

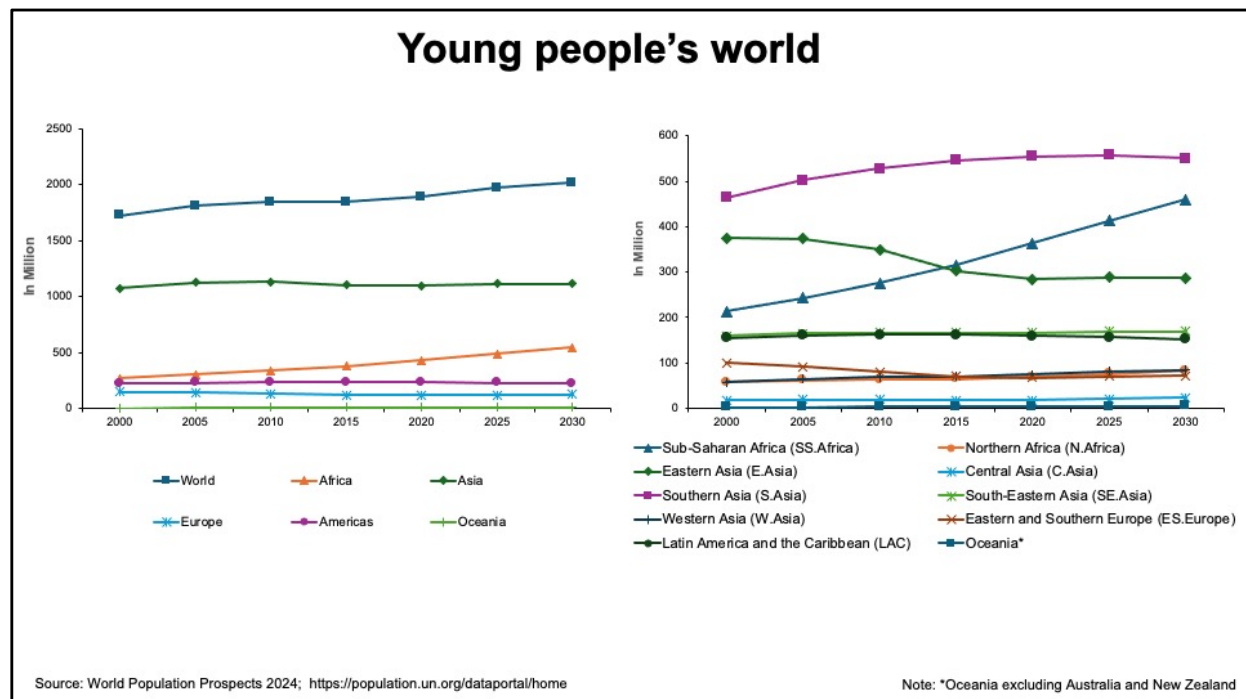
Growing up in the SDG era: Diverse Realities of Young People in Low- and Middle-income countries

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It is a great honour to me to have been selected for the 2025 IUSSP Mattei Dogan Foundation Award. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the IUSSP and the Mattei Dogan Foundation for this award. I would also like to acknowledge friends and colleagues who recommended me for this award. I see this award as a recognition of contributions made by several institutions and individuals who nurtured and shaped my journey as a demographer. My introduction to the world of demography took place at the International Institute for Population Sciences in India and almost all of my professional work that led to this award was carried out at the Population Council, especially under the supervision of Dr. Shireen Jejeebhoy. Getting this award at the IPC held in Australia was also special to me where I pursued my Ph.D under the guidance of Prof. Gour Dasvarma at Flinders University of South Australia. Thank you each one of you.

A major focus of my research has been on transitions to adulthood. Something that fascinated me is studying changes in the experiences of adolescents and young people in low- and middle-income countries, following global commitments to young people articulated in the ICPD, MDG and SDGs. Therefore, my presentation today will focus on young people in low- and middle-income countries.

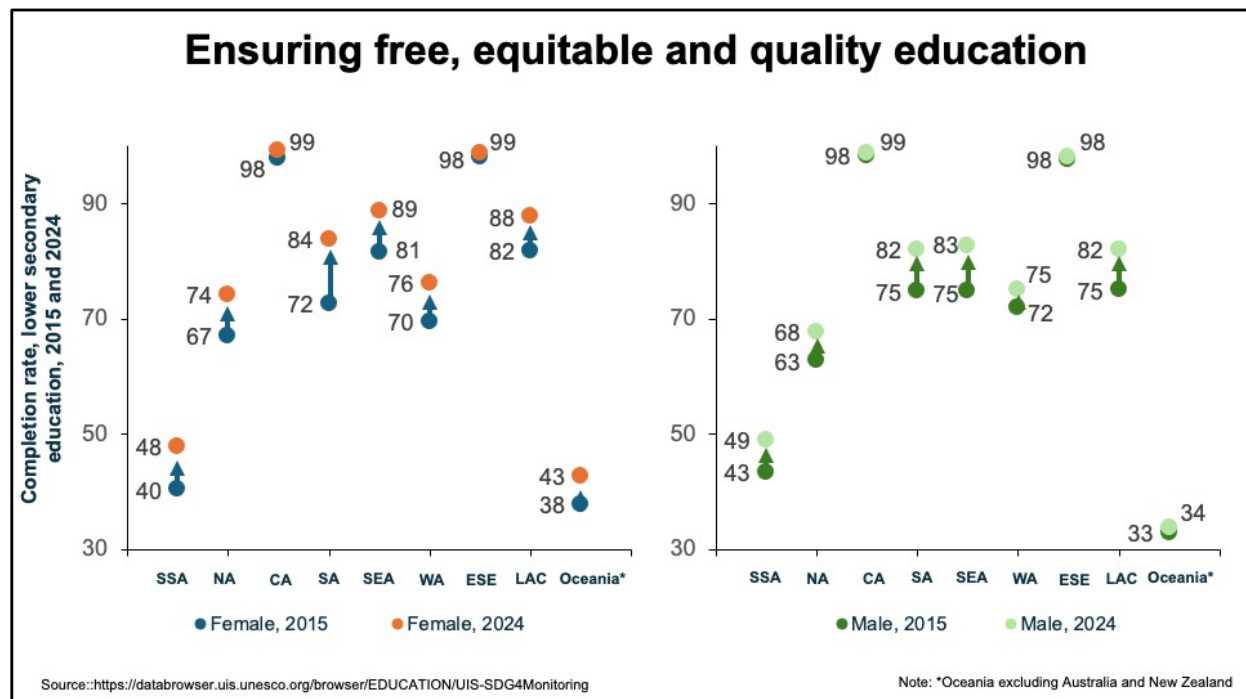


There are an estimated 2 billion young people in the ages 10 to 24 in the world today and they represent a quarter (24%) of the world's population. Nearly 90% of these young people live in low-and middle-income countries. Their numbers are estimated to decline gradually after 2030. Among the LMIC regions, while Sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia will continue to witness a growth in the numbers of young people in the coming decades, others may have already or will see a steady decline in young people's population.

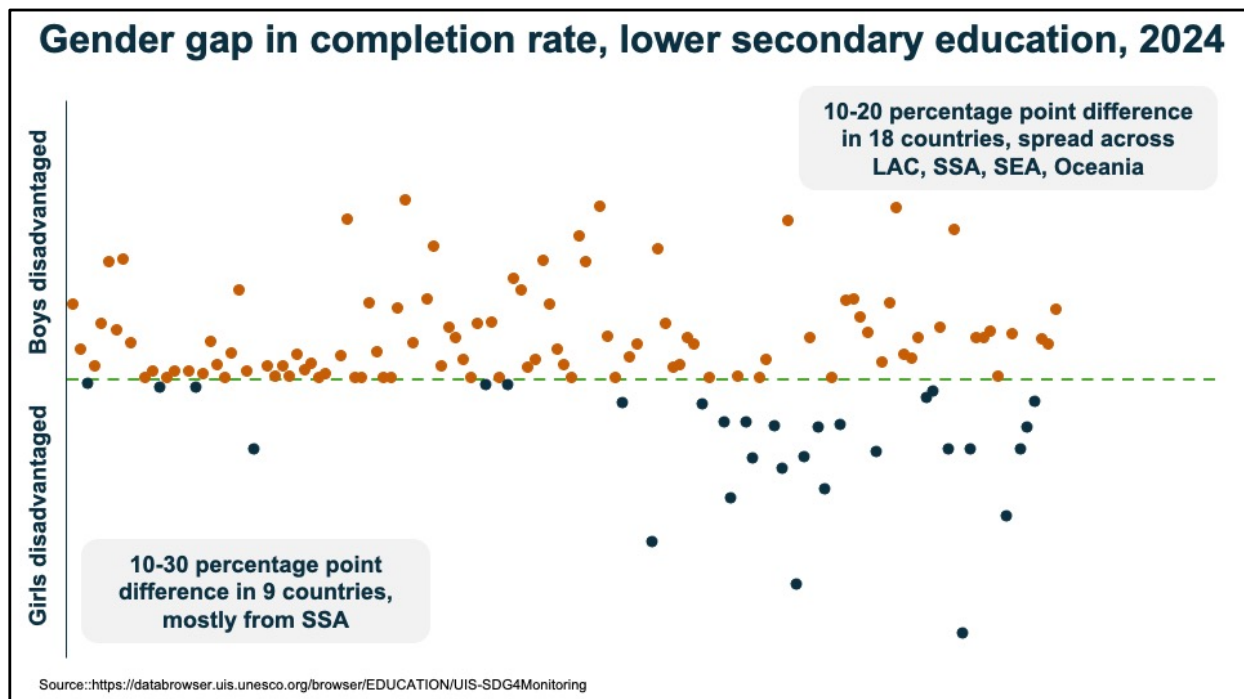
SDG commitments to young people



We have made many commitments to our young people. For example, 15 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals relate to young people. Of particular relevance to young people are **Goal 3** (ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages), **Goal 4** (ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all), **Goal 5** (achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls) and **Goal 8** (promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all). What progress have we made in realising these goals for young people in low- and middle-income countries over the last one decade? This is the theme I would like to pursue in this presentation, focusing on Goals 3, 4, 5 and 8. In this presentation, I present regional estimates, defining region in accordance with the UN World Population Prospects.



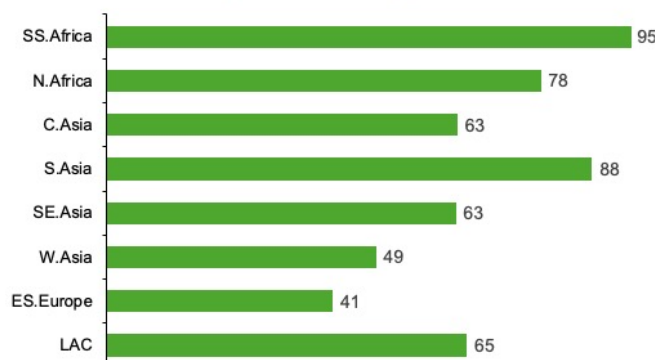
SDG 4 seeks to ensure free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes, affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education and skilling for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, gender parity in education, literacy and numeracy and citizenship education and education for sustainable development. Progress on the Goal 4 front in low- and middle-income countries has been mixed. Completion rates have improved in all regions and lower secondary completion rate, for example, was above or close to 75% in most regions. The exceptions were Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand where the rates were below 50% in 2024.



And girls' completion rates exceeded those of boys in most countries, with some 18 countries spread across Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South-East Asia and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) displaying 10-20 percentage-point gap in favour of girls in lower secondary completion rates. At the same time, there are some 24 countries where boys continued to have an advantage over girls; indeed, boys' completion rates were higher by 10-30 percentage-points than girls' in some 9 countries mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa, including Niger, Congo and Somalia, to name a few.

Promoting relevant and effective learning outcomes

Children lacking basic skills* (%)



*Data points are estimated and are not limited to 2015-2025 period

Cost* of lacking basic skills and early school leaving in 2030 (in \$ billion)

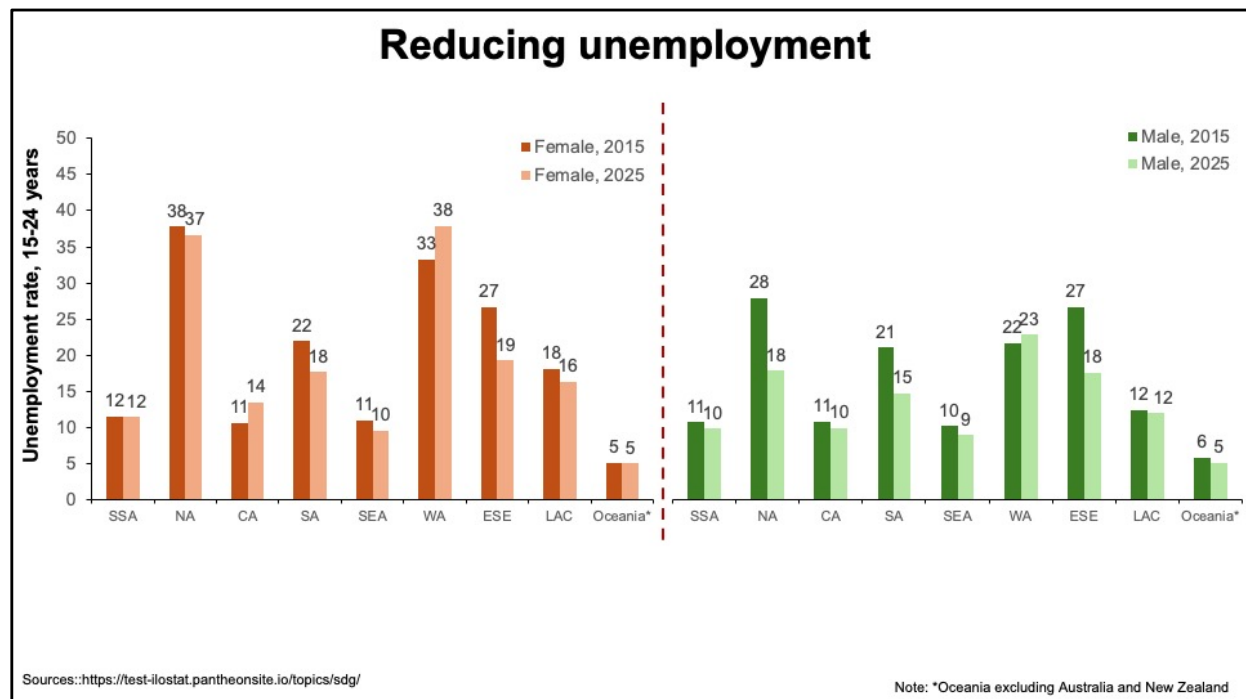
Region**	Lacking basic skills	Early school leaving
Sub-Saharan Africa	552	374
Central Asia	89	32
Southern and Western Asia	1542	743
Eastern Asia and the Pacific	1459	2197
Latin America and the Caribbean	1251	525

*Annual private cost, i.e., economic costs borne by individuals;

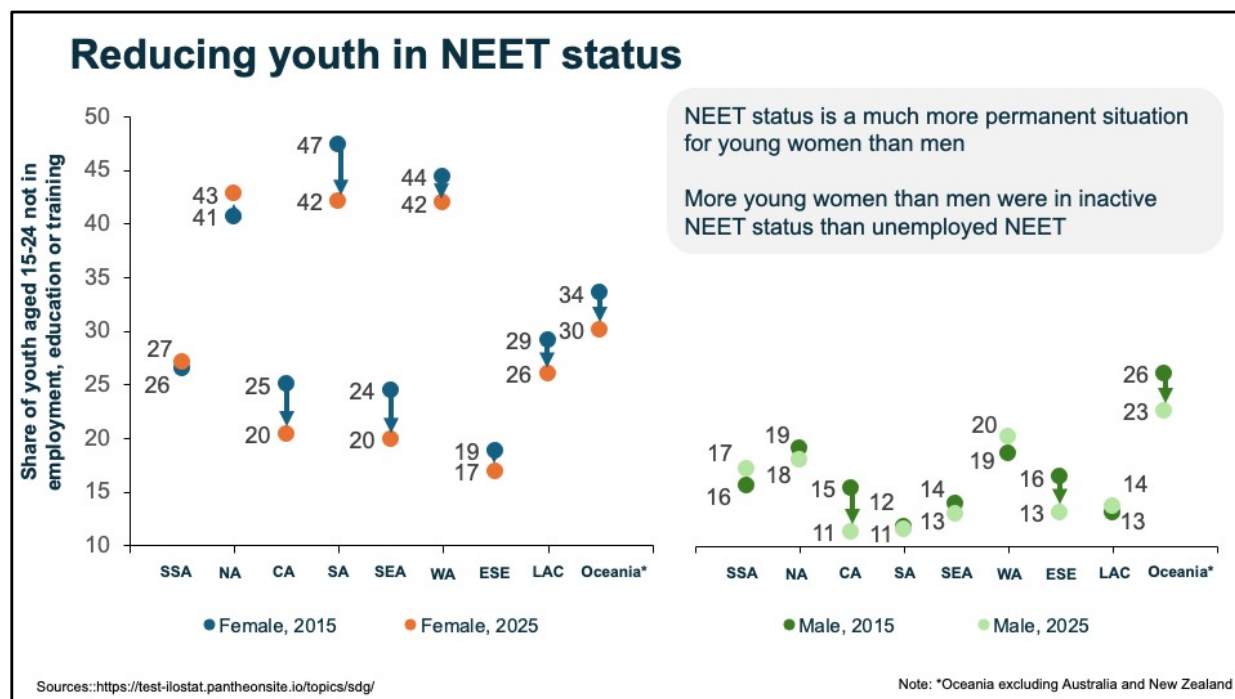
**Classification of regions differ from regional classification used elsewhere in the presentation

Sources: Gust, Hanushek and Woessmann 2024; UNESCO, OECD and the Commonwealth Secretariat 2024

Although school participation and completion have improved, extensive learning deficits remain a critical challenge in low- and middle-income countries, with significant implications for youth development and societal progress. According to the World Bank, an estimated 70% of children were in learning poverty (i.e., being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10) in low- and middle-income countries in 2022. Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by South Asia, had the largest share of children lacking in basic skills. The economic costs of learning deficits are massive. It is estimated that the current level of basic skills deficits will cost households globally USD 9.2 trillion (17% of global GDP) in 2030. Sub-Saharan Africa bears the highest cost as a percentage of GDP of children with less than basic skills; the annual cost is estimated at 26% of GDP in 2030 for the region. Learning deficits also have substantial social and health consequences, including the risk of early marriage and childbearing, poor mental health, homicides and other forms of violence.



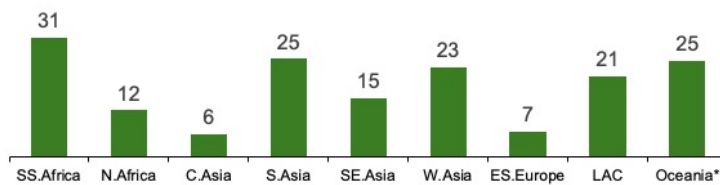
SDG 8 seeks to promote full and productive employment and decent work, equal pay for work of equal value, reduction in youth in NEET status, eradication of modern forms of slavery, including forced and child labour, protection of labour rights and safe & secure working environment among others. Data pertaining to progress on indicators related to Goal 8, similarly, present a mixed picture. Some 65 million young people aged 15 to 24 were unemployed worldwide which is the lowest number to date in the twenty-first century. There are large regional and country variations, with significant decent work deficits among vulnerable groups. For example, unemployment rate ranged from a low of 1 in 20 young women in Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand to a high of 2 in 5 young women in Northern Africa and Western Asia. It varied from 1 in 20 young men in Sub-Saharan Africa to 1 in 4 young men in Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, youth unemployment rate remained constant over the last decade in many regions, except for South Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe.



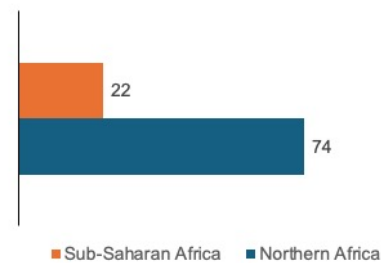
Most regions have reduced youth NEET rates over the last decade, especially among young women. Even so, some 256 million young people globally were NEET and 1 in 3 of these young people is living in a country that is “off track” in reducing NEET rate and the female face of youth in NEET status continues across all regions. Indeed, NEET rate among young women is two to four times as high as the rate among young men in such regions as Western Asia, Northern Africa and South Asia. NEET status is also a much more permanent situation for young women than for young men, indicating cumulative deprivations. Similarly, more young women than men were in inactive NEET status, that is, neither working nor looking for work than unemployed NEET.

Eliminating harmful practices

Young women aged 20-24 first married by exact age 18



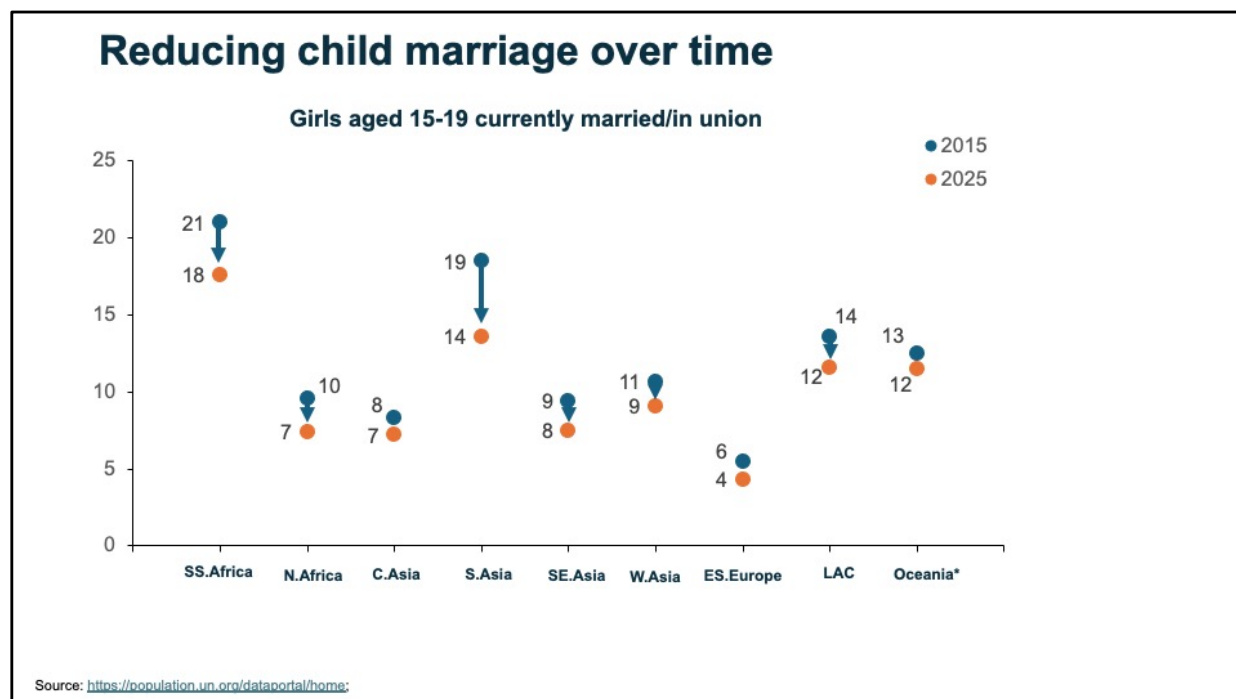
Proportion of 15-19 year-old girls who have undergone female genital mutilation (2022)



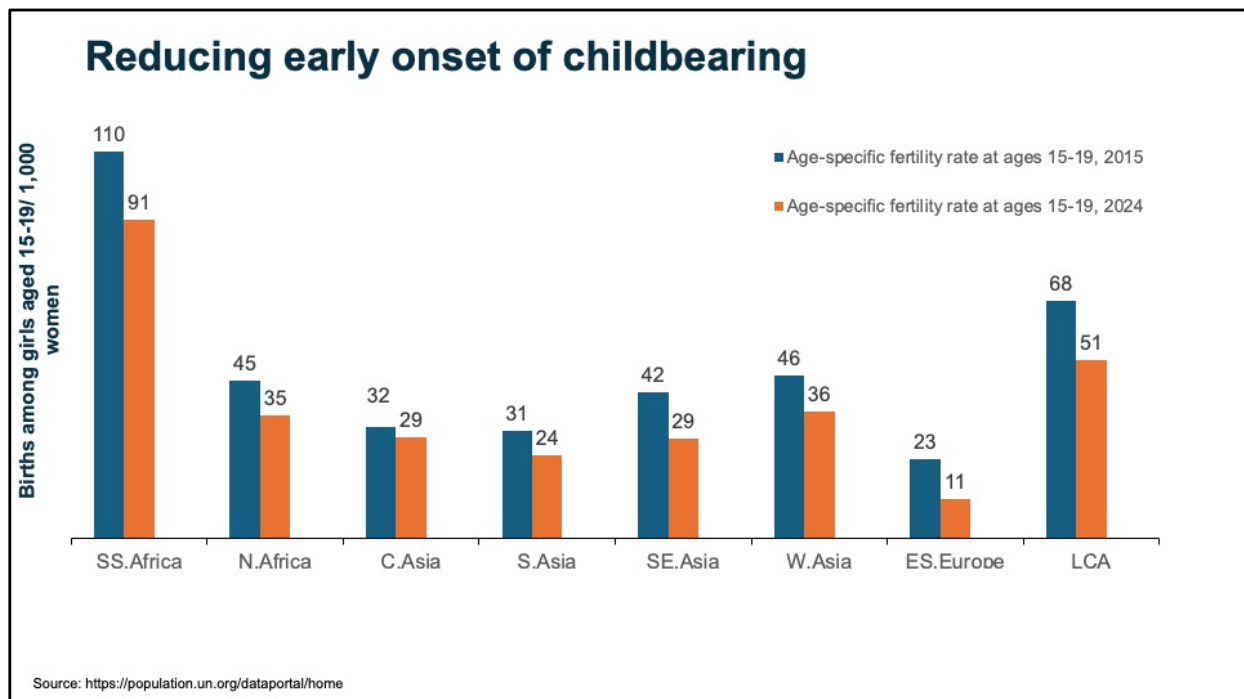
Sources: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) global databases, 2024.

Note: *Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand

SDG 5 seeks to achieve elimination of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and girls, recognition of unpaid care and domestic work, full and effective participation in civic life, universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and so on. Gender imbalances and power differentials and limited female agency continue to characterise low- and middle-income countries across the regions and pose a challenge for efforts to realize goals articulated within SDG 5. Although on the decline, harmful practices persist. Globally, 1 in 5 young women aged 20-24 were married before reaching age 18 and 1 in 20 women were married before age 15. And between 1 in 5 and 1 in 3 young women were married before age 18 in several regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, West Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, 230 million girls and women globally were subjected to female genital mutilation. Among adolescent girls aged 15-19, 1 in 5 girls in Sub-Saharan Africa and 3 in 4 in Northern Africa had undergone genital mutilation.



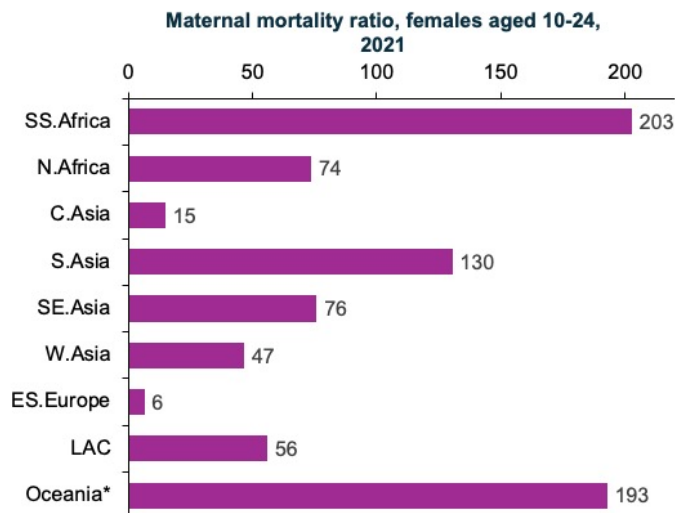
Although there has been progress in eliminating harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, the progress has been far from satisfactory. Comparable data over the last one decade show that the proportion of adolescent girls currently married or in union declined by just 1-2 percentage points in most regions over the last decade,



SDG 3 seeks to achieve reduction of maternal deaths, prevention and treatment for communicable and non-communicable diseases, substance abuse and injuries, universal access to SRH services, universal health coverage and so on. As with other goals discussed earlier, data show that we have fallen far short of meeting these commitments. Although young people are healthier than in previous generations, there remain several leading conditions that have a high burden of disease among young people, including sexual and reproductive ill-health, mental health disorders, substance abuse disorders and road traffic injuries. For example, approximately 10% of the total number of births were born to adolescent mothers globally. There is considerable variation in adolescent fertility across regions. Sub-Saharan Africa with 91 births per 1,000 women aged 15–19 had the highest rate, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean at 51 births. All regions have experienced a decline in adolescent fertility over the course of this decade. The most remarkable decline took place in Eastern and Southern Europe where adolescent fertility rate more than halved, from 23 births in 2015 to 11 births in 2024. Other regions such as South Asia, South-eastern Asia and the Latin America and the Caribbean had also reduced adolescent fertility by a quarter or more over the last decade. In comparison, there was only 18% reduction in adolescent birth rate in Sub-Saharan Africa, the region with

highest adolescent fertility rate globally.

Reducing maternal mortality

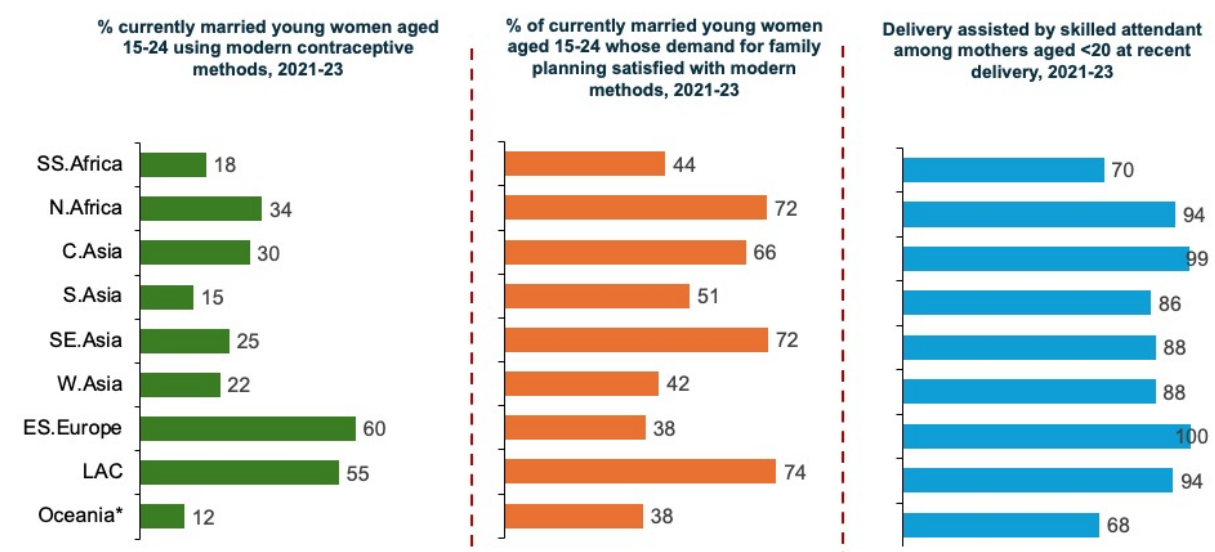


Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) 2021

Note: *Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand

Although maternal mortality has declined by a third over the course this century, an estimated 287,000 women globally died from maternal causes in 2020, equivalent to almost 800 maternal deaths every day and approximately one every two minutes. Estimates of maternal mortality ratio among young women aged 10-24 show that it was very low in such regions as Eastern and Southern Europe and Central Asia (less than 20 deaths/100,000 live births), low in Northern Africa, South-Eastern Asia, Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean (less than 100 deaths/100,000 live births) and moderate in South Asia, Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand and Sub-Saharan Africa (between 100-299 deaths/100,000 live births).

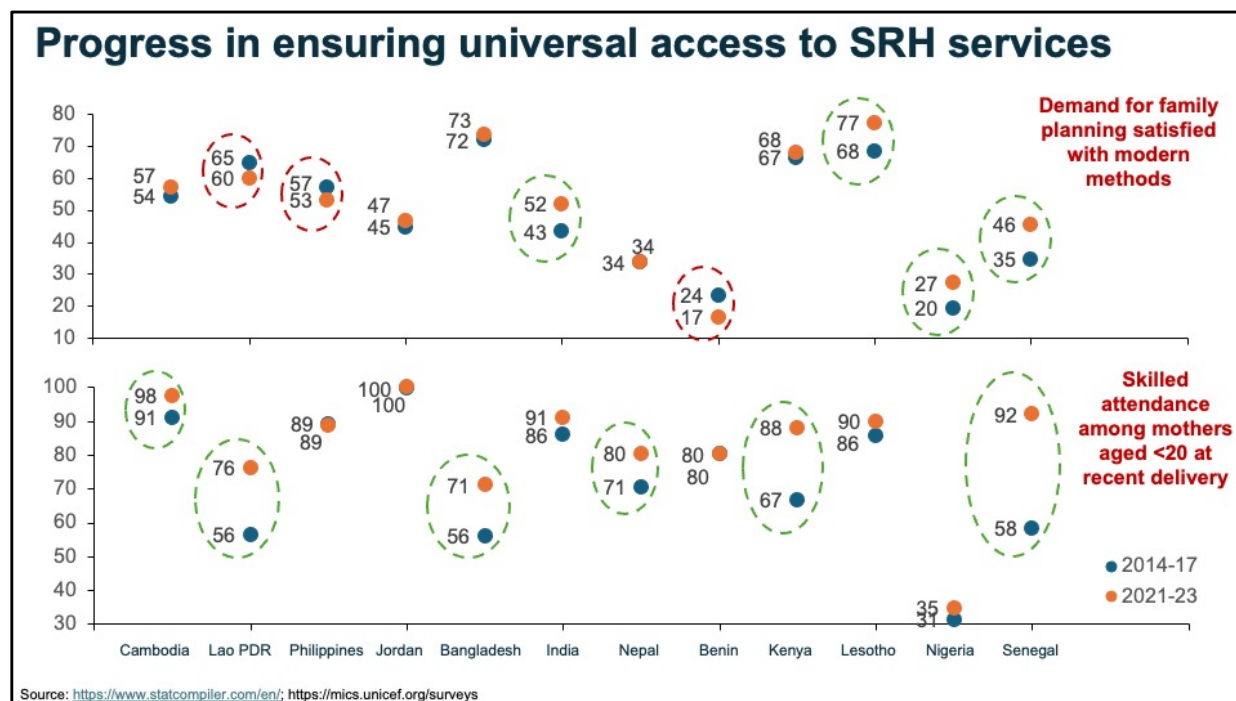
Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health



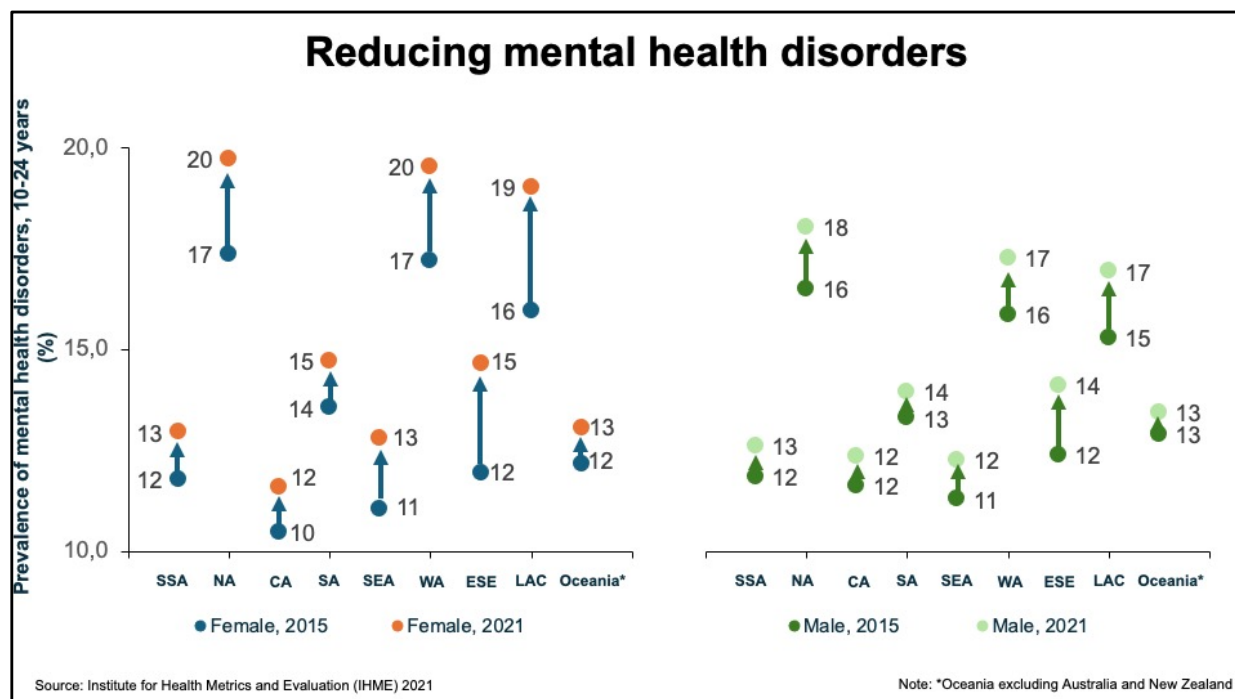
Source: <https://www.statcompiler.com/en/>; <https://mics.unicef.org/surveys>

Note: *Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand

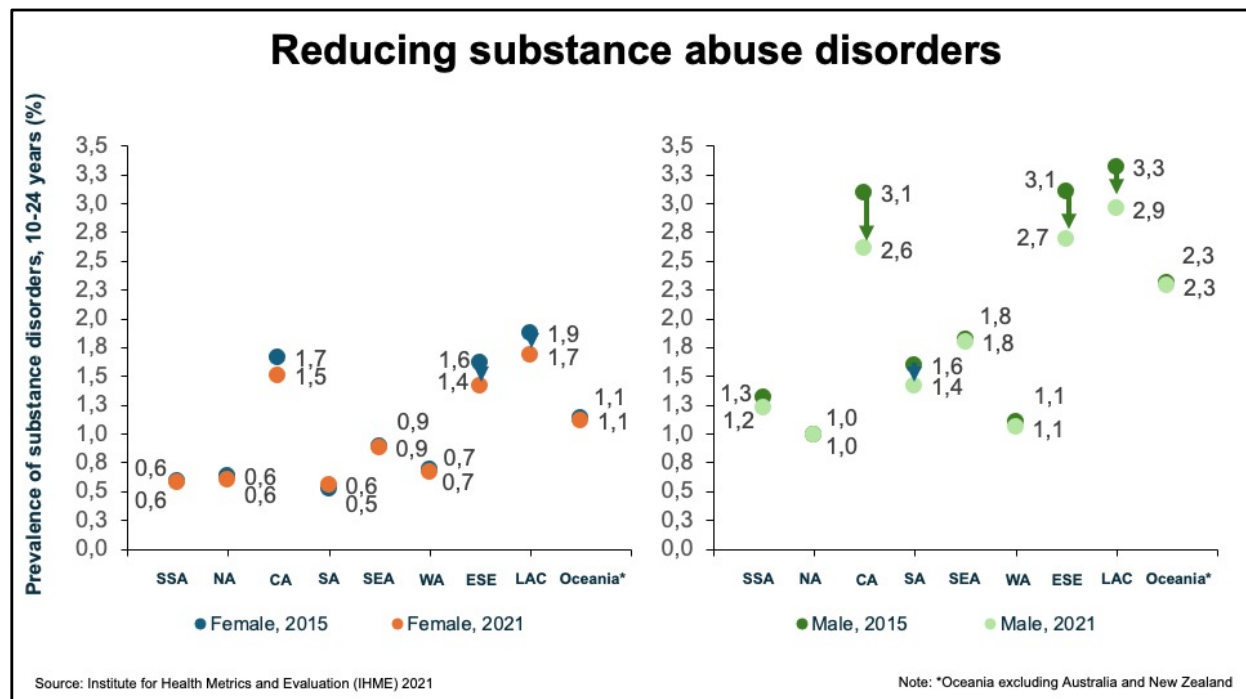
SDG target 3.7 seeks to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes by 2030. I used three indicators – use of modern contraceptive methods, demand satisfied by modern methods and skilled birth attendance to track the progress in ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health care services for young people. Access to SRH services is limited for the young. For example, fewer than one in five married or in-union young women aged 15-24 used any modern method in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand. On the other hand, modern method use among young women was above 50% in Latin America and the Caribbean and Eastern and Southern Europe. While regions such as Northern Africa, South-Eastern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean regions have nearly achieved the benchmark of at least 75% of demand satisfied by modern methods for married or in union young women, other regions have a long way to reach this benchmark. Finally, skilled birth attendance was over 90% among young mothers in Central Asia, Eastern and Southern Europe, Northern Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean regions. However, it was only 68-70% in Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand.



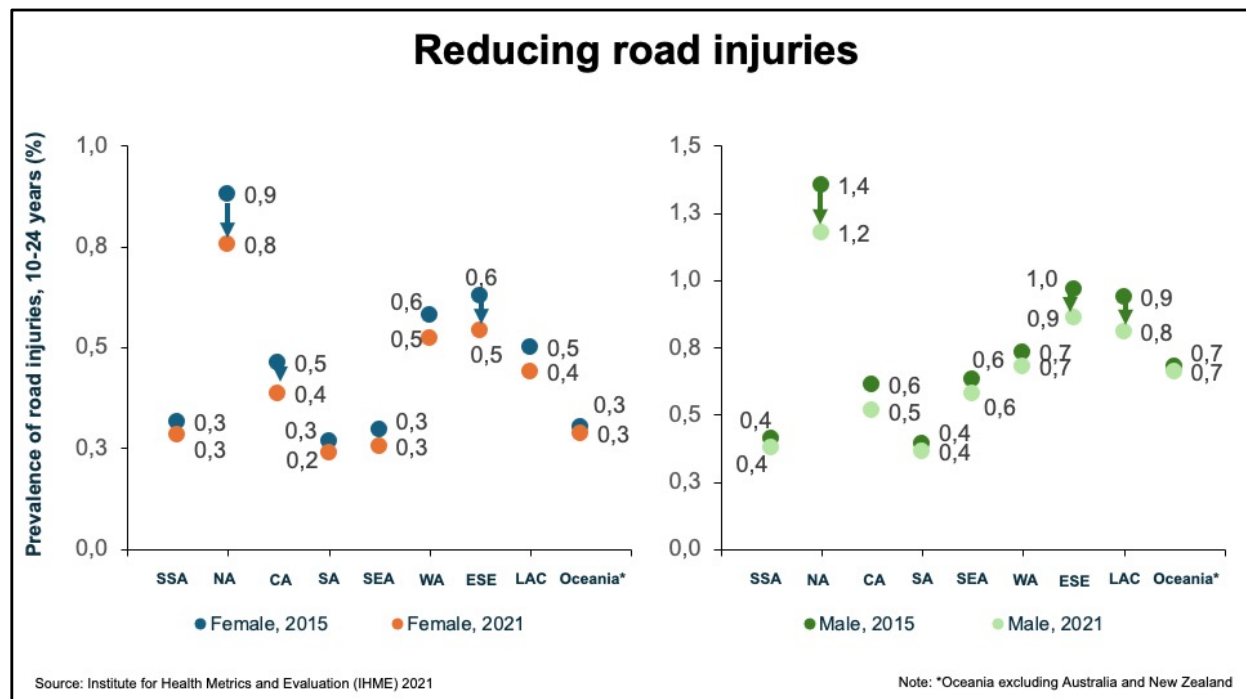
Furthermore, progress toward improving access to sexual and reproductive health care services among the young has been uneven across services. For example, while some countries have improved demand satisfied by modern methods among married or in-union young women (e.g., India, Lesotho, Nigeria, Senegal), some others have witnessed a decline (Lao PDR, Philippines, Benin, for example). On the other hand, skilled birth attendance among young mothers improved across countries for which comparable data were available.



Adolescence is a developmentally sensitive time for a person’s mental health, characterised by both vulnerability and opportunity. Roughly half of the mental disorders amongst adults start by the mid-teens, and three-fourths by the mid-20s, which highlights the critical importance of investing in adolescents’ mental health. Sound mental health remains elusive for millions and millions of young people in low- and middle-income countries. An estimated 12-20% of young women age 10-24 and 12-18% of young men experienced a mental disorder of varying intensity in 2021. The prevalence was the highest in such regions as Latin America and the Caribbean, Western Asia and Northern Africa among young women (19-20%) and in Northern Africa among young men (18%). Data also show that the prevalence of mental disorders in adolescents is on the rise.



Substance use disorders often co-occur with mental health conditions and worsen their health outcomes, and SDG target 3.5 has called for “strengthening prevention and treatment of substance abuse”. Estimated prevalence of substance use disorders among young people aged 10-24 shows consistently higher prevalence among young men than women and minimal decline.



Finally, road traffic injury remains a leading cause of death for children, adolescents and youth. Some 96% of all road traffic deaths in children and adolescents occur in low- and middle-income countries. Regionally, estimated prevalence of road injuries among young people was the highest in Northern Africa (1/100,000 population). As with the prevalence of substance abuse disorders, data over time showed minimal decline.

Moving forward

- Keep young people in the driver's seat of policymaking
- Invest in making a desirable set of indicators available across more or all countries and at regular intervals to track the progress in meeting our commitments to young people

In brief, there is, of course, progress in realising the commitments made to young people. Yet the pace of progress has been too slow and uneven. Several promising and evidence-based strategies have been identified in the global literature and have highlighted the importance of helping adolescents stay in school and learn while in school, education and training to ease the school-to-work transition and to prevent skills mismatches, building new concepts of masculinity and femininity among girls and boys and engaging the key gatekeepers in young people's lives, for example. I would like to conclude with two messages – we need to keep young people in the driver's seat of policymaking, and we need to increase investments in making a desirable set of indicators available across all countries at regular intervals to track the progress in meeting our commitments to young people.