

# KHMER GIRLS IN ACTION

Supporting the  
Leadership and  
Healthy Development  
of Cambodian Youth



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2016

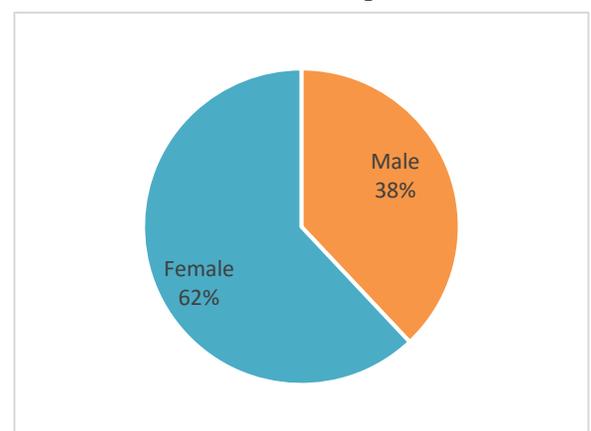
Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) is a community-based organization whose mission is to build a progressive and sustainable community that works for gender, racial and economic justice. It is based in Long Beach, California, the U.S. city with the largest Cambodian population. Founded in 1997 as HOPE for Girls, the organization initially focused on Cambodian young women's reproductive health and empowerment. As KGA grew, it changed its name and broadened its scope, seeking to build the capacity of Southeast Asian young women to work collectively to respond to immediate needs of their communities. Several years later, in 2011, KGA began offering programming for young men. Currently, KGA aims to provide holistic approach to leadership development. Hosting separate and co-ed leadership development programs for young men and young women, it engages its young members in campaigns to promote positive community change, provides academic and college preparation programs, and offers cultural historical arts programming.

Drawing on survey and semi-structured interview data collected as part of a broader evaluation of the BHC youth leadership programs, the purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of KGA's youth membership and outline some of the ways young people have been involved in and benefited from this organization. We begin with a demographic description of youth survey participants and lay out both how youth were recruited and why they remained in the organization. To provide information on KGA's programming, we show how youth members participated in different types of activities. We then share how members benefited from their involvement. This report also relies on semi-structured interview data to help illustrate members' experience in KGA and to list some of the group's recent campaigns. We hope that this report informs KGA's efforts to continue its high quality youth programming, as well as provide insights for other programs and initiatives seeking to build the leadership capacity of Southeast Asian youth, and other socially marginalized youth.

## Description of KGA Members

Survey data was collected in 2014 from 74 KGA members ranging in age from 15 to 22. Most youth—88 percent—were raised by at least one refugee/immigrant parent. While 94% racially identify as Asian-Pacific Islander, KGA includes a small number of members who identify as African American, Latino, or Other race. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the majority of participants (62%) are female, reflecting KGA's history of working with young women.

Figure 1. Gender Composition of Core Youth Participants

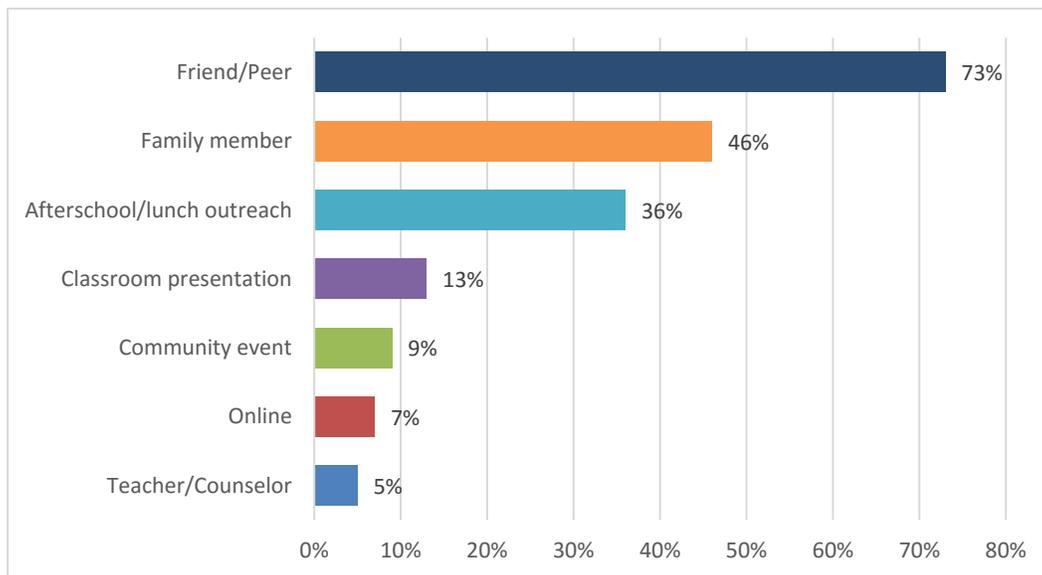


Most members come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 82% of survey respondents are eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school.

### Member Recruitment and Retention

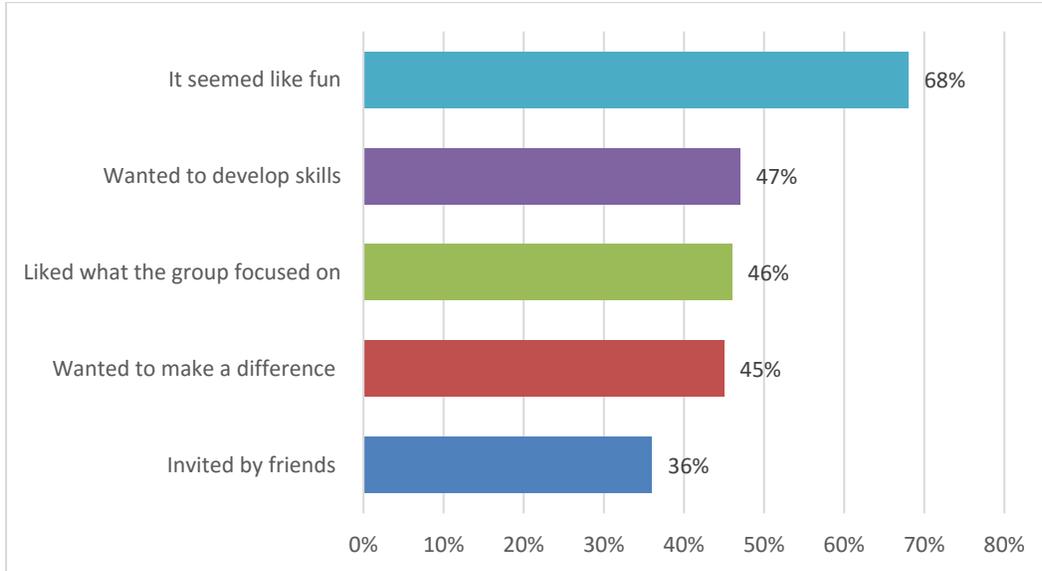
Members play a strong role in recruiting their peers to get involved in the organization. Specifically, when asked to share one or more ways in which they first heard about their group, most respondents (73%) reported learning about it from friends (see Figure 2). An additional 46% also said that they connected with their group through family. Several members of the group have siblings who have been involved with KGA in the past. Many youth (36%) also heard about the group through after-school and lunchtime outreach, showing that KGA is able to recruit students through school-based outreach.

Figure 2. How Members Learned about KGA



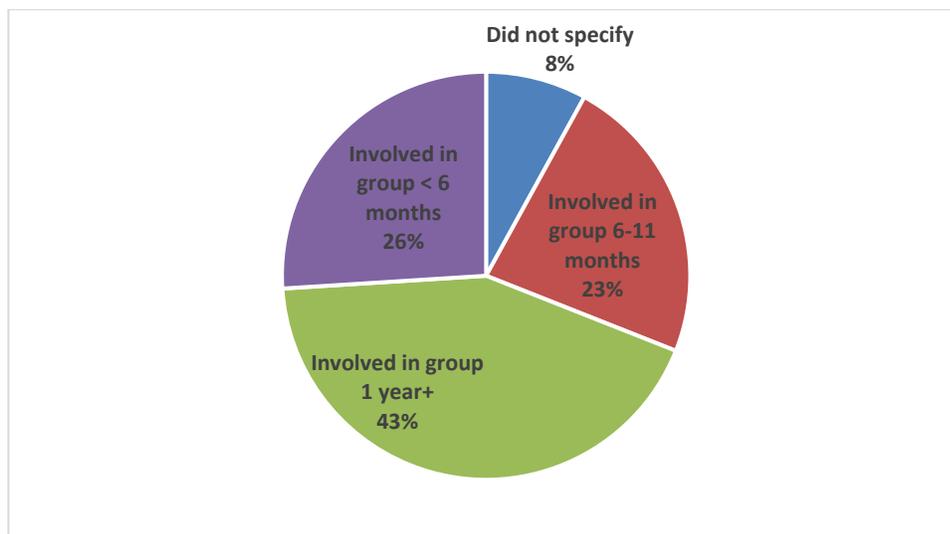
Members gave various reasons for joining, as shown in Figure 3. Over two-thirds (68%) joined because the group seemed like fun. A significant proportion also reported joining because they wanted to develop new skills (47%), liked what the group focused on (46%), and wanted to make a difference (45%). About a third of the survey respondents (36%) joined the organization because friends invited them. Overall, findings suggest that KGA draws members by creating a fun community environment. At the same time, the group attracts some young people who join because they want to develop skills and contribute to the community.

Figure 3. Reasons for Joining KGA



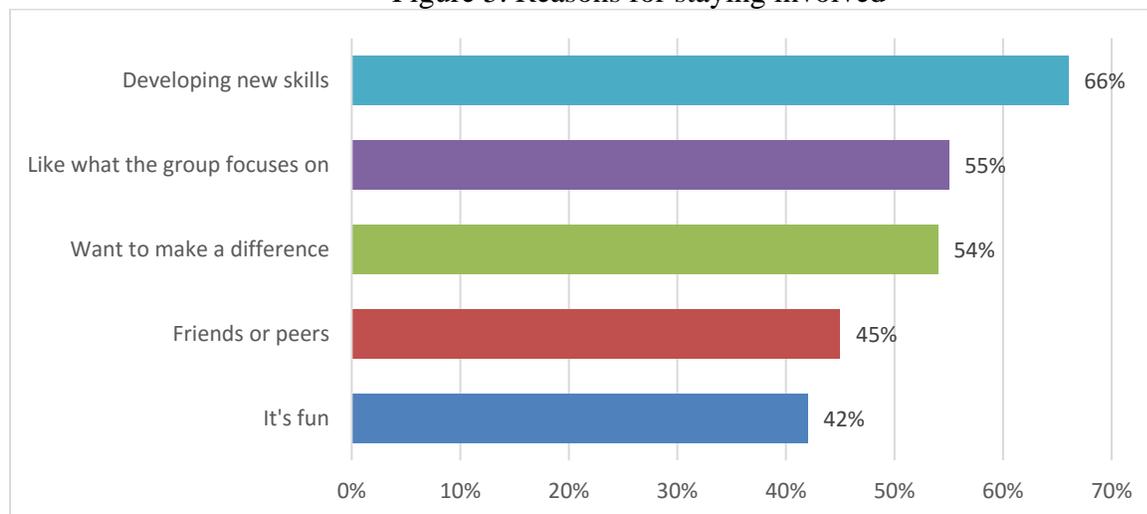
Notably, 43% of KGA members had participated in the group for a year or longer (see Figure 4). Twenty-three percent had been involved for 6-11 months. Members who have been part of KGA longer play a role in developing the leadership capacity of newer members, as veteran members typically take the lead in facilitating weekly activities and planning key events and campaign activities.

Figure 4. Length of time involved in KGA



Members' reasons for staying involved in KGA only somewhat overlap with their reasons for joining. Most members (66%) remained involved because they were developing new skills (see Figure 5). Fifty-five percent liked the focus of the group, and 54% want to make a difference in their community. A significant percentage, 44%, also remained in KGA because of the involvement of their peers or friends or because they were having fun.

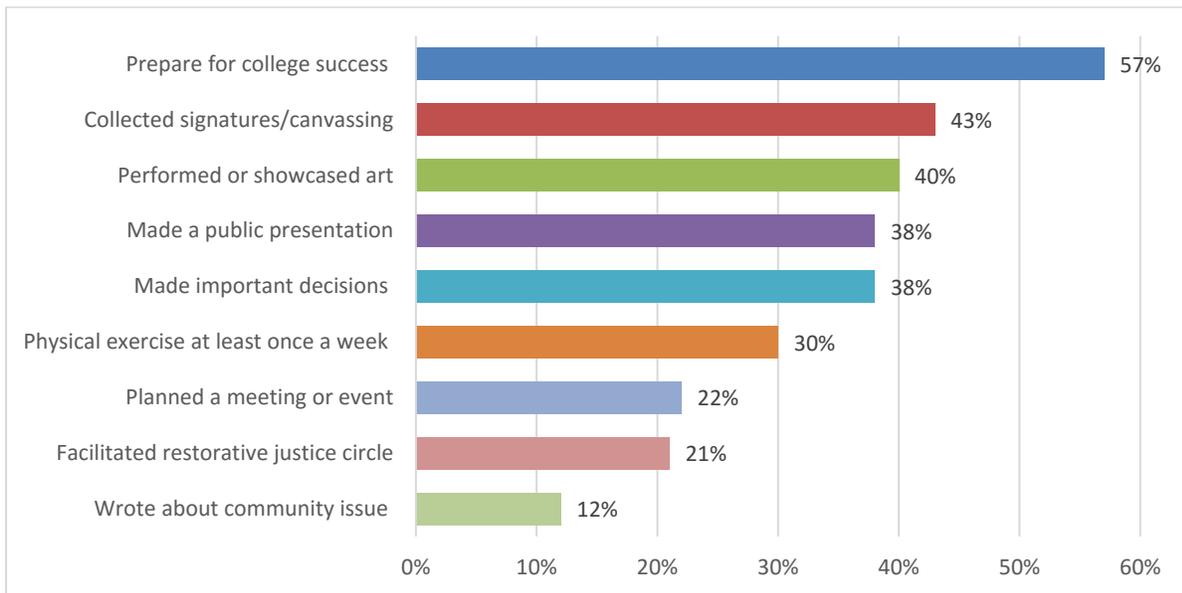
Figure 5. Reasons for staying involved



### Members' Involvement

As part of the broader BHC evaluation, we asked respondents if they had participated in any of a list of activities through KGA. The list was based on activities commonly reported among BHC groups across the state of California. Survey results shown in Figure 6 indicate that a majority (57%) reported involvement in college preparation activities. Members also engaged in grassroots campaigns, as 43% reported having collected signatures and canvassed for various efforts. Forty percent of the respondents also stated that they have performed or showcased art; KGA provides members opportunities to perform traditional Khmer dances and engage in other arts activity through their cultural historical arts program. KGA provides leadership development opportunities for members; thirty-eight percent of members reported that they made important decisions and given public presentations.

Figure 6. How Youth Participated in KGA



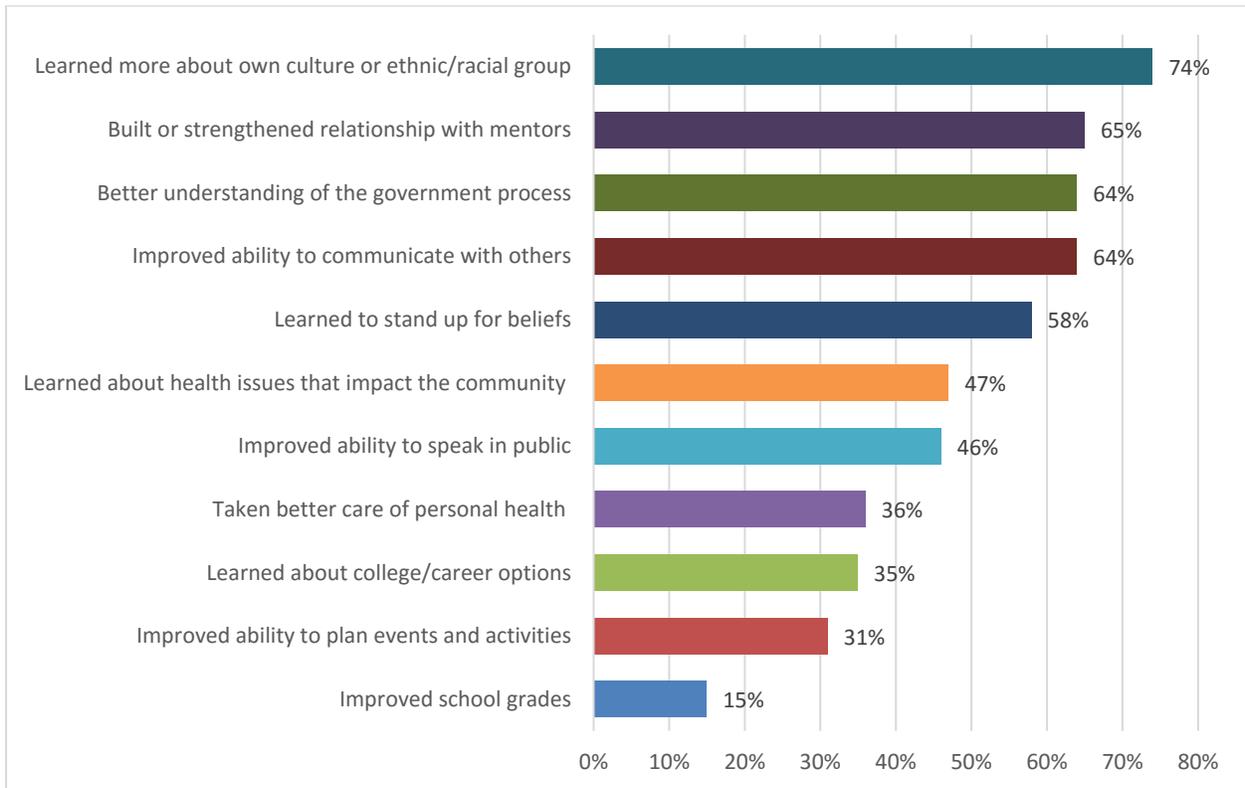
### How Members Benefit From Their Involvement

KGA contributes to members’ leadership capacity and healthy development. We asked members to rate how their organizational involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of impact*? Figure 7 on the next page shows the percent that reported that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey. Results suggest that participants overwhelmingly learned “a lot” about their culture and ethnic group—74% indicated that this was the case.



“At school we don’t get to learn about our history, our culture and ourselves. So it means a lot to better understand where we came from so we can help our community.” –KGA member

Figure 7. The degree to which Khmer Girls in Action impacts its members: Percent responding "a lot"



Sixty-five percent of members also stated that they built or strengthened relationships with mentors, and 64% of the respondents improved their ability to communicate with others. Fifty-eight percent reported that they learned how to stand up for their beliefs, 47% stated that they learned about health issues that impact the community, and 46% improved their ability to speak in public. Additionally, thirty-six percent of the respondents reported to have taken better care of their health, and another 31% reported that they improved their ability to plan events and activities. The program appears to have some impact on members’ academic trajectories: thirty-five percent of the respondents learned about college or career options, and another 15% of the respondents reported to have improved their school grades. These findings suggest that KGA has a positive effect on members’ healthy development.

“Through KGA, I was able to talk to important members of my community such as school officials and voice my opinions. I learned to speak in public spaces that I would not have been able to through KGA” –KGA member

## **Recent Youth-Led Campaigns**

KGA members have personally benefited from their involvement and developed their capacity to lead grassroots campaigns to improve the well-being of their community. One recent notable campaign has been KGA's Youth at the C.O.R.E. (Creating Opportunities and Resources for Empowerment) campaign for Wellness Centers. KGA members extended their participatory action research on community issues to focus on how Long Beach youth have faced numerous difficulties meeting their physical, emotional, and mental health needs, which have negatively impacted their academic performance.

To support students' wellness, regular attendance, and academic success, KGA members have advocated for school-based Wellness Centers as a resource to provide accessible comprehensive health services and health education. KGA has held an annual wellness week, featuring workshops on topics ranging from stress management to healthy relationships. Successfully drawing broad support from their awareness and advocacy efforts, KGA won a commitment for a wellness center located across the street from Polytechnic High School, a school attended by many members. The Wellness Center, which opened in Fall 2015, is the first in Long Beach to reserve hours specifically for teenagers. The Wellness Center will be accessible to all students in the Long Beach Unified School District.

In addition to the Wellness Center Campaign, Khmer Girls in Action have also played an active role in the Every Student Matters Campaign through their participation in the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Youth Committee. The campaign won a commitment by the school board in 2013 to reduce school suspensions and expulsions by expanding restorative justice programs that aim to address the root of behavioral issues, improve relationships between teachers and students, and address the unfair targeting of students of color. KGA has played an important role in ensuring that Southeast Asian youth are included in the campaign, while educating their constituents about restorative justice as an alternative to punitive school discipline.

KGA members have also been involved in voter education efforts. For example, members conducted outreach for Proposition 47, a 2014 initiative that re-classifies certain felonies as misdemeanors and reinvests funds into education and other community resources. Youth participated in canvassing walks in the community to educate local community members about the implications and significance of the proposition. They have also participated in voter registration efforts. This work is especially important because of barriers to political engagement faced by the local Cambodian American community.

In summary, KGA serves an example of effective youth development and organizing to promote the healthy development of Cambodian and other low-income youth.

USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) conducts research and facilitates discussions on the issues of environmental justice, regional inclusion, and social movement building. PERE conducts high-quality research that is relevant to public policy concerns and that reaches those directly affected communities that most need to be engaged in the discussion. A faculty affiliate of USC PERE, **Veronica Terriquez** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz and is leading the BHC Youth Program Evaluation. **Christopher Yik** is an undergraduate student at the University of Southern California's Department of Sociology and American Studies & Ethnicity. **May Lin** is a graduate student in sociology at the University of Southern California.

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For a statewide and other reports on BHC youth programs, please see:

<http://dornsife.usc.edu/per/bhc-youth-leadership/>

