > **Youth engagement in agriculture in Cambodia is steadily declining, reflecting broader challenges in rural employment opportunities.** The proportion of young people working in the agricultural sector fell from 83.5% in 1999 to 69.8% in 2004 and has continued to decrease, with most youth who remain in agriculture working primarily on family farms ([FAO and Humboldt University of Berlin, 2019](#), p.1). Limited access to decent jobs along the agricultural value chain ([FAO and Humboldt University of Berlin, 2019](#), p.47) and gaps in young farmers' understanding of market systems ([FAO and Humboldt University of Berlin, 2019](#), p.49) further constrain their prospects, undermining the long-term attractiveness and sustainability of agriculture for the next generation.
- > **Cambodia's large rural youth population presents a major opportunity to drive agricultural growth and economic development**, but realising this potential requires addressing skills gaps, youth migration, and declining interest in farming ([Alrawashdeh et. al., 2022](#)).
- > **Effective youth engagement in rural development requires strong evidence and participation.** However, information on youth participation in agriculture and rural development policies remains limited and poorly documented ([FAO and Humboldt University of Berlin, 2019](#), p. 58).

Marginalisation and social exclusion in the waste management sector

- > **The evolution of Cambodia's waste management framework reflects a gradual shift towards sustainability and circularity.** Initially established under the 1996 Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Management, the framework has expanded over the past ten years to include new guidelines and the introduction of circular economy principles. The adoption of the Environmental and Natural Resource Code in 2023 is expected to significantly strengthen sustainable waste management through forthcoming sub-decrees and implementation measures ([MOEF and Republic of Korea, 2024](#), p.8).
- > **Waste management has emerged as a critical environmental and public health challenge in Cambodia.** Cambodia generates an estimated 3.65 million tonnes of waste each

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

year, of which around 90% is either dumped in open sites or burned in the open. In many cases, there is no clear separation between general and industrial waste, leading to mixed disposal and treatment practices ([MOEF and Republic of Korea, 2024](#), p.18).

- **In the absence of a comprehensive solid waste management system, informal actors play a critical role in waste collection and recycling in Cambodia.** This work is carried out predominantly by women and people of Vietnamese descent, who provide an essential public service but often face unsafe working conditions and social stigma ([UNDP, 2025](#), p.14).

Informal workers

- **Rapid growth in Cambodia's consumer economy is driving a sharp rise in electronic waste.** Discarded items such as televisions, computers, refrigerators, air conditioners, and washing machines are increasingly common, with an informal network of waste pickers playing a key role in recovering recyclable materials. While valuable components are collected—often from open dump sites—and exported, non-valuable waste is typically disposed of in landfills, raising environmental and health concerns ([EuroCham Cambodia, 2019](#), p.3).

Women

- **Women play a critical yet often overlooked role in rural waste management in Cambodia.** Many are engaged in informal waste collection in hazardous and unsanitary conditions, without adequate safety measures or access to social services and legal protection. Their informal status leaves them particularly vulnerable to health and environmental risks, while persistent gender pay gaps—compounded by the low value of recyclable materials—further undermine their livelihoods in the solid waste management sector ([Kozole et. al., 2024](#), p.32).
- **Both globally and in Cambodia, there is a lack of robust quantitative data on women in waste management.** While existing qualitative evidence is valuable, it does not fully capture the scale of women's involvement or the extent of the challenges they face as waste collectors ([Kozole et. al., 2024](#), p.32).

People with disabilities

There is very limited specific evidence on the situation and role of people with disabilities in relation to waste management. Anecdotally, in recent years, the Disability Development Services Programme (DDSP) has supported at least one project to engage and empower persons with disabilities as participants in a small-scale solid waste recycling business to generate income from the sale of mainly plastic-manufactured items ([Khmer Times, 2023](#)).

Risks of addressing these inequalities

Efforts to address social and economic inequalities in Cambodia are essential but not without risk. Interventions that seek to shift entrenched power relations, social norms, and institutional practices can encounter resistance, unintended consequences, and implementation challenges. Recognising and proactively managing these risks is critical to ensuring that programmes designed to promote inclusion do not inadvertently reinforce exclusion or expose marginalised groups to further harm. The following is a summary of key areas of risk.

- **Efforts to address entrenched inequalities in Cambodia carry a real risk of social and institutional backlash, particularly where interventions seek to challenge unequal power relations, gender norms, and social hierarchies.** Deeply rooted beliefs around male

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 152

authority, women's subordination, disability stigma, and heteronormativity can generate resistance to change, especially in rural areas and conservative communities. Interventions that promote women's leadership, disability inclusion, or LGBT+ rights may be perceived as threatening existing norms, potentially increasing stigma, backlash, or even violence against already marginalised groups if not carefully designed and accompanied by community engagement and safeguarding measures.

- **Significant data gaps also pose risks to effective and ethical programming.** While Cambodia has made progress in collecting gender- and disability-disaggregated data, evidence remains limited on how exclusion intersects with factors such as ethnicity, age, migration status, and informality—particularly in sectors such as agriculture and waste management. The absence of robust quantitative data on informal workers, people with disabilities, and other marginalised communities increases the risk that interventions will fail to reflect lived realities, misidentify priorities, or unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities.
- **In the waste management sector, interventions aimed at formalising informal work carry particular risks.** Without careful consultation and phased approaches, well-intentioned reforms could inadvertently exclude those they aim to support—especially women, migrants, and ethnic minorities who rely on informal work as a survival strategy.
- **Exclusion dynamics in Cambodia are also highly interlinked across sectors.** Addressing a single barrier—such as access to employment for women or persons with disabilities—without tackling related constraints in education, childcare, transport, health services, and social protection risks raising expectations that cannot be met. For example, expanding livelihood opportunities will have a limited impact if girls with disabilities continue to face barriers to inclusive education or if unpaid care burdens remain unaddressed.
- **Interventions that do not adopt an intersectional approach risk being ineffective or even harmful.** Women informal waste pickers, Indigenous women farmers, older persons with disabilities, and rural youth experience exclusion in distinct ways, shaped by overlapping identities. Approaches that treat groups as homogenous—focusing only on “women” or “persons with disabilities”—may overlook these differences and fail to reach those most at risk of being left behind. Applying an intersectional, do-no-harm lens in programme design and delivery is therefore essential to ensure that efforts to reduce inequality in Cambodia genuinely promote inclusion, dignity, and safety for all.

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