

# VIRGINITY CULTURE IN CAMBODIA

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A PERCEPTION STUDY





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### **Klahaan Team Members**

Bunn Rachana

Kate Seewald

Pich Phearak

Heng Elen

Soeurng Sarin

Hong Sopheak Vatanak

### **Action Research Core Team Members**

Kong Sreynou

Pa Sokheng

Chhoeug Ciend

Lean Chhorvon

Meth Monthary

Tang Sivgech

Soth Peosamnang

Virak Kanhapich

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## RESEARCH CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES 1/2

In most places, the decision about when and with whom to have sex for the first time remains for most a deeply personal one. However, research has shown that numerous external factors also tend to influence this decision, and that these factors vary between different genders and across generations [1].

In the Cambodian context, where some two thirds of the country are under 30 [2], there is a gap in the research about how this emerging generation of 'digital natives' – those who have had access to the internet since at least their adolescence – are navigating issues related to sexual decision-making, and their attitudes towards the construct of virginity today.

This research aims to begin addressing that research gap by examining whether young Cambodians' opinions, attitudes and ideas about virginity are different from those of older generations. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews and survey responses from Cambodians of different ages, genders and sexual orientations, any significant differences in perspectives can begin to be understood and explained.



A better understanding of how young Cambodians are navigating their own sexual decision making, and their attitudes towards their peers' choices, is important for advocates who wish to engage young people on issues related to healthy sexual relationships.

Notions of informed, enthusiastic sexual consent, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and gender-based violence (GBV) are all examples of important issues affecting Cambodian young people, where the stigma or shame that is tied up in sexual decision-making can influence or compound a young person's experience of these issues.

It is hoped that this research study can contribute to an open, judgement-free conversation about sexual decision-making and, by extension, personal bodily autonomy – areas that are central to most of our experience as fully rounded humans and yet are seldom analysed or discussed in the Cambodian context.

Applying a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology, this research was co-designed by 8 young Cambodians and provides an initial evidence base from which advocates can more effectively tailor their SRHR-messaging, as well as an entry point for future researchers to conduct more in-depth studies into these important issues.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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

- To explore whether Cambodian youth are more progressive than older people when discussing ideas of women's sexual autonomy and virginity culture
- To explore ways in which Cambodians perceive LGBTQI+ couples' decision to start having sex in (or outside) relationships

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research has 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" [3]. 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 eight young Cambodians from Phnom Penh 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 used semi-structured interviews, allowing the research team the opportunity for informal and in-depth discussions. Interviews were conducted online or in-person where it was possible to be conducted in a socially distanced manner.



### 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 was conducted in Phnom Penh. The interview data was subsequently analysed and coded by the young researchers themselves.

Extracts from participants are labelled with either the letter 'Z' for younger, 'O' for older, and 'C' for CSO participants. The suffix 'M' or 'F' denotes male or female. For example, O11F is an older woman participant, while Z38M is a younger male participant, and the 38th interviewed.

### ONLINE SURVEY

In addition to interviews, an online survey was conducted to provide more quantitatively-oriented insights. The survey was closed after receiving **3,700** responses. The quantitative data was analysed using Excel and the findings are included throughout each section of this report. Numbers of survey respondents for each question vary slightly, as questions were not mandatory.



INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER	CODE	TOTAL = 72
CSO WORKERS (GENDER ADVOCATES)	5	'C'	
YOUNG RESPONDENTS (GEN Z, MILLENNIALS)	49	'Z'	
OLDER RESPONDENTS (GEN X, BABY BOOMERS)	18	'O'	

# 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

*'Kom Tom Mon Sro Keal.'*

'A fruit should not be ripe before it changes color'

*'Borus Chea Meas Teuk Dorb, Neary Chea Kronat Sor'*

'Men are gold, women are white cloth'

While there is a range of existing literature discussing premarital sex (P-MS) practices in Cambodia, some notable limitations became apparent when reviewing it for the purposes of this study. Firstly – with several notable exceptions including Nishigaya [4], Hoefinger [5] and Farvid & Saing [6] – most of the frequently cited articles on the topic are some 20 to 25 years old. Given Cambodia's rapidly changing social and economic context, it is difficult to view these sources as authoritative or insightful as they may have once been.

Secondly, much of the literature is written from a public health perspective, and is therefore less concerned with ensuring the perspectives and 'voice' of participants are given primacy, placing instead greater emphasis on quantitative indicators (see Figure 1). This school also applies the lens and language of 'risk factors' and 'risk activities' when discussing the prevalence of P-MS. This language and quantitative emphasis understably reflects a disciplinary focus on physical health outcomes like sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

However, such a focus does not account for, nor provide room for positive, affirming experiences of safe and consensual P-MS sex among unmarried Cambodians in committed long-term relationships or otherwise.

The majority of these previous studies also do not account for or acknowledge the sexual experiences of the LGBTQI+ community.

*"Women in Cambodia initiate sexual intercourse 0.2 years **after marriage** at age 20.7 years.*

*In contrast, men tend to begin sexual activity one year **prior to marriage** at 22.0 years."*

**Figure 1:**  
**2014 Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS) [7]**

Despite these drawbacks, the existing literature can greatly help to situate this study within existing research findings, from which core themes emerge. The first is that of the notion of the 'ideal' Khmer woman being bound together with her chastity. For instance as Hoefinger [8] explains:

*"Dutiful daughters illustrate their virtuousness to neighbours and observers by both contributing to their families' income and through their chaste sexuality"... Virgin daughters represent prudence, modesty, purity, innocence and vulnerability – not only of themselves, but of their entire families."*

The second theme that emerges from the literature is the existence of double standards between genders, as highlighted again by Hoefinger:

*"While **virginity is unquestionably mandatory in brides** and sexual fidelity in wives, men, on the other hand, are expected to be sexually experienced at the time of marriage... Whereas... women must show sexual restraint, even naivety, Khmer men are viewed as naturally and biologically sexually insatiable."*

In a study exploring the sexual behaviour of young single women working in the garment sector in Phnom Penh, Nishigaya [9] also reflects on these differing expectations of men and women:

*"To be masculine and virile, a man should have multiple sexual partners and diverse sexual experiences... In contrast, **women's bodies and mobility are under more stringent scrutiny**... The loss of a girl's virginity before marriage... brings shame to her family's honour and status."*

Lastly, Ol Narith [8] explains the shame and stigma facing women who do engage in pre-marital sex, (albeit here discussing women engaged in transactional sex):

*"...it is a generally accepted fact that both married and unmarried men frequent brothels or have sexual relations outside of marriage. Thus, "dirtied" or "bad women" serve a social function as they fulfill the sexual desire of Cambodian men, yet they are undeserving of social protection..."*

As the extracts from previous researchers show, there has long existed a strong cultural, religious and socially informed directive that women should abstain from engaging in sexual activity prior to marriage, while men have not been subject to nearly the same degree of scrutiny or control.

So with the emergence of a new, increasingly digitally savvy generation of Cambodians, how – if at all – are these norms changing?

Cambodia's generation Z (those born since 1997) and young millennials (those born between 1989 and 1996) form a cohort with rapidly increasing access to social media and instant messaging platforms. In addition, there is popular entertainment in the form of Korean love-themed dramas, and now via Netflix – a TV streaming platform that comes with access to popular shows actively challenging virginity-related double-standards, such as *Sex Education* and *Bridgerton*.

The existing literature will be revisited in more detail throughout each thematic section of the report, contextualising the study's empiric findings as well as situating them among previous analyses for the sake of comparison.



# 4. EXPECTATIONS

## FINDINGS RELATED TO EXPECTATIONS AROUND VIRGINITY IN CAMBODIA

This is the first of four thematic sections of this report exploring participants' perceptions of and attitudes towards premarital sex in Cambodia. This first section examines how participants perceive there to be varying 'expectations' placed on different genders, and it is divided roughly into three intersecting parts.

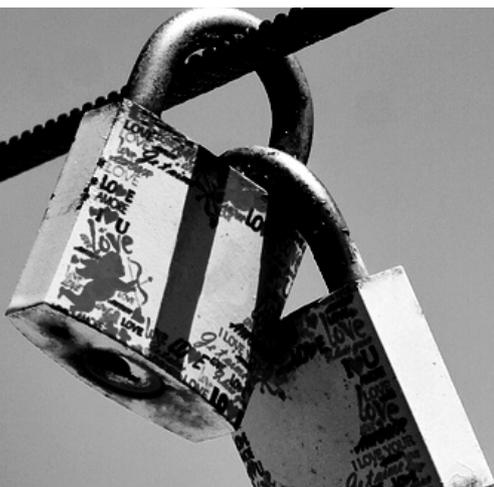
The first part explores those expectations that are directly informed and maintained by traditional **cultural** norms and customs. The second part explores the expectations reportedly held by Cambodians today, in relation to the sexual conduct of unmarried **family** members.

Lastly, and intersecting considerably with the first two parts, are those expectations that participants perceive to be held by **society** more broadly.

# CULTURAL

# FAMILIAL

# SOCIETAL



## 4.1 CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

*“Virginity has become a part of Khmer culture, [and is] based on the customs. Because – since the old days – people have tended to advise their children not to have sex before marriage. Therefore, virginity is an important part of Khmer culture” (Z23 F).*

Throughout Cambodia’s long history, the practice of Khmer people from one generation to the next has developed a dynamic and unique culture, with distinct norms and beliefs. As has already been explored in the literature review, a key function of Khmer culture has been to set out and maintain ‘complementary’ and mutually dependent (but largely unequal) roles between women and men, within which men hold a greater share of power and privilege at all levels of the community.

In terms of sexual autonomy, “a profound sexual double standard governs sexual mores, where men’s premarital and extramarital sexual behavior is acceptable, whereas women’s is not” [11]. This is in large part because in Cambodia, women have been disciplined to uphold a detailed set of teachings, norms and customs in order to become ‘proper’ women, and bring honor to the family.

For example, there exists the idea that women have the role of maintaining “marital and family harmony,” or, as per one Khmer proverb, women are said to belong to the kitchen stove. These notions featured throughout many participants’ responses in this study. Indeed, many of those among the older generations in particular, do not view a Khmer woman’s engaging in premarital sex as an isolated act: rather, they perceive it as just one component of a larger shift away from traditional Khmer social norms and systems that have existed in a relatively static form for centuries.

Maintaining the practice of modesty and chastity by unmarried women is therefore viewed by many as being inextricably bound together with an ongoing project of maintaining and preserving Khmer culture, by ensuring the prestige and honour of Khmer women as a whole.

Even those older participants who were not vehemently opposed to the idea of premarital sex still considered the issue to be bound together with a perceived 'loss' of Khmer culture, as the following extract shows:

*"I think there is not necessarily anything wrong [with premarital sex]; however, it is against our Khmer tradition and culture... we also need to take care of our culture and tradition... we don't wish to lose the concepts of our ancestors. Culture and tradition are something that make our country known by foreign people. If we lost all of it, it wouldn't be good for our country..." (O6M).*

This idea – of cultural preservation and women's chastity being interlinked – is reflected not just in customs and proverbs, but has also featured in Cambodian government policies and even laws. For example, a 2020 draft Law on Public Order includes prohibitions on women and men wearing revealing or see-through clothing, under a section of the legislation titled *"National tradition and dignity"* [12]

As the findings show, however, virginity culture is being contested by gender advocates and by some young unmarried women themselves, and to an extent also by their male counterparts.

Such participants reported the belief that women should be granted the freedom and agency to decide whether or not they want to have pre-marital sex, for instance arguing that *"I don't see why Khmer culture value should so much about virginity"* (C2F), or *"They don't want to be seen as bringing dishonor and shame for the families – but in fact, there is no correlation between those issues! This is just a culture in which society likes to blame women, and it's strongly related to victim-blaming culture"* (C3F).

In exploring this somewhat controversial debate, the following discussion contains extracts from the data highlighting significant cultural influences that continue to propagate expectations of women's chastity. These cultural influences include traditional teachings, norms and customs, classic literature and religion.

## TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS, NORMS AND CUSTOMS

Khmer traditional norms and customs originating from sources such as the *chhab srey*, written by Buddhist monks around the 14th century, have greatly influenced the upbringing of Khmer girls and women. The *chhab srey* sets out a code of conduct for behaving as ideal, proper Khmer women, just as the *chhab pros* does for Khmer men.

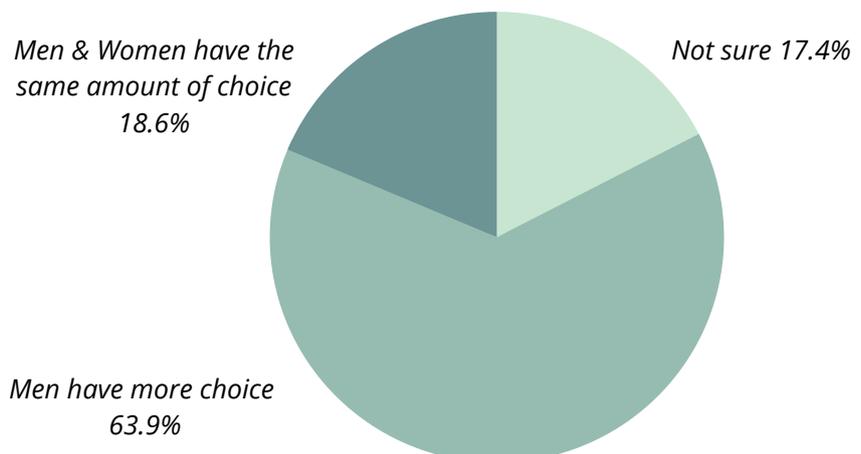
As well as these codes, which were explicitly set down to regulate the daily conduct of Khmer women and men respectively, there are many teachings and proverbs that have become norms and customs in themselves, and further solidify culturally-informed expectations about virginity. These include, as one participant explained, the idea that “our society thinks that daughters are like a folded skirt, so keeping their virginity is part of the Khmer culture” (Z26F).

In addition, there is the well-known phrase that “Men are gold, and women are like white cloth,” in that once women have been soiled with mud, they cannot be wiped clean, unlike men whose reputation can always be polished to a sparkling state. As one young male participant put it:

*“We can see that in Khmer society, we have some proverbs that force women to abide by the culture like ‘women are white cloth that cannot be washed if dirtied.’ This can influence women to remain a virgin” (Z25M).*

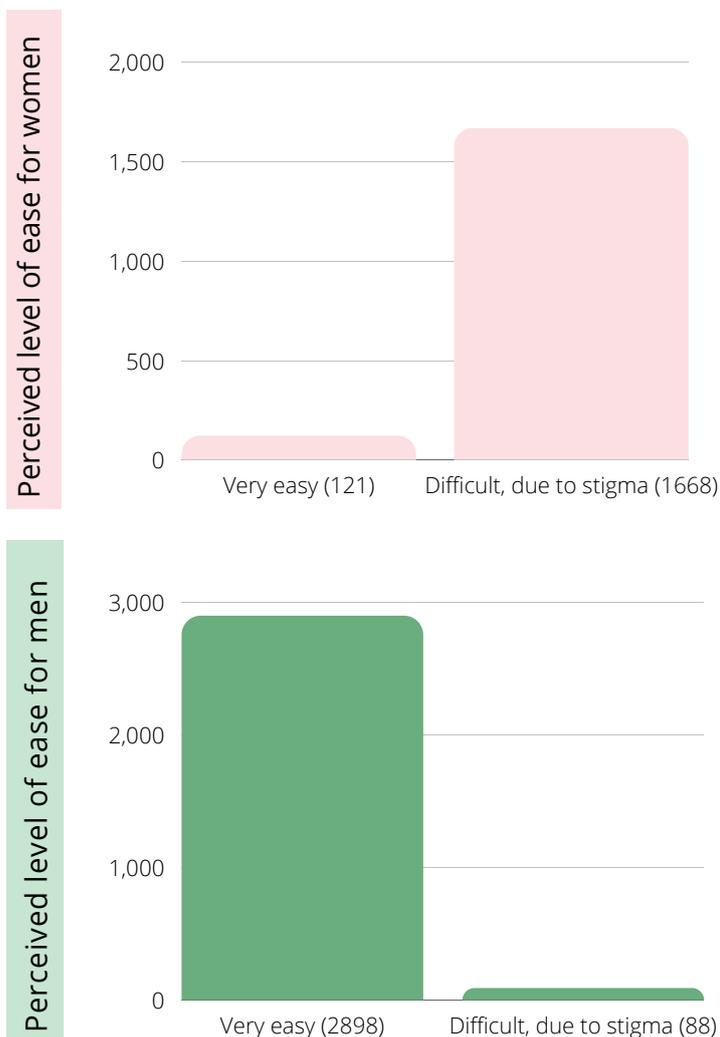
This demonstrates clearly the idea that men enjoy more privilege and are not prone to the same consequences if they choose to have sex before marriage. This perception is also evident from the survey data, where almost two-thirds (63.9%) of respondents believe that men enjoy more freedom to choose to have pre-marital sex (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:**  
**Do men have more freedom to decide whether to have sex before marriage?**



In addition, in answer to survey questions that asked respondents to indicate how easy it is for Khmer men and women to have premarital sex, the multiple response option 'very easy' was selected 2898 times for men, but only 121 times for women:

**Figure 3: How easy is it for Khmer women and men to have premarital sex?**



Thus, the quantitative data also supports the idea that men are considered less restricted than women in terms of making decisions about engaging in sex outside of marriage. This will be revisited in the following section (Section 5), which examines the different types and varying degrees of consequences for Cambodian men and women who do choose to have sex outside of marriage.

## CLASSIC LITERATURE

In terms of traditional teachings, virginity culture is also illustrated in classic Khmer literature which forms part of the educational curriculum in Cambodia. Such texts educate and guide students to be more considerate and respectful, but also to avoid losing their virginity before getting married.

Multiple participants raised the folk tale of *Tum Teav*, a romance-tragedy which contains themes related to how a daughter should behave, and what is expected of Khmer women before marriage.

One young male participant reflected on the *Tum Teav* story as follows:

*"I think the issue of virginity can also be reflected through Khmer literature as well, for example, in Tum Teav... I think the story tries to show that having sex before marriage is wrong, through the actions of the main protagonist" (Z25M).*

Another young male participant raised the *Tum Teav* story, as an example of a cultural influence that he feels should be more deeply or critically examined in order for gender equality and women's sexual autonomy to be realised in Cambodia:

*"I think [virginity culture] is from an ancient period. If we look into literature such as Tum Teav, our mindset has been focused on the woman and how she can't lose her virginity if she is not married yet. That's why such mindsets... persist until now.*

*We must try to explain... the importance of freedom for each person... we should heavily emphasise that man and woman are the same... There shouldn't be more pressure on women than men... [but in] Khmer society, as we can see in Tum Teav, women must stay home" (Z32M).*

Lastly, another young male participant explained that he perceives his exposure to virginity culture and traditional gender norms more broadly, to have been at least partially through Khmer literature:

*"Learning from Khmer literature at high school, I see that virginity is very important in our culture... especially for women. Khmer women have to be pure, know how to cook and how to care for their husbands or families. They must follow the tradition, culture and fulfil that duty. To some degree, I would say that it is a sort of a protection to women. However, sometimes it's not about protection, it's about an oppression for women" (Z30M).*

These themes of women's 'purity' being linked to their societal and community 'duties' featured throughout numerous responses and shed light on the nature of virginity culture as it exists in Cambodia today. In the following example, one young male participant takes these themes further, equating women's chastity with their having "good characteristics" and even being kept in "good condition":

*"For Khmer culture, [premarital sex] is strictly prohibited since we really follow the tradition of being humble, and having good characteristics. That's why they focus on virginity. It's about keeping a woman in an extremely good condition... For me as person with a traditional mindset... I think it's about bringing honour to the family... having that kind of person is letting foreigners know that they're a real Khmer, not doing anything to contradict the tradition" (Z33M).*

These notions of humility, goodness and purity being bound together with a woman's sexual status help to illuminate why women face such moralising and shaming consequences when they do have premarital sex, as will be discussed in Section 5 of this study.

Another interesting and recurring theme demonstrated in the above quote is the idea that 'keeping' unmarried women sexually inexperienced is thought to show outsiders that Khmer culture is alive and well. An older woman participant also demonstrates this idea:

*"...virginity has been practiced since ancient times... In Cambodia... maintain[ing] virginity also plays a part in representing our tradition and culture...*

*And if foreigners study about our culture and get to understand about our culture, they will value even more how we maintain our traditions" (O11F).*

This speaks to Jacobsen's argument, that "Past traditions – or practices that are believed to reflect a Cambodia free from external cultural interference – have immense relevance in modern Cambodian society" [13].

Jacobsen calls this "understandable," given the numerous assaults on Khmer culture throughout the twentieth century brought about by French colonisation, the Khmer Rouge regime and the Vietnamese occupation, during which time "Vietnam... insisted upon a high degree of Vietnamization of the culture and people." Jacobsen also argues that since 1993, "Cambodians have clung tenaciously to the models and ideals that have been resurrected in a search for a culturally 'pure' Cambodia."

Such analysis provides additional insight into why certain participants express anxiety about the further perceived loss of Khmer culture, and why some express a need to 'show' to foreigners that Cambodian culture remains strong.

### RELIGION

Buddhism is recognised as the state religion of Cambodia, with some 95% of the population identifying as Buddhist [14]. Indeed, the official motto of the Kingdom of Cambodia is “*Nation, Religion, King*”, giving an indication of how important Buddhist practice is to cultural and social life in Cambodia.

From the perspective of Theravada Buddhism as it is practiced today, it is considered inappropriate for men and women to have sex outside marriage, although a recent qualitative study by Klahan found that pre-marital sex is generally considered by lay followers and religious practitioners to be less serious of a violation than committing adultery.

Religion featured in numerous responses among participants. One young woman respondent explained that: “*Women are required to be virgins until marriage following tradition. This is the old mindset being practiced, especially for those who are religious followers*” (Z44F).

In addition to Buddhism, Cambodia also has a sizeable Muslim community. Islamic religious law was reported by participants to be explicit as well as strict in its ban on premarital sex, as the following quote from a young male participant highlights:

*“...if she is a Khmer woman and she is Muslim and having premarital sex, this is very wrong as it is against religious law to which needs to stop”* (Z43M).

To close this section, it can be concluded that the degree to which culture influences and maintains expectations of women’s pre-marital abstinence, remains highly significant. Questions of culture and cultural preservation have been shown through interview extracts from participants of all ages to be fundamentally linked to ideals of abstinence, even today.

The following quotation from a young Buddhist monk participant clearly shows how he perceives virginity culture and Khmer culture to be intertwined:

*“Virginity is something that Cambodian people have been practicing for a long time... it is an important factor that forms part of Cambodian culture”* (Z6Monk).

This reflects the view explored throughout the above discussion, that even young Cambodians still perceive that Khmer culture places a high values women's virginity, and that this influences what expectations society has of unmarried women today.

## 4.2 FAMILIAL EXPECTATIONS

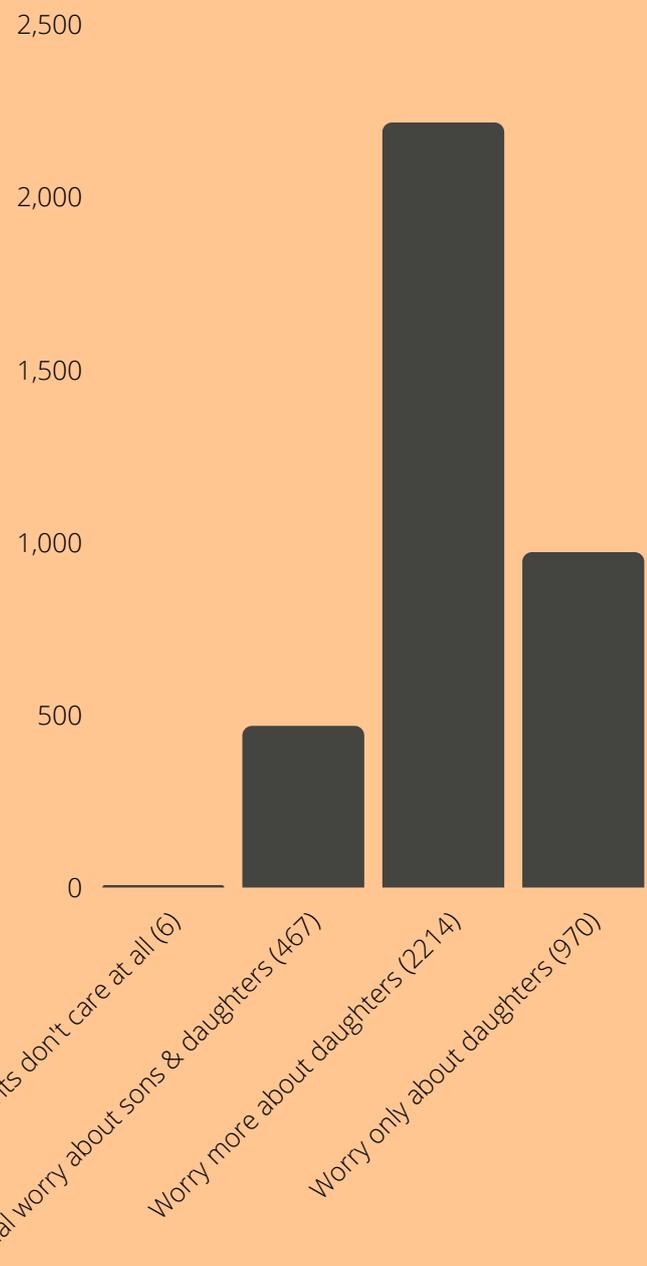
“A FAMILY’S EXPECTATION FROM THEIR DAUGHTER IN CAMBODIA IS THAT WOMEN HAVE TO BE CLEAN, FRESH, OR LIKE A BLANK PAPER. IF IT’S NOT AS EXPECTED, IT MEANS SHE’S NOT A GOOD WOMAN FOR HER FAMILY” (Z35M)

The previous section has already touched on the ways that family structures and relations specific to Khmer society feature strongly-held expectations about young women’s chastity. These expectations intersect with and are informed by cultural norms and customs.

For instance, Kent explains that the *chbab srey* portrays the ideal Khmer woman as “virtuous and self-sacrificing for the welfare of her family or society” [15]. A Cambodian woman’s virtue, particularly concerning sexuality, “remains crucial to her own status and that of her... relatives”.

**Figure 4**

**Do you think Cambodian parents worry the same about their 15-18 year old children having premarital sex?**



Total responses = 3657. Please note not all questions were compulsory, and around 40 respondents skipped this question.

Nishigaya also touches on these themes in her 2010 study: *“Daughters are expected to stay close to their parents, and to emulate the image of virtuous women. Virtuous women serve and respect their husbands, honour their parents, care for their children, and are subdued in appearance and speech”* [16].

Many of the responses from participants across all age groups spoke about young women’s virginity as comprising a duty or responsibility to their families. As one put it: *“Virginity for women isn’t merely just for her value individually, but it represents her family value, reputation and dignity in society too”* (O12F).

The failure to uphold this responsibility reportedly leads not only to shame and dishonour for a young woman, but also reflects badly on her relatives. One expression that sums up this notion, and was cited by multiple participants is that *“having a daughter is like having a big jar of fermented fish,”* in that once it is opened, the whole neighbourhood can smell it (Z25M). As for men, there was usually said to be no pressure at all:

*“For men, our society does not shame men for having sex with women. His family does not care if the men is still a virgin or not”* (Z20F).

These strong expectations of women’s abstinence are informed by the consequences that are said to befall a family by the discovery that she has had sex prior to marriage: ***“a woman who has sex before marriage is a huge embarrassment to her family if society knows about this scandal that makes it difficult for her family to live in society”*** (Z6Monk).

Conversely, a daughter who is modest and remains abstinent is said to reflect honourably on her entire family, as the following extract from a young woman participant clearly demonstrates:

***“I think for women it is very important to maintain virginity until the day of marriage... if a woman can keep her virginity until the wedding day, it shows the pride and dignity of the family... it’s hugely important for family – because firstly, it’s about honour – and secondly, it’s about the decency of the family”*** (Z47F).

This is echoed by an older woman participant, who again uses moralising language that equates having one's virginity with having an intrinsic goodness of character – in this case, in relation to her respect for her parents:

*“If a girl, or a woman can maintain their virginity until they can get married, it is a reflection of their good and considerate behaviour and respect for their parents. It means that they have followed their parent’s advice” (O6F).*

In terms of generational differences in the interview data, many young people expressed that much of the pressure that is exerted is coming from the “older generations”:

*“[The] expectation is mostly coming from old people, like family. Aunts and uncles that think that having sex... can bring the family’s reputation down” (Z28M).*

However, it is important to note there were a significant number of responses from younger participants – both women and men – that expressed a very strong personal agreement with virginity norms:

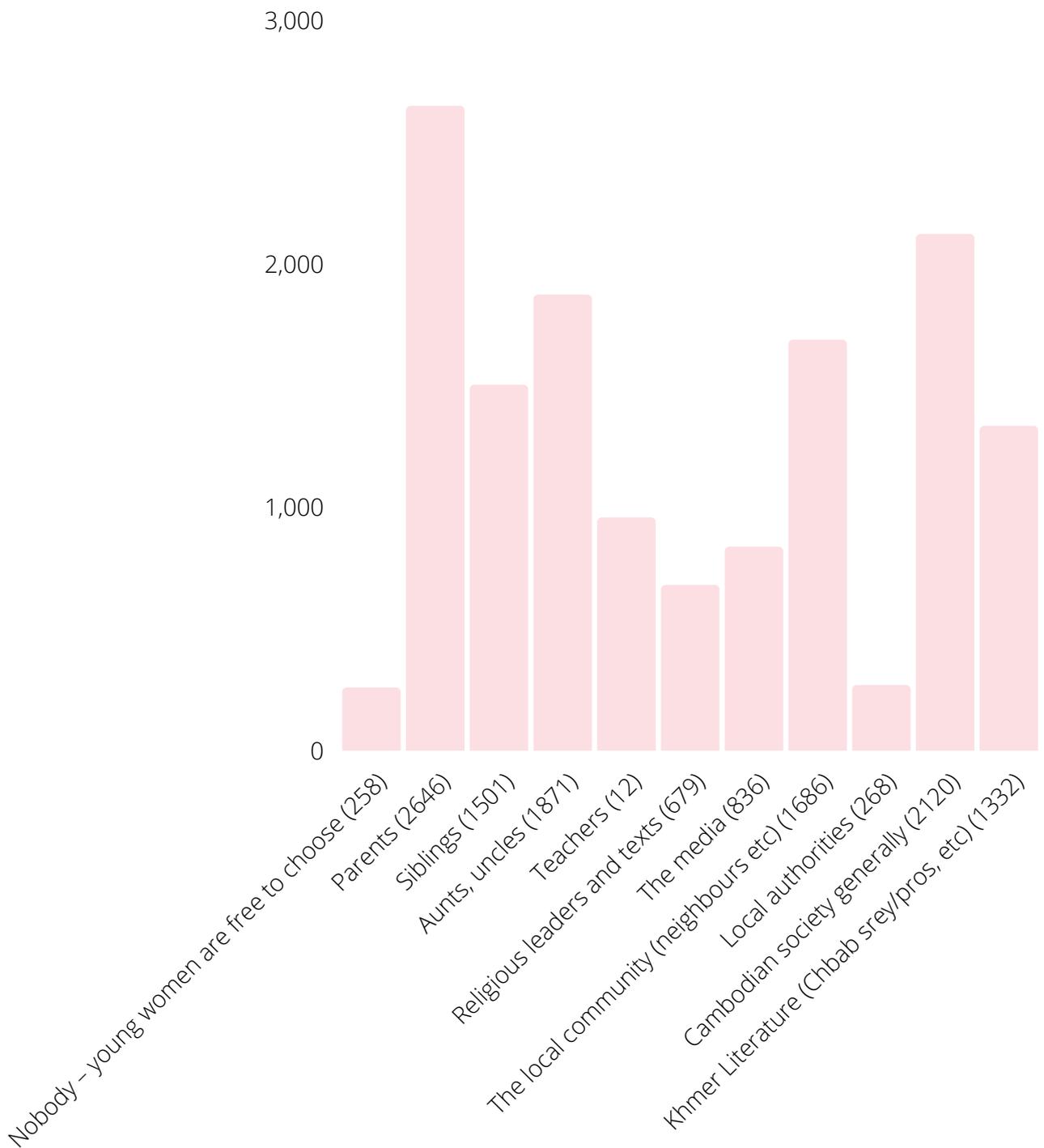
*“Remaining a virgin until marriage is very important for woman, since it helps protect family and personal honour... a woman doesn’t give herself much value by having sex before marriage” (Z33M).*

The minority of participants who disagreed strongly with the premise that daughters should be expected to remain virgins, included those from civil society organisations who work in the promotion of gender equality.

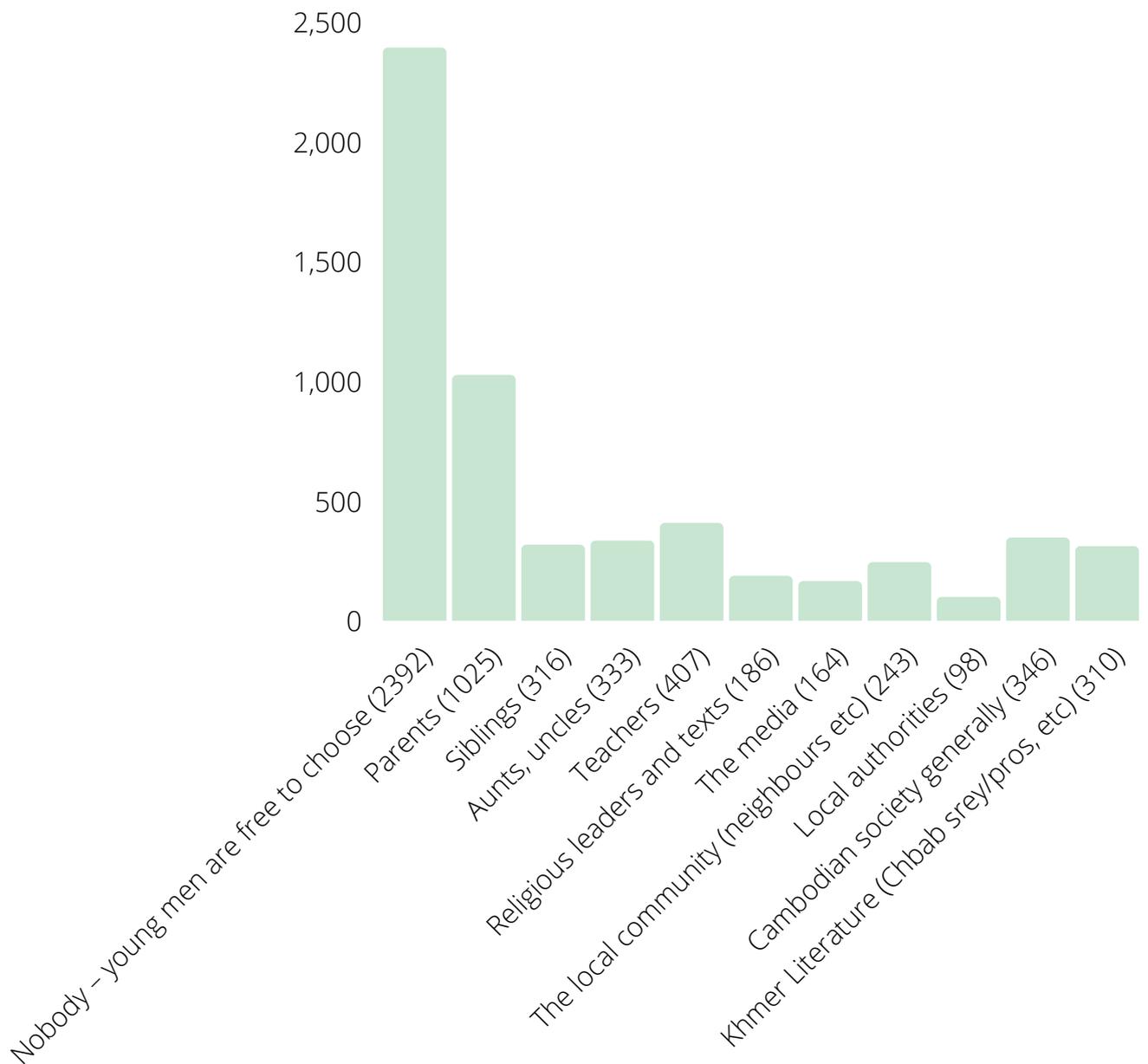
While these CSO respondents agreed with the premise that family expectations of their daughters’ virginity is strongly held, they took a decidedly more critical lens to their analysis of these issues, as the following example demonstrates:

***“Based on my experiences working with youths at the village level – most parents force their children to conform to virginity culture in order to preserve family honor, and to spare the family from any public shame. They do this without realising the harms and restrictions they are placing upon their daughters. I think this is due to poor education and limited access to information” (C4F).***

**Figure 5**  
**Who do you think pressures young WOMEN into remaining virgins until marriage?**



**Figure 6**  
**Who do you think pressures young MEN into remaining virgins until marriage?**



Total responses are higher because respondents could select as many answers as they felt applied.

This idea, that control over sons and daughters was 'harmful' to women, was also expressed by other CSO respondents, with the following example even equating pressure with oppression and force:

*"Women (mothers, sisters and grandparents) are the number one oppressors pressuring young women to conform to virginity culture. When a daughter does not behave according to the norms, the family and society will place the blame on her mother. To be... respected in society, the mother forces daughters to be conform"* (C5F).

As well as the maintenance of an unmarried woman's virginity being a prime expectation of her own family (to the extent that one said women who have premarital sex face being *"evicted from their homes by their families"*, (Z38M) multiple respondents reported that it is also extremely important for the family of her future husband:

***"I think maintaining women's virginity until marriage is very important and best for women's futures since they will be valued by their family and husband..."***

***Society always negatively judges women who lose their virginity as a bad woman and it really affects the man's family if he loves her because they will not accept her"*** (Z40M).

This extract is interesting in that it shows the perception that a woman exercising her own sexual autonomy and decisions about her body, is seen as "really affecting" others whom she may not even know well, because of their unwillingness to "accept her." This shows how deeply views about virginity are still felt in the Cambodian family context. Further, this idea that women will not be "valued" by their husbands will be revisited in Section 5.3 which examines perceived marriage-related consequences of premarital sex.

## 4.3 SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

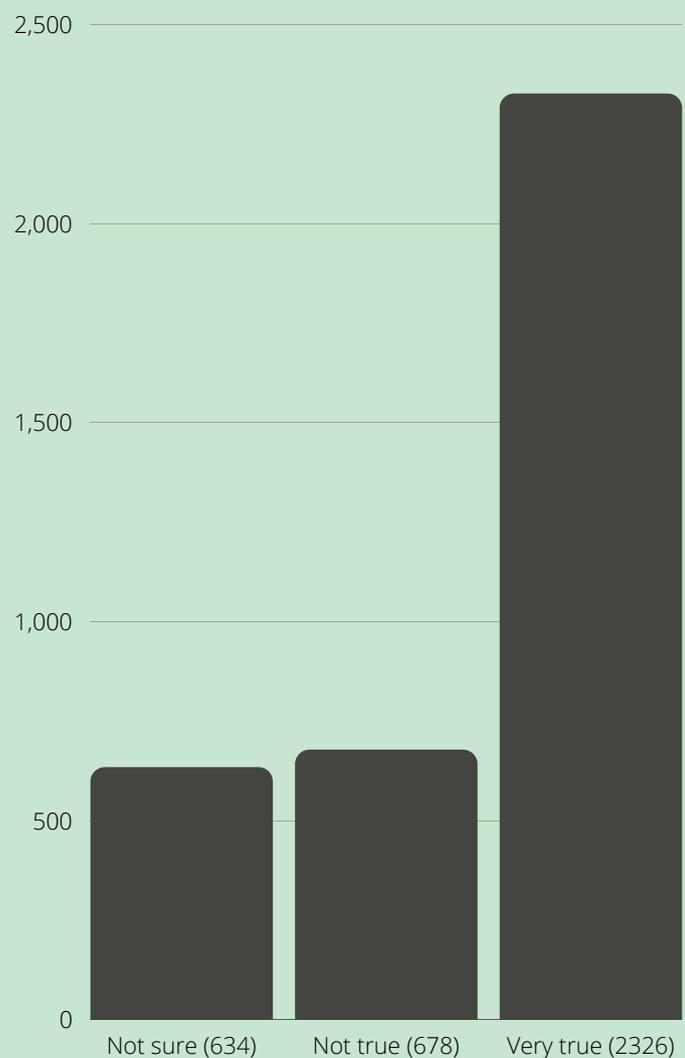
*“If anyone dares to act in non-conformity with the set norms, they will be named and shamed by their communities” (C5F).*

*“Virginity shows a woman’s purity, honor, and dignity that every woman must have, which all women have to pay high attention to, otherwise a woman may lose her value and then will get a negative judgement from society” (Z38M).*

Having explored cultural and familial expectations of virginity, this final subsection discusses the expectations of the community and wider Cambodian society. Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining an unmarried woman’s virginity, often alleging this must be done in order to maintain her supposed “value” within society.

It can be difficult to tease apart whether many interview participants who reported that virginity is extremely important were also expressing their own views, or merely providing the interviewer with insight into the Cambodian context as it currently stands.

**Figure 7**  
**How true is the following statement: MEN have more freedom to decide whether to have sex before marriage**



Total responses = 3638. NB: Not all survey questions were compulsory, and around 100 respondents skipped this question.

For CSO respondents, however, this was again very clear. While they explained the significance of virginity in society today, they also set about critiquing virginity culture and linking it to broader processes of the societal objectification of women. In the following example, which demonstrates the intersections between cultural and societal norms, one CSO participant refers to Khmer proverbs as demonstrative of a strategy of “control” and “shame”

*“People value virginity a lot, because Cambodian society is a patriarchal society. People use virginity as a tool to control women’s sexuality as well as to shame women by objectifying women and comparing women to fermented fish (prahok) and a piece of white cloth” (C1F).*

Many non-CSO participants also discussed the idea of women’s “value” to society as being measurable through her premarital sexual status, though only a small number went on to voice disagreement with this premise outright during interviews.

Some also reported that virginity reflects not only the degree to which society considers a woman to be of value, but also how much a woman values herself internally, as the following quote from a Buddhist monk respondent demonstrates:

*“Virginity illustrates the fact of giving value to oneself, protecting oneself and maintaining the family reputation until marriage... for women who are playful and not giving value to herself, they should not be given much value” (Z8Monk).*

## DOUBLE STANDARDS

In terms of how much of this societal value judgement is experienced by men, virtually all interview participants expressed the view that this was experienced significantly less, if experienced at all. This is demonstrated by the following response from a young Buddhist monk respondent, who had earlier in the interview described virginity as being “a testament to the value of a woman”:

***“Men are less likely to be criticised compared to women because, in general, virginity culture is applied only to women. Men who have sex before marriage are not a big deal, because... our culture puts pressure only on women” (Z6 Monk).***

The survey data displayed in Figure 7 on the previous page also clearly shows this dual system. Participants were asked to evaluate how true the statement was, that “Men have more freedom to decide whether to have sex before marriage.”

Of those who responded, 634 respondents felt that this statement was untrue, and that women and men can engage in premarital sex with equal freedom. Conversely, almost four times that amount (2326) responded that the statement was very true, and that men enjoy greater sexual freedom before marriage.

For some participants, both young and old, this double standard was perceived to be the most problematic element of the social stigma associated with women's loss of virginity pre-marriage. For example, the following young woman participant does not appear to be critical of societal expectations of women, except in the sense that these expectations should **also** be levelled at men:

*"For men, I think it is the same as for women. Remaining a virgin until marriage for men is also as important as for women. Even though men are not subjected to pregnancy or social stigma like women, men also have virginity like women, so I think it is also important that they should preserve it until marriage"* (Z26F).

The fact that this quote - which clearly displays a preference for premarital abstinence - is from a young woman respondent showcases the complexity of these issues, and the need for nuance when discussing apparent generational shifts in attitudes.

As for the source of these societal expectations, one CSO participant said they

come from "everyone and everywhere":

*"If we think about the level of influence, it is from everyone and everywhere: invisible influences such as video dramas perpetuating women's submission and purity; social media; families and neighbors, and visible actors such as government and religious institutions"* (C4F).

### RURAL & URBAN DIVIDE?

In terms of geographic differences, multiple participants made reference to there being a greater degree of expectation in the rural areas that women should remain virgins until marriage, as opposed to the capital. This presents an interesting area of exploration for future researchers, and is highlighted by the following example from an older woman participant, which also brings in perceived class elements:

***"...it might be more difficult in rural areas. But in Phnom Penh... the way [young women] wear makeup and how they dress, I think it will attract men... and in Phnom Penh, women can read and write, can find a job and can work"*** (O10F).

Figure 8

How important do you think Cambodian society values WOMEN remaining virgins until marriage?

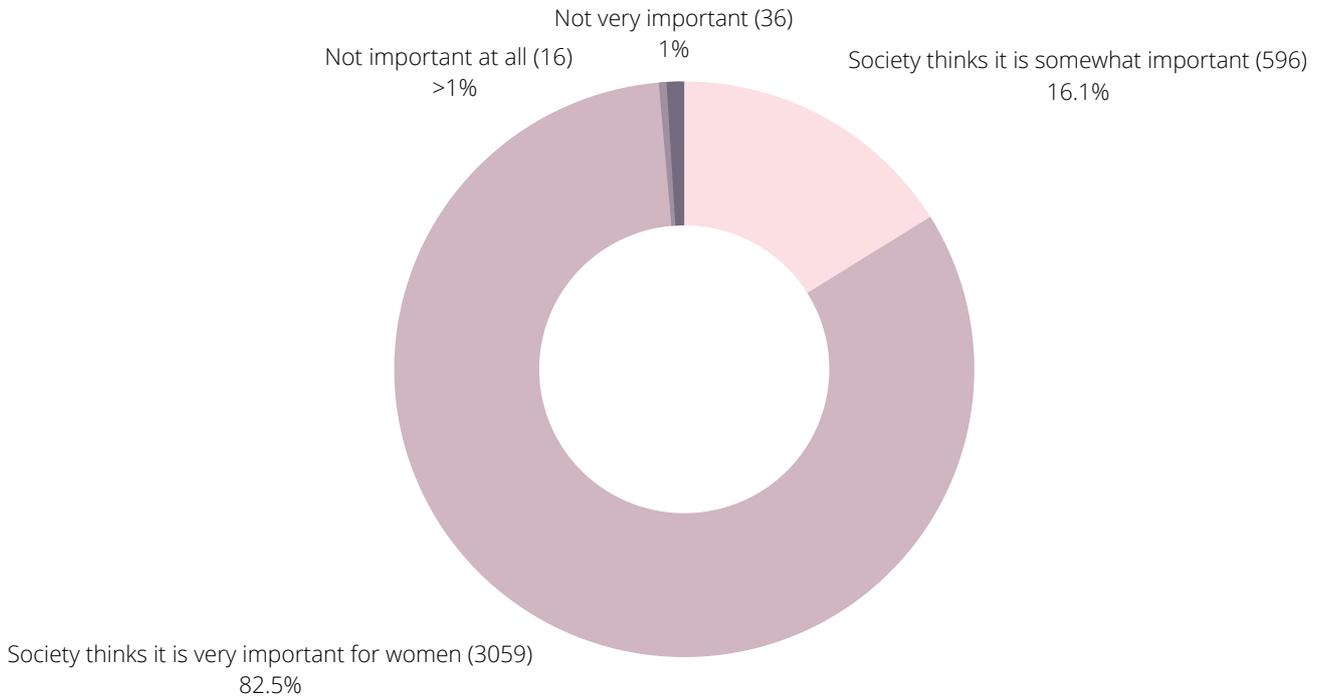
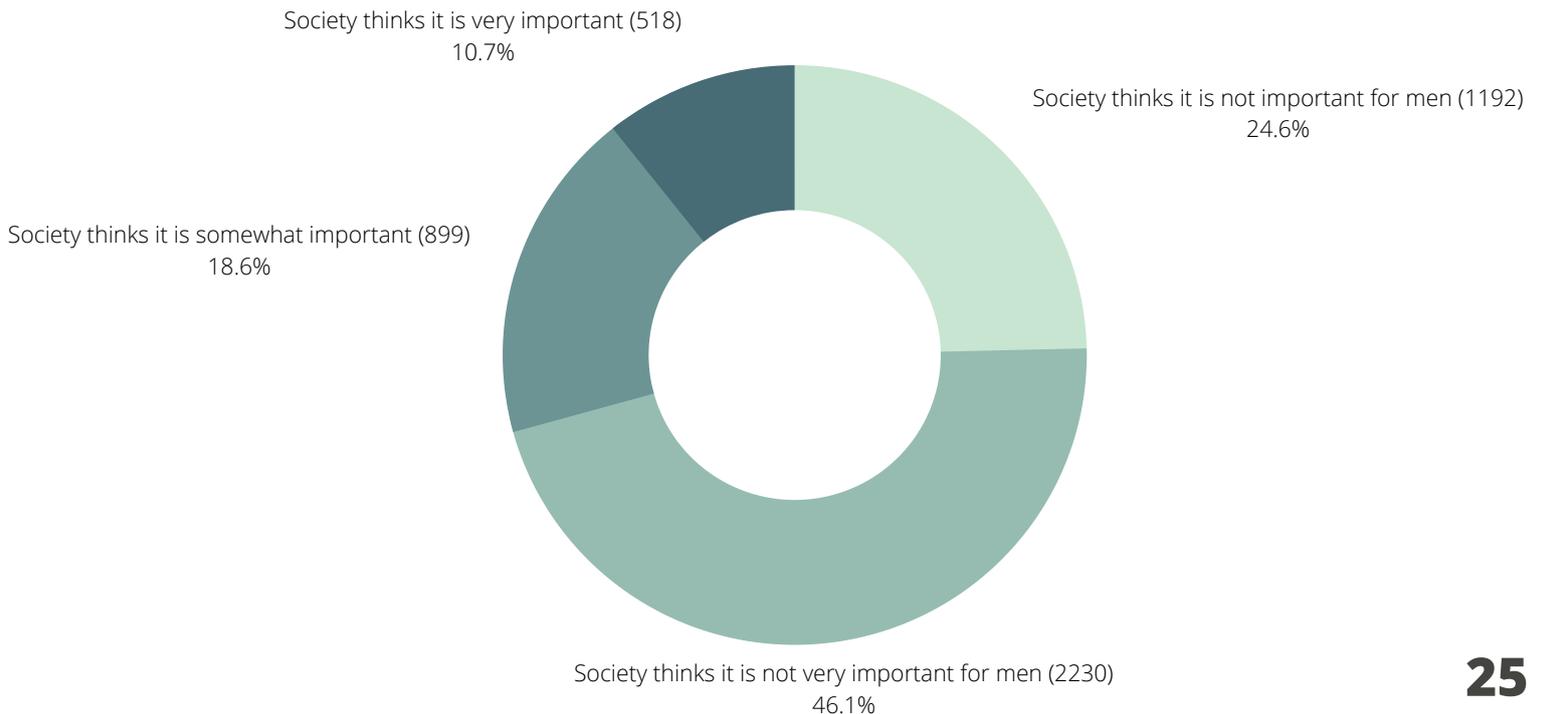


Figure 9

How important do you think Cambodian society values MEN remaining virgins until marriage?



### ONE NIGHT STANDS: A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

Another interesting trend across almost all non-CSO participant interviews was an apparent lack of approval of sex without firm strings attached, including one night stands or sex between friends. Even some participants who expressed open-mindedness towards premarital sex, later emphasised that they did not mean having sex with “strangers.”

As one young woman participant reported, “*I think it is okay to have sex with their fiancé – as they truly love each other 1 to 1*” (Z44F). These notions, of sexual liberation within clearly delineated boundaries, will be discussed further in the Consequences sections of this report. However, it is useful to introduce here what appear to be varying degrees of societal acceptability of premarital sex for women, that depend on the depth and sincerity of her relationship with the male partner in question. This is demonstrated by the following interview with what would be considered a progressive or liberal older male participant:

Interviewer: “*What are your views towards Cambodian women who have sex before marriage?*”

Respondent: “*No problem to me. Sex goes both ways for men and women. Sex before or after marriage – it should not be a problem at all.*”

Interviewer: “*Do you think it is more acceptable for a young woman who is in a long-term relationship (or engaged), as opposed to with a friend or stranger?*”

Respondent: “*The **duration of the relationship is a very important factor.** For those who just know each other for a short time... they **don’t know if they will start a family** together or not; so they should consider not having sex too soon... it might have negative effects... [and these] would affect women more harshly than men. These include heartbreak, loss of concentration on education and work – and worse, **they might think that their bodies are no longer pure** as men have touched their bodies already. They’d feel like less of a woman. In the case of men, the degree of heartbreak is lesser than women. Women should... make an assessment and evaluation if their partners have devoted themselves to live with them until old age, or not. If the commitment is there, they should go ahead with it. However, if no commitment is assured, I don’t want to encourage any women to have sex with partners. I don’t judge them if they do, I just don’t want them to get heartbroken and damaged. In order to avoid any heartbreak and disappointment, **women should carefully assess their partner’s level of commitment and devotion before engaging sexually**” (O2M).*

Thus, even among those with what would be considered more open and liberal views towards premarital sex, the extract shows that ideas of women’s sexual autonomy and decision-making capacity are still constrained within societally informed boundaries. Notions that women are more prone to “heartbreak,” and to losing concentration as a result, or to feeling like “less of a woman” because they are “damaged” and “no longer pure,” are in themselves value-laden ideas worthy of further analysis in future research.

The extract also reflects a perception that women should always subject their sexual decisions and behaviour to a greater degree of caution and scrutiny when engaging in premarital sex than their male counterparts. This, of course, is strongly linked to the perceived level of psychological, physical and even marital consequences that reportedly befall many women who do have sex prior to marriage, as will be discussed throughout the following section.

**Figure 10**  
**Do you think society is accepting of couples who live together before marriage?**



# 5. CONSEQUENCES

## SAME ACTIONS, DIFFERING CONSEQUENCES? FINDINGS RELATED TO PERCEIVED REPER- CUSSIONS FOR THOSE ENGAGING IN PREMARITAL SEX

### INTRODUCTION

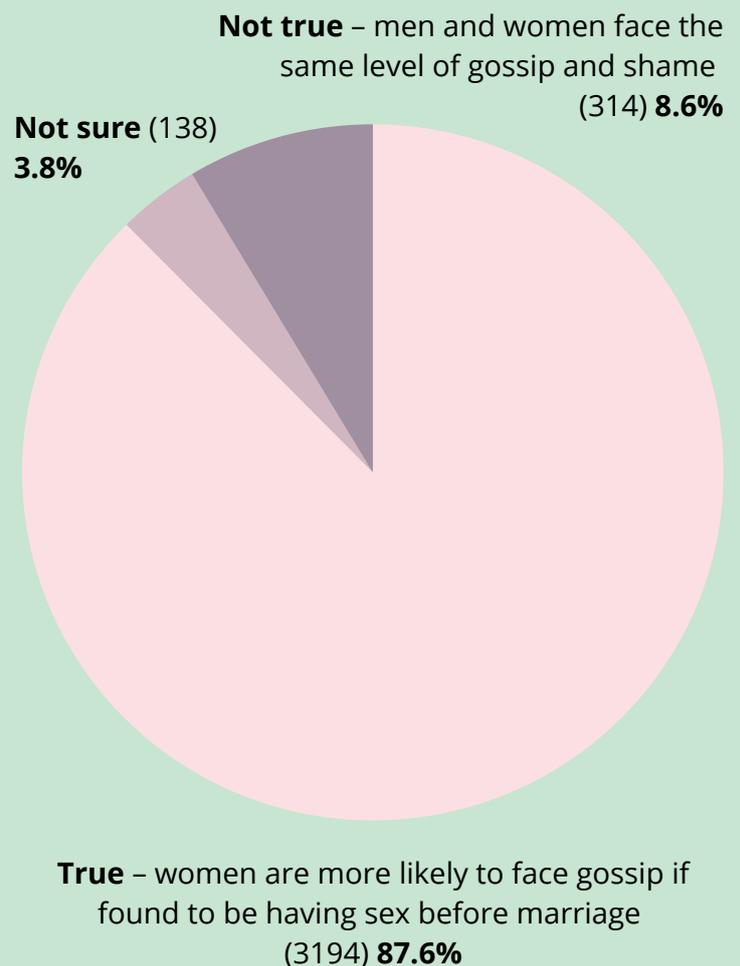
Having examined cultural, familial and societal expectations surrounding virginity in Cambodia, this report turns now to look at the reported consequences for those who do choose to engage in premarital sex.

As with the previous section, this discussion is divided into three parts. The first explores the perceived psychological effects that participants report women suffer as a result of their loss of virginity. The second concerns the reported physical implications, such as 'damage' to women's reproductive health, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy.

Finally, the perceived marital implications of premarital sex are discussed, both in terms of difficulty getting married ("*she will face difficulty finding a husband*" (Z49F)) and difficulty within marriage ("*a woman's lack of purity for her husband... might lead to disputes*" (Z33M)).

**Figure 11**

**How true is the following statement?  
"Women are more likely to be victims of  
gossip and shame if they have sex before  
marriage"**



## 5.1 PERCEIVED PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES 1/4

*“...men have more freedom. It does not matter how many partners they have sex with prior, but when the men asks for someone’s hand in marriage no one ever asks him about his virginity... they do not have to endure social stigma, mental struggle, or their parents’ judgement” (Z22F).*

The findings of this study strongly indicate that Cambodian women who are known to have engaged in premarital sex are very often shamed and stigmatised as a result.

Despite the general view expressed by participants that times are changing, and that particularly the younger generation is becoming more progressive and open-minded, the belief that women should remain virgins until marriage is reportedly still firmly held by most Cambodians.

The fact that virginity is often seen as an unmarried women’s most defining and significant attribute means that once this is lost, the consequences that a woman faces are reportedly severe and long-lasting.

For instance, because virginity is so bound together with women’s perceived ‘value,’ premarital sex is said to affect her worth and dignity, as the following quote from a CSO participant illustrates: ***“[To society], losing virginity means losing all value” (C2F).***

Again, respondents reported that the weight of shaming and stigmatising seems to be borne less, if at all, by men who engage in premarital sex:

***“Society puts more pressure on women because they think sexual desire is a privilege for men. Men can have multiple partners and be involved in adultery without facing judgment. It reflects unequal power relations and gender roles” (C2F).***

## IMPROPER WOMEN

The idea of a woman's inherent worth and dignity being lowered or damaged as a result of her loss of virginity was explored by participants in relation to the consequences suffered as a result.

For instance, when a daughter's loss of virginity is discovered by her family, she is viewed as having failed to live up to the idea of a 'proper daughter' who respects her parents' advice and expectations.

One participant (Z38M) advised that daughters can even face eviction by their own parents, while another reflected on the common reactions of parents as follows:

*"The consequences faced by women... is in both mental [and] outside pressure... It is considered a disgrace to their family, who think their daughter has lost value..." (Z25M).*

This notion of 'disgrace' was a recurring theme among participants when discussing the consequences women face if their loss of virginity becomes known.

Such stigmatisation reportedly comes in the form of 'branding,' as one participant described it: *"Our culture is conservative and we value women based on their virginity. If they lose their virginity, they also lose their value. Women would also be branded as easy women"* (Z18F).

Indeed, a woman who fails to remain a virgin until marriage is reportedly viewed as an improper woman (*srey khat leak*). As one CSO respondent explained, *"Young women who have sex are usually named and shamed as a slut and improper woman"* (C1F).

Similarly, according to an older woman respondent, *"...if their premarital sex was found out... they'll be criticised and gossiped about by these people, and called an easy woman"* (O1F).

Finally, one participant alleged that *"sexually active and expressive"* women are not only "named and shamed," but also thought of by fellow villagers as sex workers, and "nicknamed as whores (*srey somphoeng*)" (C4F).

## PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS

For a young woman (as unmarried women in Cambodia usually are), such stigmatisation almost inevitably leads to mental health challenges, which can reportedly be both severe and prolonged in nature.

For example, one young woman described the decision to have premarital sex as being subject to a kind of cost-benefit assessment. For those women who do have sex, they *“face the risks, criticism and judgement from others that can affect our mental health.”* On the other hand, *“If we maintain it, we don’t have to worry about these judgements”* (Z13F).

Another young woman respondent discussed what she sees as extremely serious psychological implications, including ‘self-hate’ and even suicide:

***“She must face her family and herself, as well as society. Her family might... pressure her, which causes emotional distress, while some might commit suicide since her family didn’t accept that, and stigmatized by society which leads to self-hate – all because of having sex”*** (Z47F).



The psychological consequences of sex before marriage are also seen as including extreme 'heartbreak,' when a relationship breaks off before it culminates in marriage.

This notion has been explored by the extract in the previous section, which cautioned a woman against having sex unless she can be certain it will lead to marriage and childbearing. This demonstrates a broader perception that women often face desertion after the loss of their virginity, and also that women are inherently more prone to heartbreak, while *"for men, the degree of heartbreak is lesser"* (O2M).

This highlights not only the severity of the perceived consequences faced by women who lose their virginity without 'securing' a husband, but also the perception that there are (perhaps as a result) distinct power imbalances in premarital relationships that are geared towards men's decision-making ability while limiting those of women.

On a final note, the idea that a woman might derive empowerment or a sense of agency from a more casual relationship or an emotionally unattached experience like a one night stand, was not strongly reflected by any respondents in the interview data, although several young participants said being unattached *"shouldn't matter"* (Z22F).

Conversely, some spoke of deep-seated psychological impacts in the form of a loss of women's respect for themselves, after having *"suffered"* the *"damage"* that a premarital loss of virginity was seen by many respondents to entail (Z34F).

Indeed, many participants spoke of virgins as being women who *"think highly of themselves,"*(Z26F), while one male respondent said that women who have lost their virginity *"might think that their bodies are no longer pure [and] would feel like less of a woman."* The perceived psychological and physiological impacts of virginity loss thus intersect, as will be explored in the following section.

## 5.2 PERCEIVED PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES

Many participants in this study reported the perception that a woman's loss of virginity prior to marriage can have multiple physical implications. These findings are of particular relevance to gender advocates with a focus on sexual and reproductive health rights, as they contain insights about perceptions related to women's sexual health and autonomy.

Firstly, there was a perception reported by numerous respondents that women who have sex before marriage cause 'damage' to their reproductive organs. One young male respondent described this idea through another traditional Khmer proverb, as follows:

*"Regarding Khmer culture and tradition, we always compare woman to a flower... they said when a woman lost her virginity, she is the same as rotten flower. They compare it to a flower, because a flower is easily impacted on its physical parts. That's why in Khmer culture, when a woman is no longer a virgin, she has lost her value like a flower without its beauty" (Z29M).*

This notion of 'deflowering' was raised by other participants in relation to being able to 'tell' if a woman is still a virgin. An older male respondent reported that 'people can know' if a woman is still a virgin, in a physical sense:

*"As a man, they have nothing to lose when they have sex before marriage. For example, no one would know and no one can identify whether a man is still a virgin... This is totally different from women. People can know – especially her partner/husband if a woman is a virgin, or not" (O2M).*

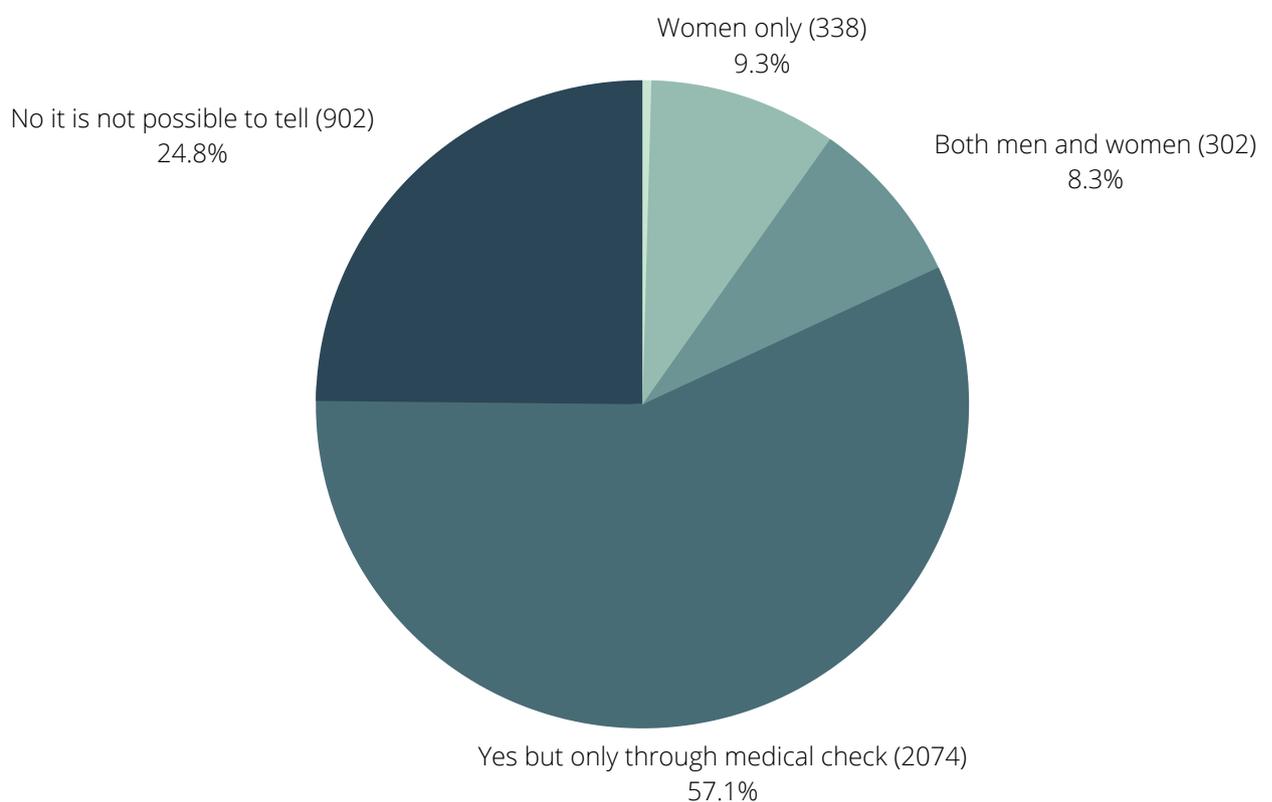
## PERCEIVED PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES (CONT) 2/5

This perception was reported by multiple respondents despite the fact that scientific research has established that *“there is no physical sign [or] physical examination [that] will be able to evaluate the virginity of a human being, man or woman.”* This is because the hymen membrane is *“sufficiently elastic to be penetrated without breaking, but fragile enough to be lacerated by activities other than sexual interactions”* [17].

One CSO respondent advised that “people talk about several ways to identify and recognise if and when a woman has already lost her virginity or not.” The survey data also reported a widespread view that it is possible to ascertain whether a woman is a virgin or not, though most (57%) selected the option that this information was only possible through a medical examination.

**Figure 12**

### Is it possible to tell if someone is a virgin?



### STIS

Another theme that emerged in relation to the physical consequences of premarital sex was that of sexually transmitted infection. Most indicated that STIs presents an equal risk for both women and men, however, a small number of participants also reported a perception that reproductive health related consequences of premarital sex are primarily or solely a consequence for women rather than men:

*“I think women can face potential consequences such as their reproductive health, as some women are not ready to have sex. I don’t think men face the same consequences” (O13F).*

Another interesting aspect related to STIs was the idea that *“if their sexual partner does not know about protection, they can possibly be affected by sexually transmitted diseases,”* (Z4M). This implies that it is up to men to “know about protection,” and that there is therefore a need for improvements in education about methods of protection from STIs.





## PREGNANCY

Many respondents discussed the consequences of premarital pregnancy. As well as the physical risks of informal sector abortions, many participants reported a high level of stigma and shame is faced by unmarried women who fall pregnant.

This also intersects with the issues explored in the previous section: the physical impacts of pregnancy are compounded by the psychosocial impact that society's response to out-of-wedlock pregnancies can cause. This notion is highlighted by the following young LGBTQ+ respondent:

***“They [women] cannot escape the judgements of society when they are pregnant without being married. They would be questioned about where the father is. Society can criticise both the mother and the child, so it can have a negative impact on the child’s mental health and development” (Z21M).***

## PERCEIVED IMPACT OF VIRGINITY CULTURE ON WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SRHR INFORMATION

One reported impact of virginity culture is that many young women lack the knowledge to prevent unwanted pregnancy, or to make informed decisions about intimacy and sexual expression. This is summarised by the following extract from a CSO respondent, reflecting on the “patriarchal values” she sees as being inherently linked to sexual taboos:

***“We grow up with these values and traditions, influenced by patriarchal values. I don’t know when it started here, but we are born and indoctrinated with it. For example, I didn’t even have a boyfriend in high school. I was taught to protect my virginity at all costs. I was told that if someone touched my hands while I was having my period, I would get pregnant. So guess what? I believed that – and at that time, I was already 16 years old.***

***Many people are still not talking about virginity and sex openly because for a very long, long time, these topics have been considered as taboo topics to talk about... especially for those who live in the remote areas” (C4F).***

### 5.3 PERCEIVED MARITAL CONSEQUENCES

***“I think it is very important for women to maintain their virginity because it is to prevent family conflict and family violence. If we don’t have virginity, this will often lead to serious violence in the relationship between husband and wife”*** (O13F).

This final section exploring the perceived consequences of premarital sex, concerns those related specifically to marriage. Firstly, as the above quotation demonstrates, there is a perception particularly among older respondents that women’s premarital loss of virginity presents a cause for later marital strife, conflict, and even violence. As a young male respondent put it, “They don’t have that purity for their next partner or husband, [so] it might lead to disputes.” (Z33M).

Similarly, a large number of respondents spoke of an inability of wives to be able to demonstrate loyalty and fidelity to their husbands, if they had sex prior to marriage:

*“...for women it is very important to maintain virginity until the day of marriage. Virginity represents a woman’s fidelity and confidence in the person she is going to marry”* (Z7F).

Numerous young women respondents appeared to agree with these norms, which was sometimes explained by a need to avoid the emotional repercussions that they report are tied to women’s experience of premarital sex:

*“I think [virginity] is important in many ways. Firstly, if she can maintain her virginity before marriage, it means she doesn’t have any physical or emotional attachment with any other men besides her husband. So she’s not heartbroken for not being able to get married with that other person”* (Z13F).

This quote reflects a commonly expressed perception that love and sex – at least for women – go hand in hand. Comparative notions of men suffering psychological distress due to such “attachment” or crippling heartbreak after premarital sex, did not feature in the interview data.

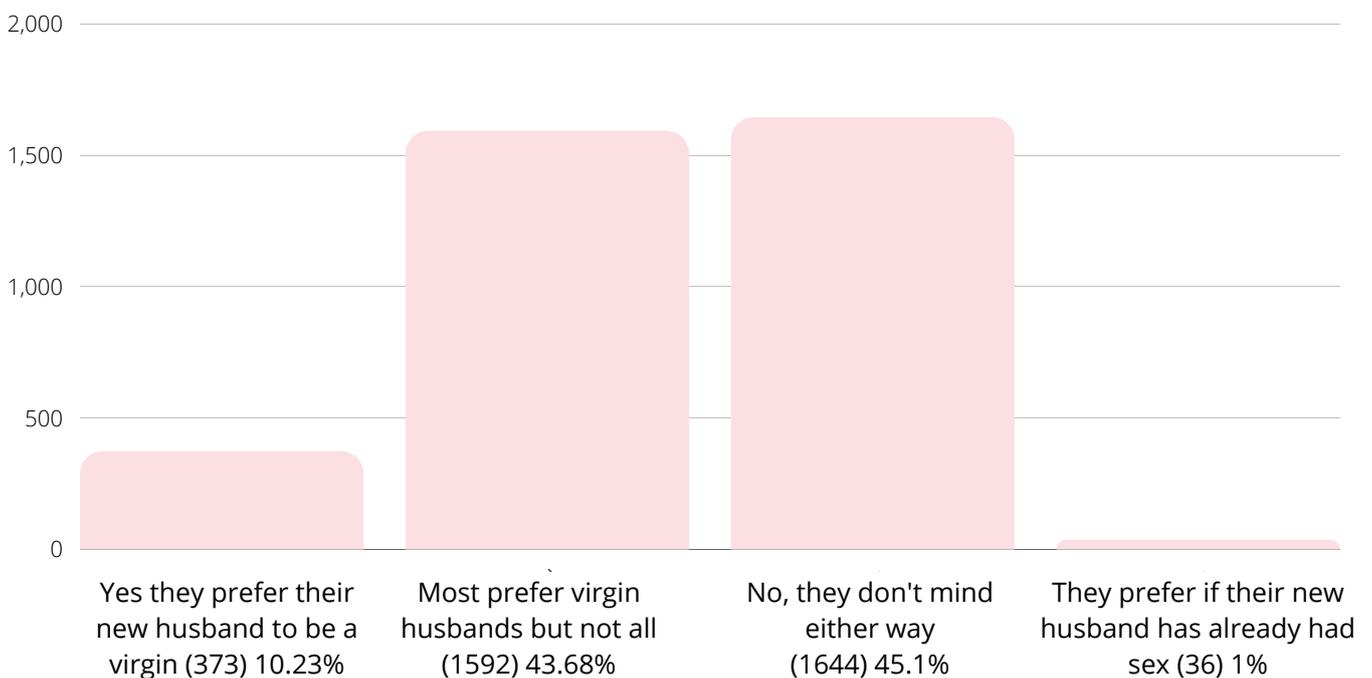
Figure 13

14. Do MEN prefer to marry virgins in Cambodia nowadays?



Figure 14

15. Do WOMEN prefer to marry virgins in Cambodia nowadays?



## PERCEIVED MARITAL CONSEQUENCES (CONT) 3/3

Preferences among men (and, it was repeatedly emphasised, men's families) for virgin wives are reportedly sometimes still held strongly enough that it can be difficult for a woman who has already had sex to find a husband later in life:

*"...she would face difficulties when finding partner afterward since they know that she involved in that. Some might not accept her or look down on her" (Z49F).*

This finding was also reflected in the survey data, where almost a thousand (997) respondents indicated that if a woman is found out to have had pre-marital sex she will find it more difficult to get a future husband, while fewer than one hundred (88) felt that this is also the case for men.

Despite this, many respondents also gave the opinion that men should be equally held to these standards when seeking a spouse, as the following quote from an older male respondent shows:

*"I think just like men want to have a virgin woman, men should be able to prove that they are pure and have no any other relationship with other women before jumping into an official relationship" (O6M).*

Other reported marital consequences included hurriedly arranged marriages, where a young couple is found to be having sex and so their parents quickly arrange a wedding and pressure the couple to agree:

*"Their parents don't have any choice, but to marry them... when their daughter lost her virginity they would seek out the guy and marry them" (Z28M).*

Finally, one CSO respondent reflected on the impact that virginity culture can have on women even *after* they are already married, given there is a perceived expectation that Khmer women should generally appear more sexually naive or modest than their partners:

*"Some women don't even dare to express their sexual desire with their partners and husband in fear of judgment" (C2F).*

This reported impact on women's sexual agency, expression and fulfilment represents an important area for future research.

# LGBTQI+ EXPERIENCES

## EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO LGBTQI+ VIRGINITY

### INTRODUCTION

This report has thus far concerned itself with perceptions related to virginity norms in relation to heterosexual, cisgender Cambodians.

However, the early sexual experiences of the LGBTQI+ community are equally as important and valid, and present an interesting area for future research into how young queer Cambodians perceive and navigate these issues.

As well as the research team having LGBTQI+ representation, LGBTQI+ participants were also sought out for their insights into these issues. Non-LGBTQI+-identifying participants, as well as survey respondents, were also asked questions about their perceptions of LGBTQI+ virginity.

### PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF LGBTQI+ PEOPLE'S VIRGINITY

Among participants who did not identify as LGBTQI+ during interviews, various different insights were offered as to whether they perceive virginity norms as being applicable to the LGBTQI+ community, in a country that presently does not enjoy marriage equality rights.

Firstly, among many respondents, there was a clear view that LGBTQI+ people are not bound by the same virginity norms discussed throughout this study. Interestingly, this was held to be true even by older respondents who had earlier emphasised the importance of maintaining unmarried women's virginity until marriage.

## EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO LGBTQI+ VIRGINITY (CONT 2/5)

For example, while one older millennial appeared to support the restriction of women's sexual autonomy in the name of virginity culture, she had a seemingly more liberal view of what norms should apply to non-straight couples:

**Interviewer:** *How important is it for women to wait until marriage before having sex?*

**Participant:** *"I think it is very important for women, as it has been practiced through our ancestors until today... this is our tradition and culture."*

**Interviewer:** *"How important is it for LGBT to wait until moving in together before having sex?"*

**Participant:** *"I don't think they have to wait until moving in together, I think they can have sex at any time and anywhere. If they love and agree with each other, then it's up to their decision" (O15F).*

Another older millennial woman, when asked whether virginity culture applies to LGBTQI+ Cambodians, answered simply that *"I don't think so... I have friends*

*who are LGBT and they don't care about this. In short... they can freely have sex as long as it doesn't violate the law" (O16F).*

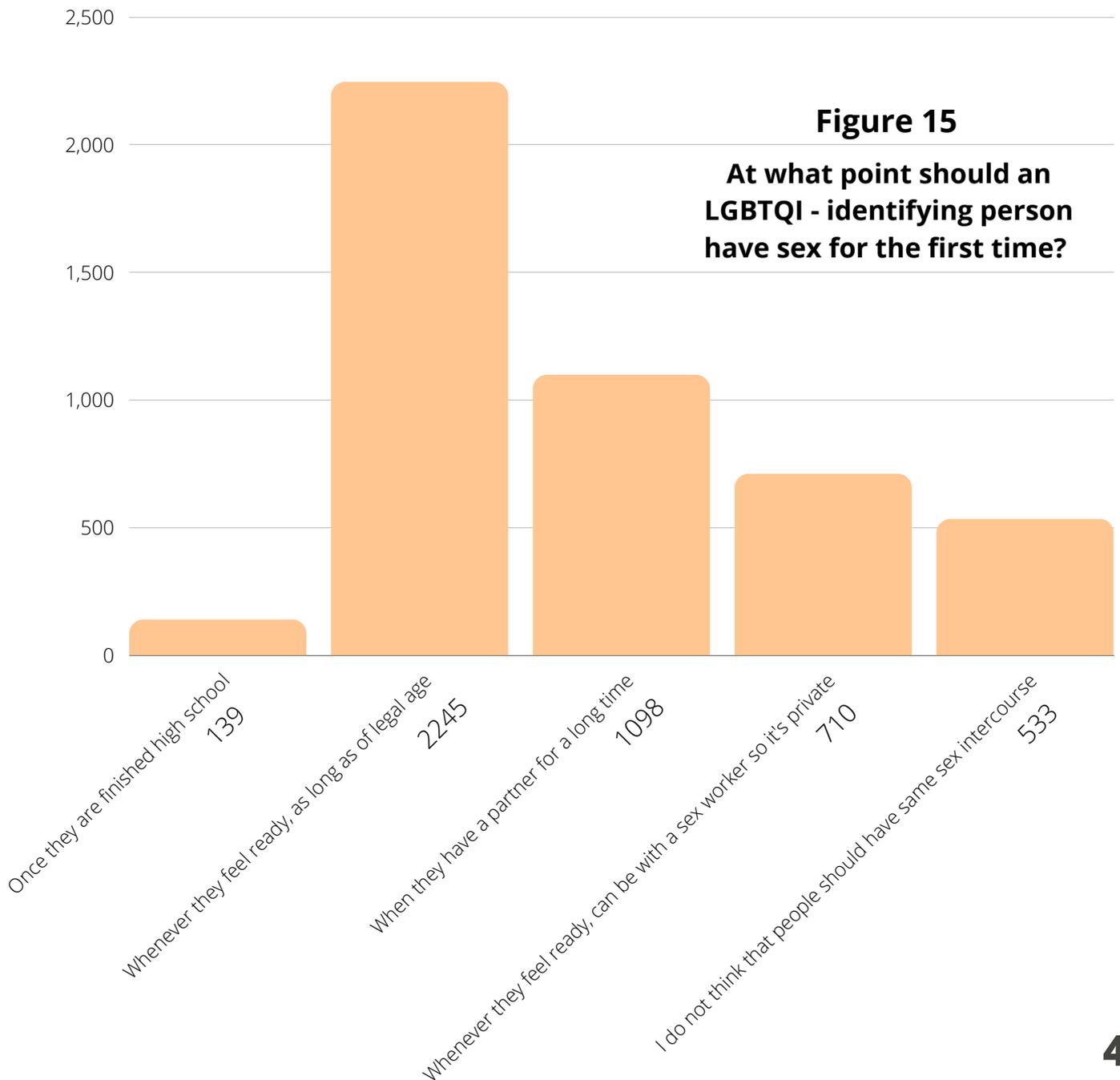
Unfortunately, however, some participants expressed a lack of understanding or tolerance towards LGBTQI+ people and their relationships. For example, one older woman, when asked if she thought LGBT people should wait until living together to have sex, answered as follows:

*"Honestly, I don't understand why they choose to be LGBT so I am not sure I can answer this question – I have no idea about it" (O17F).*

This lack of tolerance was also reflected by the 533 survey respondents (Figure x) who indicated that they do not think that people should engage in same sex intercourse at all.

While this number makes up only 11.3% of total responses to the question, it nonetheless shows that there is more work to be done to shift attitudes concerning LGBTQI+ towards greater understanding and respect.

## EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO LGBTQI+ VIRGINITY (CONT 3/5)



**Figure 15**

**At what point should an LGBTQI - identifying person have sex for the first time?**

*"If a man sets the condition that a woman has to be a virgin, then his love is limited."*

Young LGBTQI+ respondent (Z21M)

## EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS AMONG LGBTQ+ PARTICIPANTS

Just as attitudes about LGBTQI+ virginity varied widely among interview and survey respondents generally, the views of LGBTQI+ participants themselves also varied widely.

For example, one lesbian couple interviewed reported the following perspective:

*Q: Do you think it is acceptable for a young woman... to have sex with a long-term partner?*

*A: No. No to both long term and new partner.*

*Q: So for you, she must not have sex before marriage? Even if she's engaged?*

*A: Yes.*

-----

*Q: And do you think that LGBTQ people should wait until they live together?*

*A: I think they should wait until they are living together and have got to know each other first, before doing anything.*

This extract highlights the importance of accounting for different views and opinions from within the LGBTQI+ community.

Each of the responses from other LGBTQI+ respondents, however, reflected a much more liberal perspective on issues related to sexual autonomy and virginity culture.

For example, one young male respondent who identifies as gay explained that to him, for straight couples *"it's an individual's decision whether they decide to get married or not,"* and that *"there's nothing wrong with having sex before marriage, as long as it's their choice"* (Z21M).

The same respondent, when asked whether LGBTQI+ people should wait to have sex until living together, answered the following:

*"I don't think so, because for LGBTQ – for me – I have nothing to lose. If I want to engage in sexual activity, it's because I want to explore more. For me, it's for fun. For LGBTQ, they don't have virginity to lose, so it is for fun and to explore, as long as we can use protection."*

*"LGBTIQ people are a lot braver than straight people when it comes to sexual expression and relationships. They're also artistic when it comes to the expression of intimacy and sexual intercourse."*

LGBTQI+ CSO respondent (C5F)

When asked whether virginity is seen as important among the LGBTQI+ community, the respondent answered that what is most important is knowledge about safe sex practices and there being consent among both parties. As for whether the virginity of a partner was important to himself, he answered:

*"I don't mind because I love the person regardless of their sexual experience. I don't care whether he used to have sex or not. What important is that in the present, I love him" (Z21M).*

Another LGBTQI+ respondent, a young woman, also agreed with these ideas, advising that what is most important for sexually active LGBTQI+ people, is "safe sex" and "happiness":

*"I think they do not discuss virginity specifically but they discuss safe sex... Instead it's about how to be together in a way that is comfortable and provides them both with happiness" (Z22F).*

Each of these young respondents had differing views on whether the LGBTQI+ community will discuss more about "waiting until marriage" to have sex once Cambodia has marriage equality,

The young woman respondent replied that *"I think no. LGBTQ community only waits for same sex marriage to be legalized..."*

*Virginity is no longer a topic of discussion for LGBTIQ, especially for me, the topics for discussion are instead related to safe sex" (Z22F).*

For the young male respondent, however, he gave the view that perhaps there will be at least some debate among the community:

*"I think that topic is going to be debated when that happen when same sex marriage is legalized. The pros and cons will be debated. Even among LGBTQ people, their ways of thinking are different so there should be a debate on what is appropriate. For me personally, I do not mind about not waiting until marriage" (Z21M).*

# 7. CHANGING TIMES?

*“Around the 1950s to the 1970s, prior to the emergence of the genocide regime, our people strictly followed and conformed to traditional norms. Women were recognised as good and proper when they maintained their virginity until marriage.*

*Nowadays, our society norms have evolved and positively changed in favour of women’s freedom. People do not mind so much when young women have boyfriends. People are actually starting to support women to go everywhere that they want to go... [and] it is not so important for women to remain virgins... Men and women have equal rights to make decisions when it comes to choosing their intimate partners and sexual relations” (O2M).*

## **PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL SHIFTS**

As each section of this report has shown, it is difficult to make generalisations about how one particular demographic perceives the role and importance of virginity today. Some of the most ‘progressive’ statements in the interview data came from older male participants, while numerous young women participants spoke passionately about the importance of maintaining virginity culture among Khmer women.

Despite this, there were some observable trends across the qualitative data, including that younger participants often tended to report more open-minded views than those of older generations.

Many older respondents reflected on the value of virginity culture as being an integral part of cultural and traditional norms which they consider part of an ideal manifestation of ancient times, and which are linked to notions of Cambodian pride and sovereignty.

In contrast, many younger participants expressed greater emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, and focused less on cultural and traditional influences.

These liberal notions of individual autonomy and choice had limits, however, with most young participants who spoke about the rights of young couples to have premarital sex, also cautioning against women having unattached or casual sexual encounters.

## PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL SHIFTS BETWEEN AGE GROUPS (CONT) 2/8

### 'PROGRESS'

Of the young people who supported equal choice in relation to premarital sex, their responses also discussed themes related to 'progress,' as ways of explaining what they see as generational changes in perceptions.

These included, for example, digital connectivity; improved education; social and political stability, and greater access to information and new ideas. This notion is demonstrated by the following example from a young male respondent:

*"I think there's been progress in order to have changed this culture... youngsters have received a lot of education on these issues" (Z28M).*

This idea, of shifts in virginity norms being connected to broader trajectories of 'progress,' was also argued by CSO respondents, as shown by the following interview extract:

*"Youth are more progressive and advanced, because they are living their experiences in a modern environment" (C2F).*



## PREMARITAL LOVE:

The same young male respondent also explained that young people increasingly view love and intimacy as being expressible through physical sexual activity, and drew a perceived link between the arranged marriages more common in previous generations, and virginity culture:

*“[young people] understand more about **love and virginity**. In the previous generation, arranged marriages meant that a lot of parents already arranged them without them knowing about it... the mindset is changing little by little.*

*People who've changed their mindsets know that they love their partner – their thoughts, and anything else – not just their virginity. It means that it's beyond sex. There's a change currently about these perceptions, from the previous generation to the new one” (Z28M).*

This idea, of sex being about love and intimacy rather than a ‘gift’ or ‘prize’ bestowed on new husbands, was a common theme among those young participants who expressed more open views about premarital sex.

Another young male respondent also displayed this idea clearly, arguing that:

*“Marriage should not be a line to draw what a woman is or isn't allowed to do... Marriage should be a commitment of love... so they shouldn't care about the past” (Z11M).*

As for the proposed link between experiences of arranged marriage and support for virginity culture, this presents an interesting area for future research.

## PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL SHIFTS BETWEEN AGE GROUPS (CONT) 4/8

### SOCIAL VALUES AND DOUBLE STANDARDS:

While numerous young participants expressed the importance of family reputation and social status, these themes featured more prominently among older generations. To ensure the maintenance of these social values, participants reported that parents tend to be more strict with their daughters compared with their sons, limiting their behaviour and mobility in order to ensure compliance with codes of conduct like the *chhabab srey*.

In contrast, as the data in this report has repeatedly indicated, societal pressure and judgement of men as a result of rigid social values is far less when compared to women. The demand for equality between women and men – as articulated by respondents in interviews – presents an interesting finding:

Some (mostly younger) participants who voiced disapproval with these double standards, presented solutions that tended to include greater sexual freedoms and choices for young women. On the other hand, some (generally but not all) older respondents also viewed the double standard as problematic but argued that what was needed was in fact more pressure on men, to also conform with virginity culture.

This generational difference in attitudes was reflected on by the following CSO respondent, who argued that young people “are more progressive than older people,” because:

*“They tend to have more opportunities to get out of the house... going to school, university, workplaces.... working away from home, living in a different city, or studying abroad. The more they’re living away from home, the less strict rules are being imposed on them by parents. They have more opportunities to meet people. They’re more open to having boyfriends and girlfriends. With those experiences, they can start questioning what their parents taught them about virginity, such as: ‘what is the correlation between virginity and honor and betrayal of family?’ and so on” (C3F).*

This extract reflects the view that for younger generations, social values such as ‘dignity’ and ‘morality’ are not as clearly linked with chastity and modesty as they were for previous generations.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND WESTERN INFLUENCES:

Social media interaction and increased exposure to western culture was also raised by participants as having caused a shift in adherence to virginity norms, with social media allegedly containing content in the form of “*sexual entertainment that... affects teens' mindsets,*” and has been a “*main contribution towards declining virginity culture*” (Z5F).

Many older respondents reflected negatively on these trends, viewing them as dual negative forces pushing young people to care less about Khmer culture and tradition and to engage in sexual activities and relationships at a young age:

*“Virginity culture has changed and is not so strict nowadays because people are living with modern technology and they don't listen to parents or elder people's advice like before”* (O5F).

*“Our society has become more progressive, especially young people... due to better education and understanding among the public – men and women alike.*

*The international communities who are coming into our country also have influenced some changes.*

*In addition, people have been exposed to different lifestyles and environments through traveling, movies, music, and social media”* (O2M).

## PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL SHIFTS BETWEEN AGE GROUPS (CONT) 6/8

Such trends were often described as generally unwholesome and detrimental to the entire society. For example, the following older woman respondent explained that she cannot see how it is possible for Khmer culture and the normalisation of premarital sex to coexist, and so rejects the notion outright:

Q: *“Do you agree with the statement: ‘Having sex before marriage is a choice and right’?”*

A: *“I don’t agree with the statement... If a majority in our country believe having sex before marriage is all about their rights and choice, where is the role of virginity? And what is the meaning of marriage? **In short, choices and rights that oppose our culture are unacceptable to me.**”*

Q: *“Do you think it is more acceptable for a young woman who is in a long-term relationship to have sex, as opposed to with a friend or stranger?”*

A: *“I choose none of them. No matter what – long-term partner, friend, or stranger, women in general have to wait until marriage... I think since it is a modern society, they can do whatever they want, but back in my time, we need to really follow the tradition” (O12F).*

For many older participants, social media in particular is having a negative impact on Khmer culture and tradition, due to what they see as immoral content and false concepts that will affect young people who do not possess enough knowledge about what is right or wrong, especially in rural areas. This was also the perspective offered by some young respondents, as the following example demonstrates:

*“Social media is very influential... The level of influence [on young people in urban areas] is lesser when compared to the countryside where they focus on it, such as doing what is on TikTok. Some content targets people that can be influenced. They are the victims of such content that make them feel erotic and wanting to have sex with their partner” (Z28M)*

## PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL SHIFTS BETWEEN AGE GROUPS (CONT) 7/8

The idea that social media has precipitated changes in the mindsets of young Cambodians, and led them to be attracted to more 'modern' lifestyles and aspirations, was echoed by the following CSO respondent, albeit with a far more optimistic tone:

*"Social media has played a huge role in opening people's horizons. People know that there are other ways to live their lives. With the knowledge and information, people have started to resist and are inspiring each other to take different paths. It's a chain reaction!" (C1F)*

Thus, there are very different takes between participants about how social media is influencing young people in relation to virginity culture, and whether this is for better or worse.

However, as the extracts in this report have repeatedly shown, it is important to note that many young participants do continue to voice approval of and conformance with virginity culture, showing that any perceived generational trajectory should therefore be approached and analysed with caution.

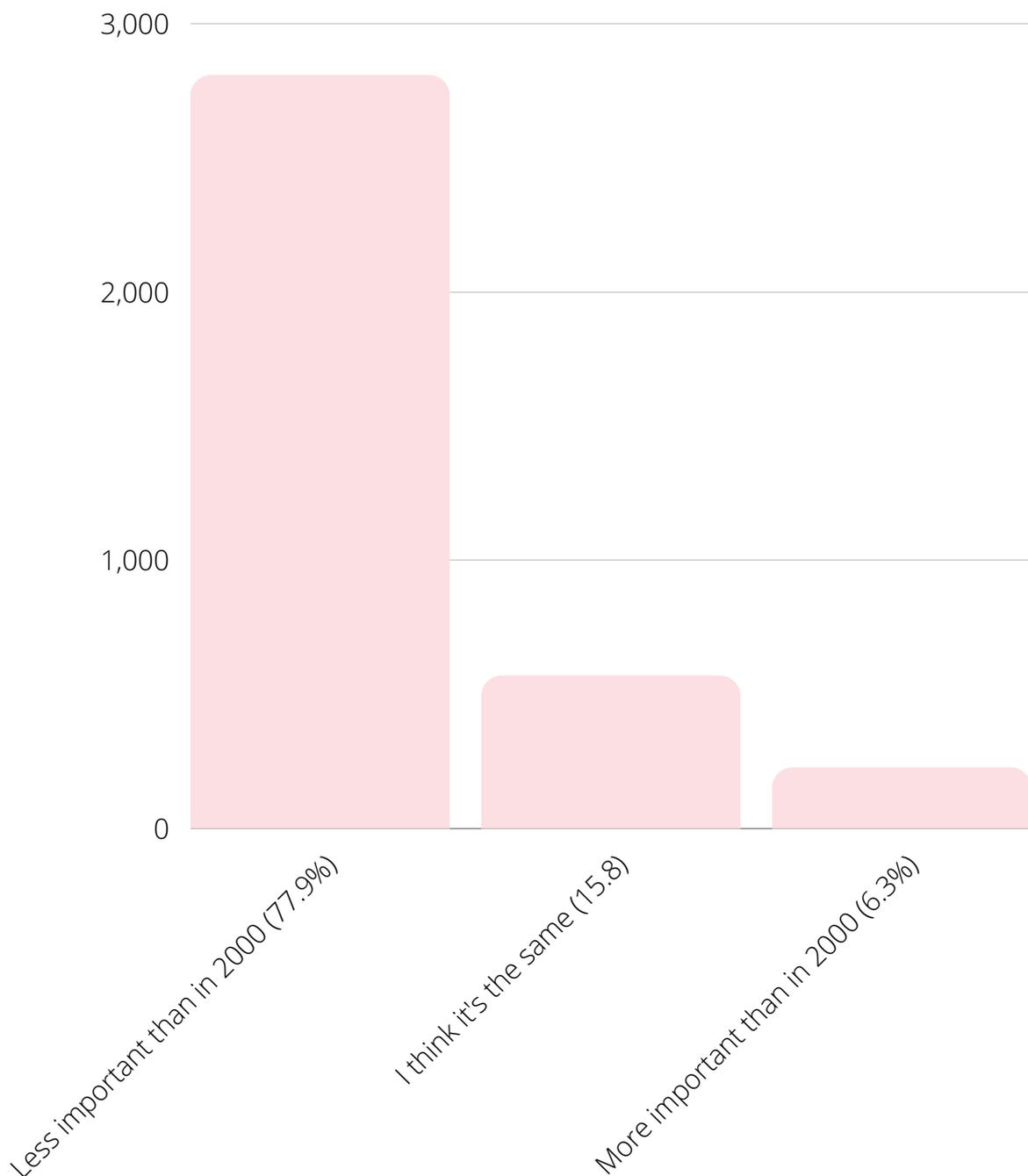
What *can* be said, however, was that there was certainly a view across the whole dataset, young and old, that times are indeed changing:

*"If we talk about the old generation, it was way more important to get married before the couple can live together. [For] my generation, I needed to keep my virginity until marriage – but nowadays, it's hard to know, since some people live together and break up and so on..." (O3F).*

This is also strongly supported by the survey data, which shows a perceived decline in the importance of virginity culture, as shown overleaf.

**Figure 16**

**Is it less important for women to be virgins at their wedding today than it was in the year 2000?**



# 8.0 CONCLUSION

## EXPECTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

This report has explored perceptions of virginity culture, among Cambodians of different ages, professional backgrounds and sexual orientations.

It began by examining the expectations of young women's premarital abstinence, paying particular focus to the cultural, societal and familial elements at play. It then moved to examine the consequences experienced by women who do choose to have sex before marriage, which were reported to include the following:

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES:**

Anxiety; depression; anguish caused by the loss of a sense of 'purity' and 'womanhood'; inability to concentrate, and even suicidal tendencies. Such consequences were said to be caused either by the societal shame, stigma and bullying that a young woman experiences once her sexual experiences became known, and/or the breakdown of a premarital relationship – always described in the sense of men 'abandoning' their partners – causing extreme heartbreak and loss of social status;

### **PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES:**

STIs; unwanted pregnancies, and purported 'damage' to women's reproductive organs that would later give her away as a non-virgin. These consequences were often seen as only or primarily affecting women, despite the fact that men can also contract STIs, and there is no scientific evidence to indicate that it is possible to 'tell' when a woman is no longer a virgin.

## MARITAL CONSEQUENCES:

These consequences fell roughly into three groups – i) pressure on a young couple who were discovered to have had sex to quickly marry; ii) inability of a young woman (but never young men) to find a husband, and iii) future marital strife due to the woman's lack of 'purity' at the time of marriage. This last consequence was seen as potentially so severe as to lead to lack of trust, divorce, and even domestic violence.

These consequences are relevant in numerous ways to gender advocates who aim to understand the possible intersections between sexual and reproductive norms and knowledge, and the ways that women are discriminated against at home and in society. For example, the following young male respondent directly links his open-minded views and refusal to judge women's choices, with his anatomical knowledge:

*"I am not a female, but from my perspective, [sex before marriage for women] doesn't matter. I think virginity is not actually a thing, even for females – I have seen some scientific proof about this. [So] the sayings of the older generation don't make much sense when I think about it. I think it doesn't matter if a woman wants to keep her virginity until marriage, or if she engages in sexual acts before marriage" (Z11M).*

Those interested in promoting women's sexual autonomy or equality – or simply reducing the harm and stigma caused by society's "naming and shaming" (C5F) of unmarried women who choose to have sex – should consider developing content that offers a more accurate understanding of how penetrative sex affects cis women's bodies. In addition, virginity culture norms were also said to have the potential for lasting consequences into marriage, which was said to result in some women lacking confidence to express desire to their husbands, presenting an area for future research.

## LGBTQI+ PERSPECTIVES

The report also examined perspectives in relation to LGBTQI+ sexual experiences and constructions of virginity. Again, views differed widely, with many participants indicating a heightened degree of sexual autonomy and liberation among LGBTQI+ individuals, while others cautioned that they should wait until being in a long term relationship or living together, to fully know and trust one another before having sex.

For LGBTQI+ respondents themselves, one lesbian couple interviewed also still held strong views about straight women's need to maintain virginity until marriage, and for LGBTQI+ couples to live together "before doing anything" (Z34F).

However, all other LGBTQI+-identifying respondents emphasised the importance of consent and safe sex over any notions of virginity, which several respondents viewed as not applicable to them in any case. This demonstrates a need to account for differing views and perceptions within LGBTQI+ community.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Finally, the report briefly examined perceived trends towards greater openness and acceptance of premarital sex in Cambodia today. In short, this study has found the following:

- 1 The data indicates clearly that across generations, most Cambodians perceive the society around them to be changing in relation to virginity norms, towards a decline in their significance;
- 2 However, on an individual level, a majority of respondents across all age groups still reported that virginity for women before marriage is something that they personally consider to be at least somewhat, if not very important.

Thus, while times are *seen* to be moving quickly, this study has found that traditional norms and customs are still playing an active role in Cambodian society.

It is therefore the task of gender advocates to navigate how best to sensitively and cautiously approach these issues in order to reduce gender-based shame, stigma and judgement of women who choose to exercise their sexual autonomy, while being mindful of the ways in which norms around virginity are still held as valid and valuable by many in contemporary Khmer society.

This is perhaps best put by one CSO respondent, as she emphasises a focus on self-determination and unconditional self acceptance:

***“We should not tell people how to live, but let them learn to live by themselves.***

***We shouldn't pressure men, women, or nonbinary people to change anything, but provide information to them so that they can learn to make an informed decision by themselves. It is their lives, we should not take control over their lives.***

***We should focus on ourselves and learn to accept ourselves unconditionally.”***

LGBTQI+ CSO respondent (C5F)

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For more information contact [info@klahaan.org](mailto:info@klahaan.org)  
A digital version of this report is available at [www.klahaan.org](http://www.klahaan.org)