

Learning to Cook through time among different generations in Cambodia

An exploratory study on how different generations acquire knowledge of cooking techniques and practices aid the transition to cooking with clean, modern fuels.

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Acronyms

VoP	Vision of Perfect
IDI	In-depth Interview
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
LtC	Learn to Cook
MSG	Monosodium glutamate
E-COOKING	Cooking with gas or electricity as a cooking fuel

Project goal

The Modern Energy Cooking Services (MECS) is supporting the transition of low-income economies from biomass to the use of modern energy cooking services (e.g. cooking with electricity, gas or renewable energies). It calls for a greater focus on modern energy as the source of clean cooking and has evidenced that cooking with modern energy using energy-efficient appliances can be cost-effective, particularly for urban communities.

MECS is partnering with 17 Triggers in exploring the ways Cambodians who live in urban/peri-urban areas learn to cook. To understand past and current practices, desired learning methods, motivations and barriers that people experience(ed) regarding learning to cook. Gaining this understanding will allow us to determine the most effective point of entry to aid the transition to modern energy cooking fuels.

Research objectives

The research aimed to explore how people living in Cambodian peri-urban and urban areas learn to cook. Time spent investigating day-to-day cooking practices and the cooking techniques that people engage with will help us understand more clearly what cooking behaviours (diversity, innovation (e.g. adopting innovative food products), implications on labour and time burden, etc.) look like. Field research was conducted under the top 3 objectives below in guiding the research questions:

- Explore how urban populations learn how to cook through both non-digital and digital ways in the past and present moment;
- Identify key motivations, feelings, and barriers in learning to cook at different life stages;
- Understand people's perceptions on modern/future cooking and the desire in transitioning.

Methodology

Background Reading & VoP Workshop (Vision of Perfect)

The project commenced with an administrative Kick-off Meeting, followed by a review of all existing background information. Then at the VoP workshop, the team facilitated an

alignment on project goals, desired outcomes, the draft research approach and research questions with the MECS Link Researcher before creating the research guide.

In-Depth Interview (IDI)

We conducted interviews to understand current practices, perceptions, changes throughout a lifetime, barriers, motivations, and aspirations of how people learn to cook. The interviews took place at their house/kitchens and took approximately 90-120 minutes. Visual aids were developed as a way to prompt conversations. The visual aids were: Food Journey, Food Cards (See appendix 1).

Kitchen Observation

Immediately following the IDI interviews, we conducted Kitchen Observations to understand the set-up and organisation of the kitchen/cooking space. This includes the way in which people set up their kitchens, and the assortment of their kitchen utensils, tools, appliances, fuels and technologies. The Kitchen Observation also allowed the research team to probe for additional information and gaps, and cross-check information.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

We conducted FGDs to gain in-depth insights on learning to cook and to validate early findings from in-depth interviews. The FGDs took place at The Museum Café Phnom Penh, Street 178, Sangkat Cheychoh Neah, Khan Daun Penh, Phnom Penh, Cambodia and lasted around 120 minutes to 180 minutes. Visual aids were developed as a way to prompt conversations (See appendix 1).

Synthesis & Analysis

All interviews and early findings were discussed throughout the field immersion period between researchers to make sure all gaps are covered. This was followed up by a high level data capturing spreadsheet, cross checking with the interview transcripts, and finally analysis of data by themes and persona on Miro board (a remote analysis platform).

Sample

The table below shows the actual participants the research team conducted the interviews with. It is a mix of younger and older generations divided by gender and socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority of the participants cook at least one main meal a day and cook, on average, 3 days a week. A main meal in the Cambodian context consists of making rice (a typical staple) and cooking a dish to eat rice with (eg. rice with grilled pork, rice and fish soup, and rice with stir-fried ginger).

IDI					
	Female		Male		Total
Criteria Age	16-35 (Young Gen)	36-60+ (Older Gen)	16-35 (Young Gen)	36-60+ (Older Gen)	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay-home Cook minimum two main meal Low income¹ 	1	1			2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unskilled labour² workers Cook minimum one main meal Low income¹ 			1	1	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skilled workers³ Medium-high income Cook minimum one main meal 	2	1	2		5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PWD⁴ Low-high income Cook minimum one main meal or has a role in the kitchen⁵ 	1		1		2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wet market vegetable vendors 	1	1			2
Total	8		5		13

FGD						
		Female		Male		Total
		16-35 (Young Gen)	36-60+ (Older Gen)	16-35 (Young Gen)	36-60+ (Older Gen)	
F G D 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mother/Grandmother Various income level Cook minimum one main meal 	10				10
F G D 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mother/Daughter Various income level Cook minimum one main meal 		10			10
F G D 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unskilled labour workers Migrated from other provinces (minimum 6 months ago) Various income level Cook minimum one main meal Living alone or in shared accommodation where there are no women to do the 			3	1	4

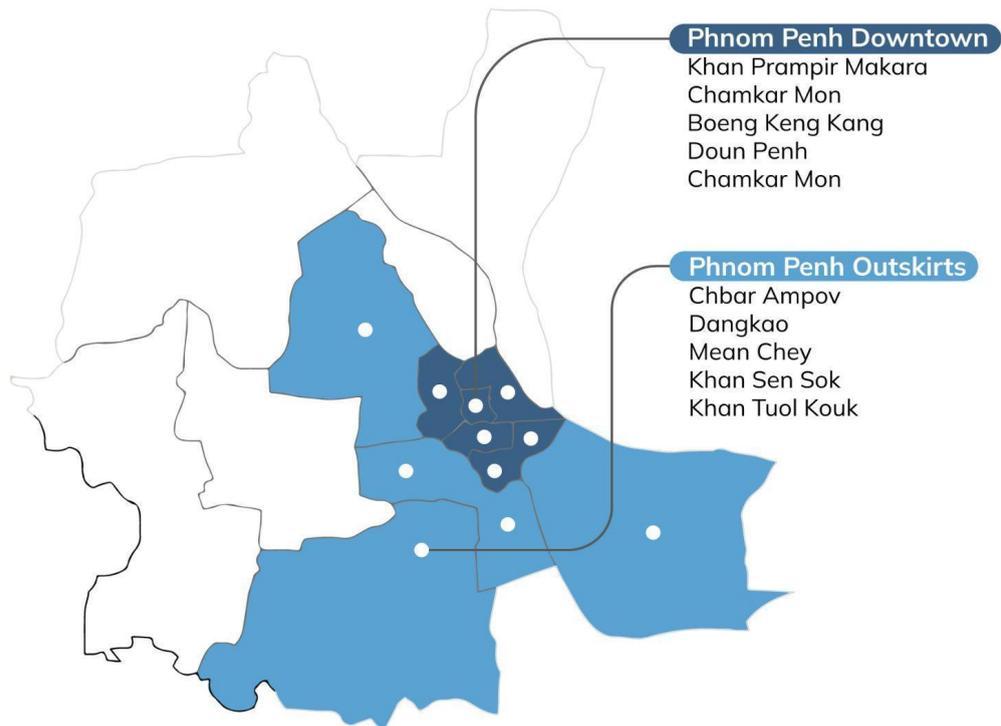
	cooking				
F G D 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University students Migrated from other provinces (minimum 6 months ago) Cook minimum one main meal 		3		3
F G D 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local food bloggers/vloggers* on Facebook, YouTube, Tik Tok, etc 	4			4

1. **Low income** can be defined by having an unskilled labour job as the main income generation, ID poor, home location in slum area, etc.
2. **Unskilled labour** refers to work that doesn't require a certain set of skills or formal education. Some examples of unskilled labour include cashiers, office/house helpers, construction/factory workers, etc.
3. **Skilled job** refers to work that requires formal education or training such as NGO, government, cooperative office, workers, medical professionals, etc.
4. **People living with disabilities** can be someone who has a disability, the impairment or condition that impacts daily activities, communication and/or mobility.
5. **Having a role in the kitchen** here means she/he has a responsibility to cook rice, boil water, or assist other members of the family in the kitchen.

Location

These 2 areas are demographically different from each other (in terms of infrastructure such as access to public services, stable electricity and running water, street conditions, proper sewers, etc.), supermarkets, occupation diversities, income levels, accommodation arrangement. Mainly the unskilled labour workers are from the outskirts and medium-high income participants, who mostly work in the skilled-jobs are from the downtown part of the city. Local vloggers are from across the regions in the country.

- **Phnom Penh Downtown** - Chamkarmon, Boeng Keng Kang, Doun Penh and Sen Sok. Participants from these 4 districts in the consideration of the population densities, income levels, access to supermarkets and health care centres.
- **Phnom Penh Outskirts** - Factory areas such as Veng Sreng Street, National road 2 and 4, and Cham Chao. These areas are present with thousands of factory workers and unskilled labour workers that migrated from different regions.



Key Findings

In this part of the report, we will share our analysis by group or profile including young women, older women, displaced men and food vloggers. For each group, we identified key themes and sub-themes and used these themes to organize our findings. As a reminder, all of these findings are based on interviews and focus group discussions with the participants that participated in the research, and also the local knowledge from both local researchers who have been working in the sector for five years respectively.

Young Women

In this section, we share insights and the voices of young women we interviewed as part of the study. We conducted five in-depth interviews and facilitated one FGD with 10 young women. The ages of the young women ranged from 19 to 35 years old and the majority of them are married. It is also a mix of regional populations who are originally from the capital city and the ones who migrated from other regions throughout Cambodia.

Ways of learning to cook

As our world has progressed so have the technologies and it has a significant impact on how people learn in general. Below are ways in which young women specifically learn to cook:

- **Observing and unintentionally memorizing** - the majority of them know how to cook starting by helping the main cook (typically the mother, older sister or the auntie) such as cutting vegetables and passing the seasonings.

- **Cooking together with the main cook and asking follow-up questions** - this is more intentional than the one above as this happens once they are aware that they need to cook in the near future.
- **Learn to cook by practising and experiencing themselves** - for most young women, they start to improve and achieve their cooking skills through time as they keep on learning from their experiences and keep practising the successful techniques.

“I still keep using the coconut water in my *Khor Jerng Jrouk* (Cambodian sweet, caramelized pork stew) because I love the taste and aroma. I remember I learned it from my mother.” – married 33-year-old woman, staying-home

- **Being involved in the kitchen during national and religious celebrations** - which is an opportunity for them to learn to cook from the elders; oftentimes they would ask or learn by seeing the main cook prepare food.

“I know how to cook chicken curry from my mother, but never ask to learn from her; I just helped and observed her in the kitchen and now I know how to cook by recalling the memories.” – single 24-year-old woman, finance officer

- **Asking the closest family members or someone they know** how to cook (living with or next to) when there is a need to learn a new recipe or to master current knowledge in order to achieve more tasty food.

“I know how to make the normal soup, but in order to make it special and delicious I need to ask my mother-in-law, who has much more experience in making it.” – married 36-year-old woman, food vendor

- **Learn to cook through the internet (specifically YouTube)** - sometimes when they have already moved out of the house and are living without people who know how to cook, participants said they would usually search for recipes using YouTube or randomly watch cooking videos on Facebook Watch (a feature for users to keep watching recommended videos). They also learn to cook foreign foods from videos on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. If the videos don't provide a recipe, they will search YouTube for it.

“I saw someone on Facebook the other day making the Thai dessert and then I looked on YouTube then made it with my mother. It did not look pretty like hers, but it tasted good.” – single 27-year-old woman, working in [the] Japanese embassy

YouTube is the main digital platform preferred by the younger generation of women as it is more convenient for learners rather than food-recipe blogs.

“I have never read a food blog as it is easier to watch videos rather than spending time reading.” – single 29-year-old woman, freelancer

- **Asking the vegetable vendor in the wet markets** about the ingredient options when they get stuck on choosing vegetables for a recipe while doing grocery shopping at the local market.

“Mostly young people ask me about types of vegetables that make curry taste more delicious, what vegetables to put in the salad, etc.” – 62 years old vegetable vendor at Kandal market

- **Cookbooks are not popular among this group** as the majority of the participants both young and older groups, mentioned that it is old-fashioned and only used by highly educated, elite families and professional chefs.

“I never bought any cookbooks in my entire life, used to see them when I was young in the bookstore, but never interested. I think only rich people and restaurant chef use it.” – married 28-year-old woman, staying at home

Life events

Learning to cook is also prompted as people’s life situations change through time, especially among young women. It can be a pressure and motivator at the same time depending on each individual case. The life events that prompt them to learn to cook are:

- **Reaching teenage stage** - there are gender norms and expectations once girls reach 13-15 years of age, and the society and their family start to expect girls to be able to cook in order to be a ‘proper’ woman and perceived from a good family by others.

Gender norms and stereotypes are expressed through in-jokes and teasing directed at young women. Below is a common expression to tease young women who are able to cook at an early age:

“Jes tver mahob jeng, tich teat ban pdei hery” (You know how to cook, soon you will get a husband).

“My mother, she feels ashamed when she didn’t teach me to cook because she was busy with her business and now I need to learn by myself.” – 18-year-old woman, university student

- **Moving out of parental house for study or work** - this is relevant to young women who need to migrate to other cities after graduating from high school to pursue university studies and also those from low-income households that need to migrate to a region with higher job opportunities.

“I moved here to *Phnom Penh* to study at *Vanda (University of finance and banking)* so I needed to cook by myself unlike when I stayed at home, my mom cooked for me.” – 19-year-old woman, migrated from *Battambang*

“At home, my older sister cooked, but after moving here I live alone so I started to cook more.” – 23-year-old garment factory workers.

- **Getting married** - when they get married, young women usually move to their husband's house or a new house, which requires them to cook more compared to

when she lives with their parents. There is also a need of wanting to be a good wife or mother which is defined by knowing how to cook diverse types of food.

“When I stayed with my parents, I didn’t know how to cook anything, even rice! But after getting married to my husband I started to learn to cook as we moved to a new house so nobody was able to cook.” – married 36-year-old woman, staying-home

“I keep learning new recipes or techniques to improve my cooking because I want to be a good wife and mother to my family. I am happy to see them asking for more rice (an indicator in Cambodia showing that someone likes the food.)” – married 32-year-old woman, non-profit organization officer

- **Having a child** - when a woman is pregnant, she sometimes craves new foods; this prompts her to learn to make new recipes. In Cambodia, it is also popular for pregnant women to crave and eat specific foods in order to have a smooth delivery and beautiful child. For example: eating more banana flower soups, food with goose eggs, etc. In addition, after the child is born, a mother would also start to learn new baby recipes either by the nurse at the health centre or relatives who knows how to make it, in order to take care of her child such as *Borbor khab krob kreung* (Khmer yellow porridge recommended by the Ministry of Health), carrot soup, etc.

Traditionally, young women who just delivered a child are encouraged to eat hot and spicy food such as ginger, black pepper, etc.

- **Travelling, meeting new people** - young women that like to travel or occasionally encounter people of diverse backgrounds tend to get inspired to cook new recipes such as foreign food and dessert.

“I remember my first time travelling to *Battambang*, I really loved the way they made *Bok Teuk Kreung* (Khmer traditional fish paste with mixed vegetables), so I asked them how they make it and practised it at home when I came back to Phnom Penh.” – single 25-year-old woman, social entrepreneur

“My colleague *Zuki* from Japan usually brings her deep-fried spring rolls for us to eat at work. So I asked her how she makes it and now look, I can make it myself.” – single 27-year-old woman, working in the Japanese embassy

Influences

Besides life events that motivate young women to cook, there are also other factors that influence them to learn new practical skills, techniques, adaptations in the ways they currently prepare their food.

- **Culture**
 - Local celebrations such as *Pchum Ben* or *Chheng Meng*; Cambodians, especially young women, usually cook types of food that their deceased ones liked and take these to temple to give as offerings. For example,

stir-fried ginger chicken, or glass noodles, are popular dishes as the majority of Cambodian people believe that their ancestors will be able to eat it when they give it to the monks.

- Exchange or tourism programmes, for those who participate in exchange programmes or who take local tour packages often get inspired by the culture of other countries which also has influenced the way they cook as one of the main focuses of these two programmes is about local cuisine.

- **Social occasions**

- Cooking together is a popular activity when young women gather for a celebration.

“I remember, when I first learnt to make *Ko Lerng Phnom* (Khmer hotpot), it was a small party with my high school friends during the vacation.” – single 28-year-old woman, banker

- Weekend gatherings are one of the most popular activities young women Cambodians socialize. This gives them an opportunity to learn from each other in terms of cooking.

- **Global events, movements and trends**

- Majority of young women think specific diets could improve beauty.
- Young women who favour social media have been influenced by the Korean Mukbang (viral eating show on the internet) in the way they cook by learning to make it.
- Majority of young women enjoy eating raw food such as salmon, seafood, and exotic plants.
- Young women that are influenced by western cultures, think that vegetarian and vegan diets could potentially be a choice for a healthier lifestyle and more sustainable world which leads to learning new recipes.
- The pandemic impact requires people to be at home more.

“I cooked more during the lockdown in April as I could not go out to buy food. I called my mom when I didn't know some recipes or got stuck.” – single 28-year-old woman, banker

- **Mindsets**

- Young women who are open-minded are willing to get new experiences and take the risks in trying new things such as food, cooking, etc.

“I love travelling, it gives me new experiences and opportunities to eat new foods and sometimes I make them when I come back home.” – 30-year-old woman, English teacher

- Healthier and hygienic choice. This belief motivates them to try to prepare food at home more rather than eating out because they believe hygiene is not a priority among ready-to-eat food vendors.
- They believe that cooking is a way to express love (related to language of love; act of service). Some young women, who knew about the five love languages by Gary Chapman, have been aware that they express their love and caring through their food towards their loved ones.

- Perception that cooking could save money. Some young women, especially those from a low-medium income household that struggles with finance, tend to cook more as it they believe it is a way to save money. Despite this young women who are from the medium-higher income families believe that cooking is enjoyable; as it could release stress and reduce tension from school or work.

Barriers

Cooking is not always the top priority for everyone. Below are the findings we identified from the study on what prevents young women from learning to cook or cooking:

- **They are not expected to cook (yet)** - usually if there is someone in the house who is primarily responsible for cooking. (e.g. a stay at home auntie or nanny who cooks for a family with teenagers).
- **A busy lifestyle from capitalism** - among women with high education, productivity is about working hard, achieving more and spending less time doing other things especially when cooking is perceived as a time-consuming task even though they wish they could cook more.
- **Availability of ready-to-eat food in the urban/peri-urban space** - for those who live in the areas with quick access to street food and have a hectic lifestyle, it prevents them from cooking more often as the food from vendors are affordable and convenient for them, even though they know that it is not very hygienic.
- **Not a topic of interest** - for a small number of young women, cooking is not an activity that they enjoy so there is no need to learn to cook. They usually eat outside during the break from work or simply use the delivery service.
- **Availability of quick and affordable delivery services** - even if they want to cook more, young women who have a busy lifestyle have been influenced by the quick, 5 minutes in the doorstep food service delivery which was just introduced a few years ago.

“I cook less these days since now *FOODPANDA* (local food delivery service) is super convenient and it is so quick to order to my work.” – single 28-year-old woman, graphic designer

Aspirations

Interviews also covered young women’s aspirations regarding their dreams, wishes in the ways they learn to cook, the future of cooking, and modern fuels.

- **Learning to cook**
 - Learn to cook with the internet such as smart home devices.
 - More availability and clarity of local cooking content on the internet, specifically YouTube.
 - Still believe that learning to cook will continue by indirect observation and self-practice.

- Preserving traditional recipes for young people to learn from which could potentially get lost by modern influences.
- Believe that it could be an activity that they will pass down to their children in a way they show they care and love.

“I want to teach my future children to cook if I have time, because it will help them to make good and healthy food for themselves when they are living by themselves.” – single 25-year-old woman, social entrepreneur

- **Future cooking**

- Young women aspire to have modern cooking appliances such as a bigger gas stove or electric induction cooker.
- They also wish to be healthier and better-looking, so they want to cook more at home to increase the nutrition diversity and hygiene.
- Cooking is considered as one of the essential life skills and elements in building a happy family among this group.

“Everybody eats regardless of her/ his age, gender; so we all should learn to cook, at least the basics to maintain a family with happiness.” – married 28-year-old woman, staying at home

- **Modern cooking fuel and technologies**

- Young women aspire to use electricity as their main cooking fuel if only the electricity rates become more affordable. In addition to this, they also mentioned that e-cooking appliances such as induction cookstove, microwave, oven, etc, might also be a challenge in transitioning to fully electric as it is highly costly at present.
- They also believe that LPG gas will remain the main source of cooking energy in the next few years.
- They are also concerned about the source of electricity that they generate from as it is not always from renewable sources.

Older Women

In this section, we focus on sharing insights from the voices of older groups of women who participated in our study. We conducted three in-depth interviews and one FGD with 10 older women in the older generation. The ages of the women ranged from 45 to 70 years old and a majority of them were grandmothers who have been through many stages of life. The majority of them were born and raised in the other provinces and moved to the city after the Khmer Rouge (the genocide regime in Cambodia, 1975-1979) 43-47 years ago.

Ways of Learning to cook

The ways older women learn to cook has not changed much compared to the younger generation. Older generations tend to keep on practising their personal process and technique in cooking. Below are the ways in which older women have been learning to cook:

- **Observing and unintentionally memorizing** - similar to the younger generation nowadays, older women, in their teenage years, were also involved in the kitchen mainly with their mothers, aunties, and older sisters to help with cooking. From time to time, they started to observe and memorize how to cook.
- **Learn to cook by practising and experiencing** - most older women acquired their current cooking skills from at least three decades of cooking experience. They tend to be more confident with their personal recipes and less likely to change them.

"I like to put the fish first because if you put vegetables first it will cause a strong fishy smell. Also if we don't want the fish to be too well cooked; putting lightly cooked fish aside then put vegetables and put it back later on. I learned this from my own experience because when I keep the fish longer in the boiling soup it becomes small pieces." – 69-year-old grandmother

- **Asking their peers** - older generations of women usually go around their neighbourhoods chit-chatting during the afternoon as a pastime. They mentioned that sometimes they spend time helping their neighbours to cook and eat with them. This gives them the opportunity to ask and learn from their friends and neighbours.
- **Religious community cooking occasions** - Cambodia has both religious and traditional ceremonies such as *Pchum Ben*, *Bun Ka Thinatean*, *Pka Prak*, etc. These occasions bring people together at a particular time in the temples, village centre, to cook together for the monks and community so people share their recipes and learn from each other during this time.

"I remember I learned to make *Somlor Misour* (glass noodle soup, a popular food during festive occasions) from an auntie during *Bun Ka Thinatean* when I was living in Takeo 30 years ago." – 69-year-old grandmother

Life events

Beyond those identified in the younger group of women, learning to cook is also prompted by people's life situation changes through time, but this group of women's cooking has not changed as much compared to the younger generation.

- **Reaching teenage stage** - gender norms in Cambodia and the expectation to be able to cook strongly impacted older women during their teenage years. Young girls were told that to be a proper woman, she needs to keep herself beautiful and master house chores such as cooking, taking care of the house, and children. So sometimes, their mothers would start to teach them by directly explaining the way they cook or involve them in the kitchen space to be familiar with the task.

“In my time, I must know how to cook when I reach 12 years old. My mother, she taught me, so I can become a proper woman in order to get married.” – 56-year-old woman, a snack vendor

- **Having a child** - similar to the younger group, older women in Cambodia were told they should consume specific food in order to have a smooth delivery and good-looking children, such as eating more banana flower soups, food with a goose egg, and herbal teas (In Khmer: *Teuk Thnam*) etc. So they normally learn the recipes from their mother, mother-in-laws, elders who live nearby.
- **After the Khmer Rouge** - the Khmer Rouge resulted in the loss of many traditional recipes as they were forgotten (for almost 4 years people were only given a bland white porridge with salt, all cooking was restricted and you could get yourself killed by trying to cook), culinary documentation got destroyed and erased. Despite this tragic event, Cambodians that went through this period of time became more creative in the way they cook as they needed to start experimenting with new recipes, ingredients after the genocide ended.

“I started to use any green vegetables I could find to make *Samlor Proher* (Traditional Cambodian soup). Some of them I didn't even know the name of or if I could eat them, but you know? We were starving to death.” – 60-year-old grandmother

- **Getting sick** - the majority of older women are experiencing ageing, which makes them more vulnerable to sickness. Those who have some illness or struggle to keep their health stable tend to change or adapt their cooking methods such as avoiding deep-fry food, removing *MSG*, reducing sugar, etc.

“My doctor told me I should stop using *Bi Cheng* (*MSG* in Khmer), otherwise my bones will be prone to weakness and more fragile as you can see, it is so hard for me to walk properly.” – 68-year-old grandmother

Influences

Life events prompt older group of women to cook similarly to the younger group and there are also other factors that influence their cooking skills, techniques and processes such as:

- **Family** is a very important priority in Cambodia, most people live as a family for a longer period of time even sometimes after they get married. In the past, most young teenagers stayed with their parents and learned basic life skills from them. Each individual has their own special family recipes they inherited through generations.
 - **Family traditions (recipes)** - nearly all of the older generation of women we spoke to during the FGDs and IDIs, learned most of their cooking skills from their parents, especially from their mothers and kept practising most of it throughout their lifetime.
 - **Younger family members** - older women that are living with their young children and grandchildren are most likely to learn new recipes for two potential reasons. One is they really like the food that is cooked by the younger family members and two because they prefer to be able to cook whatever food makes the children happy.

“My daughter likes to eat the European style omelette which has different types of vegetables. Unlike our Cambodian omelette, we just put *Sa’om* (Cambodian green leafy vegetable) or onion. But she showed me how to make it and I keep on making them for her as I really love her.” – 57-year-old stay-home mother

- **Culture**

- **Preserving the tradition or standard** - most older women tend to keep the tradition of practising the same recipes and techniques that they have learned for the past decades. As they prefer to follow the standard recipes on how food should be cooked.

“*Nhom klach khos khboun, jeng hai tver oy doch ke doch eng tov* (scared to be different from the well-known and correct standard so I should keep doing the same ways as everyone does.)” – 55-year-old and a mother of 6, stay-home

- **Religious traditions** - Cambodia is a religious, Buddhist country in which approximately 95% of the population are Buddhists. e.g. going to the temple and offering food to monks during holy days such as half and full moon are considered to lead them to enlightenment and receive good karma. They usually follow what is called the trends in choosing what kind of food to cook. It depends on the occasion, so if they don’t know the recipe, they would ask someone in order to fit in the standard of what is a proper food to bring to the temple.
- **Myths** - Older generations are most likely to follow false beliefs compared to the younger generations which sometimes influence the way that they cook such as putting a metal spoon in meaty soup to make the meat soft faster, keeping fishtails in the food to eat in order to be able to swim, never taste the food before putting it aside for the offerings otherwise you will go to hell.

- **Other factors**

- **Advertisements commercials on TV and banners** - nowadays there are millions of commercial banners and tv programs that oftentimes also target older women as they still watch tv and go to the market. This also has an influence on the way they cook, such as putting the chicken soup bar (Khnor) in their food and adding oyster sauce in stir-fry to make it more delicious.
- **Health and medical advice** - as mentioned previously, older generations of women tend to be more vulnerable to sickness, so health is one of their top priorities. Medical advice has a strong influence on the way they prepare food with the goal of improving their health and living longer.

“I stopped using MSG and reduced meat in my food as my doctor told me it could help to reduce the risk of diabetes and helps with my high blood pressure.” – 69-year-old grandmother

- **Texture** is another influencer in the majority of older women's cooking because of difficulty in digesting and chewing. Older women are willing to adapt or change their cooking techniques in order to achieve different textures by simmering longer than the normal period of time, putting extra additional ingredients, removing chewy ingredients, etc.

“I put pineapple in my *Khor Trey* (Khmer caramelized fish stew) to make the bone soft in order to chew it.” – 70-year-old grandmother, stay-home

- **Availability of vegetables** - it has slightly influenced the way they choose ingredients since in the past the vegetables were more locally grown and people mainly consume green leafy vegetables, but nowadays the markets have more several different foreign vegetables and the local vegetables have become less available due to the decrease of agriculture rate in the country.

“Before I just go around picking some green leafy vegetables to cook, now I need to buy everything from the market or card vendors. For example, the chilli leaves in *Samlor Proher* (Traditional Cambodian soup) is rarely available to get from the market as before I just pick from my farm.” – 69-year-old grandmother, stay-home

- **Need of saving money for the family** - elderly who stay at home or are retired and live with their children are most likely to adapt the way they cook in order to reduce food-related expenses as they want to support their family by reducing the expenses on food.

Barriers

- **Elders should know all** - In Cambodia, there is a belief that elders have the wisdom to know everything. So showing the willingness to learn new cooking techniques could conflict with this well-known fact and be one of the barriers for older people to be open to trying new recipes.
- **Taste preference** - some of the older women we spoke to mentioned that they don't like the taste of new modern food, which tend to be rawer and spicier nowadays because it tastes strong or unpleasant for them.

For example salmon sashimi, raw seafood, and other types of fish with hot and spicy chilli sauce.

- **Lack of confidence in trying new things** - older generations of people are usually not excited by new experiences because they are afraid of the complications they have to deal with.
- **No responsibility or expectation** to learn or cook additional dishes besides what they already know. For example, older women who live with teenagers who are able to cook by themselves do not need to cook for them.
- **Limited technological competence** – the majority of older women do not use smartphones and other social media even though they could benefit from using them to learn to cook new food.

- **Individual perception** – the majority of older women we met cook mainly traditional Khmer food because new and modern food such as fast food and foreign food is perceived as strange food (strangely weird food they specifically mentioned) and would prefer to leave it to the younger generation to cook if they want to eat.

“I never cook any difficult recipes such as those modern foods nowadays, only my daughter makes them because I think it’s strange to eat raw fish as it probably has parasite.” – 54-year-old mother, garment factory worker

Aspirations

- **Desires in cooking**

- Some of the women among this group are willing to adopt new changes or improvements in their kitchen space or cooking techniques that could potentially save money, simplify processes they are currently practising, improve their health and so on.

“I want a bigger gas tank so we don’t need to refill it more often.” – 69-year-old grandmother

“I have started to stop using charcoal to cook the rice because it’s very simple to wash the rice, plug and just 10 minutes I have the rice cooked.” – 45-year-old woman, vegetable vendor

- Hoping to be able to help their grandchildren grow up. A few older women we met mentioned that they wish to learn any new techniques or changes that improve the quality of their food in making their young family members grow up healthy, smart, and successful.
- However, a majority of older women voiced that they don’t have the desire or need to learn how to cook because they are now old and tired.

- **Modern cooking fuel and technologies**

- Willing to use electricity or gas instead of biomass if only they don’t have access to wood and charcoal or move to a newly built living space
- Less likely to adopt new modern cooking technologies due to the complications of the products as it is difficult for them to function.

After showing the electric stove, “I don’t really want it, as it is difficult for me to read the buttons, and use this stove properly. My daughter bought one a long time ago, but we gave it to our grandson in Battambang.” – 67-year-old grandmother.

Migrated Men

In this section, we share findings and the voices of men who have migrated to urban and peri-urban areas for study or work, or those who live in displaced settings, who are suddenly living alone or in a living accommodation with other men, and have no women to do the cooking. We conducted five in-depth interviews and two FGDs with four low-skilled workers men and three students who migrated from other provinces of Cambodia. The majority of male participants were young men in their 20s and early 30s, with a diverse mix of men who live by themselves and with other men.

Ways of learning to cook

Men who live alone or with other men without the presence of a woman, who usually would be the main cook, tend to learn to cook in many different ways as required by their life situation. Below are ways in which displaced men learn to cook:

- **Observing by being involved in the kitchen** - same as other groups, a few men had the opportunity to help the main cook in the house as they grow up and get to observe and learn a few cooking skills unintentionally by being involved in the cooking process.
- **Self-practice** - for most young men, both migrated university students and low-high skilled workers, they start to improve and master their cooking skills over time as they keep on learning from their experiences and keep on practising it.
- **Asking close family and relatives** how to cook, whether it's learning a new recipe or getting stuck while cooking, the majority of displaced men usually call their family-especially their mothers and aunties for help. Low-skilled workers tend to be less confident and embarrassed to ask their female neighbours as they mentioned that it could be inappropriate and weird; this is not the case for male university students.

“I always call my mom if I want to cook something I like by myself and have no clue how to make it.” – 25-year-old man, living alone, working in real estate

- **Through other men they live with who can cook** - usually men who live in a shared space with other men who know how to cook learn the basics such as simple stir-fry and soup from others by asking questions and practising with the supervision of the ones who know how to cook. A few of them also share specific tasks such as grocery shopping, doing dishes, making rice and preparing food.
- **Learn to cook through the internet (specifically YouTube)** - the majority of this group of men use YouTube as their main digital channel to learn to cook. In addition to this, young men who are in university use additional apps such as Instagram. Men who work in low-skill jobs mentioned that YouTube videos are a little long and complicated to follow. They fast forward to specific steps they would like to learn from most of the time.

“One time I went on YouTube to learn how to cook sour duck curry, and I just skipped to the part they show about ingredient options because I want to know what ingredients I need to put in the soup to make it special as I already know how to make a basic version of this.” – 37-year-old man, living alone

- **Asking vegetable vendors in local wet markets** about the ingredient options when they get stuck on choosing vegetables for a recipe while doing grocery shopping at the local market. Additionally they sometimes also ask or clarify a few recipes to the vendors compared to the young women group.

“People who often ask me a lot are male shoppers. I think it is difficult for them to cook.” – 24-year-old vegetable vendor at Kandal market

- **Recipe from outside food** - some medium-high income men who like to eat out usually like to ask for the recipes if they enjoyed the food. They don't always get the recipes as the owners sometimes would prefer to keep their special recipes to themselves.

“I remember my son in law made a really good beef soup when he was alive, he learned it from a restaurant in Vietnam when he was living there alone.” – 69-year-old grandmother, mother of a displaced man who passed away

“My family really loves my *Chhar Kdav* (spicy hot stir-fry) when I visit them in my hometown. I remember I learned it from a small food stall near my flat here (*referred to his rental flat in Phnom Penh.*)” – 28-year-old man, living with his brother, labour worker

Cooking practices

- **Willing to learn to cook at a later stage of life** especially when there is no other choice, but to start cooking. This is usually the case when a man moves out of his parent's house to share a living space with others or to live by himself, which requires him to share or be responsible for the cooking. University students usually learn to cook during their young adult stage, but migrant men learn at a later stage in life when they migrate to other regions to find jobs.
- **Cook to save money** – low-income groups of men tend to cook more as they believe it is more affordable than eating out.
- **Cook mainly simple and quick meals** – across all profiles of men we met, most cook simple and quick types of food such as stir-fry, soup, or just simple shallow-fry meat. Generally, they cook more on the weekends and public holidays as there would be more time during these periods.
- **Skilful with supporting tasks** - the majority of men would take a more supporting role in cooking such as cutting vegetables and meat if they are in the kitchen with someone who's better at cooking.
- **Make better sauce** - mostly, men tend to make a better sauce compared to women as they don't follow a strict recipe standard as women usually do. Women are less likely to change a standard recipe, but men are more likely to, as they need to be more creative because they don't have a clear picture of what is a standard or correct recipe.

Barriers

There are a small number of men who enjoy cooking or can cook a proper meal. There are many barriers that prevent men from learning to cook, including the social norm that

women are the ones responsible for cooking. In this section, we will focus only on the findings from the male sample we interviewed. Those factors are:

- Living alone or with another person who rarely eats at home
- Busy working or studying schedules
- Availability of ready-to-eat food
- Accessibility of delivery services (younger groups of men)
- Complicated tutorial videos on YouTube (male YouTube users)
- The belief that men should not cook; embarrassment to be perceived as feminine (across all groups of men)
- Toxic masculinity and gender role expectations that men should be the income generators and women should be the homemakers (mostly mentioned by older men)

Aspirations

- **Learn to cook**
 - Able to cook food that can be accepted by everybody
 - Know how to make simple quick food
 - Simple, clear and easy to understand tutorial videos
 - Able to take care of family in terms of cooking when their wives are occupied with work or doing other things she wants to do
 - Build an equal relationship/ marriage and take off the burden/ pressure from their partners. Understand that this could contribute to building a happy and successful family.

"I want to be able to cook well when I get married so I don't need to give the pressure for my future wife." – 27-year-old man, WASH engineer, living alone

- **Learn modern cooking fuel and technologies**
 - Young university student men are most likely to be more open to using modern fuel options such as electricity to cook. They are more exposed to the up-to-date technology and content on the internet compared to other groups of men.
 - Low-medium income men are willing to adopt clean and modern cooking fuels if only they are affordable.
 - All groups of men aspire to have any types of cooking appliances that could decrease the time to cook as they mostly believe cooking is a very time-consuming task.

Food Vloggers

In this section, we share findings from the FGD with 4 local food vloggers. They believe that one of the most effective ways to learn to cook is to learn from a professional chef, but they also believe that using YouTube even if the users don't know the language, they could see through demonstrations, but this does not apply to foreign languages speakers as

they might struggle with the local ingredients and pastes. It takes more time than learning in person because people need to practice by themselves more.

Channels

- Majority of the food vloggers use YouTube as their main channel in sharing their videos, in addition to this, they also create a page on Facebook to interact with their followers and also to promote themselves too.
- Most of them follow both other local and foreign cooking channels to get inspiration and improve their cooking skills. For example, one of them uses the 'see first' option on Facebook to get the latest updates from a famous local chef. She mentioned that she follows this particular chef because the chef has a good team to support her in making good content and the chef videos look very professional.

Audience

- Food bloggers mentioned that their audiences are mostly Cambodians who either live in the country or other countries. They are mostly able to use smartphones and enjoy cooking.
- Vloggers believe that those who have no background or experience in cooking might not understand and therefore cannot follow their tutorial videos.
- They mentioned that most Cambodian users prefer Facebook and YouTube while people from other countries might use more Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok.
- One of the vloggers said, the majority of people know how to cook most Khmer food, but food vlogs show more detailed techniques and processes on how to improve the food.

Contents

- For them, an effective content would be a video that demonstrates how they cook with other people with good experience in cooking.
- They also believe that their content could potentially help local food vendors that sell traditional or typical Khmer food to generate more customers, this is only the case of a video with a food vendor making their food for sale.
- The content among the four vloggers are mainly about Khmer recipes, very few are foreign food because they are able to cook and prefer to eat mainly Khmer dishes and lack interest and knowledge of foreign food.
- Sometimes, vloggers post options on their page for followers to select for their next video and oftentimes audiences like to select Khmer traditional pastes such as Teuk Kreoung, Mum, etc (a traditional dish with fermented fish).

Other learnings from food vloggers

- They agreed that food creates a connection between people as it is one of the universal languages people share regardless of their ethnicities, or the countries they come from.

- One of the food vloggers believes that cooking can reduce stress, but contradictory, sometimes cooking could also create overwhelm people who are not able to achieve what they want to as a result.
- Another vlogger added that cooking is an art and a part of daily life tasks. It is also a method to socialize with other people. She added an example, going to the market to get groceries while encountering fellow shoppers, they could chit chat about what's on the menu of the day, why they cook it, how they would cook it, etc.

Cooking Spaces

More than seven kitchen observations were conducted immediately after or during the in-depth interviews, to explore the set-up and arrangement of the participants' cooking atmosphere. It also allowed us to probe additional questions to capture rich information.

Typical Kitchens

In urban and peri-urban Phnom Penh, typical kitchens are ranging from basic to middle-class style depending on household income level. There are basic tools and appliances across all cooking spaces shared such as:

- At least one cooking stove (majority of them were small LPG gas)
- A space or box to keep the eating and cooking utensils
- Electric rice cooker (6 out of 7 kitchens have it)
- A mortar with a pestle (7 out of 7 kitchens have this) as Cambodian cuisine usually requires grinding and crushing.
- Seasonings such as fish and soy sauce, salt, sugar, *Prohouk* (fermented fish), chilli powder, etc
- There were no cookbooks, recipes on the wall, among these kitchens.

We also observed that the environment of most kitchens is closed with less air ventilated. For older generations, some of them move to cook outside of the house as their kitchens seemed to have low light and ventilation.

Stoves levels range from putting on the ground level to stomach level depending on individual needs. Specifically, for the 2 people living with disabilities we met, they keep it at their wheelchair level or even lower to be able to see the food in the pots while cooking.

The Desired Modern Kitchens

The majority of the people we spoke to have mentioned that they have seen the modernity of the kitchens in the TV show (*Master Chef*), movies, Facebook cooking videos, food vloggers who live abroad. By modernity, they added that the kitchen would use mainly electricity or modern shiny gas stoves, and would have blenders, ventilating machines, etc. In the last section of our interviews and focus groups we asked participants to describe their 'dream kitchen' and below are the responses we received from them:

- Big, bright and open space kitchen
- Kitchen with bigger gas tank stove (older group of women)
- Kitchen that fits all family members

- Brand new shiny plates, and cutleries (among low incomes households)
- A fridge (among low incomes households)
- Smart devices such as smart kettle, smart fridge, etc (among younger generation only)
- For participants who we met and are living with disabilities (physical), they are wishing their future kitchen to fit to their own needs such as the counter level, safety features that fit their challenge in moving away quickly, when there is an accident in the cooking space, and weight of the appliances.

Insights

In this section, we share the similarities and differences noted among the different audiences in response to the three research objectives: how they learn how to cook, key motivations and barriers in learning to cook, and perceptions on modern and future cooking.

Similarities and differences in how they learn to cook through both non-digital and digital ways

- **Similarities**

- Start as assistants or helpers - most people learn to cook during their teenage years by indirect observation, memorizing basic cooking skills while assisting the main cook in the house such as their mothers, aunts, older siblings, and so on.
- YouTube tutorials - YouTube is the main digital channel for online learning among the younger generation and they use it to learn to cook in combination with other methods noted above (such as observing, asking family, relatives, and others).
- Online cooking videos - for young people who learn to cook via online tutorial videos, the majority of them fast forward to the section of the video they want to learn, rather than watching the full length.

- **Differences**

- Asking vendors when grocery shopping - the younger generation (both men and women) sometimes learn new ways to cook by asking vendors in the market for recipes or ideas.
- Channels of influence - older women are influenced by TV and advertisements, buying ingredients based on something they might have seen on TV.
- Learning as part of ageing - as women get older, their cooking is influenced by medical advice as they want to stay in good health and avoid getting sick.
- Learning from peers - migrant men who live with male roommates learn how to cook from each other and share food prep and cooking tasks.
- Learn out of necessity - the majority of men learn to cook only when their new life situation requires them to cook (e.g. when his wife delivers a child when he moves in a place without a woman to cook.), as opposed to women who are expected to know how to cook by the time they are old enough to get married.

Similarities and differences in key motivations, feelings, or barriers in learning to cook at different life stages

- **Similarities**

- Life events trigger all profiles to learn to cook - for the younger generation this could include migration to the city to study or work, marriage, having a child, and, for the older generation, they are triggered also by medical advice and to avoid sickness.
- Preparation for key cultural and religious holidays are a common moment that people learn how to cook by participating and cooking with family and relatives.
- Aiming for efficiency - those interviewed shared wanting to master a new technique or recipe to cook faster in order to save time, charcoal, or electricity expenses.
- Global influences are penetrating either directly to profiles, or indirectly when young women and men share food with older generations. (e.g. a young daughter who cooks her mother a Japanese Takoyaki cake, inspires her mother to learn the recipe when she likes the taste of it.)

- **Differences**

- Cooking based on health - the older women demographic shared about changing cooking practices based on medical reasons and health advice. This changed both the type of food they cook and also the texture of the way they prepared it.
- Risk-taking - younger people were more willing to take risks and explore new recipes whereas older people were more comfortable with their existing knowledge and less likely to learn new recipes or even seek out advice from anyone on cooking.
- A barrier to learning to cook among younger women and men is the current context in the city where available ready to eat and food delivery services are relatively inexpensive.

Similarities and differences in perceptions of modern/future cooking and the desire in transitioning (Objective 3)

- **Similarities**

- Modern cooking is aspirational - most people dream of having a modern and luxurious kitchen, especially the ones that have seen the looks of it through cooking shows, movies, etc. But they still feel like it is far from where they are, as most believe it would cost a lot.
- LPG is a reachable goal - transitioning to fully LPG gas as a cooking fuel is a reachable goal in the near future, but to use only electricity to cook would

take a while as most Cambodians are still struggling to afford electricity bills and replacing electric compatible cooking appliances.

- **Differences**

- Older people are less confident with modern technology - younger people are the decision-makers when it comes to purchasing kitchen appliances, tools, and fuel. The older generation feels less confident in operating modern cooking appliances and will use them only when their children buy them. However, older people sometimes stop using new tools and end up returning to their old appliances.
- Preference for biomass - the majority of older women strongly desire to keep using biomass as cooking fuel as it has been their main cooking fuel for a long time and they also believe the food tastes better when cooked with firewood or charcoal.

Overarching insights

The following are overarching insights based on the sub-themes that were explored during research and don't necessarily tie into a specific research objective.

- Gender norms - gender norms are stronger in the older generation where men and women are thought to have distinct roles and responsibilities. The younger generation was observed to be more flexible with men sharing they are willing and have the intent to cook to help out their wife or partner. This is not to say there are no gender expectations regarding cooking with the younger generation, but simply that younger women and men are more open to blurry lines than the older women we interviewed.
- Desire to save money - through the specific reasons to save, varied from group to group (e.g. older generations wanting to save for their children or younger men wanting to save for their future or marriage).
- Improving cooking - everyone shared a desire to learn and practice techniques to improve taste and aroma.

Recommendations and Gaps for Further Study

This exploratory study explored three main research objectives. The following are proposed other topics that could be further investigated:

- Conduct a stock-taking or communications audit of various digital resources and social media platforms widely used by Cambodians. Elements of the audit could include content, mood and tone, format, food types and techniques.
- Explore potential channels that may be emerging in the city such as cooking schools, chefs, and informal cooking clubs that may be offering courses for midline income segments.
- Understand how traditional dishes and recipes are shared as well as adaptations that are made over time.

- Understand if and how traditional beliefs are shared and whether younger generations follow or not.
- Identify and learn more about role models or initiators among migrant groups of men who inspire and teach other men to start to cook.
- As the majority of people learn to cook by observing someone who cooks well, how can we work together to support the transition to modern and clean cooking fuels?
- Study on how the pandemic leads to changes to how people learn to cook/ cook more.
- Explore if the shared economy concept is common in Cambodia with regards to sharing or renting cooking appliances, equipment, stoves and ovens.

Appendix

1. [Research visual aids](#)