

Youth and Older Generation Relations in Cambodia

Introduction

Cambodia has one of the youngest populations in Southeast Asia. Roughly 63 percent of the population is under 30 years old, of which youth, defined here as those between 15 to 30 years old, accounts for 33 percent. Essentially, the youth cohort in Cambodia makes up a substantial proportion of the politically active and engaged population. Many observers have suggested that recent political changes in national and local elections are to a large extent due to the growing significance of young voters and the dynamics of this “new generation” (Eng and Hughes 2017; Mccargo 2014; Un 2015).

The socioeconomic characteristics of the new generation are distinct from those of their parents. Born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they grew up in a time of relative peace and stability with regular elections – an era that ushered in decades of impressive economic growth and rapid structural change. Unlike young people in previous generations, they are better educated, mobile, typically find work in urban areas, and connected to global online communities through social media. Arguably, such stark differences between the new and older generations could lead to generational conflict. Yet the findings of a survey of Cambodian citizens conducted by CDRI in 2017 (Eng et al. Forthcoming) suggest otherwise. Despite significant gaps in life experience and socioeconomic background, young and older adults hold similar attitudes towards family, gender relations, life priorities and cultural values. Young Cambodians prioritise family obligations; in return, older Cambodians respect and support young people.

This paper presents the key findings of a study conducted by CDRI in 2017 to examine Cambodia’s emerging new generation, their ideas and attitudes, and its implications for future development, society and politics. First, it outlines several distinctive ways in which young people differ from older generations. It then examines the attitudes and outlook of youth and older Cambodians with respect

to gender, family, society and culture, politics, and their essential life goals. The conclusion summarises key findings and then discusses why young and older adults share similar attitudes and under what circumstances, and suggests this augurs well for Cambodia’s future development.

Cambodian youth in a time of rapid socioeconomic change

The timeframe and the impact of youth demographics is not so much about emerging adulthood but more about young people’s distinct experiences, socioeconomic roles, values and way of life amid rapid and dramatic socioeconomic structural change. They have no personal memory or direct experience of the genocide and violence their parents and grandparents endured. The period they grew up in was marked by sustained robust growth, several institutional and policy reforms, and the emergence of digital technologies and social media.

Cambodia sustained average growth of 7.7 percent between 1995 and 2017 (World Bank 2017), marked by a gradual shift from agriculture as the main source of growth towards industry and services. This has significant implications for Cambodia’s millennials in that they have different opportunities, challenges and expectations from those of their parents, for structural change and poverty reduction, and for human development through a rising standard of living and better health and education, especially among young generations. At the same time, the incidence of poverty has fallen quickly, reaching 13.5 percent in 2014 and possibly below 10 percent more recently. However, when deprivations in education and health are taken into account, the estimated poverty rate is close to 35 percent; of this figure, 45 percent are under 19 years old (UNDP 2018).

Cambodia’s economic performance and progress have led to significant improvements in key human development indicators, especially education, health and infrastructure. Notably, the country has improved equitable access to primary education for poor and rich girls and boys in rural and urban areas (Lun and Roth 2014). In school year 2016,

the primary school net enrolment rate stood at 98 percent with a completion rate of 80 percent, and the lower secondary school completion rate was 43 percent (MOEYS 2017).

The availability and accessibility of primary education means that today's young people are attaining higher levels of education than their parents. School-to-work transition surveys (SWTSs) implemented two years apart found that 54 percent of young adults had a higher level of completed education than their father and 69.7 percent a higher level than their mother in 2014 (NIS and ILO 2015, 15), compared to 48.6 percent and 62.8 percent, respectively, in 2012 (Heang, Khieu and Elder 2013, 2).

Although educational attainment remains relatively low in Cambodia, at 2.4 percent, youth unemployment is very low compared to most countries, largely due to plentiful jobs for unskilled and low-skilled workers (NIS and ILO 2015, 3). Of employed youth, 51 percent are unpaid family workers, 33 percent are salaried workers, 16 percent are own-account workers, and less than 1 percent are employers. By main economic sector, 47 percent of youth are employed in agriculture, 31 percent in services and 22 percent in industry (NIS and ILO 2015, 29). However, the high youth employment rate belies the fact that there are not enough decent jobs to go around. Youth are often employed in poor quality jobs, characterised by the combination of low pay, irregular or long working hours and temporary positions.

Structural transformation has led to improved mobility and more employment opportunities for young people, while the rapid growth of the internet along with new technology (laptops, tablets and smartphones) has increased their sphere of influence. One third of Cambodian youth have access to the internet, 40 percent of whom use the internet at least once a day (BBC Media Action 2014).

Cambodian society has undergone marked changes, too. There has been a marked shift towards more egalitarian gender norms and role models, perhaps linked with women's empowerment and ability to question their traditional subordinate status and gender roles. Despite these developments, the importance of family remains prevalent and influences virtually all social interactions (Karbaum 2015; Pen, Hok and Eng

2017). In the 2014 SWTS, 42 percent of young people chose "forming a good family life" as their primary life goal, above wealth, work, education and contribution to society (NIS and ILO 2015, 18). Furthermore, the urban-rural divide and family economic resources are significant in shaping a new pattern of inequality. Better-off urban youth become university graduates and less well-off rural youth improve their lot by becoming migrant workers (Peou 2013).

The country's rapid growth has been facilitated and reinforced by closing almost 68 percent of the total gender gap (WEF 2017), making Cambodia one of Asia's top 10 most gender equal countries (WEF 2018). The current study confirms the findings of previous studies, particularly the fading away of the gender divide for both young and old generations.

The survey: method and sampling frame

The survey was conducted in five provinces – Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampong Speu, Svay Rieng, and Phnom Penh – from October 2017 to January 2018. We used stratified multistage sampling to randomly select 1,600 respondents from 101 villages. The villages were stratified by location into rural and urban, and the respondents into youth (15–30 years) and adults (older than 30) and by gender. The sampling frame for respondents comprised 398 youth and 1,202 adults, 60 percent female and 40 percent male. The comprehensive questionnaire comprised 100 questions and was administered via face-to-face interviews in the respondents' homes. The sampling method, along with the use of existing demographic information, allowed us to minimise selection bias and normal sampling variability due to population distribution. The findings of the survey are therefore representative of the Cambodian population.

Highlights from the survey findings *Socioeconomic profiles of youth and older Cambodians*

That the characteristics of young and older Cambodians differ has become increasingly apparent, and public perception of such differences was evident in our survey. Sixty-six percent of young and 81 percent of older adults agreed that they are "very different" from each other in a general sense.

Figure 1: Educational level of youth and older adults (N=1,600)

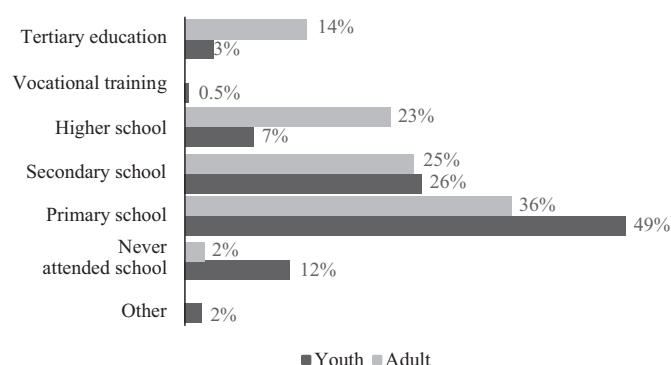


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who have experienced migration (N=1,600)

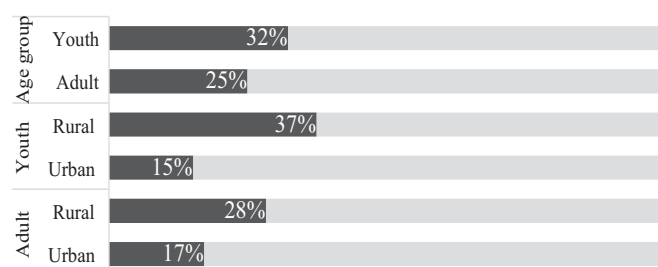
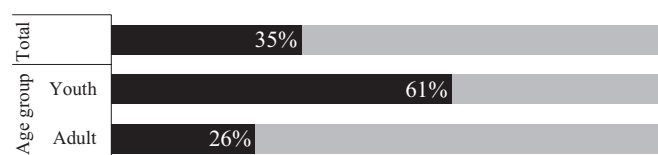


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents switching jobs several times in the last year (N=1,600)



Figure 4: Internet usage (N=1,600)



Educational attainment: Young Cambodians have access to more education and have achieved a higher level of education than their parents. As Figure 1 shows, more older adults than young adults have primary and secondary education, but more young adults have high school or university education.

Occupation type: The rural-urban divide still determines trends in employment (Table 1). However, young rural Cambodians, even if they are interested in agriculture, are more likely to seek to leave rural areas for better employment in urban areas. More young people than older adults are paid employees. Men generally dominate all employment sectors but women tends to occupy self-employment (own-account worker and unpaid

family worker), considered vulnerable employment.

Mobility: As Figure 2 shows, more young adults (32 percent) than older adults (25 percent) migrate to find work. This holds true for rural young (37 percent) and rural older adults (28 percent). Young people (14 percent) tend to switch jobs more often than older adults (9 percent) (Figure 3).

Internet access: Young Cambodians are more likely than older generations to be connected to the internet: 61 percent of youth use the internet, compared with 26 percent of adults (Figure 4). Of the 35 percent of respondents who identified as internet users, 84 percent use a smartphone, 9 percent a personal computer, 5 percent an office computer and 2 percent a public computer.

Table 1: Main occupation (percent) (N=1,587)

	Total	Age group		Gender		Location	
		Youth	Adult	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Farmer	36	25	40	40	34	46	8
Government employee	6	2	7	10	3	3	12
NGO employee	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Paid employee	13	24	9	17	10	12	14
Own-account worker	24	15	28	22	26	19	40
Unpaid family worker	14	18	13	3	22	13	18
Student	4	14	0	4	3	4	3
Unemployed	3	2	3	4	2	3	4

Figure 5: Do you agree that it is better for boys to go to university than girls? (N=1,600)

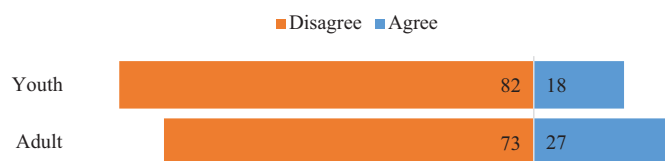


Figure 6: Do you agree that gender is an obstacle to success? (N=1,600)

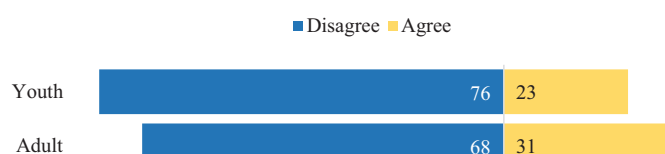


Figure 7: Do you agree than men make better political leaders than women? (N=1,600)

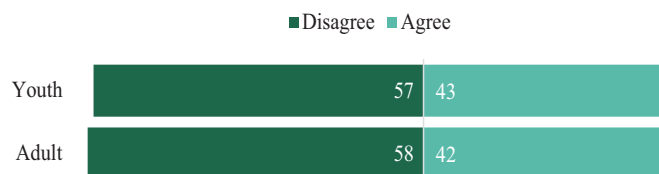


Figure 8: Do you agree that it is acceptable for young people to disagree with their parents? (N=1,600)

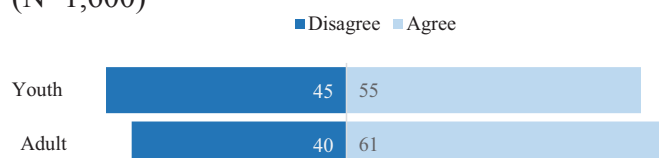
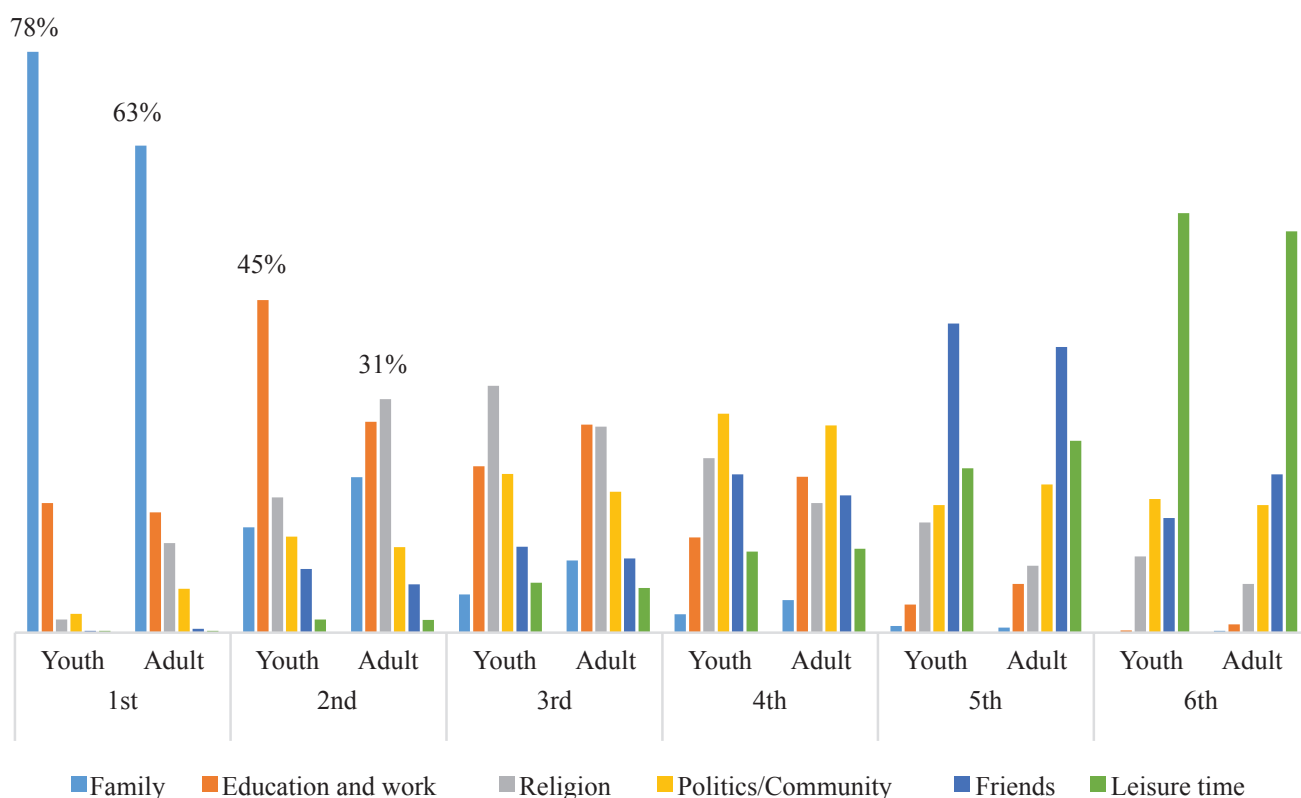


Figure 9: Respondents' rating of social factors in order of importance (N=1,600)



In sum, despite the different socioeconomic characteristics in terms of educational attainment, employment, mobility and internet access, young and older adults have similar attitudes towards the role of the family and close family relationships.

Attitudes and outlook of youth and older Cambodians

First, we present young people's attitudes and outlook towards gender equality in education, barriers to success, and leadership roles, social and political values within their family and personal lives, and decision-making power. We then look

Table 2: Who most influences your political opinion (percent)? (N=1,433)

	1st		2nd		3rd		4th		5th		6th	
	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult
Family	32	28	18	19	17	19	19	20	15	18	8	12
Political authority	31	28	32	31	19	20	12	12	6	11	0	0
Media	22	25	18	18	19	14	13	16	16	18	17	15
Teachers	10	10	17	15	19	17	20	19	20	16	7	9
Religious authority	3	7	9	11	10	15	17	13	17	15	41	28
Colleagues	3	2	6	6	16	14	20	21	27	21	28	36

at young people's preferences and priorities in life. Overall, family influence remains central to young people's social and political perspectives and attitudes.

Statistically, the survey found that young and older adults have similar attitudes and perceptions towards each of the aspects explored. In other words, there are no significant differences between young and older adults.

Overall, there is high acceptance of gender equality in education, job and career, and political leadership (Figures 5, 6 and 7). Put simply, we find little gender bias in these three aspects. This could reflect increased self-awareness of traditional stereotypes and gender norms. For example, young people (82 percent) and adults (73 percent) mostly agree that boys and girls should have the same opportunities. In addition, just 23 percent of young and 31 percent of older adults think gender is an obstacle to success, suggesting the diminishing influence of gender norms as a determinant of success. When it comes to political leadership, however, there is considerable agreement among youth (43 percent) and adults (42 percent) that men make better political leaders than women.

Parents retain a central role, not only with respect to traditional parental authority but also in shaping young people's life priorities, affecting their decision making and political outlook. Forty-five percent of young and 40 percent of older adults still adhere to the traditional values of tolerance, deference and obedience towards parents (Figure 8). Family was ranked as the most important social aspect by 78 percent of young and 65 percent of older adults, followed by education and work for 45 percent of young people but religion for 31

percent of older adults (Figure 9). Similarly, when asked what shapes their political opinions, family was ranked as the most important influence by 32 percent of youth, followed by political authority, then the media (Table 2). The family is the second main source of political information, after television (Figure 10). Also, youth (61 percent) and adults (58 percent) alike are most likely to share ideas and concerns and spend free time with their family.

As shown in Figure 11, decision making rests mainly with young adults, though parents play a more important role in the bigger life decisions of marriage and education as a joint decision. This is probably because education and marriage have lifelong effects on individual achievement.

Youth's outlook on the future

Respondents were asked to rate five key life priorities on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important). The results shown in Figure 12 indicate no statistically significant differences between the life priorities of young and older adults.

"Making parents proud" was extremely important for 80 percent of youth, perhaps supported by an underlying feeling of filial responsibility toward parents, and "becoming a role model" was extremely important for 66 percent. These results suggest that most young people have a positive attitude towards life as they strive for success. Unexpectedly, "completing higher education" was ranked as extremely important by only 43 percent of youth. This result is perhaps more a reflection of persistent constraints in the education system rather than young people's ambition and aptitude. Overall, young people still value family over wealth and education.

Figure 10: Where do you get political information from? (N=1,600)

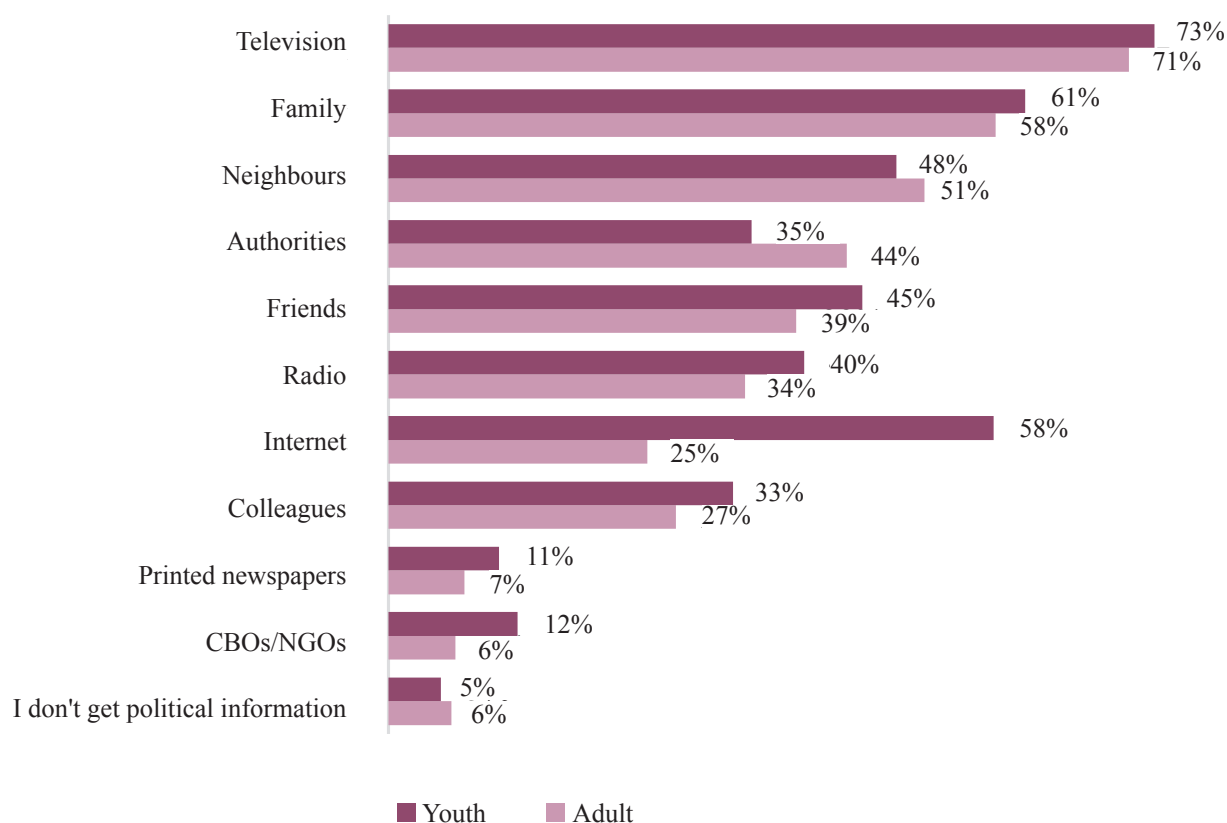


Figure 11: Who should make the final decision for youth on these issues? (N=1,592–1,596)

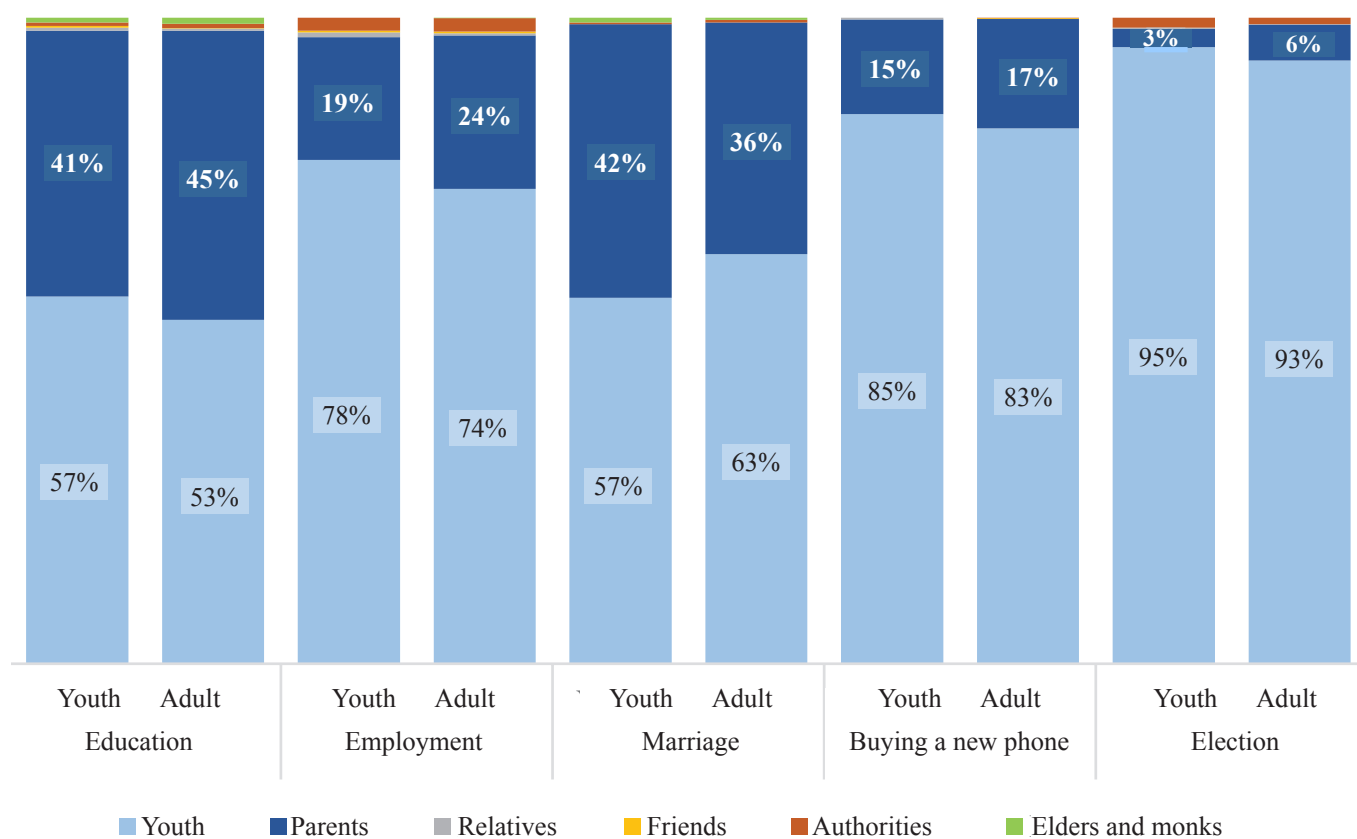
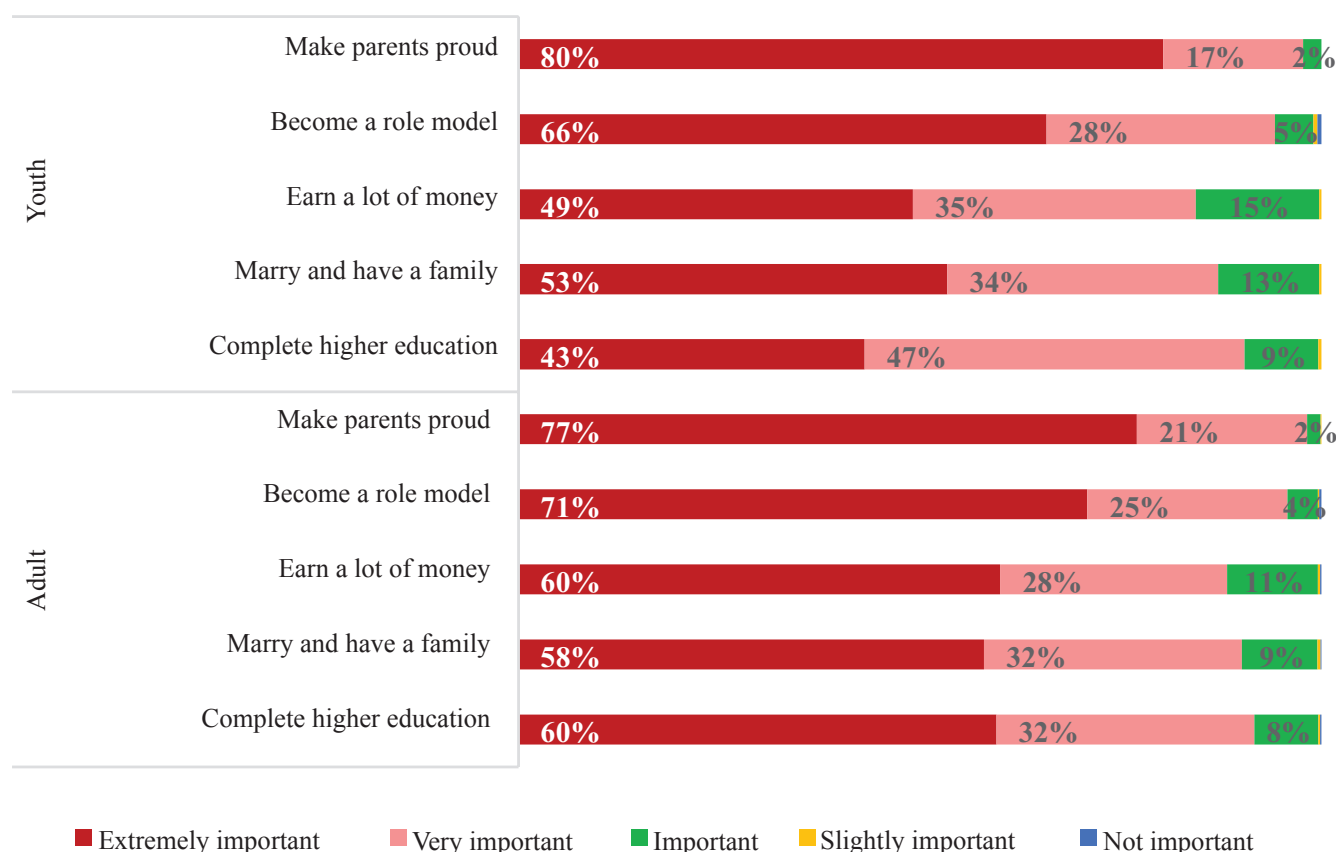


Figure 12: Respondents' rating of five key life priorities in order of importance (N=1,587–1,589)



Conclusion

Despite socioeconomic developments and demographic trends, we find no evidence of intergenerational conflict across perceptions of social, political and cultural aspects of life. Young and older generations value family, gender relations and life priorities similarly. The family retains its traditional functions and is one of the most important aspects of life, to some extent influencing social and political outlooks and decision making. Young people today are more independent than young people in previous generations, making their own life decisions and choices. Older generations respect and support young people, allowing them more authority and power in decision making. And traditional gender divisions are fading in both age groups.

Many studies highlight the importance of the role of family within Cambodia's hierarchical society and how, traditionally, social relationships revolve around and trust is confined within the family (Inada 2013; Eng et al. Forthcoming). This remains true for young people as they value marriage, religion and family above leisure and community activities. Parents primarily viewed

their involvement as imbuing young people with respect for and obedience to parental authority. They are a central influence in young people's lives and decisions, a key source of political information, and the most influential political opinion.

Youth are not necessarily entirely bound to traditional family settings, however. From our survey research, we find evidence that gender differences are diminishing among young and older adults alike. The results show a high level of acceptance for gender equality in higher education, high agreement that gender is not an obstacle to success and moderate prejudice against female political leaders, though persistent gender gaps remain. These results may reflect the fact that youth are more informed than older generations, through the internet and social media, education opportunities and physical mobility.

The survey research has drawn considerable attention to the significant role family values still play in shaping young people's lives, decisions and political opinions. As a result, family structure and culture and family social relationships continue to shape economic and political life. Young people are

more committed to fulfilling family expectations and obligations than pursuing personal wellbeing, income, wealth and education. Given the major influence of family on young people's lives, studies to deepen understanding of the economic, political, civic and social spheres that shape young people's aspirations should take as a starting point analysis at family level.

Socioeconomic status factors – the changing role of gender, higher educational attainment, improved job and career prospects, greater internet usage – all play a significant role in political and social behaviours and relations between generations, while perhaps rural-urban divide matters by itself but does not affect other interactions. Thus government policy needs to expand and deepen the areas of focus that fit young people's abilities, interests and aspirations. Time and effort should therefore not only be directed towards improving education and employment for young women and men, but also towards capitalising on their participation in political and development arenas.

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