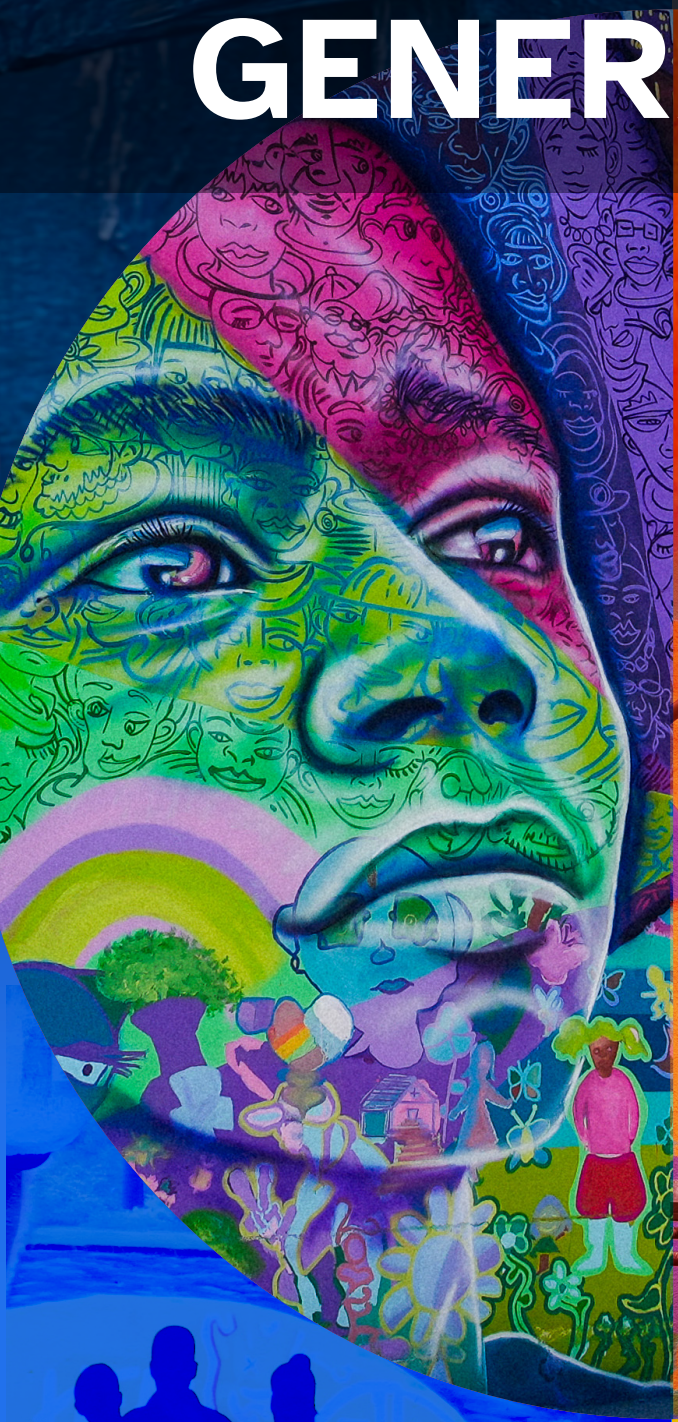
United Nations Population Fund

State of World Population 2026

SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS

Empowering young people to chart the future





State of World Population 2026

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The art concept for this year's *State of World Population* report was developed through a collaboration between UNFPA and Artolution, engaging young people aged 18–25 in creating murals in Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Ukraine and the United States. Separate activations were conducted by other UNFPA offices around the globe, demonstrating that young people are actively redesigning the world in ways that are inclusive, hopeful and collaborative.

United Nations Population Fund

State of World Population 2026

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FOREWORD

Since the United Nations Charter was adopted in 1945, the world has committed "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". That promise must now go further: Succeeding generations must also have the opportunity, freedom and power to shape the world they will inherit.

This report gives us reason both for urgency and for hope. Young people today are better educated and better connected than any generation before them. They are innovators, entrepreneurs, community leaders and agents of change. Yet for far too many, greater potential is colliding with narrowing opportunity.

The cost of living is rising. Secure work and affordable housing are increasingly difficult to find. Conflict, climate change and inequality are reshaping lives and expectations. Progress in sexual and reproductive health cannot be taken for granted. And too many young people are shut out of the places where decisions about their futures are made.

These conditions matter far beyond youth policy. They shape some of the most consequential decisions people will ever make: whether they can leave home, find meaningful work, form relationships, have children if and when they want them, and build the lives they imagine for themselves. Our demographic future will ultimately be shaped by millions of such individual choices – and by whether people have the means and opportunities to make them freely.

Drawing on the perspectives of more than 100,000 young people, this report reveals a generation that is clear-eyed about the challenges it faces, but far from resigned to them. Young people believe that today's systems can change. They want societies that are more inclusive and accountable; economies that create genuine opportunity; communities free from gender-based violence and discrimination; and institutions in which participation means having real influence over decisions. Most importantly, they are not asking others to build that future for them. They are already building it themselves.

Across the world, I have seen what becomes possible when young people have the space, resources and power to turn their ideas into action. You will meet some of them in the pages that follow.

Young people have told us what matters to them, repeatedly and clearly. The question is what we will do with what we have heard.

Our responsibility is to make sure their aspirations become real choices. That means investing in their health, education and economic opportunities. It means protecting their ability to make decisions about their own bodies and lives. And it means moving beyond inviting young people into the room to sharing responsibility for the decisions made there.

The future is not something that simply happens. It is something generations build together.

This report is an invitation – and a challenge – to begin building it now.

Ms. Diene Keita
Executive Director
United Nations Population Fund

DEFINITIONS

Adolescence: the period of time in which someone is an adolescent; this critical period, marking the second decade of life, encompasses a range of physiological, mental and social transitions from childhood to adulthood that lay the foundations of health, opportunity and well-being in later life (WHO, n.d.).

Adolescents: typically defined by the United Nations as people aged 10–19 (WHO, n.d.), although some experts now recommend defining adolescents as people aged 10–24 (Sawyer and others, 2018). Note that by either of these definitions, an adolescent can be an adult, young person and youth at the same time.

Adults: people who have reached the "age of majority", which is most commonly 18 years (United Nations, n.d.a).

Children: people under age 18 (OHCHR, 1989).

Generation: a group of people born around the same time period. These periods sometimes span the time it takes for a group of people to grow up and have children of their own, or they may be grouped around shared experiences and cultural events.

Youth: the United Nations generally defines youth as people aged 15–24 (United Nations, General Assembly, 1996), although other definitions are common, including 18–29 (United Nations, Security Council, 2015) and 15–35 (African Union, 2006). In 1981, a report of the United Nations Secretary-General noted that "there is no universally agreed upon definition of youth. A chronological definition of who is young, as opposed to who is a child or who is an adult, varies with each nation and culture" (United Nations, General Assembly, 1981). That document also reflected the view that "youth should be viewed not as a monolithic group, but as a category encompassing different age groups with different needs and environments". In certain political contexts, such as representation in parliament, the definition may be expanded as high as age 45 (IPU, 2018).

Young people: variously defined; usually considered as people aged 10–24 (WHO South-East Asia, n.d.), but recent United Nations surveys of young people have used the age range 15–29 (UN DESA, 2026; Envoy on Youth, 2025).



Our dreams are not limited: Young people, ages 18–34, paint a large-scale art mural in the sprawling informal settlement of Kibera, in Nairobi, Kenya, after partaking in a dialogue session with community members.

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CHAPTER 1

Thriving in a turbulent world



Today's youth have borne repeated "once in a generation" economic challenges (Luhby, 2020), technological disruptions (Johar, 2026), public health crises (Poorolajal, 2021), disasters (UNICEF, 2021) and conflicts (ICRC, 2025), shaping their reality, expectations and choices in unprecedented ways. Growing economic inequality, job insecurity, the world's failure to deliver promised solutions on education, climate change, gender-based violence and conflict, and persistent exclusion of youth from policy- and decision-making roles are all fuelling distrust in institutions and authority figures.

None of these individual pressures are new or unique: Economic precarity, war, inequality and technological disruptions have all affected previous generations. This fact is sometimes used to dismiss the urgency and specificity with which

young people raise concerns. However, these trends have never before unfolded so rapidly and simultaneously in a globally interconnected world. "Polycrisis" is the emerging term of art to describe today's state of affairs, a condition of constant inter-systemic catastrophes that current institutions are failing to remedy (Lawrence and others, 2024).

People of all ages are affected by these conditions, of course. But observers, from academics (Berry, 2012) to media to individuals (Yague, Nagel and Barents, 2025), are noting the growing disparity between the institutions and leaders overseeing the world's response and the young people whose lives and futures are and will be most impacted. Many decisions are being made by a generation of people – occupying positions of power from judges and parliamentarians to executives and media heads – who are unlikely to see the full range of consequences resulting from those choices.

This is borne out in the evidence. Despite a global commitment to improve "responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels" in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.7 (UN DESA, 2018a), young people remain largely shut out from positions of influence (IPU, 2026).

Young people are not a monolith, but even so, a clear common message has emerged from the myriad studies, meta-analyses, surveys, youth-led reports and youth dialogues undertaken and investigated for this report: Over and over, we see young people question the systems they see as failing to include them, failing to adapt to their lived realities and incapable of producing the changes they demand.

To meet their needs, we must build upon the world's lofty ambition to protect succeeding generations from harm, as stated in the opening lines of the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945). We must commit to ensuring those generations succeed.

Over and over, we see young people question the systems they see as failing to include them, failing to adapt to their lived realities and incapable of producing the changes they demand.

A growing chorus for change

Included in these pages are findings from UNFPA's Demographic Futures Survey, which asked 108,926 Internet-connected young adults aged 18–39 residing in 73 countries and territories, about their aspirations, employment status, reproductive and partnering goals, and concerns and optimism about the future. This report draws from recently published insights into the aspirations and realities of respondents (UNFPA, 2026), and also contains original research into that same large and rich data set. The latter illustrates the most common life path among survey respondents, showing that many life milestones are achieved later in the life course, and sometimes not at all. This report's original analysis of the survey data shows that economic factors are major barriers to milestone achievement.

Additionally, this report draws significantly from surveys by the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Youth Envoy, which reached 27,000 young people (Envoy on Youth, 2025); the 2025 *World Youth Report* survey, which reached 2,500 young people (UN DESA, 2026); and UNFPA's The Big Listen survey of 7,247 young peacebuilders, developed through the organization's role in the United Nations Security Council's Youth, Peace and Security agenda (UNFPA, n.d.a). These surveys cover a wide gamut of young people, from everyday adolescents to young people engaged in youth empowerment programmes and young peacebuilders actively working to create lives and opportunities amid extreme hardship.





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The authors also conducted a series of solutions-focused consultations with hundreds of young people from around the world, specifically for this report. Their recommendations are included at the end of the report. Note, as well, that they build on and contribute to the recommendations and calls to action developed at other youth dialogues, including the 2023 Youth Reflections from the High-Level Commission on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 Follow-up (UNFPA, 2023) and the 2024 Cotonou Youth Action Agenda (UNFPA, 2024), each of which represents the cumulative vision of thousands of young people from hundreds of youth organizations around the world.

No data source is perfect. The Demographic Futures Survey is limited to Internet-connected respondents, and though the data have been weighted by sex, age and educational attainment, the results are not nationally representative. Outcome documents from international youth dialogues and surveys about peacebuilding and youth participation tend to elicit the views of civically engaged young adults, often members of youth networks and empowerment programmes from like-minded organizations.

Still, when combined with extensive research, this *State of World Population* report offers a penetrating look into conditions under which the young people of the world are coming of age, their challenges, and, in particular, their positive, inclusive and achievable vision for the future. It finds that young people are actively working to reshape systems, reclaim power and agency, assert ownership over their lives and bodies, and disrupt entrenched status quos. And in doing so, they are demanding intersectional equity as a solution to the systemic exclusion they have faced and continue to face.

Who are young people?

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of adolescents, youth or young people (United Nations, General Assembly, 1981). One of the most common definitions holds that adolescence occurs between ages 10 and 19 (UN DESA, n.d.a), but others – including the one used by the second *Lancet* Commission on adolescent health and well-being (Baird and others, 2025) – run from ages 10 through 24.

Adolescence is a period covering the development of a wide range of capacities and responsibilities (Sawyer and others, 2012; WHO, 2023). Yet those who have reached the age of majority in their country, usually age 18, are legally entitled to, and accountable for, independent decision-making. This is a significant distinction from the legal obligations of younger adolescents. For these reasons, older adolescents and young adults are often categorized as "youth", which is itself subject to various definitions. The United Nations typically defines this as ages 15–24, but not always (United Nations, General Assembly, 1981). The United Nations Security Council considers "youth" to apply to ages 18–29 (United Nations, Security Council, 2015). The African Youth Charter, meanwhile, considers youth to be all people between 15 and 35 years old (African Union, 2006). National governments often have

their own youth policies with their own youth definitions.

And when it comes to measuring "youth participation" within formal institutions, such as parliaments, the age cap is raised further still. The Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Development Programme collect data on "young" members of government, and given how rarely these decision makers fall within traditional definitions of youth, they include officials in even older age ranges (IPU, 2018).

Of course, there are reasons to be cautious about *all* of these definitions, which can have real consequences for youth programming, policymaking and investments. For example, wider definitions of youth often result in opportunities going to individuals at the older end of the continuum, raising "difficult questions about who youth is understood to be, whose experiences are centred and what happens to young leaders when they age out" (UNFPA and YPS, n.d.). This has been a long-standing concern within youth programming. At the 1970 World Youth Assembly, a United Nations-convened meeting intending to bring fresh thinking to a world beset by cold war tensions, critics decried many participants as "not-so-young professionals" and "professional youths" bringing "adult cynicisms and ploys" into the conference (Ortiz, 2026). In this way, the very ambiguity in the concept of youth was seen as weaponized to manipulate the summit's outcomes on one side and as delegitimizing the proceedings on the other side. Both views undermine the project of making systems accountable to young people.

Cultural and traditional norms also muddy these definitions. Financial independence, marriage or leaving one's parental home may be seen as prerequisites for youth emancipation and "real" adulthood. Economic and housing pressures, then, withhold the social status of adulthood even from legal adults, leading to stereotypes around their "perpetual adolescence" (Lovett and Wheeler, 2026). At the same time, in places that practice child marriage or have high adolescent birth rates, the responsibilities of adulthood are conferred even on legal children (UNFPA, 2018).

These conditions argue for flexibility in how young people are defined and discussed. This report, while recognizing common



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UN definitions, aims to reflect all of the definitions above. The authors endeavour to delineate, wherever possible, the specific age groups under discussion to avoid sweeping generalizations.

Opportunities and challenges

It would be a mistake to neglect the many advances that young people have experienced and benefited from. Adolescents and youth, however they are defined, have access to more opportunities than ever before. This progress shapes not only their capabilities, but also their expectations and the collective possibilities they are eager (some might say impatient) to realize.

Today, more young people are enrolled in school and training than at any point in history. Some 78 per cent of children, globally, now complete lower secondary school, 62 per cent complete upper secondary school (UN DESA, n.d.b), and 44 per cent of young people go on to tertiary education (World Bank, n.d.), the highest such rates ever. Digital technologies have also expanded access to information, connection and knowledge (ILO, 2024). Young people have access to a universe of information, and with smartphones this access is often literally in their hands.

Life expectancy has risen in most parts of the world, and even though the COVID-19 pandemic unravelled nearly a decade of progress (WHO, 2024), the average global lifespan has since recovered, standing now at just over 73 years (WHO, 2025). Today's young people can expect to benefit greatly from the conditions that have led to these extended lives, including advances in healthcare and reductions in extreme poverty.

Between 1990 and 2014, the extreme poverty rate fell by an average of 1.1 percentage points each year, from 38 per cent to 11 per cent (United Nations, n.d.b). By 2023, a majority of countries – 133 – had met SDG target 3.2 on reducing under-five mortality. Global AIDS-related deaths have been halved since 2010 (United Nations, n.d.c). Adolescent sexual and reproductive health, in particular, has improved greatly, with reductions seen in adolescent childbearing, child marriage, female genital mutilation and more (although progress has been slowest or stagnated for the most marginalized, including the least educated, rural and poorest adolescent girls). Even amid current challenges – including an alarming prevalence of mental health conditions – health systems have more tools and capacity to address emerging concerns. That is, if they are sufficiently resourced and prioritized.

Formal rights frameworks protecting children and young people have also expanded. These protections are hard won, and they are frequently at risk, but the successes of the children's and youth rights movements should not be minimized. Today's youth are profoundly emboldened when they have knowledge of their rights, and this, together with their native-level mastery over digital spaces, means young people can be formidable actors at every level of society.

By these measures, and many more, this generation of youth should be entering adulthood with greater potential than those

before it (ILO, 2024; UNICEF, 2025; WHO, 2023). Yet many – perhaps most – young adults have little memory of these advances. Progress in reducing extreme poverty, for example, slowed to a crawl in 2014, and then abruptly reversed with the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, n.d.b).

In fact, the global pandemic and its aftermath have in many ways shaped how younger people understand the world: It triggered a spike in depression and anxiety (WHO, 2022), led to the biggest global economic crisis in almost a century, and vastly increased inequality between and within countries. Youth, women and marginalized groups were the hardest hit, and continue to face the steepest paths to recovery (World Bank, 2022).

Even as young people are extremely diverse, they often experience at least one shared phenomenon: the lengthening transition to adulthood. Young people are remaining in education longer, entering stable work later, delaying partnering and postponing parenthood (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Rising housing costs, labour-market insecurity and prolonged dependence on family support have made economic independence and emancipation harder to achieve (Baranowska-Rataj and others, 2017). Delayed onset of parenting in these settings may reflect people's uncertainty about whether and when desired family formation will become feasible, as well as changing aspirations that may result as people age and their paths narrow (Brauner-Otto and Geist, 2018).

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"They have knowledge in their hands. They have cell phones, they have devices, they can gain information. But it also means they have to cross-check all their information, they have to find evidence and sources, and decide what is valid and authentic."

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

Importantly, the delay in achieving social recognition of "adulthood" does not mean that young people are failing to mature or assume adult responsibilities and burdens. Studies of young people in conflict and post-conflict settings offer an especially poignant look at how adult responsibilities are increasingly divorced from milestone achievement: "Although violence and social dislocation often force young people to take on some adult roles prematurely – for example, by taking on a breadwinning role – they can also shut down educational and employment opportunities, and close off pathways to marriage and family formation needed to attain adult status and recognition…. For both young men and women, difficulty in acquiring land, jobs, education and a home mean that many find themselves trapped in youthhood, affecting their status in society and potentially contributing to a sense of frustration" (UNFPA, 2018).

At the same time, for many of the most vulnerable adolescents, including those in crisis settings, the transition to adulthood remains compressed. Millions are pushed into marriage, parenthood and adult responsibilities quite early in adolescence, often before they are physically, emotionally or economically prepared. Conflict, insecurity and poverty are contributing to child marriage, early pregnancy and premature labour-force entry, which then limits access to education and narrows future options. For the adolescents affected, adulthood arrives not too late, but too soon (UNFPA, n.d.; UNICEF, 2025).

These experiences may appear opposite, but they share a common thread: In both cases, young people's ability to make free and informed choices about their lives is highly constrained. Some are prevented from reaching adulthood on their own terms because opportunity remains out of reach. Others are pushed into adult roles before they are ready. Ultimately for both, agency is undermined, with significant consequences for individual and societal well-being.

A distinct reality

Younger generations are growing up in a world that looks very different from the one that shaped policymakers during their own formative years. Pathways to upward mobility are less reliable. Disruptive technologies have completely reshaped how young people learn, socialize and form their identities, with consequences for how they understand the world and their place in it. All of this has affected the trust that many young people have in institutions and systems they are expected to one day inherit.

Bridges to nowhere

Education remains a central ambition for many youth – even most youth. One of the largest surveys of young people to date, reaching 1.5 million people aged 10–24 primarily in low- and middle-income countries, asked respondents to complete the prompt "to improve my well-being, I want" with their own priority, in their own words. The results were classified into five domains, and the most prioritized of all was "learning, competence, education, skills and employability" (Saran and others, 2025). This is borne out in young people's actions: Participation in schooling and training rose globally from 38 per cent in 2000 to 48 per cent in 2023 (ILO, 2024).

But education no longer offers any guarantee of economic security. In many countries, labour markets have not generated enough secure and productive work to absorb increasingly educated youth. The returns on education have weakened as economies struggle to create sufficient skilled employment (ILO, 2026). Young people are staying in school longer, often at considerable cost, while facing uncertainty about whether education will deliver the mobility it once promised (WHO, 2023) – and questions about the quality of education being delivered and whether it prepares learners for a world being reshaped by artificial intelligence (AI).

This may not be obvious from global youth employment figures, which show only a modest decline, 0.7 per cent a year, between 2000 and 2019 (ILO, 2024). Yet this masks deeper structural instability. A large share of young people who are employed remain in informal, precarious, temporary or low-quality work, with limited job security, weak social protection and few pathways for advancement. In low-income countries, only one in five young adults holds a secure paid job. In many low- and middle-income countries, informal employment accounts for the majority of youth work, limiting the ability of young people to build stable and predictable livelihoods (World Bank, 2024).

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“Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is very prevalent these days. It can affect [young people] emotionally and mentally and economically.”

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

Informal work is increasingly a lifeline for young people in these settings, including so-called "gig work" often facilitated by digital labour platforms (Janampa and Dasgupta, 2021). On the one hand, these kinds of jobs open up the possibility to perform digital work for clients in more resource-rich countries, helping to bypass stagnant local job markets. On the other hand, it can potentially come at the cost of fundamental rights, as digital gig workers operate in a space with high competition, low social protection and unclear employment classification. They are also highly vulnerable to shocks. In the Philippines, for example, typhoons have been known to sever Internet connectivity and cause prolonged power outages, cutting this largely young workforce off from their income streams (Fairwork, 2025). Here, climate and economic vulnerability overlap in a way that disproportionately affects young people (World Bank, 2023).

Youth in high-income countries have not been spared, either. There, too, real wages have been essentially stagnant (OECD, 2026), while inflation has driven up the cost of essentials like rent, food and energy (Harari, 2026; Machin, 2025). For youth, this has been compounded by a labour market dominated by non-standard work. While the gig economy can play an important role in helping young people break into the labour market, allowing them to develop hard and soft skills and explore career options by trying on different roles, it also means forgoing job security and benefits that would support their independence and self-determination.

What about self-employment? Entrepreneurship is found to be very attractive among young people. Four in ten youth across European Union countries note they would rather be self-employed than employed (OECD, n.d.). Data from 50 countries show that entrepreneurship is generally highest among those aged 18–44 (Bosma and others, 2020). But these ambitions are often thwarted by steep barriers including limitations in financing, training (OECD, 2023), physical infrastructure, access to capital and regulatory and protection systems (Bosma and others, 2020).

As the transition from education to stable employment has grown longer and more uncertain, financial independence has become harder to attain for many young people. Employment no longer guarantees job security or stability. And many cannot make it into the job market at all: Labour-market entry has become more complex and prolonged, with young people spending more years in education or training, often without a clear path to transition into stable employment. This, too, has contributed to delayed financial independence and prolonged reliance on family support, even among highly educated youth. Housing costs and rising living expenses have further reinforced this pattern, making independent living increasingly difficult in both high- and middle-income settings (World Bank, 2024).

It is important to note that these trends are tied to broader shifts in the global economy rather than a reflection on the skills and abilities of early-career workers. Slower economic transformation in many middle-

income countries has limited the creation of high-productivity jobs, even as the number of educated young people continues to grow. This mismatch between education and labour-market demand has contributed to underemployment and skills underutilization, particularly among graduates. In some settings, youth with higher levels of education face unemployment rates several times higher than those with basic education, reflecting a shortage of suitable jobs rather than a lack of skills (ILO, 2024).

Those who are excluded from both work and education often face some of the greatest disadvantages. One in five young people globally are not in employment, education or training, a circumstance commonly referred to as NEET (UN DESA, n.d.b). International agreements, including SDG indicator 8.6.1 (UN DESA, 2018), have long emphasized the need to support the pathway to education and work, yet progress in reducing the global proportion of NEET individuals has stalled. Between 2015 and 2025, the proportion of men aged 15–24 who were not in employment, education or training remained about the same at roughly 13 per cent. And while gains have been observed among women and girls, the gender gap remains wide, due in part to disproportional unpaid care responsibilities and gender discrimination (ILO, 2026). The proportion of women and girls aged 15–24 with NEET status is more than double that of young men – 27 per cent (UN DESA, n.d.b). For those with additional forms of marginalization, the exclusion is compounded: On average, 49 per cent of young persons with disabilities are not in school and not employed (UN Youth Office and others, 2024).

The consequences of this instability extend beyond employment outcomes. Economic insecurity is increasingly shaping how young people plan their lives and make decisions about the future (Zabak and others, 2023). Research suggests that uncertainty about income, job stability and economic mobility is associated with delays in partnership formation and childbearing, particularly in higher-income and urban settings (OECD, 2023; Zabak and others, 2023), evidence corroborated and illustrated in this report's analysis of UNFPA's Demographic Futures Survey. And in the worst cases, economic hardship can result in extreme vulnerabilities for women, adolescent girls and marginalized people, limiting their decision-making within relationships and their lives more broadly (Thiaw and others, 2024).

Equipping young people amid climate crises in Eswatini and Malawi

The East and Southern Africa region has some of the world's youngest populations (UN OHRLLS, n.d.) and they are among the most affected by climate crises. These generations increasingly depend on environmental policies that empower youth to act – because when they are supported, young people can show ingenuity, compassion and leadership in addressing these challenges.

Climate disasters like floods, cyclones and droughts are disrupting food security in the communities around Lake Malawi. To address this, Catherine Mkandawire, in the village of Kavuzi, began building fish ponds and beehives and planting pine trees and banana groves. She uses a mix of old and new methods to sustain herself. She explained, "Manure was too costly, so I decided to start farming pigs. They give me fertilizer for the bananas, then I sell the bananas and use the money to buy them their feed. It's a cycle that supports both my family and my community."

Catherine decided to also open her doors to girls in the community whose homes remain without power, so they can study every evening under her lights. "It began with just five girls," she recalls. "Today, more than 30 come here every single night to learn."

Catherine knows what it is like to be vulnerable: She was almost married off at age 13, before village elders intervened. Instead of becoming a child bride, she became an environmental advocate, an employer of farm staff and a role model. She also trained as a comprehensive sexuality education facilitator and a mentor, teaching young

"It began with just five girls. Today, more than 30 come here every single night to learn."

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people about contraception, consent and other health topics. The results of this initiative have exceeded expectations: In Kavuzi, the number of girls reaching secondary school soared from 1 to 20 in a single year. Beyond passing their classes, said Catherine, "they are protecting their dreams from being interrupted by an unplanned pregnancy."

Other young people in the region are also at work finding solutions. Ncamiso Ngcamphalala, 27, makes mosquito-repellent candles and soaps in the small village of Richmond, in Eswatini, a country facing climate-related crises in flooding and malaria (Carlson and others, 2026; Lay, 2026; Cocks, 2026). He was expelled from school after failing fourth grade nine times. Born with a disability that made it difficult to write, academic progress proved almost impossible without tailored support that wasn't available.

But in 2023 he joined an initiative launched by the organization Junior Achievement Eswatini, which focuses on financial literacy and business development for early school leavers. The following year he won 10,000 lilangeni (about $550) in an entrepreneurship contest and invested it with a view to his future: In addition to the candles and soap, he now makes mosquito-repellent floor polish for local clinics and schools. He also farms pigs and runs a tuck shop he intends to turn into a grocery store.

"My life has changed for the better," said Ncamiso. "My family and neighbours respect me now because they see my capability."

Ncamiso also teaches business skills to other young people, and sits on the Bandlancane, the local council, where he advocates against the misuse of disability grants and for the needs of people the system leaves behind.

These initiatives and many others were all made possible by UNFPA's Safeguard Young People programme, launched across East and Southern Africa in 2013 and implemented in 11 countries. In its 13-year run, it reached just over 4 million young people with services covering sexual and reproductive health and the prevention of gender-based violence. In 2025 alone, almost 20 million students received comprehensive sexuality education lessons.

As the programme concludes this year, countries – and their young people – are carrying it forward. Countries in the region, including Malawi and Eswatini, have trained over 70 youth advocates and trainers to lead community-level initiatives. In these programmes, young people are integrating comprehensive sexuality education into climate change adaptation and socio-economic empowerment programmes. They are building on the lessons of the past, and their experiences in the present, to unlock the full potential of a shared future.

Disruptive technologies

Digital technologies have fundamentally reshaped ("disrupted", in the parlance of the technology industry) how people engage with information, markets, services and one another – in ways both good and bad. Social media has connected young people across the globe while also contributing to an "epidemic of loneliness," and AI is poised to create major improvements in healthcare efficiency and diagnostic abilities, while also reproducing and further entrenching systemic biases.

For one thing, access to these technologies is unequal, meaning groups already at the margins are most likely to be excluded from the benefits (Viollaz, 2025). Research by the World Bank suggests that, in general, college-educated workers have greater access to higher paying gig work, which today comprises 12 per cent of the global labour force (Datta and others, 2023). The gender inequalities present in traditional labour markets are prevalent in the digital world, too – including occupational segregation, gender pay gaps and vulnerability to harassment (Fox, 2026). In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, gig platform algorithms have been shown to disadvantage women, much as humans themselves do. And human prejudices show up, too: Research from several countries shows evidence of gender bias in customer ratings where female workers are rated lower (Rani and others, 2022).

The rapid expansion of AI is adding a new layer of uncertainty to early career pathways. Entry-level and routine roles, which have traditionally served as points of entry into the labour market, are among the most exposed to automation by AI and related technologies (Georgieff and Hyee, 2022). Recent evidence suggests that occupations requiring basic analytical, administrative and communication tasks are particularly vulnerable, raising concerns about reduced availability of entry-level positions and fewer opportunities for young people to gain initial work experience (Cazzaniga and others, 2024; Green, 2024). Research from OECD countries notes that the new forms of work created by AI often demand higher levels of digital and technical skills, creating a widening gap between the skills of entry-level workers and those increasingly demanded by employers (Green, 2024). Without targeted investment in skills development and inclusive digital transitions, there is a risk that AI may deepen existing labour-market inequalities (Cazzaniga and others, 2024).

The AI revolution mirrors previous historical moments in which disruptive technologies have transformed entire economies, including the Industrial Revolution and the Information Age. But it differs in at least one critical respect, experts say: "The Industrial Revolution unfolded over generations, allowing time for societal adaptation. The AI revolution, built on software and distributed via the Internet, is occurring at an exponential pace, compressing the adaptation cycle from decades to years. This acceleration creates a more intense and potentially destabilizing transition, widening the gap between the speed of technological change and the pace of institutional response" (Deming and others, 2025).

Even before AI, regulatory mechanisms struggled to keep pace with technological change. So too, for that matter, did science: Researchers

understand that connectivity online can come at a mental health cost to young people, but the exact dynamics, and therefore prescriptions, are still not well known. One vector of harm is exposure to bullying, discrimination, harmful content and social comparison. Among 15-year-olds, high-intensity social media use is associated with lower life satisfaction, while the quality of online experience may matter more than time spent online (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). But it is not only unmoderated social dynamics that can be harmful. Mis- and disinformation are major concerns (Howard and others, 2021; Zhou and others, 2026). In these ways, digital spaces cannot be separated from youth well-being or social stability. They are now part of the environments in which identity, relationships and self-worth are formed.



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Technology-facilitated gender-based violence presents a particular risk for girls, young women and gender-diverse young people. UNFPA has warned that digital technologies and AI are amplifying existing forms of violence and creating new forms of abuse, from image-based sexual exploitation to deepfakes and coordinated online harassment (UNFPA, 2025). These harms threaten privacy, bodily autonomy, participation and safety. They also show how older inequalities can be reproduced through newer technologies. At the same time, very young adolescent boys are vulnerable to exposure to, and recruitment by, the "manosphere", an online community uniting around a shared misogynist worldview whose adherents often exploit adolescent boys' insecurities and loneliness (Hayes and others, 2024).

It is impossible to overstate how profoundly digital tools have rewritten adolescence and early adulthood. For many adolescents, online life now shapes self-image, relationships, political awareness and perceptions of personal worth as profoundly as offline influences do. Studies of young adolescents – even children as young as 9 – show that they often see little distinction between their online and offline lives, a sign that these technologies are now inextricably interwoven into young people's social and emotional development (Save the Children, 2025).

But it is important to understand that young people are not only concerned about the threats posed by these technologies; they are just as concerned about being denied access to them and having their use surveilled. As technologies shape the most formative experiences of young people, it is reasonable for young people to expect to have a say in how those technologies will continue to affect them.

Disillusionment with leaders and institutions

Young people, from adolescents to older cohorts in their 20s and 30s, are in many cases losing faith in their leaders, institutions and governments. A global review of nearly 4,000 country surveys and a cumulative 4.8 million respondents, for example, found universal declines in youth satisfaction with the performance of democracy in their countries (Foa and others, 2020).

Much of the reason, experts say, is rooted in young people's difficulty making ends meet. "Evidence makes clear that in countries where younger generations face little difficulty in finding a job, hold less debt, can find affordable housing, and are less likely to encounter corruption or discrimination in policing and public services, youth satisfaction with democracy remains overwhelmingly high," reviewers state. "[E]ven if democratic satisfaction and support for democratic values are conceptually separate, they are empirically related" (Foa and others, 2020).

One survey by the UN Youth Envoy's office in 2021 found that 76 per cent of people under age 30 believe politicians "do not listen to young people".

In fact, studies show that young people evince a deep sense of political disempowerment (Berthin, 2023). One survey by the United Nations Youth Envoy's Office in 2021 found that 76 per cent of people under age 30 believe politicians "do not listen to young people" (Envoy on Youth, 2025). Indeed, these are not only perceptions; they are reality. Young people, by any definition, are greatly underrepresented in elected and leadership positions.

And the broader context must be examined as well. Young people are frequently told they are the heirs to a world order rooted in global cooperation, international law and commitment to a common humanity (Muhammad-Bande, 2020), but for many the benefits of that world order predate living memory. Instead, they see climate change, conflict, widening inequality and persistent violence as central conditions shaping their lives.

Wars are disrupting more young lives than ever. The number of young people aged 10–24 living within 50 kilometres of an active conflict has more than doubled, increasing from 164 million in 1990 to 340 million in 2022. This is not only a change in absolute numbers; it also reflects an increased proportion of youth in this age range – growing from 11 per cent to 18 per cent between 1990 and 2022 – exposed to conflict (Baird and others, 2025). And conflict does not only entail violence. It undermines the basic operations of society, destroying infrastructure and disrupting public services, from protection to education to healthcare, that are necessary for young people to securely transition into successful adulthood (UNICEF, 2025). Even for those not directly displaced or injured, the constant visibility of

war and instability shapes perceptions of safety, belonging and future possibility during this critical stage of life (UNICEF, 2025). This fear is ever present and global.

Climate change, too, poses a clear and growing threat to youth well-being (UNICEF, 2021). Today's adolescents will be the first group of people to live their entire lives in a world where annual global temperature has consistently averaged 0.5°C or more above pre-industrial levels (Baird and others, 2025). Many young people understand that the environmental conditions of their future are deteriorating. Climate anxiety has become part of how many young people, from childhood through early adulthood, envision their futures (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

Just as limited advancement has been made in addressing climate change, progress in addressing the global scourge of gender-based violence has similarly lagged, despite decades-long attention in international human rights and development agendas. New estimates from the United Nations show that, globally, almost 32 per cent of women aged 15–49 have experienced either intimate partner violence or sexual violence from a non-partner within their lifetimes. Violence often starts young, as well: Looking just at intimate partner violence, the lifetime prevalence for young women aged 15–19 is almost 23 per cent (WHO, 2025a).

There has been just a 5 per cent decline in the lifetime incidence of intimate partner violence between 2000 and 2023, and a 4 per cent decline in the prevalence of intimate partner violence experienced within the past 12 months. Expressed as an annual rate of change, this is just a 0.2 per cent decline each year amid population growth – meaning, in absolute terms, the number of people affected is growing (UNFPA, 2025a).

Meanwhile, conflict-related sexual violence (United Nations, n.d.d) and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (UNFPA, UNICEF and Save the Children, 2025) are both on the rise, as is gender-based violence linked to the hardships associated with climate change (UN Women, 2025). Yet investments to end gender-based violence stood at just 0.2 per cent of overall aid and development spending in 2023 (Equality Institute and Accelerator for GBV Prevention, 2023), and has since fallen even more (Whipkey, 2026).

Despite the #MeToo movement and efforts to maintain its momentum, impunity for perpetrators remains the most common outcome of gender-based violence, even in its most systematic, well-documented and egregious forms. High-profile criminal investigations such as those into Dominique Pellicot (OHCHR, 2024) and Jeffery Epstein (OHCHR, 2024a) have only exposed "the scale, nature, systematic character, and transnational reach of these atrocities against women and girls", say experts at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2026). OHCHR has also highlighted the complicity of online platforms and corporations in enabling sexual predation specifically, and undermining bodily autonomy in general, with little in the way of accountability (OHCHR, 2026a).

Calling for a seat at the table – and a new table

Notably, youth movements have not been calling for the exclusion of older leaders but for intergenerational partnerships, a topic that emerged again and again in the Youth, Peace and Security dialogues held across more than 60 countries (UNFPA and YPS, n.d.a). "[I]ntergenerational justice and accountability" was named as a guiding framework of the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda, as well. The movements' answer to systemic exclusion has been to call for *more* inclusion – not only of young people but of people of all ages, with particular attention to marginalized communities.

"Inclusion" in this sense refers not only to the presence of diversity within decision-making bodies, but also the act of integrating diverse and marginalized perspectives into the makeup of systems themselves, from top to bottom. In doing so, young people are not engaging in so-called "identity politics" for the purpose of nettling their elders. Instead, they see inclusion as a corrective to power structures that continue to place authority within a small, unrepresentative sample of the population, whose views fail to reflect their own. "We must address the root causes of power dynamics, including challenging ageism, sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, classism and all forms of intersectional discrimination and exclusion," the authors of the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda wrote (UNFPA, 2024).



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They are looking at successes from recent history that show how community engagement and the formation of diverse alliances have led to major gains. And they are reinventing what civic participation looks like, creating new and inclusive platforms for dialogue, expression and sophisticated real-world political advocacy (Youngs and others, 2025). These youth-led approaches are not just alternative ways of looking at the world; they are a road map for the very systems-level reforms that young people are calling for.

In other words, young people are not asking just for a seat at the table. They are asking for a newer, better table, with more seating for more people. And they are insisting that the table be built together.

Navigating the contradictions of today

Today's youth are often said to be full of contradictions (EY Americas, 2020). For instance, one often-cited fact about young men is that they have more gender-regressive attitudes than older men (Equimundo, 2022). This is often attributed to radicalization by the "manosphere". Indeed, the proliferation of "manosphere" content has become highly profitable for brands and influencers in the subculture, who enlarge their subscriber and consumer base by promoting harmful views of women (and, it should be noted, men) (Elia, 2026).

But the reality is more complex than a simple story in which young men are collectively becoming more regressive. A recent survey by King's College London, covering dozens of countries across all world regions except the Arab States, shows that gender-regressive attitudes are actually ascendent among young men **and** young women. At the same time, increasing proportions of men ***and*** women ***also*** identify as feminists (King's College London and Ipsos, 2026). Other international surveys show similar findings (Ipsos, 2024).

Researchers suggest that exposure to more information, and more misinformation, may be contributing to the development of more complex identities that are fluid and unsettled. "[M]en are living in a world where their core expected identity is in flux," write experts at the research and advocacy group Equimundo (Equimundo, 2026). The same can be said of young women as well.

Together, young people are "navigating new contradictions created by modern life", one market research firm recently noted. "These pressures don't produce fixed beliefs or consistent behaviors in youth culture globally. They produce competing needs that have to be navigated simultaneously" (Litman, 2026).



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This is very different from how young people are frequently portrayed, as either unsophisticated naïfs, entitled and overparented, or by contrast as wellsprings of creativity and novel thinking to be harnessed and utilized. Those engaged in international forums are treated either as "bridges to a new historical formation" or "unruly, chaotic or destructive" threats to the existing order (Ortiz, 2026). Academics have found considerable frustration among young people at being viewed through these frames, as either agents of regime disruption or tools for regime continuation (Mosiashvili and Canali, 2026).

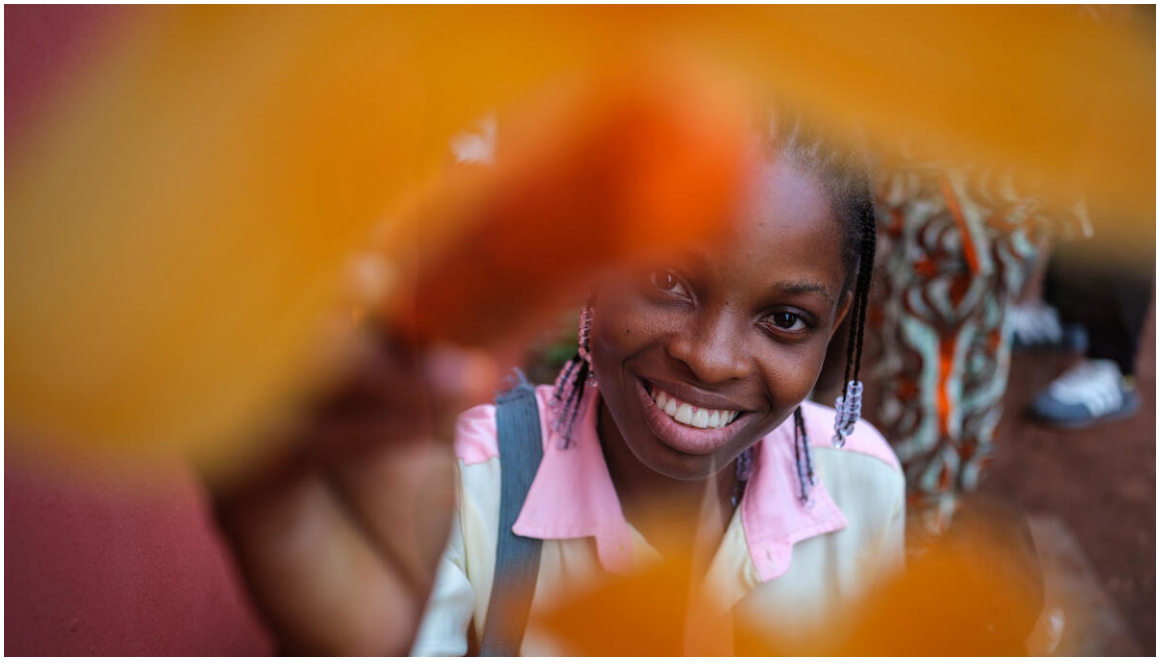
A more accurate portrayal would show how young people are, broadly speaking, embracing inclusion in all forms at all levels. This is a generalization, and there will be many exceptions and counter-examples. Still, there is evidence to suggest that as young people search for solutions, they are more inclined than previous generations to seek out and value a wide range of perspectives. For instance, youth activism is more inclusive and diverse compared to previous generations, researchers assert (Teixeira, 2024).

This may even reflect social norms that have been generated in, and transmitted through, digital spaces (Balon, 2024). Research shows that social engagement online has allowed young people to explore, cultivate and express overlapping identities, between and across contexts (Hällgren and Björk, 2022). A growing number of people have "supranational" identities, an allegiance to regional or global identities beyond nationality (Jung, 2008). Young people increasingly "view solidarity as transnational, having grown up in hyperconnected environments", a recent United Nations report noted (United Nations, 2026). Surveys across dozens of countries have found

younger respondents are more likely to interact with people from different backgrounds and ethnicities (Silver and others, 2020), and more likely to support diversity (Silver, Fetterolf and Connaughton, 2021), compared with older respondents.

Young people are also much more likely than their elders to encounter people of diverse genders and sexualities, or to identify as being diverse in these ways themselves (Ipsos, 2023). While proportions of gender diversity vary by study, it is persistently observed in all world regions. The recent *World Youth Report* conducted an online survey of 2,500 people aged 15–29, across 137 countries, and found that 12 per cent identified as bisexual and 6 per cent identified as gay, lesbian or other (UN DESA, 2026). The 2023 What Young People Want survey of 1.5 million people found 2.2 per cent of participants, primarily in low- and middle-income countries, identified as a gender identity other than male or female (Saran and others, 2025). A UNFPA-supported survey of 7,247 young peacebuilders in fragile and insecure settings found that roughly 2 per cent identified as non-binary (UNFPA, n.d.a).

At the same time, the data do not suggest that exposure to gender-diverse people is leading to a wholesale rejection of gender or sex differences by young people. Instead, youth leaders in youth-led movements are adopting a *both/and* approach. Youth, peace and security leaders have called for *both* gender-disaggregated data to highlight the ways in which women and girls are being left behind *and* inclusive language that acknowledges gender diversity (UNFPA, 2018a). Experts on gender inequality are increasingly calling for programmes to acknowledge *both* the ways patriarchal norms harm women and girls *and* the ways those same norms harm men and boys (UNFPA and Equimundo, n.d.).



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Youth at the heart of the ICPD

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was a 1994 meeting in Cairo where 179 governments adopted a revolutionary Programme of Action calling for reproductive health and rights to take centre stage in national and global development efforts. But it was also much more than a single conference or consensus. It led to a series of follow-up actions that have, cumulatively, put young people into the driver's seat of the movement for sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy.

This began at the ICPD+5 Youth Forum held in The Hague in 1999, where a youth coalition powerfully advocated for stronger UN language around youth issues (Mcginn, 1999). This was followed by the 2012 ICPD Global Youth Forum in Bali, where young advocates produced the landmark Bali Global Youth Declaration, firmly linking reproductive health and rights to broader priorities like comprehensive education and civic participation (ICPD Beyond 2014, 2013).

The momentum accelerated at the 2019 Nairobi Summit (ICPD25) where youth-led coalitions helped mobilize broad global commitments to end unmet need for family planning, end preventable maternal deaths, and end harmful practices and gender-based violence. These extensive obligations were formally anchored in the Nairobi Statement on ICPD25, which remains a roadmap for the world (Nairobi Summit, 2019).

Marking thirty years of progress, the 2024 Cotonou Global Youth Dialogue (ICPD30) gathered over 400 young leaders from 130 countries, resulting in the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda, a document demanding systemic shifts, including institutional protections for bodily autonomy and robust funding for youth-responsive infrastructure (UNFPA, 2024).

Today, young people are raising their voices to connect grass-roots rights to international processes like the UN Summit of the Future, highlighting that global progress remains stalled while political inertia and structural barriers limit youth leadership. (See page 28 for a reflection by the authors of some of these important outcome documents.)

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Youth, Peace and Security: Young people as agents of peace

In 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security, recognizing the important work of young people in maintaining and promoting peace. The resolution, and the advocacy preceding and following it, gave rise to a global movement to integrate and empower young people as peacebuilders. This became known as the Youth, Peace and Security agenda. The Security Council has since adopted two subsequent resolutions dedicated to the agenda. Resolution 2419 called for the meaningful inclusion of young people in peace processes, and resolution 2535 laid out steps to operationalize the agenda.

Young people are now being engaged across many pillars of peace and security in conflict and post-conflict settings, from violence prevention efforts to dispute resolutions and more. They are also raising their voices, highlighting ways in which continued exclusion, fragmentary responses and political inertia are holding back the cause of peace.

Purpose driven and future fit

Ultimately, young people are the most under-resourced solution the world has. Despite their many challenges, they are, overall, hopeful (UNFPA, 2026). With digital tools at their fingertips, they have the potential to realize a remarkable collective power. This is already being seen in their contributions to successful health programmes and their inventive, decentralized political organizing. It is being seen in their movements and recommendations and calls for accountability.

The question before us is whether today's policymakers will continue designing systems *for* young people, or if they will finally build systems *with* and *by* them. The world's youth are already working to forge a new path for everyone. The next step is to join them.

IN FOCUS

Young people own the ICPD agenda – and the future

Young people have shaped the global ICPD movement to advance and protect sexual and reproductive health and rights for years (see page 28). Here, youth leaders from this movement share their views on progress gained, progress stalled and where the world must go from here.

As youth activists involved in International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) follow-up processes in Nairobi and Cotonou, we have seen both the possibilities and limitations of global youth engagement. At their best, these processes do more than produce an outcome document. They bring together young people across countries, identities and movements; connect issues too often addressed separately; and build the relationships and shared analysis needed for longer-term organizing. When designed, led and safely facilitated by young people themselves these processes can strengthen individual movements, deepen solidarity and amplify constituencies whose experiences might otherwise remain absent from global agendas and debates.

Over the past few years, we have seen young people's advocacy become increasingly coordinated, technically sophisticated and politically specific. The outcomes emerging from these processes have become less generic and more policy literate, reflecting young people's growing technical expertise and both cross-regional and cross-movement coordination. Yet there remains a clear and consistent set of demands from young people: meaningful participation, bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, economic justice, climate action, freedom from violence, and accountable institutions. Policymakers do not need another consultation to discover what young people want. The priorities are already clear; what remains missing is sustained action, investment and intergenerational solidarity.

There have been important gains. The ICPD Youth Platform, launched by youth-led organizations at the 2019 Nairobi Summit, has endured as a space for collective youth organizing, advocacy and accountability. It carried forward the energy and commitments generated in Nairobi, helped shape youth mobilization towards the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda, and continues to sustain momentum through youth-led advocacy and accountability at national, regional and global levels. Alongside constituencies such as the Major Group for Children and Youth and YOUNGO, the platform has strengthened young people's ability to coordinate across regions, preserve institutional memory and track commitments from one process to the next. Digital organizing has also made it easier to scrutinize unmet commitments publicly and drive accountability. This enduring youth-led infrastructure has made it harder for agreed priorities – and failures to act on them – to disappear.

There is also growing recognition of meaningful and inclusive youth participation within United Nations strategies and agreements, including the Pact for the Future and Declaration on Future Generations. But access is not the same as power. Too often, participation becomes a legitimizing ritual or checklist: Young people are invited to speak, but not to shape decisions, exercise control over resources or determine what happens next. Participation remains unequal, with financial, linguistic, disability-related, visa and digital barriers excluding many of those most affected by policy decisions. Meaningful youth participation also requires engaging with the full complexity of young people's political participation, including understanding and addressing the conditions that are drawing some young people into increasingly coordinated anti-rights and anti-gender movements.

The most persistent challenge arises after an outcome document is adopted. Youth-led outcomes such as the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda provide valuable direction, but are rarely backed by clear system-wide ownership, dedicated funding or institutionalized monitoring frameworks. Governments may have limited awareness of these outcomes and are seldom expected to report on them through formal review processes. Yet the journey from Nairobi to Cotonou and beyond also demonstrates the power of youth ownership. Through the ICPD Youth Platform and the continued commitment of youth-led organizations in all their diversity, young people have carried these commitments into other spaces, using them to guide advocacy, strengthen accountability and sustain political momentum. The Cotonou Youth Action Agenda therefore remains alive not simply as a document, but as a framework around which young people continue to organize, particularly with a view of a post-SDG world in mind.

This is a source of hope, but it also exposes an unfair reality. As civic space shrinks and funding dwindles – particularly for youth-led organizations working on sexual and reproductive health and rights – young activists are expected to sustain and monitor commitments without the resources or institutional power needed to implement them. Young people often continue to be treated primarily as beneficiaries or simply a vulnerable group to be accounted for, rather than as partners capable of governing resources and leading programmes defined by their own priorities.

Youth outcome documents should be treated as mandates for action, not records of consultation. Governments, United Nations agencies and funders must assign responsibility, establish timelines and indicators, finance youth-led implementation, and formally involve young people in monitoring progress. Practical implementation labs could help governments and United Nations agencies understand these outcomes, translate them into regional and national action and connect them to existing review processes.

The endurance of the ICPD Youth Platform and the continued life of the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda give us reason for hope. But youth ownership cannot substitute for institutional leadership and responsibility. Young people have already defined much of the road ahead; the real test of inclusion is whether leaders will share the power, space, resources and accountability needed to travel it with us.

Text contributed by Lucy Fagan from the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth and the ICPD Youth Platform, Riju Dhakal from the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women and the ICPD Youth Platform, and Levi Singh from SRHR Africa Trust.



This mural in Kolinkivtsi, Ukraine, is called "Inspiration by Dreams" and represents young people's dreams of peace, travelling, education, prosperity and of starting a family.

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Chapter 2

Too soon, too late, just right?

The overlapping set of challenges described in the preceding chapter are not abstract phenomena – they are playing out in the lives of real young people around the world, affecting their most intimate, personal choices and ability to realize their own hopes for the future.

For previous generations, adulthood was often marked by a broadly recognizable sequence of milestones: Finish school. Enter work. Become financially independent. Form a partnership. Have children. Though never universal, this pattern of progression to adulthood continues to structure social expectations of young people – and the expectations of their communities and policymakers.

UNFPA's Demographic Futures Survey asked 108,926 young adults about their lives and aspirations. Their responses show that the expected path of milestone achievement has grown less predictable and, for some, unattainable, with wide variation in whether, when and under what circumstances people aspire to reach those milestones.

The frustrations explored in chapter 1, around exclusion from decision-making and weakening social protection systems, take shape here in the real experiences of survey respondents around the world. The survey is a snapshot of young adults who are not benefiting from the structures that once helped young people move from dependence to independence, from school to work, and from adolescence to adulthood. For them, the consequences are not theoretical; they are expressed as delayed independence, as marriages forestalled and pregnancies forgone, and as delay and loss of love, joy and fulfilment.

About the Demographic Futures Survey

The 2025 *State of World Population* report found that large proportions of people were ending their reproductive lives with fewer children than they desired, challenging simplistic narratives about falling fertility and highlighting the need for robust data on people's reproductive aspirations and their ability to realize them.

UNFPA's Demographic Futures Survey was conducted to develop this evidence base. It asked 108,926 respondents aged 18–39, in 73 countries and territories across all world regions, about their aspirations, reproductive and partnering goals, and concerns and optimism about the future.

Respondents to the survey, it should be noted, are Internet connected, and thus more likely to have tertiary education and higher incomes, especially in lower-income countries, than the general population of 18–39-year-olds. This is partially addressed through post-stratification weighting by sex, age and educational attainment to reduce the influence of compositional differences between the achieved sample and the national population of 18–39-year-olds. However, this weighting cannot correct for the exclusion of those without Internet access, and thus results should be interpreted as reflecting the views of Internet-connected young people aged 18–39, not as fully nationally representative estimates (see technical note on page 145 for details).

Analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey began with the July 2026 publication of ***Lives, Choices and Futures*** (UNFPA, 2026) and continues with this chapter. Further region-specific analyses of the survey are also being produced by researchers, which will yield further insights.

What people want

Young people (defined variously, see page 5) are often described as "rejecting" or "refusing" marriage and parenthood (LaGorce, 2026; Newkey-Burden, 2024; Kipling, 2026). To this point, there is some evidence that partnership rates are declining. One study looked at data from the World Values Survey, covering more than 100 countries over four decades, and found that rates of singlehood are indeed increasing over time (Homocianu, 2025). Overall, people are also having fewer children, and some are having none at all, contributing to global declines in fertility rates essentially everywhere. While *choosing* to forgo parenthood is often thought to be a Western or high-income-country phenomenon, evidence that preferences for remaining childless is found across contexts (UN DESA, 2025; Neal and Neal, 2025). And of course, many people express ambiguity, and preferences can change with life circumstances (Sturm, Koops and Rutigliano, 2023).

Recently published data from the Demographic Futures Survey (UNFPA, 2026) also confirm that there are significant proportions of respondents who do not aspire to marriage or parenthood: At ages 18–39, 16 per cent of respondents said their ideal relationship and living arrangement was to remain single (ranging from 21 per cent at ages 18–19 to 14 per cent at ages 35–39). Nine per cent said their ideal total number of children is zero.

Even so, it is incorrect to say that young people are, generally, "rejecting" marriage and parenthood. In fact, the evidence shows the *opposite* – that large majorities of respondents *want* to marry and have children. Marriage (either directly or after a period of cohabitation) is the ideal relationship arrangement for 70 per cent of surveyed men and women. Further, more than 90 per cent of respondents want to have one or more children (UNFPA, 2026). Seventy-three per cent of respondents rated having a partner and children as somewhat or very important life milestones.



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Findings from the Demographic Futures Survey

In June 2026, UNFPA published *Lives, Choices and Futures,* a descriptive analysis of its Demographic Futures Survey and the starting point for more in-depth analysis. Some of its key findings are noted below.

Optimism and worry: Two thirds of respondents feel somewhat or very positive about the future, but this varies substantially across regional groupings. Conflict and security risks and economic insecurity and inequality are the two highest-rated concerns about the future. More than three quarters of respondents across the full sample rated each as somewhat or very worrying.

Partnering: More than two thirds of respondents selected an ideal relationship and living arrangement that includes marriage. Among respondents aged 25–39 who ideally wish to marry or live with a partner, one quarter are currently single and not dating. Financial security is the highest-rated consideration for partnership formation, cited as important by 81 per cent of respondents. Economic and housing constraints constitute the most commonly reported category of barrier to partnership, rated important by 57 per cent.

Parenting: The highest-rated preconditions for feeling ready to become a parent are being financially secure (88 per cent), having stable employment (87 per cent) and feeling emotionally ready (85 per cent). On average, female respondents rated each of the preconditions as more important than male respondents did. Economic and housing constraints constitute the highest-rated barrier to having children, with 72 per cent of respondents rating this as important. Lack of a suitable partner and health and reproductive factors are the next highest-rated barriers.

Most common life path

It is important to look at rates of partnering and childbearing not just as isolated data points but as part of the rhythm of one's life – in no small part because that rhythm, for many, is changing. An original analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey seeks to identify the most common age of milestone achievement for men and women by looking at the living arrangements, employment status, and relationship and parenthood status of all respondents by age cohort.

Global trends in milestone achievement have, historically, been hard to ascertain, as studies have used differing methodologies and tended to cover one country or region at a time. Cultural factors and costs also significantly affect expected life milestones. One recent study of 29 European countries found that people left their family home at a median age of about 22 (Ferraretto and Vitali, 2023), while studies of adults' living arrangements in East Asia show that many unmarried adults do not leave their parents' home at all (Yoon and Lian, 2025).

Still, there are some global indications that milestones are being achieved later than in the past. United Nations projections estimate, for example, that 64 per cent of women in the 20–24 age range were married in 1970, while today this is true for 43 per cent of women in this age group (UN DESA, n.d.a).

The Demographic Futures Survey provides a cross-sectional picture of young adulthood among Internet-connected respondents across more than 70 countries and territories. It offers an opportunity to see which life milestones, and at which ages they report having achieved them. Even though its findings cannot be directly compared to previous studies, this life path assessment adds to the growing body of evidence that young people are increasingly seeing major life events postponed (Tucci, 2025). This analysis identifies the youngest age group in which at least 50 per cent of respondents report certain life circumstances. These thresholds offer a descriptive way to compare patterns across age groups, genders and regions. (They do not establish when individuals first reached a milestone, the sequence in which they experienced these events, or whether milestones are occurring later than among previous generations.) Importantly, this is not a longitudinal analysis. Instead, this is a way to understand how the life trajectory is *tending* to unfold, using snapshots of each age group.

Looking at the data in this way yields several striking observations. The first is that, across Demographic Futures Survey respondents, key life milestones are being reached at ages older than many might expect. Seventy per cent begin legal adulthood, age 18, still living with their parents or relatives (i.e., their natal family). Half or more are living independently from their natal family at ages 25–29; and half or more are in a stable relationship at ages 30–34. By ages 35–39, half or more are parents to at least one child, while fewer than half are married.

The second striking observation is that male and female respondents' entries into adulthood, as defined by the achievement of certain life milestones, look very different: Across all respondents, half of male respondents are employed by ages 20–24, while a majority of female respondents are not employed until ages 25–29, and women's rates of employment remain lower than men's across all age groups analysed.

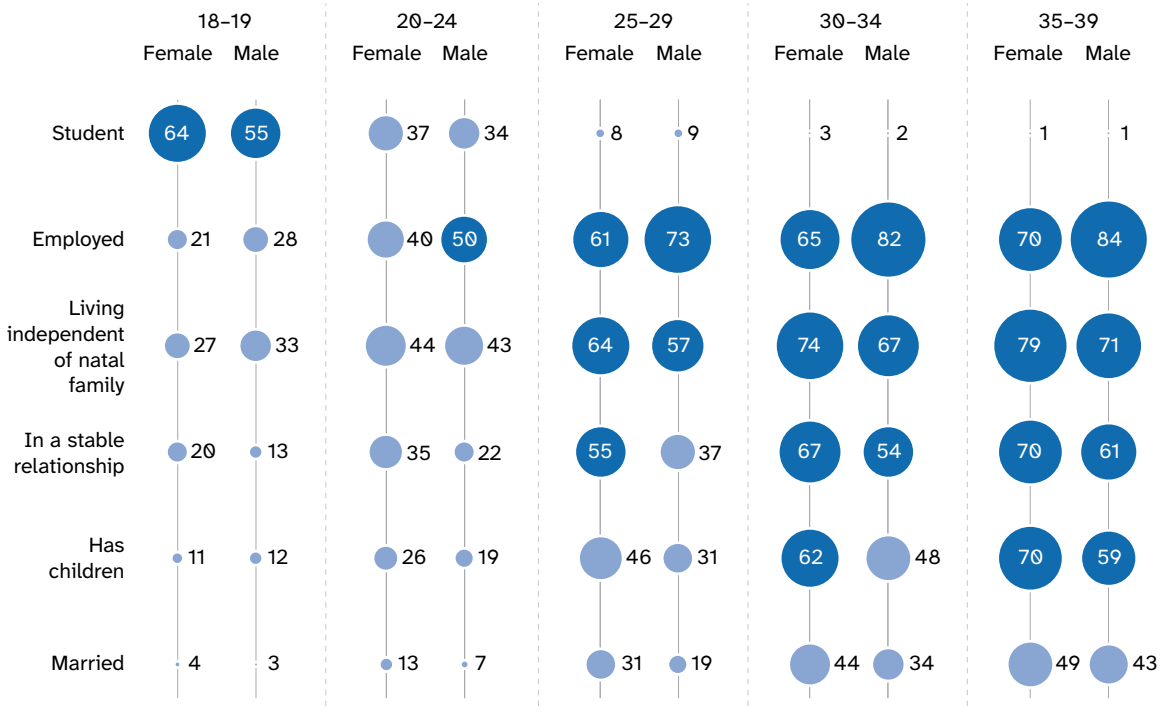
By contrast, a majority of women are in stable relationships by ages 25–29, while a majority of men achieve this milestone at ages 30–34. In fact, a larger percentage of women compared with men in the Demographic Futures Survey sample are in a relationship, in every age category, in every region. Age gaps are common in surveyed relationships, with men being an average of 2.4 years older than their female partners. A majority of women are parents to at least one child by ages 30–34, while this isn't the case for a majority of men up until they reach ages 35–39.

There are also major variations by region. In Asia and the Pacific, for example, more than half of men are still living with their natal family in their mid-to-late 20s, while a majority of men in all other regions live independent of their natal family in their early-to-mid 20s. This pattern aligns with social norms common in many parts of Asia (Chen, 2025) (see figure 2). In the Arab States region, women are

employed in much lower numbers, across all age groups, compared with women in other regions; this phenomenon, too, is well supported by research into gendered labour-market barriers (Budhwar and Pereira, 2023). In Latin America and East and Southern Africa, the proportion of respondents who are married is consistently lower than in other regions, particularly among those aged 25 and older. In the East and Southern Africa region and the West and Central Africa region, the proportion of both female and male respondents with children is higher than the proportion in a stable relationship for virtually all age groups.

Figure 1

Milestone achievement globally, by age group and sex



Percentage of Demographic Futures Survey respondents in each age group who are currently students, employed, living independently of their natal family, in a stable relationship, parents of at least one child or married. Dark-shaded circles indicate where half or more of respondents have reached a certain milestone. Each age group is a different set of respondents surveyed at the same point in time, not the same people followed as they age. Differences between age groups therefore reflect both stage of life and differences between generations. Milestones are not mutually exclusive, so percentages do not add up to 100. Data are weighted by sex, age and educational attainment. See the technical note on page 145.

Source: State of World Population 2026 analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey.

Figure 2

Milestone achievement, by age group, sex and region

	Age (years)	Student		Employed		Living independently of natal family		Stable relationship		Married		Has a child	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Asia and the Pacific	18–19	70.4	61.6	20.0	26.6	23.3	25.4	12.6	11.3	4.8	3.5	9.2	11.8
	20–24	38.3	36.4	44.2	48.2	34.7	33.7	26.0	18.2	15.0	8.4	20.6	18.0
	25–29	5.3	8.3	68.3	75.2	52.2	44.8	51.3	35.6	39.3	24.9	43.4	29.4
	30–34	1.1	0.8	72.4	86.1	63.2	55.8	69.7	55.1	59.4	46.8	61.7	49.9
	35–39	0.7	1.1	76.0	86.1	70.7	55.6	73.7	61.3	64.8	53.0	70.1	57.4
Latin America	18–19	56.1	45.9	21.9	35.3	22.8	28.0	22.9	13.6	1.2	2.8	14.5	11.1
	20–24	31.2	28.1	41.2	56.3	40.0	36.9	36.4	24.9	6.9	3.9	29.1	17.7
	25–29	9.1	8.7	57.6	75.8	61.2	53.8	53.2	35.7	15.7	10.3	48.4	30.1
	30–34	3.8	2.7	62.7	84.0	71.8	64.6	60.1	48.5	24.4	18.4	65.6	47.8
	35–39	2.1	1.6	67.2	84.9	77.9	72.2	63.4	57.6	28.6	26.2	73.2	59.0
Western Europe, Australia, Canada and US	18–19	60.9	51.9	26.8	29.7	30.5	40.5	22.7	16.6	1.9	3.0	5.4	11.0
	20–24	36.1	28.0	45.7	55.4	55.8	55.8	40.5	29.7	10.5	9.2	20.8	22.3
	25–29	11.0	9.7	68.9	75.7	76.0	72.6	55.9	40.0	25.0	17.3	32.9	25.9
	30–34	2.7	3.1	76.6	83.0	87.4	82.4	66.6	56.1	37.2	31.0	49.2	40.6
	35–39	2.2	1.6	75.8	84.9	89.1	85.5	70.3	59.7	42.3	39.3	58.3	50.4
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	18–19	66.6	48.1	17.8	32.9	31.4	36.4	26.4	14.3	4.8	4.8	8.5	10.7
	20–24	33.7	31.6	37.4	51.0	53.1	46.7	50.8	24.1	22.6	7.8	27.7	12.6
	25–29	5.6	6.4	55.0	74.4	69.2	56.0	70.5	43.4	44.6	25.3	48.9	28.5
	30–34	1.3	0.9	58.4	81.3	76.0	64.4	76.5	56.8	56.7	38.3	65.0	44.2
	35–39	1.0	0.8	63.1	82.4	79.6	68.8	76.7	60.7	56.4	43.5	72.3	57.0
East and Southern Africa	18–19	68.6	61.6	11.8	17.1	24.9	42.8	11.9	11.0	0.4	0.7	8.5	12.4
	20–24	45.2	44.3	27.7	36.0	45.0	50.7	26.0	13.9	5.9	3.6	27.4	18.1
	25–29	7.0	11.3	55.3	60.1	60.3	63.2	44.1	29.3	15.6	8.7	60.3	40.8
	30–34	3.2	3.1	60.1	69.6	78.6	70.8	54.8	47.8	28.8	24.2	73.6	64.8
	35–39	0.1	2.0	69.6	78.1	82.0	80.3	58.3	60.4	36.4	32.3	81.3	81.9
West and Central Africa	18–19	59.3	68.2	32.4	26.7	39.7	31.8	28.5	11.7	10.2	1.8	39.3	25.6
	20–24	43.0	40.5	45.6	44.6	36.2	48.1	26.0	19.0	8.2	3.6	40.0	31.9
	25–29	17.3	24.7	62.8	58.1	64.0	54.7	41.1	28.1	30.0	7.3	61.6	41.8
	30–34	12.4	5.8	62.5	79.7	65.8	67.8	63.0	45.8	37.7	22.9	80.9	59.7
	35–39	3.6	1.0	82.2	84.3	74.8	68.4	69.2	57.6	47.2	41.5	85.9	66.0
Arab States (including Gulf Co-operation Council)	18–19	63.6	61.8	19.2	18.7	20.5	28.0	13.3	9.1	10.4	5.2	10.8	15.0
	20–24	40.9	37.7	27.1	43.9	31.2	35.6	27.0	17.0	20.2	11.6	24.9	20.6
	25–29	6.9	8.9	50.2	71.9	63.8	56.0	56.4	36.1	49.5	31.3	48.2	33.5
	30–34	3.2	0.6	42.4	80.1	70.7	67.6	71.9	57.6	58.7	46.7	63.2	49.8
	35–39	0.1	0.2	54.5	86.5	72.0	71.8	73.1	69.6	67.4	63.4	73.1	65.4

Percentage of Demographic Futures Survey respondents in each age group who are currently students, employed, living independently of their natal family, in a stable relationship, married, or parents of at least one child. Darker shaded cells show where half or more of respondents have reached the milestone. Each age group is a different set of respondents surveyed at the same point in time, not the same people followed as they age. Differences between age groups therefore reflect both stage of life and differences between generations. Milestones are not mutually exclusive, so percentages do not add up to 100. Data are weighted by sex, age and educational attainment. See the technical note on page 145.

Source: State of World Population 2026 analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey.

There are limitations to this kind of analysis. It captures an average based on all respondents, even those who have not achieved certain milestones (just as total fertility rate is calculated inclusive of people who do not have children). In this way, there are nuances that cannot be captured here, such as the prevalence of very early milestone achievement. For these researchers must look to other measures, such as child marriage estimates and adolescent pregnancy estimates (covered in chapter 3 on page 60).

Additionally, it must be noted that milestones themselves are not the only way in which young people undertake adult responsibilities. Academic literature (Wong, 2015) and United Nations consultations with youth across a variety of forums (UNFPA, 2018a) show that even when young people see traditional milestones delayed or forgone, they are still encountering major adult pressures and responsibilities – including caretaking roles, unpaid or informal labour and more – but often without recognition or a safety net (ILO, 2024).

Still, the identification of common life paths helps frame important questions for further research. Is the timing of one's milestone achievement intentional? Does it vary between different sub-populations? Is it supported or stigmatized in the community? How do individuals themselves feel about the age at which they reach these markers of adulthood? Articulating and investigating these questions will yield important insights for policymakers – and for young people themselves as they chart their paths to the future.

Missing the mark

The biggest question, ultimately, is whether people are able to exercise affirmative choice over these milestones, which represent some of the most intimate and consequential aspects of their lives. And to this point, ample subsets of young respondents in the Demographic Futures Survey show signs of frustrated relationship aspirations.

As mentioned above, among the survey's respondents aged 18–39, 70 per cent consider marriage as part of their ideal living and relationship arrangements. Yet among those who hold such marriage ideals at ages 35–39 (the oldest age group in the sample), only 56 per cent are actually married. Among respondents aged 25–39 who said they would ideally like to have a partner, 19 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men said they are single and not dating. Of respondents aged 25–39 who are dating but not in a cohabiting relationship, more than 80 per cent want to be cohabiting with or married to a partner (UNFPA, 2026a). Overall, these patterns display limited differences by sex and regions.

The survey also asked how the respondents' current number of children compares to the number they would like for their current age. The majority of younger respondents (those in the 18–19 and 20–24 age groups) replied that they are uncertain. By ages 35–39, uncertainty gives way to clarity: The largest proportion of respondents of this age (52 per cent of women, 44 per cent of men) said they have the right number of children for their age, while a quarter of respondents (23 per cent of women, 26 per cent of men) said they have

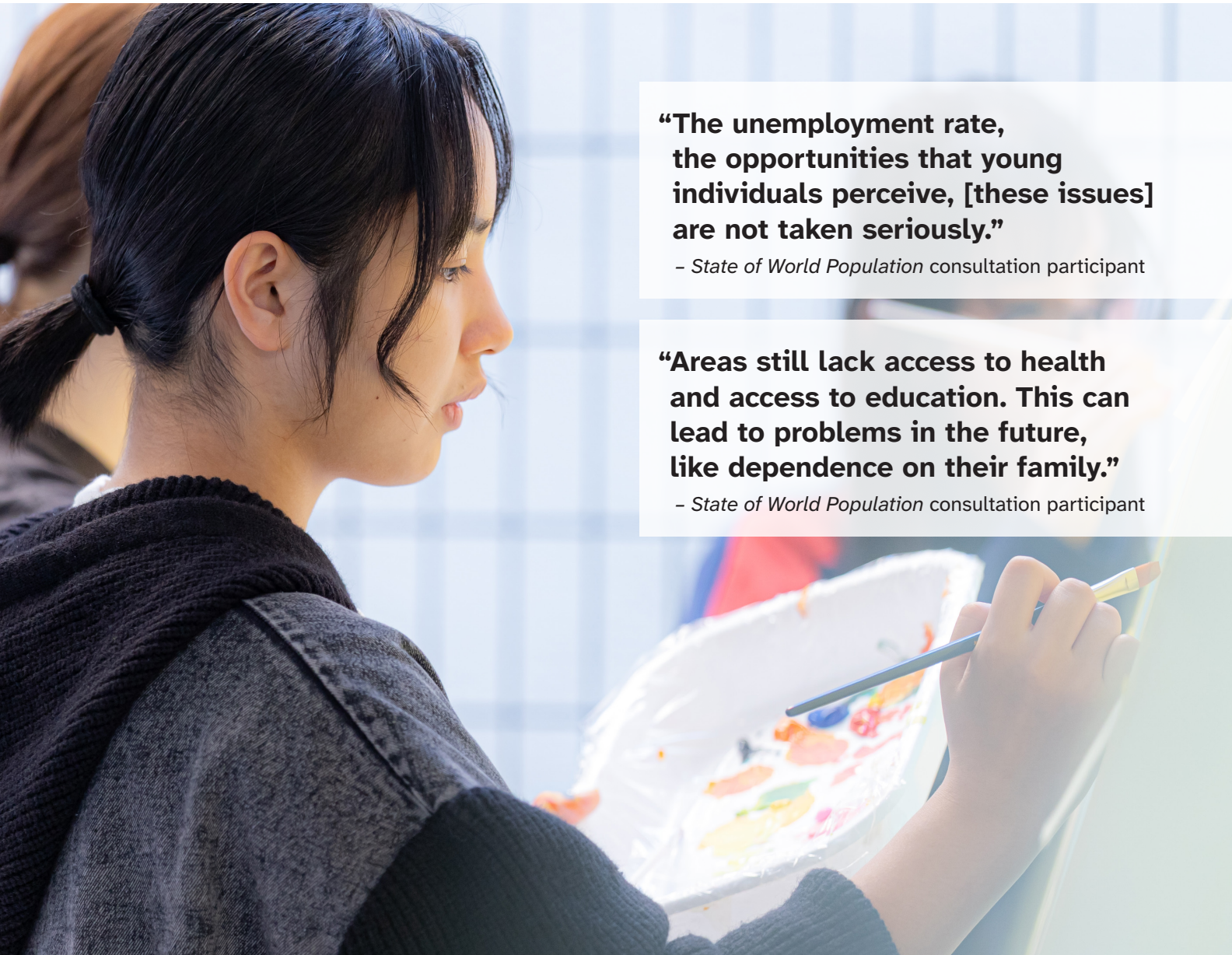
fewer children than they would like for their age. A small but consistent proportion of respondents, 3–6 per cent across age groups, said they have more children than they would like for their age, with women being more likely to say this than men (original analysis of Demographic Futures Survey data).

Overall, these data suggest that large proportions of respondents in every region of the world are having their aspirations and goals for independence, partnerships and family life delayed, and sometimes forgone entirely.

Motivations and barriers

One of the goals of the Demographic Futures Survey was to examine how people's partnering and parenting aspirations exist alongside, and in conversation with, social norms and economic pressures. The initial analysis of these data, in the publication *Lives, Choices and Futures*, highlights how profoundly economic and societal factors shape both people's motivations for reaching certain life milestones and for delaying those milestones (UNFPA, 2026).

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"The unemployment rate, the opportunities that young individuals perceive, [these issues] are not taken seriously."

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

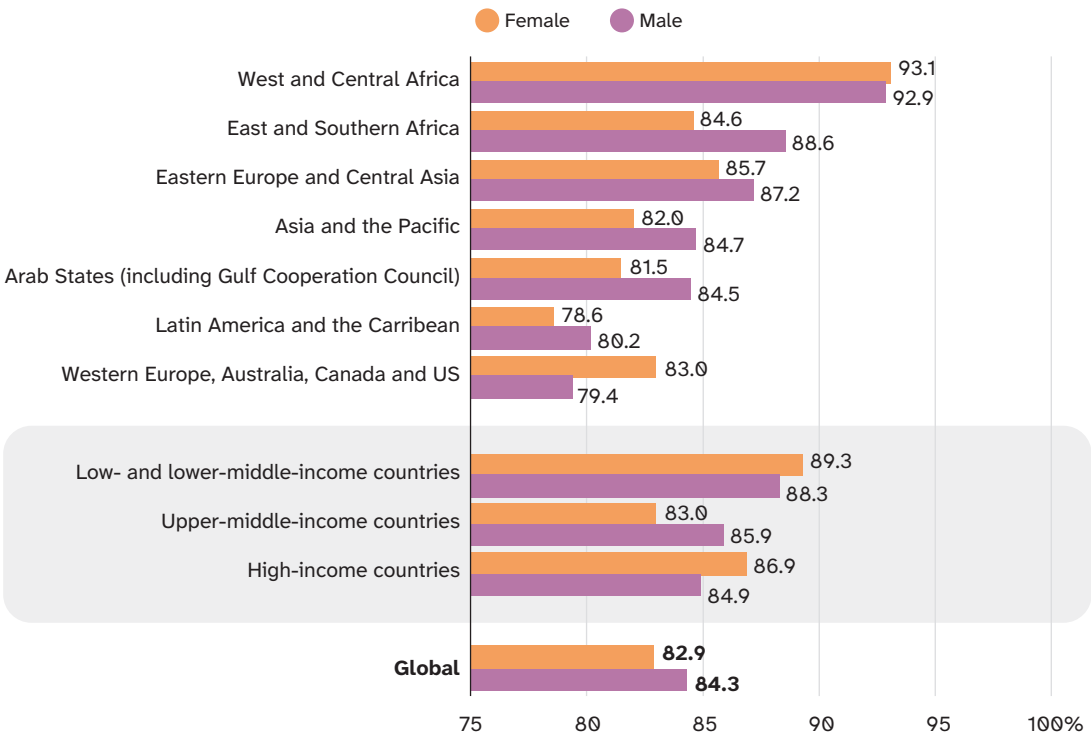
"Areas still lack access to health and access to education. This can lead to problems in the future, like dependence on their family."

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

Economic issues emerged as the most important motivation for finding a partner among people who are not cohabiting or married (with 81 per cent of people saying that "being financially secure" is a somewhat or very important reason for partnering), while financial insecurity is also the biggest barrier to partnering. This is consistent across regions, but is especially apparent in lower-income countries. Economic issues are also the biggest barrier to becoming parents. In other words, around the world, the path to partnering and parenthood cannot be separated from the sense of financial security people have or require. And even though partnering is commonly viewed as an avenue towards financial security (suggesting that partnering remains an economic survival strategy for many people), it is also seen as a goal obstructed by economic circumstances (UNFPA, 2026).

Figure 3

Desire for marriage or cohabitation among respondents aged 25–39, by region, country income level and sex



Percentage of respondents aged 25–39 years and currently dating or in a non-cohabiting relationship who want to marry or live with a partner, by sex, regional grouping and country income group. See the technical note on page 146.

Source: Lives, Choices and Futures, UNFPA 2026.

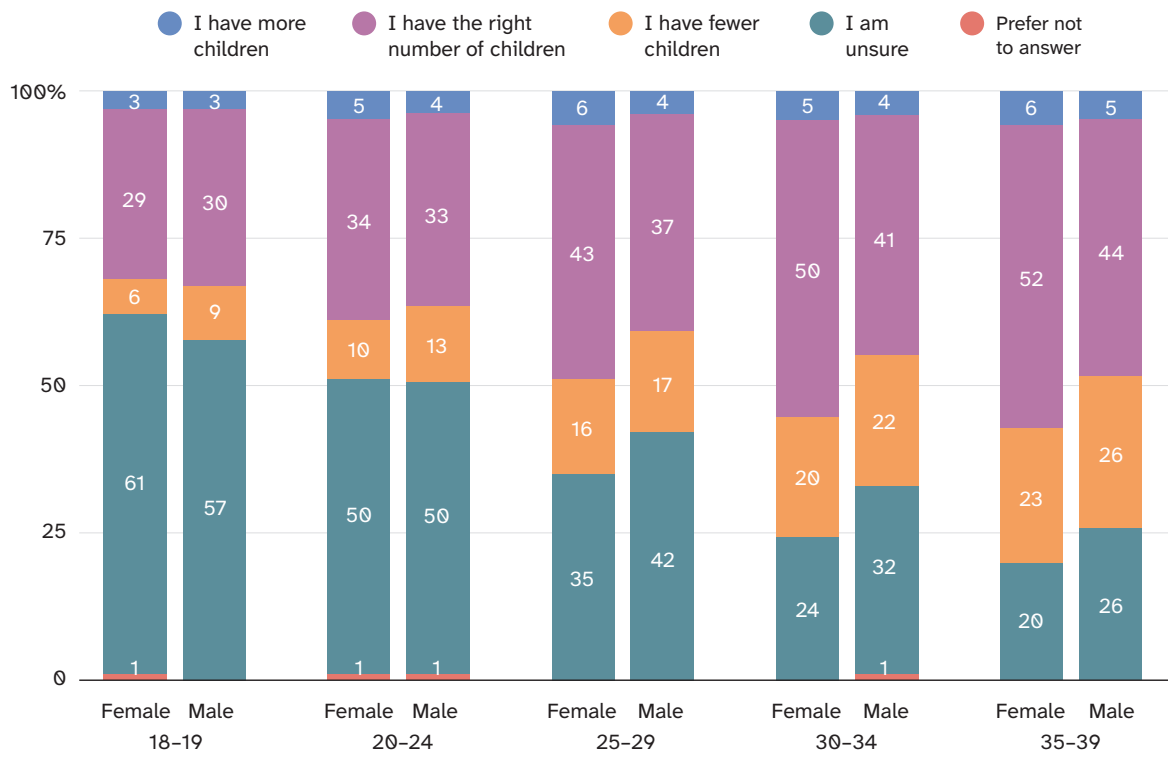
But economic issues are not everything.

The second most important motivation for finding a partner involved emotional and intimate fulfilment, with 68 per cent of respondents who are not cohabiting or married saying this is a somewhat or very important reason for partnering. Sixty-six per cent of respondents cited independence from their parents, and 65 per cent of respondents cited having children as somewhat or very important motivators for partnering. Together, these responses highlight that partnership formation is, for many, a critical part of the journey towards personal fulfilment, whether it is for companionship, because it represents a departure from childhood, or because it is the entry point for forming a family of one's own (UNFPA, 2026a).

And while many respondents said financial security is a major motivator for being in

Figure 4

Satisfaction with current number of children, by respondent age and sex



Percentage distribution of Demographic Futures Survey respondents in each age group responding to the question "How does the number of children you currently have compare with the number you would like for your age?" Data labels may not add to 100% due to rounding. See the technical note on page 146.

Source: State of World Population 2026 analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey

a partnership, the reasons people cited for having children are notably less utilitarian: 80 per cent said joy and happiness were important or very important motivations for wanting children. This, too, points to the importance of parenthood in many people's journeys through life: Not only do more than 9 in 10 respondents *want* children, but the great majority of them, across regions, do so because of the emotional rewards it would bring to their lives.

And social attitudes matter too. More than half of survey respondents who are not cohabiting or married (56 per cent) said that social norms and community expectations (defined in the survey as "honouring the wishes of my family" and "gaining respect in the community") were somewhat or very important motivators for being in a partnership. Thirty-five per cent said that social norms and discrimination (such as family pressure, cultural or religious expectations or stigma relating to, for example, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or disability) were somewhat or very important barriers to being in a partnership (UNFPA, 2026). Some 48 per cent of respondents said that social and cultural expectations are somewhat or very important motivations for having children. Together, this suggests that many respondents feel pressure over these deeply intimate and consequential life choices.

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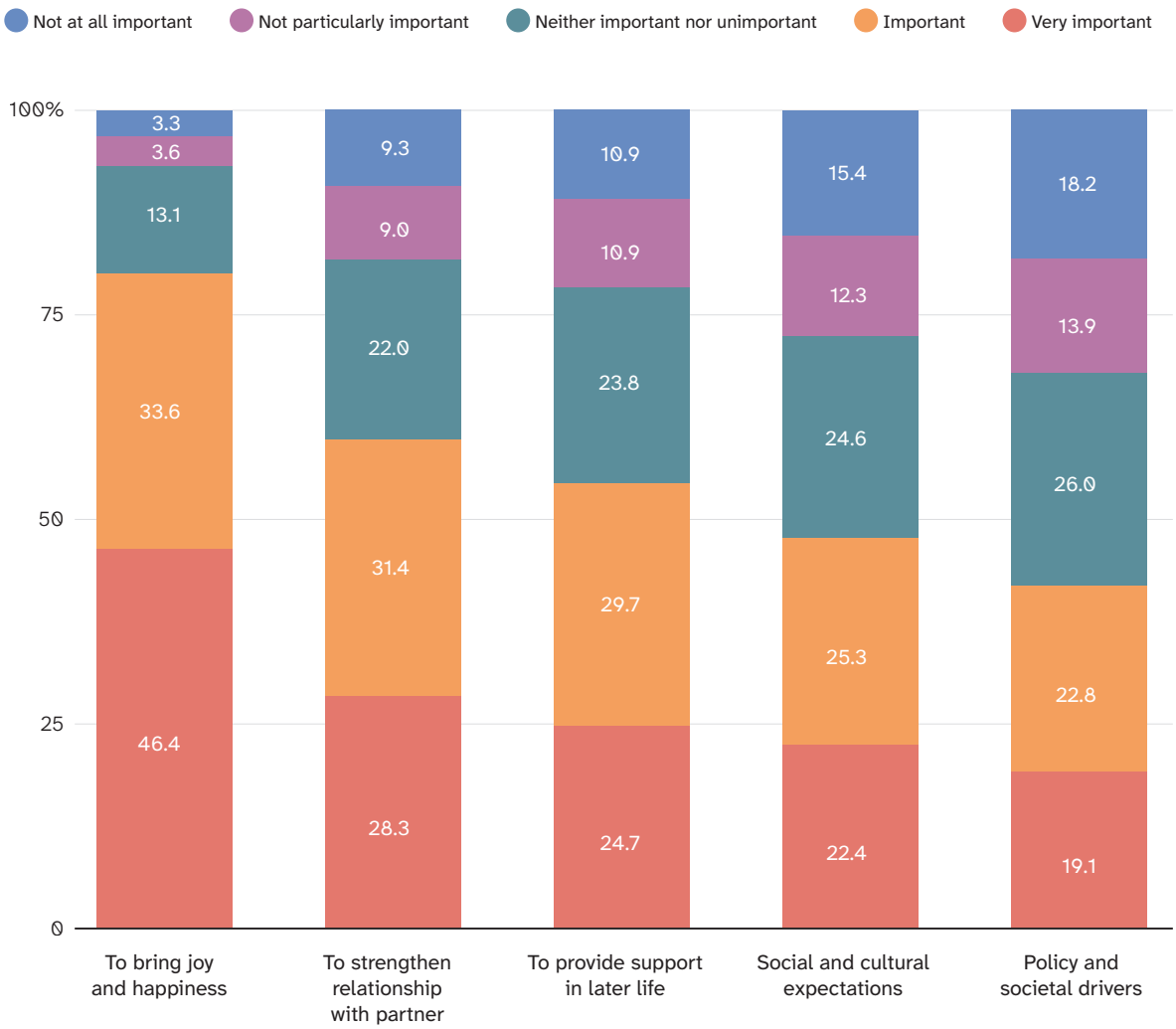


"It's important to involve more young individuals not just in politics but in economic issues, social issues."

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

Figure 5

Perceived importance of the reasons for wanting children



Percentage distribution of respondents by the perceived importance of various reasons for parenthood. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding. See technical notes on page 146 for details.

Source: Lives, Choices and Futures, UNFPA 2026.

Perceptions and concerns shape respondents' life goals

In recent years, serious attention has been paid to the relationship between respondents' fertility intentions and their sense of hope for the future, with many asking whether having a bleak global outlook is depressing fertility rates (UNFPA, 2025b; Sussman, 2026). On this, published data from the Demographic Futures Survey show a nuanced picture. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their view of the present and future, including what worries them and what they consider to be important life milestones. These data show that respondents, aged 18–39, tend to harbour both a positive view of the future and *also* pressing worries about a number of risks (UNFPA, 2026).

One of the prominent aspects that this report explores in further depth is how respondents' perceptions of their own financial security are related to key concerns about the state of the world.



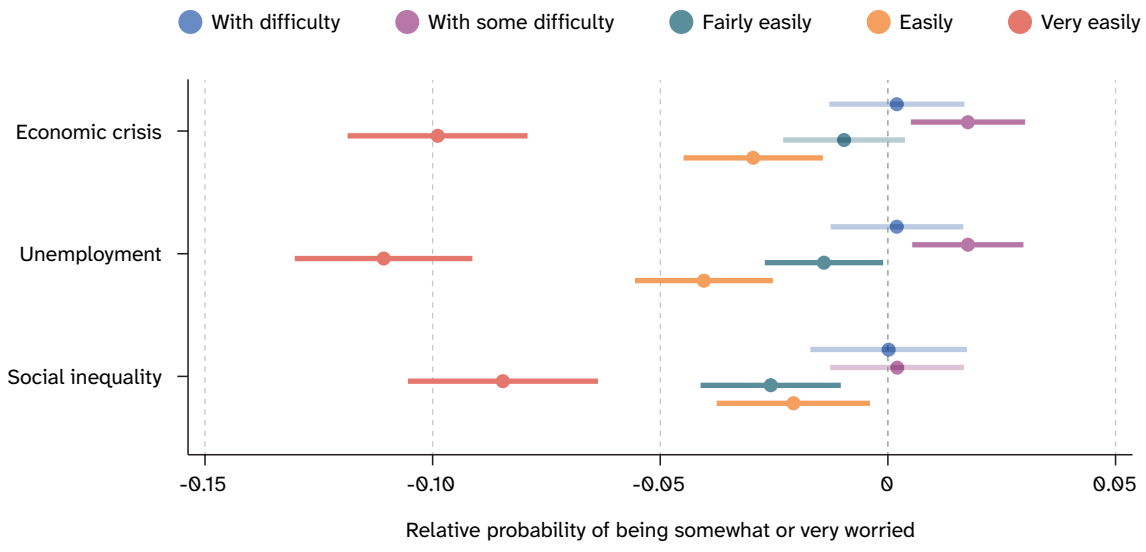
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Here, the analysis finds one fairly straightforward association: Respondents who said they can make ends meet "very easily" were the least worried about broader concerns like economic crises, unemployment and social inequality. This much is predictable. Yet the association does not hold true at the other end of the spectrum: All other categories of respondents – from those who can meet their needs only "with great difficulty" up through those who can make ends meet "fairly easily" – experience similar degrees of concern. It is only those who report to be the most financially comfortable who are meaningfully less worried about the broader economy and state of social inequality.

The analysis also looked at how respondents' perceptions of the world may correlate with their fertility intentions. Asked how positively they feel about the future, 30 per cent said "very positive" and 37 per cent said "somewhat positive"

Figure 6

Concerns about social and economic issues, by ability to meet one's needs



This figure shows Demographic Futures Survey respondents' relative probability of being somewhat or very worried about certain social and economic issues, according to their self-reported ability to make ends meet. Note that respondents who say they can meet their needs "very easily" depart considerably from all other respondents, indicating that only the highest level of financial comfort is associated with less concern over the issues noted on the y-axis. All other respondents (those saying they can make their ends meet "with difficulty", "with some difficulty", "fairly easily", "easily" and "very easily") cluster together near the zero, which is the reference category (those who responded they make ends meet "with great difficulty"), indicating broadly similar degrees of worry. Estimates account for respondents' age and country. The horizontal line through each dot shows the range of uncertainty around the estimate. Transparent lines indicate findings are not significantly different from the reference category, while solid lines indicate the effect is statistically different. See the technical note on page 146.

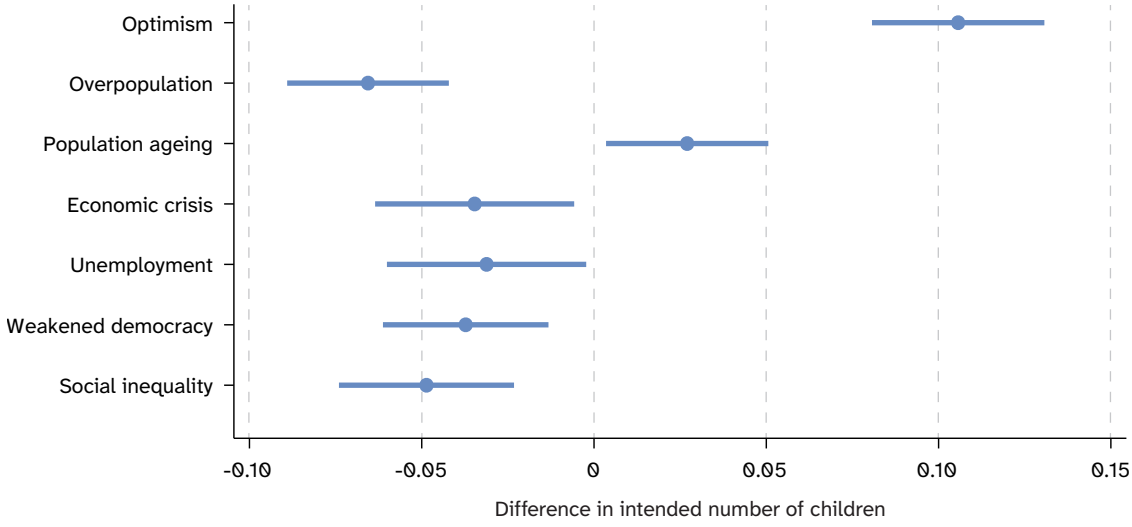
Source: State of World Population 2026 analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey.

(UNFPA, 2026). And there is a significant positive association between level of optimism and the number of children respondents say they intend to have. Expressed as a comparison between the lifetime fertility intentions of the most optimistic respondents (those who report feeling "very positive" about the future) and of the least optimistic respondents (those who feel "very negative" about the future), the former intend to have on average 0.42 children more than the latter (16 per cent more children, in relative terms).

By contrast, respondents who are worried about overpopulation, economic crisis, high unemployment, weakened democracy or social inequality reported lower lifetime fertility intentions than those who are not. The one exception is concern about population ageing, which correlates with slightly higher fertility intentions (see figure 7). Importantly, these are associations, and they may run in both directions, with hopeful people more inclined to have children and people intending to have children viewing the future more hopefully (Aassve and others, 2026).

Figure 7

Fertility intentions and outlook on the future



Each dot represents the difference in the intended number of children between respondents who report being "very optimistic" and those who report being "very pessimistic" about the future (top row); and respondents who report being "very worried" and those who report being "not worried at all" about the listed concerns (subsequent rows). A dot to the right of zero means that the people reporting higher scores tend to have higher fertility intentions, while a dot to the left of zero means the item is associated with lower fertility intentions. All estimates are statistically significant at the 95% level and they account for respondents' age, sex, income, education and country. The horizontal line through each dot shows the range of uncertainty around the estimate. See technical notes on page 146 for details.

Source: State of World Population 2026 analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey.

A changing view of the world

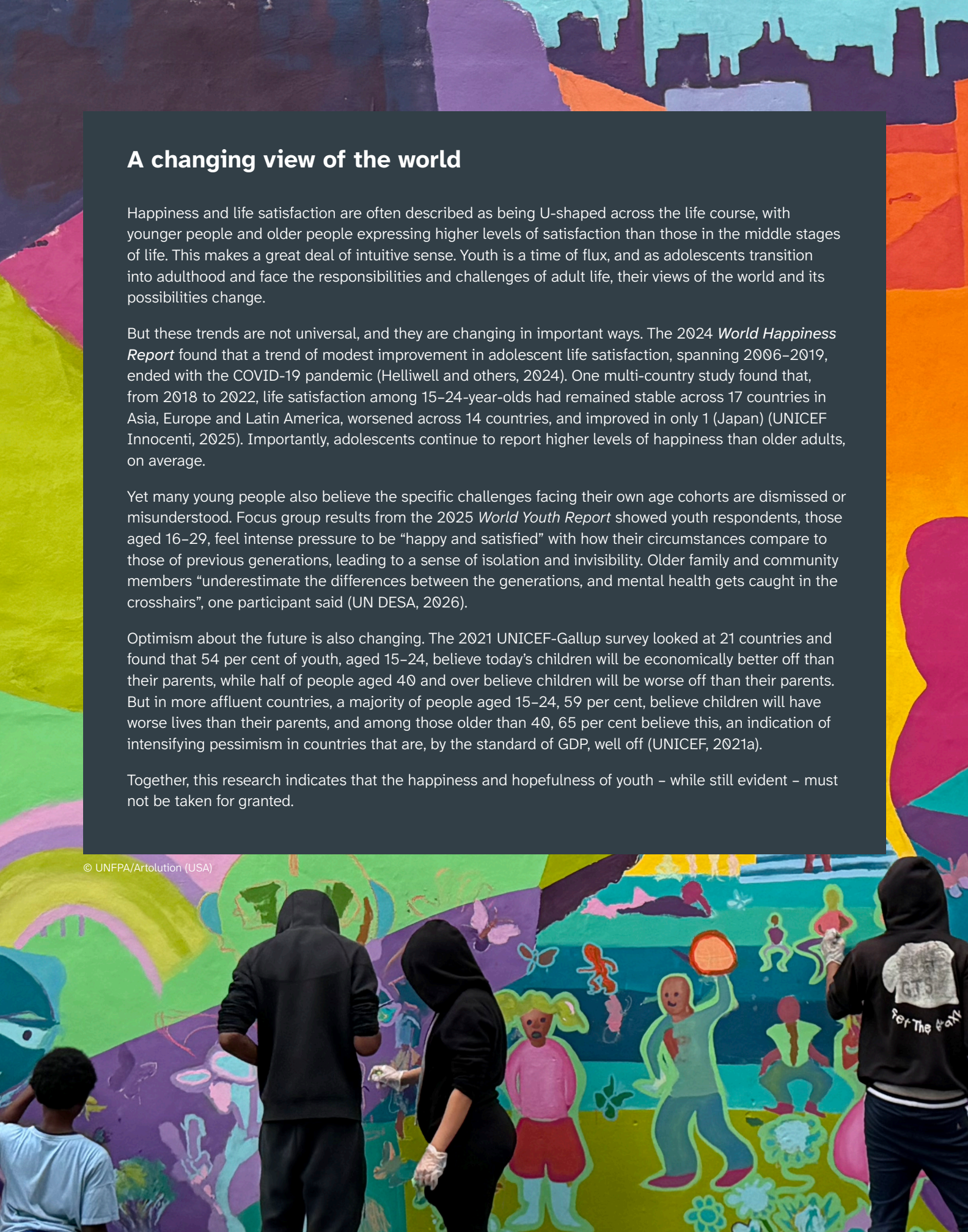
Happiness and life satisfaction are often described as being U-shaped across the life course, with younger people and older people expressing higher levels of satisfaction than those in the middle stages of life. This makes a great deal of intuitive sense. Youth is a time of flux, and as adolescents transition into adulthood and face the responsibilities and challenges of adult life, their views of the world and its possibilities change.

But these trends are not universal, and they are changing in important ways. The 2024 *World Happiness Report* found that a trend of modest improvement in adolescent life satisfaction, spanning 2006–2019, ended with the COVID-19 pandemic (Helliwell and others, 2024). One multi-country study found that, from 2018 to 2022, life satisfaction among 15–24-year-olds had remained stable across 17 countries in Asia, Europe and Latin America, worsened across 14 countries, and improved in only 1 (Japan) (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Importantly, adolescents continue to report higher levels of happiness than older adults, on average.

Yet many young people also believe the specific challenges facing their own age cohorts are dismissed or misunderstood. Focus group results from the 2025 *World Youth Report* showed youth respondents, those aged 16–29, feel intense pressure to be "happy and satisfied" with how their circumstances compare to those of previous generations, leading to a sense of isolation and invisibility. Older family and community members "underestimate the differences between the generations, and mental health gets caught in the crosshairs", one participant said (UN DESA, 2026).

Optimism about the future is also changing. The 2021 UNICEF-Gallup survey looked at 21 countries and found that 54 per cent of youth, aged 15–24, believe today's children will be economically better off than their parents, while half of people aged 40 and over believe children will be worse off than their parents. But in more affluent countries, a majority of people aged 15–24, 59 per cent, believe children will have worse lives than their parents, and among those older than 40, 65 per cent believe this, an indication of intensifying pessimism in countries that are, by the standard of GDP, well off (UNICEF, 2021a).

Together, this research indicates that the happiness and hopefulness of youth – while still evident – must not be taken for granted.



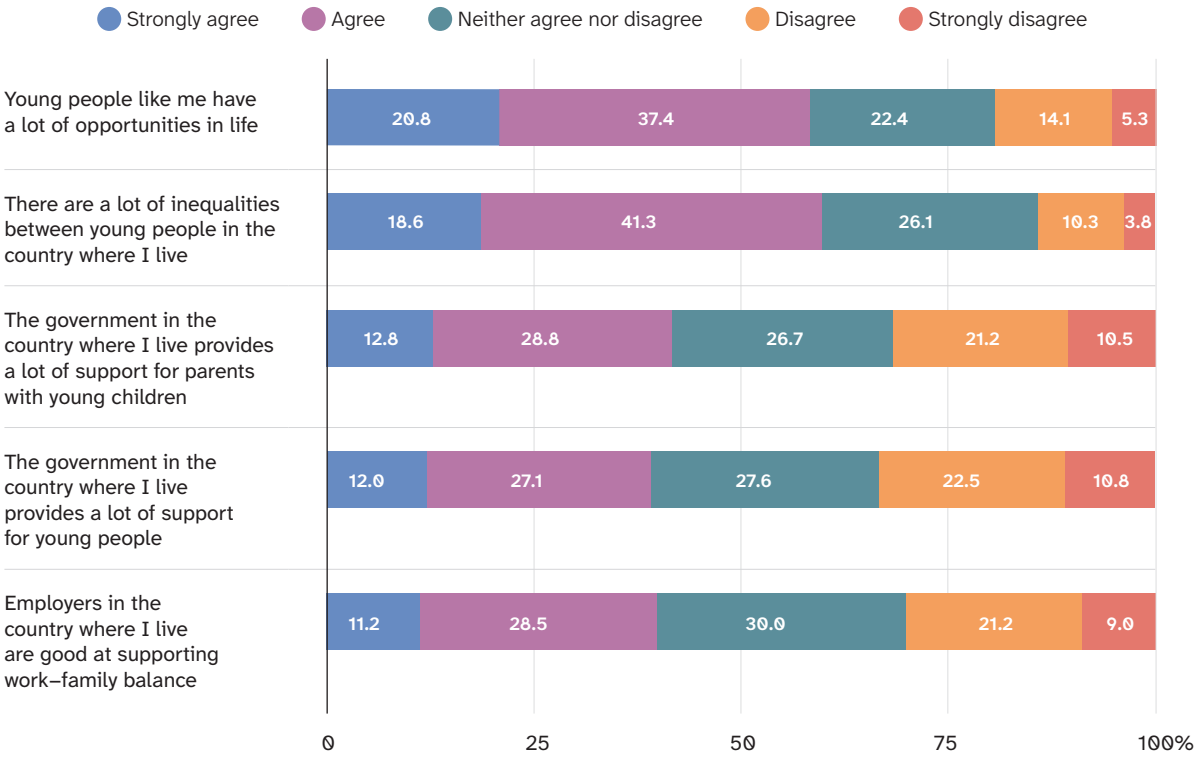
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The question that naturally follows is whether young people feel supported – as young people, as parents, as employees or otherwise – and if so, whether this can help them to envision a future inclusive of major life milestones.

The answer is that the large level of optimism shown by Demographic Futures Survey respondents is not matched by a faith in institutional support. Although a majority of respondents, 58 per cent, agreed or strongly agreed that young people have opportunities, far fewer believed they will be supported by the government or employers. Specifically, fewer than half – between 39 and 42 per cent – agreed or strongly agreed that their government

Figure 8

Perceptions of opportunities, inequalities and support systems



Demographic Futures Survey respondents' perceived opportunities for young people as well as need for additional support across a range of issues, from reducing inequality to support for parents, young people and work–family balance. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding. See technical notes on page 146 for details.

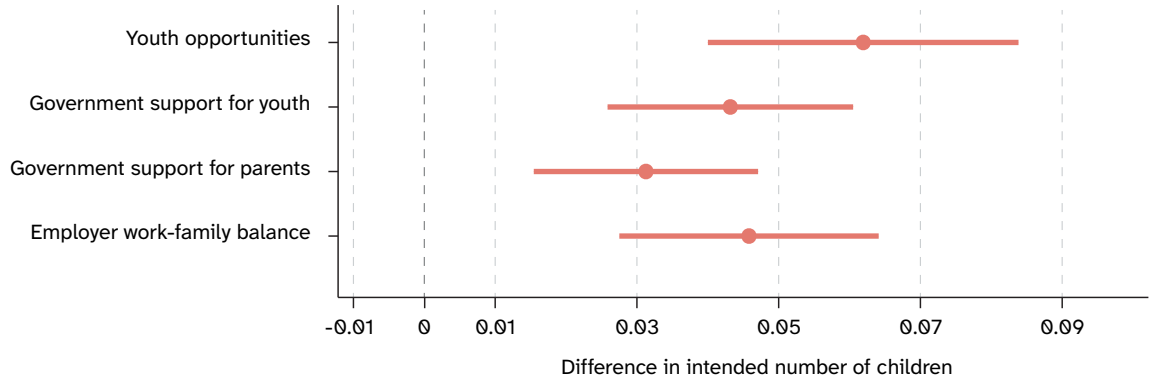
Source: Lives, Choices and Futures, UNFPA 2026.

provides a lot of support for young people, that their government provides a lot of support for parents of young children, or that employers are good at supporting work–life balance (UNFPA, 2026).

These perceptions do, in turn, relate to what young people intend for their own families, this report's original analysis finds. Independent of sex, age, education, income and country, respondents who see more opportunity and support report higher lifetime fertility intentions (see figure 9). The association is strongest for respondents who say young people have a lot of opportunities in life. (Importantly, this does not mean that perceptions of greater support will raise fertility intentions; these are associations, not necessarily causal relationships.)

Figure 9

Fertility intentions and perceptions of support



Each dot represents the difference in the intended number of children between respondents who "strongly agree" and those who "strongly disagree" that young people have good opportunities in life, that government supports young people, that government supports parents of young children and that employers support work–family balance. A dot to the right of zero means that agreeing strongly with the relevant statement is associated with more intended children. All estimates are statistically significant at the 95% level, and they account for respondents' income, sex, age group, education and country. See technical notes on page 146 for details.

Source: State of World Population 2026 analysis of the Demographic Futures Survey.

Calling for rights and empowerment

Overall, UNFPA's Demographic Futures Survey illustrates how closely young adults' aspirations and life trajectories are connected to the broader economic, social and institutional contexts in which they make decisions. Young people are not merely confronting macroeconomic or demographic trends; they are experiencing those trends in their daily lives, in their expectations, in the choices they see as available to them, and in the partnerships and families they are forging – or not.

Yet, as this report demonstrates, young people are largely disconnected from the systems and structures that drive these conditions. One expression of this disconnection can be seen in how decision makers are reacting to large-scale national and global demographic changes and the economic challenges that accompany them.

Young people are not merely confronting macroeconomic or demographic trends; they are experiencing those trends in their daily lives, in their expectations, in the choices they see as available to them, and in the partnerships and families they are forging – or not.

Demographic changes are poised to reshape humanity: The total human population is expected to continue rising for the next half-century, with much of that growth driven by countries still experiencing high fertility rates. At the same time, in more than half of all countries the fertility level is below 2.1 births per woman (commonly considered the "replacement rate"). Falling fertility is projected, ultimately, to take place in essentially all countries in the foreseeable future (UN DESA, 2024).

Both situations, high fertility and low fertility, will require sound, rights-based and forward-looking policies. Whole systems will need to adapt as these demographic changes unfold, including investments in human capital, care systems, labour-market participation, migration, healthy ageing, social protections and more. Yet public discourse tends to revolve around fertility rates, from decreasing them in high-fertility countries to increasing them in low-fertility countries (UNFPA, 2023a). In some cases, reproductive rights are even being curtailed to help achieve certain demographic outcomes (UNFPA, 2025b).

To many younger people (including a number consulted for this report), the public focus on their fertility rates and economic potential sounds like a prescription for how they should live – without consideration of what they want for themselves. Why call upon the labour of youth to support growing populations of dependents, whether children or elderly, when they do not feel supported themselves? Why focus on young people's most personal, intimate and consequential choices when those choices are already constrained?

Young people are demanding to make life choices – from gaining independence to starting families – for themselves and on their own terms. As the following chapters will show, ensuring the pathway to a dignified adulthood will mean supporting sexual and reproductive health so all people can decide if, whether and when to have children. It will mean ensuring access to the family planning services, from contraception to safe deliveries, needed to make those choices a reality. It will mean supporting young people's engagement in health systems and decision-making spaces, so they can play a role in crafting solutions. It will mean safeguarding their rights, expanding their agency and enabling their self-determination.

Today's young people are stewards of our collective future. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure they are supported in that role.



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Indonesian youth leading the fight against online gender-based violence

When Mariana “Tata” Yunita Hendriyani Opat, a young activist and content creator from Indonesia’s southern province of East Nusa Tenggara, first noticed “linked device” notifications on her messaging accounts, she dismissed them as glitches. What she didn’t realize was that a former romantic partner had begun watching her. His digital surveillance quickly escalated into real-world coercive control and blackmail.

Out of fear of victim blaming, Tata initially suffered in silence. But soon she realized that “violence is everywhere,” she said. “It can take any form, and the possibility of it continuing into the offline realm is very real.” Indonesia’s 2024 National Women’s Life Experience Survey found that digital violence is the primary contributing factor to non-partner sexual violence (Setyonaluri and others, 2025).

In 2016, Tata founded the Tenggara Youth Community, an organization providing reproductive health education to adolescents and young people, including information about violence prevention. By engaging

© Tenggara Youth Community



> “Young people need to work with the government, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders in improving digital literacy and security infrastructure.”

religious leaders and using storytelling, games and youth activities, the initiative has so far reached more than 4,000 young people across 30 communities. “People listen to their religious leaders,” explained Tata. “So we approached them first, explaining our mission and the importance of the issues we work on. Once they supported us, it was much easier to gain the trust of the community.”

The approach paid off, with schools and churches now requesting workshops from the organization. “We’ve seen the biggest change when the requests to talk about reproductive health come from the community itself,” Tata said.

However, her growing influence as a content creator talking about sexual and reproductive health has exposed her to other forms of digital violence, from sexist comments to hacking threats from her followers and strangers alike. “As a content creator with a public account, we are especially vulnerable,” she explained.

And laws around these issues can be inconsistent or unclear – a situation seen in many countries around the world. For example, even after the adoption of the law addressing technology-facilitated violence, other laws continue to leave survivors vulnerable — like prohibitions on the alteration or transmission of private electronic information, which could criminalize survivors.

But advocates are working to change this. Daniel Wahyu Priyambodo, a member of a youth-led organization focused on adolescent health and well-being called Tabu.id, reached out to the Ministry of Communications and Digital Affairs. “They admitted they weren’t paying much attention to digital violence,” he said.

With an audience of more than 140,000 and an annual reach of millions, Tabu.id is one of Indonesia’s largest digital platforms dedicated to adolescent health and well-being. Daniel was invited to speak on the ministry’s podcast for their first episode on digital violence. “I’m glad the ministry is now more sensitive to digital safety and data protection, which is evident in their new policies.”

Other leaders are listening, too. At community and school levels, the Ministry of Population and Family Development has included online gender-based violence awareness as part of their training modules for peer educators. Forum Anak (Child Forum), a youth participation platform managed by the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection, is campaigning for prevention of online violence. Subnational governments in several Indonesian provinces have established mechanisms to include young people in policy design from the outset, such as by involving Forum Anak in annual development planning consultations.

Tata and Daniel plan to stay engaged in the fight, and they want more young people to raise their voices, too. “Young people need to work with the government, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders in improving digital literacy and security infrastructure,” Daniel said.

IN FOCUS

Divesting from adolescents is divesting from the future

As the world rapidly transitions towards sustained low fertility and population ageing, investing in young people is not only a youth development priority, it is central to the future (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015). Today's adolescents and young adults will carry an unprecedented share of tomorrow's social, economic, caregiving, environmental and political responsibilities (UNFPA, 2014a). Their health, education, safety, agency and opportunities today form the foundation of a potential global triple dividend: immediate benefits for young people now, stronger outcomes for the adults they will become, and gains for the next generation they will raise (Patton and others, 2016; Vandermorris and Bhutta, 2017).

Yet the conditions needed to realize this dividend are deeply misaligned. The demographic opportunity is concentrated where fiscal capacity is often most constrained: 9 in 10 adolescents are growing up in low- and middle-income countries (UNICEF, n.d.) that face limited resources to invest in the foundations of human development, such as schools, primary healthcare, meaningful work, climate resilience and the social infrastructure that allows young people to thrive. At the same time, many high-income countries are ageing rapidly, with public budgets increasingly oriented towards older populations. This creates a generational and geopolitical mismatch. The world's future labour force, caregiving capacity, innovation, civic leadership and climate adaptation will depend heavily on young people growing up in settings where investment is least secure.

The second *Lancet* Commission on adolescent health similarly warns that global policy must better balance the needs of growing older populations with those of younger generations (Baird and others, 2022). The global financing architecture, however, is moving in the opposite direction. OECD preliminary data show that official development assistance from the Development Assistance Committee member countries fell to $174.3 billion in 2025, a 23 per cent decrease from 2024, the largest annual contraction on record (OECD, 2026a). This signals more than a temporary fiscal adjustment; it reflects a wider retreat from the investments needed to turn today's youth population into tomorrow's demographic dividend. Poverty reduction, gender equality, health, education, decent work and climate resilience all depend on whether adolescents are supported to survive, learn, participate, work, lead and care (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015; Patton and others, 2016).

Public spending does not take place in a vacuum. Traditional providers of international

development assistance and health financing are facing competing priorities amid economic constraints and protracted global crises. Even so, the consequences will be powerfully felt by young people. The current divestment threatens to reverse decades of progress for adolescents. For girls, it risks eroding gains in schooling, delayed marriage and childbearing, protection from violence, and pathways to economic independence. These losses are not only individual. Every girl denied education, bodily autonomy, safety and opportunity represents a preventable loss of health, agency and national development potential. For boys, divestment is equally consequential, leaving them more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, hazardous work, gangs, armed groups and harmful forms of belonging. Positive pathways to identity, connection, care and purpose are essential for all adolescents, and the stakes are intergenerational.

The first dividend of investment is immediate: healthier, safer, better educated and more connected young people who can thrive now. The second unfolds across adulthood: stronger skills, improved mental health, greater agency, better employment prospects and stronger caregiving capacity. The third is societal: future parents, workers, caregivers, innovators, voters and peacebuilders equipped to sustain families, economies, democracies and climate adaptation in ageing societies (Patton and others, 2016; Vandermorris and Bhutta, 2017).

Positive pathways to identity, connection, care and purpose are essential for all adolescents, and the stakes are intergenerational.

While divestment is felt most acutely by young people in low- and middle-income countries today, its consequences will shape the world's demographic future and sustainable development for decades to come. Cutting investment in adolescent health, education, protection and opportunity is shifting costs onto the future, and it is weakening the foundations of global labour markets, care systems, migration, innovation, democratic resilience and climate adaptation. Investing in adolescents is therefore not a narrow sectoral priority but a development strategy, a demographic necessity and a moral imperative. The question is not whether the world can afford to invest in young people, but whether our common aspiration for the future, captured in the sustainable development agenda, can survive if it does not.

Text provided by Caroline Moreau, Kristin Mmari and Kara Hunerson from the Department of Population Family and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.



Azraq, Jordan: A group of 20 young women, aged 18–24, paint a bright-colored mural at a safe space in Azraq refugee camp depicting their personal journeys and aspirations for the future — for themselves and for generations to come.

© UNFPA/Artolution (Jordan)

Chapter 3

Health: Safeguarding progress and advancing action



Health is an enabler of autonomy for all people, and in particular for adolescents. As they transition into adulthood, their physical, mental and emotional health will factor into all avenues of decision-making, with consequences throughout the life course and into old age. It affects everything from the development of human capital and the achievement of economic independence to engagement in communal decision-making and leadership at all levels of society.

Recent decades have seen major progress in health outcomes. In fact, advances in adolescent sexual and reproductive health are among the greatest, and most unsung, successes in public health history. From reductions in adolescent childbearing to declines in child marriage, drops in female genital mutilation, and action on limiting HIV infection and mortality, the world has enjoyed two decades of steady progress.

Yet this progress is uneven both between and within countries, and between young men and young women, with those in fragile and conflict-affected contexts lagging furthest behind. And much of this progress has recently slowed, stalled or threatened to reverse.

This chapter will examine these significant public health achievements, as well as areas where progress is still to be made. In doing so, it will highlight the importance of cross-cutting, multisectoral efforts that bridge gaps between policy, service provision and communities.

Bridging the gap to communities is, from the view of youth engagement, especially critical. So often, top-down approaches produce resistance, but solutions can be found in promoting individual rights and agency, engaging young communities and forming diverse alliances. Examples in this chapter show how engagement with, and leadership by, youth has powered major public health gains. These should be models for future progress. Unfortunately, notable cases of public health stagnation, and even losses, show that these lessons are too often going unlearned.

Decades of achievement: Major public health successes

Adolescent pregnancy, childbearing and maternal mortality

Statistics on adolescent pregnancy are generally collected for girls aged 15–19 (WHO, 2024a). And by this definition, most of the world has seen remarkable decreases in adolescent childbearing since 2000. Western Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, North America and especially South Asia have seen the adolescent childbearing rate halved between 2000 and 2023. Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean also saw notable drops of roughly 40–50 per cent in this period. In East and Southern Africa and West and Central Africa, the adolescent birth rate decreased by more than a quarter (UNICEF, n.d.a).

Three factors have contributed to the success in reducing adolescent pregnancy and childbearing. First, expanding girls' opportunities, including continued education, skills development and the ability to envision alternatives to early motherhood, has strengthened their agency over their own life choices. Second, increased access to comprehensive sexuality education and adolescent-friendly contraceptive information and services has enabled adolescents and young people to make informed decisions and effectively prevent unintended pregnancies. Third, broader structural changes, including reductions in child marriage, shifts in gender and social norms, and multisectoral efforts to address poverty have together created enabling environments that sustain declines at scale (WHO and HRP, 2025). All of these, notably, help adolescents exercise informed agency over their health, bodies and futures.

Successful programmes have tended to bring these factors together. Thailand's 2014 national strategy to reduce adolescent pregnancy, for example, included a comprehensive legal and institutional framework that guaranteed rights to information, education and reproductive health services, as well as confidentiality and non-discrimination. Crucially, it also expanded school-based comprehensive sexuality education, strengthened adolescent-friendly health services, and raised awareness of services and adolescents' rights. It also engaged communities in positive social norms change (UN News, 2023; Hadley, 2024). These latter two measures, youth empowerment and community engagement, are known to be essential in ensuring the ownership and trust of young people themselves in these efforts (Sharma and others, 2018; Chavula, Zulu and Hurtig, 2022).

Such efforts, centring the affirmation of rights and rooted in public health evidence, must be sustained – in no small part because of how many girls remain unreached. Some 15 per cent of girls aged 15–19, globally, were estimated to have an unmet need for family planning in 2019, with little improvement expected between 2019 and 2030 (Kantorová and others, 2021). Thirteen per cent of young women globally reported entering motherhood before reaching legal adulthood, according to 2023 data (UNICEF, n.d.a). And in 2021, it was estimated that nearly half a million girls became mothers at age 10–14 (UNFPA, 2023a). These girls are likely to be the most marginalized and hardest to reach.

Regional differences show where investments can and should be made. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, even though adolescent childbearing rates decreased by 27 per cent between 2000 and 2023, population growth means the overall number of births to adolescent mothers increased (UNICEF, n.d.a; IHME, n.d.). And while data are hard to generate in crisis-affected locations, these environments are known to increase vulnerability to adolescent pregnancy (UNFPA, 2026a), including through recourse to child marriage and exposure to sexual violence (UNICEF, UN Women and Plan International, 2025), and being pregnant in these settings is more likely to prove fatal (WHO and others, 2025).

For girls who do become pregnant and whose pregnancies are continued, maternal health services are essential. Adolescent pregnancy can be extremely dangerous; complications in pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death for adolescent girls aged 15–19 (WHO and HRP, 2025). Unfortunately, the recognition of adolescents' needs for healthcare and support during pregnancy and childbirth has trailed well behind attention to adolescent pregnancy prevention. A large and growing body of evidence documents the multiple challenges that pregnant and parenting adolescents face – and how health, education and social welfare systems often fail to respond adequately to their needs. These include barriers to respectful and age-appropriate healthcare, exclusion from education, and limited access to social protection and economic opportunities across diverse settings (Ajayi and others, 2023). Recent analyses underline this gap and call for more deliberate and sustained investment in meeting the needs of pregnant and parenting adolescents (Sabet and others, 2026).



How should we understand intended adolescent pregnancies?

An estimated half of adolescent pregnancies are, in fact, intended. And when adolescent pregnancy is defined as taking place among girls aged 15–19, more than half of all adolescent pregnancies take place in legal adulthood – among girls aged 18–19 (UNFPA, 2022).

While, broadly speaking, girls' empowerment tends to lead to delayed pregnancy, evidence from several settings suggests that the actual relationship between girls' and young women's empowerment, fertility aspirations and childbearing is not so straightforward. Many older girls and younger women *do* desire motherhood.

One large randomized trial in the United Republic of Tanzania found that girls' entrepreneurship training at the end of secondary school increased income and economic independence but did not reduce early pregnancy and childbearing; rather these *increased*, possibly because greater economic security made it more feasible for some young women to form families on their own terms (Berge and others, 2022).

Studies of migrant and mobile young people also show that many *want* children, but their circumstances can constrain or postpone childbearing. Among self-identified street adolescents and youth in Kampala, Uganda, 94 per cent wanted children in the future, yet repeated mobility, overcrowded living arrangements and migration-related challenges were associated with reduced personal decision-making around childbearing (Bwambale and others, 2022).

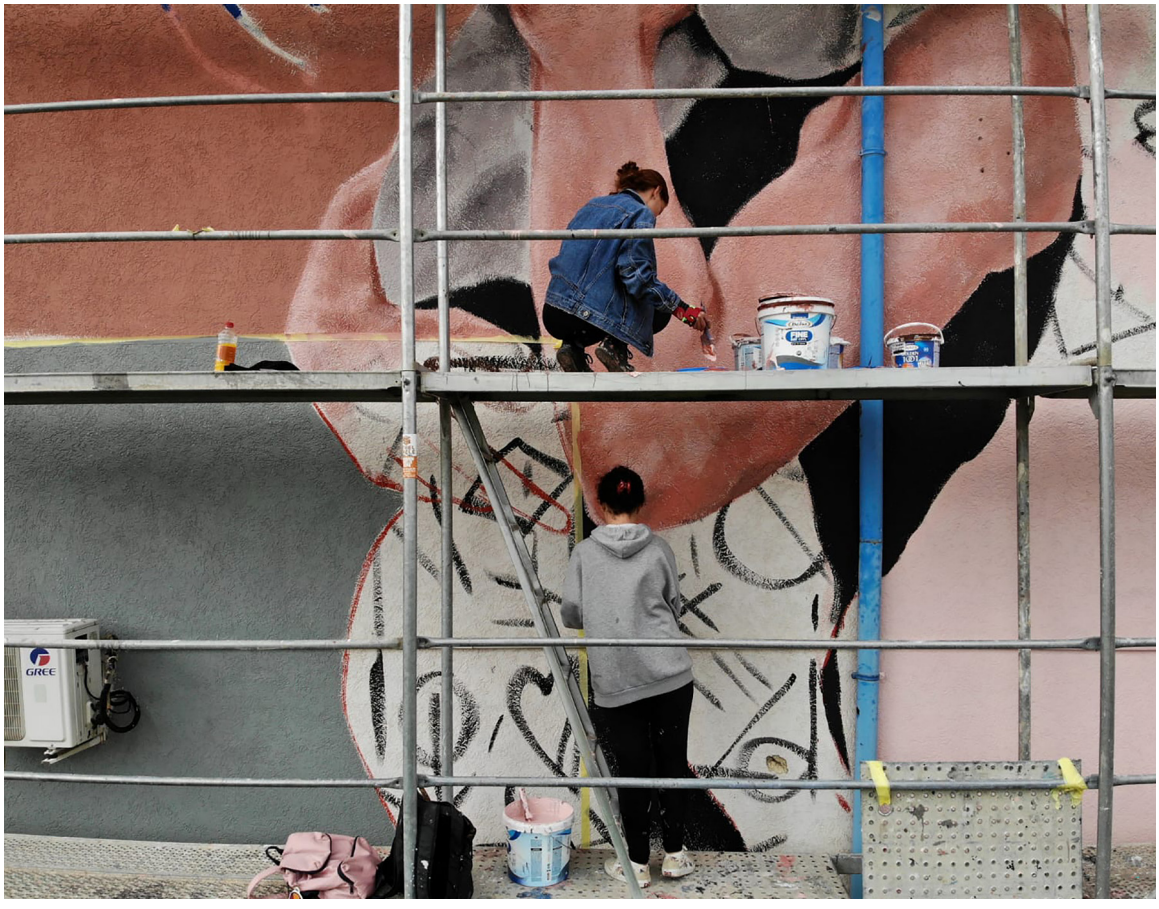
At the same time, there is evidence that even when intended, adolescent pregnancy is often the result of having only constrained choices (UNFPA, 2022). Research has found, for example, that spending more time in school reduces adolescent fertility even beyond the age of schooling. This is hypothesized to be an "aspirational" effect of schooling, in which girls delay pregnancy as education affords them greater opportunities (Garbett and others, 2025).

Even as adolescents and young adults deserve agency and empowerment in decision-making, so too do they deserve the full complement of information, services and opportunities that will enable them to make informed and responsible choices for themselves and their future families.

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While most maternal health programmes do include adolescents, few go the extra step of understanding and responding to them with the sensitivity and additional care they need (Ajayi and others, 2023; Sabet and others, 2023). Research studies and NGO initiatives demonstrate what is possible, even in resource- constrained settings, by providing integrated packages of care and support tailored to young pregnant women, young mothers and their infants. These experiences – documented in global reviews and case studies – offer practical lessons for programme design and delivery (Sabet and others, 2023).

Some countries have gone further, incorporating systematic attention to young pregnant women, young mothers, their babies and their partners into national programmes, with dedicated interventions that address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of pregnant and parenting adolescents (Sabet and others, 2023). These kinds of interventions, seeking to reach vulnerable adolescents on highly stigmatized topics, are often most successful when they include engagement with, and leadership by, young people. Whether as peer educators, outreach volunteers or peer counsellors, youth are often most effective at reaching other youth (see feature on page 64).



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Reducing adolescent pregnancies to harness youth agency in Benin

On a quiet afternoon in Benin, 22-year-old Akimatou sits on her porch surrounded by a small group of teenage girls. She holds an illustrated booklet covering topics long kept in the shadows: contraception, safe sex, bodily autonomy. She speaks with assurance – and experience.

At 16, her secondary school education was cut short by an early pregnancy. It is an all too common story in the region, where adolescent pregnancy rates are among the highest in the world, narrowing girls' prospects for the future. Like other girls in her situation, Akimatou faced stigma and rejection, and withdrew not only from school but from her community.

West and Central Africa is home to more than 150 million young people aged 15–29. This vibrant generation has the potential to drive economic and social



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transformation, but only if they see the support they need – including investments in education, health, and structural conditions like stable employment, inclusive institutions and equal opportunities for all. Youth-friendly family planning is another of these investments. It can help keep girls like Akimatou in school, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Without these investments, the bright lights of a generation may be dimmed. In Benin, only about one in three girls completes the first cycle of secondary education, mainly due to financial difficulties, child marriage and adolescent pregnancies. The most recent data show that 28 per cent of women, aged 20–24 years, were married before age 18 (UN DESA, n.d.b). Other countries in the region see the same concern: In Chad for example, the total net enrolment rate for lower secondary education is just 41 per cent, while child marriage rates are at 61 per cent (UN DESA, n.d.b).

But even girls who discontinue schooling can be engaged and empowered. Akimatou's turning point came when she was 19 and attended a community discussion organized by the international NGO EDUCO. That led her to join a comprehensive sexuality education programme supported by the Government of Benin. She became a peer educator, and gained the confidence to complete training sessions in tailoring. Today she balances motherhood with running a small sewing business and serving as a respected community leader.

One measure of whether young people's potential is being realized is a country's proportion of young people not in education, employment or training – its NEET status. Throughout the region, the proportion of NEET individuals is strikingly high. In 2024, Senegal's was 35 per cent, Mali's was 30 per cent, and Burkina Faso's was 22 per cent, pointing to significant gaps in economic inclusion across the region. These figures illustrate how youth energy and vision must be met with the right policies. Only then can young people translate their potential into opportunity.

But efforts are under way to meet young people where they are. Benin is focusing on free public schooling for girls, expanded access to meals in public schools to improve retention rates, and raising awareness of gender-based violence and the dangers of early pregnancies. Between 2016 and 2024, adolescent pregnancies in the intervention areas dropped by 62 per cent. In Nigeria, investment in free schooling, school canteens and safe spaces is also showing returns in the form of girls' secondary school completion, which rose by 25 percentage points between 2018 and 2024. Child marriage rates fell by 10 percentage points over the same period.

Every one of the girls reached can now amplify that progress through her own contributions and creativity. Back on her porch in Benin, Akimatou is doing just that. She is guiding the girls of her neighbourhood, rewriting a story of narrowed choices into one of agency and resilience – of young people not just benefiting from development, but driving it forward.

Between 2016 and 2020, for example, Uruguay initiated a strategy for both preventing unintended adolescent pregnancy and providing comprehensive care for pregnant adolescents and adolescent parents (López-Gómez and others, 2021). Among the components were school retention and employment measures and comprehensive sexuality education programming, including programmes directly engaging adolescent boys (López Gómez and others, 2026). Between 2016 and 2020, Uruguay's adolescent birth rate declined rapidly, reaching half the regional average (PAHO and UNFPA, 2020). As another example, the Women's Center of Jamaica Foundation's Programme for Adolescent Mothers was found to be extremely effective at reducing repeat pregnancies through counselling, continuing education and outreach services (Amo-Adjei and others, 2023). And in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Adolescent Mothers Against All Odds Initiative offers community engagement as well as support to pregnant adolescents and first-time mothers in crisis-affected areas, demonstrating that these services can also be provided in humanitarian contexts (CARE, n.d.).

There has been worldwide improvement in adolescent maternal survival, too. Adolescent maternal mortality declined significantly between 2000 and 2015, following a long arc of progress seen in reducing maternal mortality overall – which fell by 40 per cent after 2000 but has plateaued more recently (WHO and others, 2025) – and the declining incidence of adolescent pregnancy noted above. Still, improvements in both overall maternal survival and adolescent maternal survival have been unevenly distributed. The youngest adolescents, aged 10–14, have the highest risk of dying from pregnancy and childbirth. These risks decline as girls and women move into adulthood (Maheshwari and others, 2022; Wei and others, 2025). And the risks vary greatly by context, with a large majority of adolescent maternal deaths occurring in sub-Saharan Africa (IHME, n.d.).

Unsafe abortion remains a leading global cause of preventable maternal death; a growing number of countries are liberalizing laws on access to safe abortion care (Center for Reproductive Rights, n.d.) and developing national guidelines to improve both services and engagement with communities (WHO, 2025b; Ganatra and Morris, 2024). Efforts to improve awareness of rights, access to confidential and respectful treatment, and service availability are associated with young people's ability and willingness to seek safe care. Key examples include programmes in Mexico and Nepal, which are reaching adolescents and young people with safe services held to international standards – in both cases following strong civil society and youth engagement to raise awareness of the real-world needs of young people (Chandra-Mouli and others, n.d.).

Although there are some countries where underage adolescents can obtain abortion care, most minors are required to obtain permission from a guardian or judge (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2025; Guttmacher Institute, 2026; Pai and Chandra, 2023). Additionally, there are many countries in which adolescents simply cannot seek or obtain legal and safe abortion care. As a result, adolescents are more likely than adults to turn to informal or unsafe providers, often with serious consequences for their health (Chandra-Mouli

and others, n.d; Guttmacher Institute, 2016). While nearly 60 countries increased legal access to abortion between 1994 and 2023, at least four have adopted laws restricting access (Sierra, 2024).

Harmful practices

Child marriage and female genital mutilation, two major harmful practices contributing to significant morbidity among adolescent girls, have both declined in recent decades – in both cases thanks to the strong partnerships forged among grass-roots organizations, public health and human rights actors, and policymakers.

The prevalence of child marriage, which is associated with earlier initiation of childbearing and higher overall fertility (Fan and Koski, 2022), has fallen from nearly one in four girls to one in five girls in the last decade (UNICEF, 2023). Much of the change can be credited to increasing girls' education, economic empowerment and expanded social protection programmes implemented at scale, and to community engagement shifting discriminatory gender norms. Together, these factors have increased girls' opportunities and perceptions of self-worth, reduced the pressures that drive families to marry off their daughters, and promoted more gender-equal norms at the community level (Siddiqi and Mann, 2024). This has been apparent in countries like Bangladesh, Ethiopia and India, which have seen the biggest declines in child marriage prevalence over the past two decades (Alamdoand others, 2025; IIPS, 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

Still, progress has been highly uneven. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, almost one in three girls will be married by age 18 (UNICEF, n.d.b), and many regional and country estimates mask within-region and within-country differences. And notably, child marriage has not yet been eliminated in many high-income countries. A recent World Bank report shows recent child marriage data for just 15 high-income countries, and of them eight had a child marriage prevalence over 1 per cent (Chen, Shuning, and others, 2025).

In the last 30 years, half of all progress made towards eliminating female genital mutilation happened in just the past decade (UNICEF, 2024). In the last 10 years, the proportion of girls aged 15–19 who had undergone female genital mutilation in 31 high-prevalence countries fell from 41 to 34 per cent (UNICEF, 2022). Progress in Burkina Faso, Kenya and elsewhere may be particularly instructive. In Burkina Faso, close collaboration between the government and civil society organizations has led to sustained declines in rates of the practice, including through mobile community courts, engagement by traditional and religious leaders, and coordination among health workers (UNFPA and UNICEF, 2025). Kenya, too, has seen major successes through legal reforms that strongly affirm the rights of women and girls, as well as close coordination with civil society and local leaders (Republic of Kenya, 2019). Both countries are home to dynamic girl-led movements to end female genital mutilation.

Still, much work remains to be done, particularly in countries where female genital mutilation remains widely practised. The risk is not evenly distributed, even within these countries; girls from poorer and more rural backgrounds still face the highest risks (United Nations, General Assembly, 2024).



Youth in health policy design

People may doubt that youth have a place in health policy creation. After all, most young people will not have the resources, education or work experience to qualify as health specialists. Yet since the 2020 World Health Organization Global Consensus Statement on Adolescent and Youth Engagement, there has been global agreement that young people should be involved in shaping the policies that impact them (PMNCH and others, 2021). The World Health Assembly Resolution on Social Participation for Universal Health Coverage urged health systems to create sustained, structured and accountable mechanisms enabling communities, including young people, to influence decisions (World Health Assembly, 2024).

Integrating youth perspectives is shown to increase health policy relevance, strengthen trust and democratic practices, and improve responses to the needs of all people (Albreht and others, 2026). When young people are engaged in the creation of digital mental health tools, the resulting outputs can see significantly higher uptake and sustained engagement than those designed without youth engagement (McGovern and others, 2025). Research around sexual health has also found that peer-led educational models can, in some cases, outperform traditional approaches in delivering relevant, actionable information (Siddiqui and others, 2020). Finally, as young people experience disproportionate social and health inequalities, this lived experience constitutes expertise in its own right, in addition to the range of other assets they bring to the table.

Even as participation has long been recognized as a determinant of health, young people remain inadequately included in health policy and implementation, with clear consequences for their well-being. Exclusion affects their sense of agency, and further weakens trust in institutions, factors linked to negative mental and social health outcomes (Albreht and others, 2026).

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HIV and HPV

The global response to HIV represents one of the greatest public health achievements of recent decades. Since 2010, new HIV infections have fallen by more than 40 per cent globally, AIDS-related deaths by nearly 60 per cent, and new HIV infections among children through vertical transmission by 69 per cent. These gains are a powerful demonstration of what sustained political commitment, scientific innovation, integrated sexual and reproductive health services and – critically – community leadership can achieve (UNAIDS, 2026).

The Zvandiri programme in Zimbabwe, for example, used peer-led, community-based models to train young people to provide counselling, psychosocial support and links to care. This programme demonstrated that well-designed youth engagement can significantly improve HIV testing, treatment adherence and viral suppression among adolescents living with HIV (Ferrand and others, 2017; Mavhu and others, 2020). Similar approaches that combine community leadership, adolescent-friendly services, comprehensive sexuality education and gender-responsive programming have contributed to sustained reductions in new sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in several countries – illustrating that adolescents are not simply beneficiaries of programmes but essential partners in delivering them (UNAIDS, 2026).

Yet these gains have not been shared equally by all adolescents and young people. In 2025, adolescent girls and young women faced an HIV incidence three to four times higher than their male peers'. These disparities are driven by, among other factors, persistent gender inequality, gender-based violence, unequal power in relationships, limited access to comprehensive sexuality education, and poor access to sexual and reproductive health services. The epidemic is also becoming increasingly concentrated among marginalized populations: 49 per cent of new HIV infections globally take place in key populations and their sexual partners, while outside sub-Saharan Africa they account for around two thirds of new infections. Young key populations include young men who have sex with men, transgender adolescents and young people, young people who sell sex, young people who inject drugs, and adolescents in prisons and other closed settings – groups that continue to face stigma, discrimination and criminalization that limit access to HIV care (WHO, 2021; UNAIDS, 2026). Overlapping inequalities also have a major impact on sexual and reproductive health outcomes. For example, many adolescent girls and young women at risk of, or living with, HIV are also mothers, or will become mothers during adolescence or early adulthood.

Vaccinations against the human papillomavirus (HPV) are another area where clear progress is being made, with civil society and community advocates playing a significant role (UICC, 2026). HPV is one of the world's most common STIs and the primary cause of cervical cancer, which disproportionately affects women in low- and middle-income countries. Together with cervical cancer screening and early treatment, HPV vaccination has the potential to substantially reduce future cervical cancer deaths. And today, increasing numbers of countries are

introducing HPV vaccination programmes for adolescent girls, with growing efforts to improve coverage and, in some settings, extend vaccination to boys. Rising vaccination coverage has been seen across a number of countries (UNICEF Asia and the Pacific, 2025), resulting in demonstrably lower rates of cervical cancer in women and girls (Kumar and others, 2025) and HPV-related cancers in boys and men (Sasieni and Falcaro, 2026). Credit for this is owed to a wide alliance of partners that have helped to lower the cost of the HPV vaccine, expand its availability and develop supportive policy and programme guidance (Gavi, n.d.), and to many youth-led efforts to reach communities with destigmatization and education efforts (SRHIN, n.d.; WFPHA, 2025).

Unfortunately, the progress seen with HIV and HPV has not been matched when it comes to many other STIs. Bacterial STIs such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia remain major causes of ill health among adolescents and young adults, while antimicrobial-resistant gonorrhoea is an increasing global public health concern. Congenital syphilis, which is preventable through antenatal screening and timely treatment, remains a persistent cause of stillbirth, neonatal death and disability. Extending the lessons learned from the HIV response and HPV vaccination efforts is therefore essential. These include centring human rights, integrating sexual and reproductive health services and HIV care, doubling down on comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and investing in real and sustained community engagement (WHO, 2026).

Care for sexual and gender minorities

In many countries, same-sex sexual behaviour is criminalized, and alarmingly an increasing number of countries are moving towards criminalization. Recent estimates suggest that around 60 countries (about one third of all countries) continue to criminalize consensual same-sex relations, in some cases with severe penalties (Mendos and Rohaizad, 2024). In many others, they are not illegal but remain highly stigmatized (Poushter and Kent, 2020).

But it is important to highlight that major gains in providing positive, non-judgemental health services to LGBTIQ+ populations have indeed been made in recent decades, and a small number of countries demonstrate that rapid progress remains possible. Stigma-free healthcare for gender-diverse people was essentially non-existent before the 1960s and 1970s (Landers and Kapadia, 2019). Today, legal and social acceptance of LGBTIQ+ people is the norm in many parts of the world, and vibrant communities of sexual minorities exist even in countries where same-sex activity and diverse gender expression are criminalized. Of course, acceptance is uneven within and across countries (European Commission, 2023). And though recent progress has been contested in many settings, the overall trend is towards recognizing that all people, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, deserve equitable access to rights-based healthcare that meets their needs (WAS, 2024).

Malta and Uruguay provide examples of how comprehensive legal reform, combined with participatory processes, can create more enabling and protective environments. Even though stigma persists, especially for marginalized groups like migrants (MaltaToday, 2023), Malta has made significant progress in securing legal protections for LGBT people (ILGA-Europe, 2024). These gains follow the pattern of sustained political commitment, inclusive lawmaking, and advocacy by affected communities – including youth (LGBTI+ Gozo, n.d.) – described for other public health achievements. Similarly, Uruguay's comprehensive legal reforms resulted from many years of youth-led activism and engagement (Outright International, 2026; Cariboni, 2014).



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Failure to progress: Learning from inaction

Gender-based violence

One of the most disheartening failures in global public health has been the persistently high prevalence of intimate partner and non-partner sexual violence. The lack of progress here is not only among adolescents, but among all populations. Still, it is important to note the impact of gender-based violence on adolescents as a cohort, given the lifelong physical, emotional and mental health impacts of this violence, which all too often begins in early adolescence. In 2023, nearly a quarter of 15–19-year-old girls who have had an intimate partner also reported experiencing physical or sexual violence from a partner; 16 per cent reported experiencing intimate partner violence in the past year (WHO, 2025a). About 8–9 per cent of adolescent girls and young women report ever experiencing non-partner sexual violence, 3–4 per cent of them in the past year – and these are almost certainly underreported (WHO, 2025a).

The evidence suggests that most types of sexual violence are experienced substantially more frequently by girls than by boys (Piolanti and others, 2025). That said, rates of sexual and gender-based violence against boys and young men cannot be ignored. A global analysis in *The Lancet*, for example, estimated extremely high rates of sexual violence against children, with a prevalence of 19 per cent for girls and 15 per cent for boys (Cagney and others, 2025).

Marginalized young people are also at particularly high risk of experiencing violence. Youth who are gender-diverse or sexual minorities, for example, have elevated risk of sexual violence (Blayney and others, 2023), especially in high-stigma countries, with gender-nonconforming individuals targeted at higher rates (Bränström and others, 2023). And while there are gaps in the data, researchers indicate that girls and boys with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to endure sexual violence, with girls facing the greatest risk (Jones and others, 2012). An estimated 40–68 per cent of young women with disabilities experience sexual violence before age 18 (UNFPA, 2018a).

Exposure to gender-based violence, including sexual violence, often has lifelong implications. Violence during adolescence and early adulthood is strongly associated with poor mental health, adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, disrupted education and life opportunities, and long-term physical illness. These effects accumulate over a life course and contribute to intergenerational cycles of violence, poverty and poor health. And beyond the physical and psychological scars, sexual violence can also lead to pregnancy during adolescence (Ruiz-Sternberg and others, 2024; Ajayi and Ezegbe, 2020), with the likelihood of pregnancy often higher if perpetrated by an intimate partner (Basile and others, 2018). Adolescents may contract HIV during a sexual assault, and more broadly, experiencing sexual violence is associated with increased incidence of HIV (Folayan and others, 2022; Abrahams and others, 2021).

Why has the world seen so little progress in this space? Experts point to limited investment, fragmented programming, poor data, and weak systems for prevention and response. Funding

remains far below what is required; much programming continues to be small in scale and pilot in nature; and countries often invest in interventions with limited effectiveness (García-Moreno and others, 2026). The prevention and response systems involved in addressing violence – including health, police, justice and social services – often remain inadequately equipped and, in some settings, may perpetuate stigma and repeated harm (Blofield and others, 2026). And experts are increasingly calling for a reframing of prevention efforts, which frequently engage only potential victims, so that they address the harmful norms that drive violence in the first place. Current efforts to engage men and boys are "small and scattered, and few initiatives address institutional and structural levers of change", one recent report finds (Flood and others, 2026).

Menstrual health

Menstrual health is a multidimensional aspect of well-being for girls, women and gender-diverse people who menstruate. Social taboos and lack of knowledge exacerbate the exclusion of girls from public spaces, limiting their educational attainment and economic empowerment (Sood and others, 2022). While data to assess trends in menstrual health remain lacking, there are clear indications that menstrual needs are going unmet. A 2021 study across eight low- and middle-income countries found that, in most of the countries, more than 70 per cent of women lacked a place to manage menstrual hygiene that meets all six basic conditions assessed – cleanliness, privacy, safety, water and soap. The study also found persistent inequalities by household wealth, with poorer women more likely to lack adequate conditions for managing menstruation (Rossouw and Ross, 2021).



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Still, it should be noted that efforts to destigmatize menstruation have ramped up considerably in the past decade (Zivi, 2025). In 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution calling for more efforts, jointly between states, civil society and human rights groups, to support menstrual hygiene management, including ensuring "that men and boys, as well as religious and community leaders and the family unit, are also included in all awareness-raising initiatives" (United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2024).



Bodily autonomy is highly constrained for certain young women

SDG indicator 5.6.1 measures women's decision-making power across three dimensions of sexual and reproductive health: contraceptive use, sexual relations and reproductive healthcare. The latest data show that, across 78 countries, looking at women aged 15–49 who are married or in a union, only 56 per cent are able to exercise decision-making over all three of these dimensions, a figure that is essentially unchanged from previous years. In a nutshell, nearly half of partnered women still lack full autonomy over their own bodies.

There are major differences among the dimensions of decision-making and among population sub-groups. For example, women tend to have comparatively more autonomy when it comes to making choices over contraception (89 per cent of partnered women say this), while fewer are able to refuse sex (75 per cent) or make their own healthcare decisions (75 per cent).

UNFPA analysed data for eight countries with comparable data (Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kazakhstan, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Tajikistan and Zambia), and found both education and wealth are strongly associated with increased levels of bodily autonomy. Youth, by contrast, is associated with having *less* autonomy. Adolescents aged 15–19 reported, on average, lower decision-making power (27 per cent are able to make choices over all three dimensions) compared to all older age cohorts, with decision-making ability highest among those aged 45–49 (with 41 per cent able to make decisions across all three dimensions) (UNFPA, 2026b).

These findings emphasize the disadvantaged position that younger women, in particular, occupy when it comes to making essential sexual and reproductive health choices, from limited negotiating power to reduced access to services. They also align with research showing adolescent girls endure very high rates of intimate partner violence (WHO, 2024b). Together, these facts argue for greatly increased reproductive health and rights information and survivor services tailored to meet the needs of adolescents.



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Rising concerns: Modern and emerging frontiers

Mental health

Mental health is no less essential than physical health in empowering young people to fulfil their potential and exercise informed and responsible choices over their futures. Tragically, all evidence points to a gradual worsening of adolescent mental health. Increases in mental health morbidity since 1990 have been particularly pronounced for anxiety, depression and eating disorders; among girls; and among 15–19-year-olds. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly amplified this trend, with adolescent mental health conditions spiking in 2020 and 2021 after what had been a consistent but gradual upward trend in prior decades (Tian and others, 2025). Anxiety moved from the third-largest to first-largest driver of disability among children and adolescents during the pandemic period (Liu and others, 2025).

Mental health conditions now account for a substantial share of the burden of disease among adolescents worldwide, contributing to 19 per cent of the total disease burden and 42.4 million disability-adjusted life years globally (Baird and others, 2025). An estimated 14 per cent of adolescents aged 10–14, and 15 per cent of those aged 15–19, live with a mental health condition (WHO, 2023). Research using data from the Global School-Based Health Survey estimated that 21 per cent of girls and 15 per cent of boys across 61 countries and territories reported feelings of loneliness, anxiety or suicidality (Shawon and others, 2023). There was significant variation by region and sex, ranging from 24 per cent of girls and 21 per cent of boys in Africa to 11 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls in Southeast Asia (Shawon and others, 2023). The rise in mental health issues should ring alarm bells for public health systems everywhere. Mental health problems are among the leading causes of ill health and disability in adolescents (WHO, 2025c). Suicide is the third leading cause of death for those aged 15–29 (WHO, 2025c), and deaths due to self-harm are nearly one third more frequent among boys than among girls (IHME, n.d.).

Adolescent mental health has rightly risen on the agendas of international organizations and governments, and there is now a growing body of guidance to support their efforts. WHO guidelines emphasize a comprehensive approach that includes promotion of socioemotional skills, prevention of risk factors, and provision of accessible, integrated services (WHO, 2020; WHO, 2019). Still, progress in countries has been slow. Mental health conditions in adolescents remain under-recognized and under-treated, with services often inaccessible, fragmented and under-resourced (Wang and Schilbach, 2023). A combination of factors can be blamed, including stigma that limits help-seeking, insufficient investment, weak system capacity, and the need for coordinated, multisectoral responses spanning health, education and social sectors (Wang and Schilbach, 2023).

Here is where the lessons of recent public health successes are applicable – especially those addressing highly stigmatized conditions and requiring alliances across diverse communities and actors. Youth actors have consistently been at the vanguard of efforts to raise awareness of the adolescent mental health crisis, from

young peacebuilders calling for trauma-informed programming (UNFPA, 2018) to youth advocates calling for "mental health, psychosocial support and wellness services" to be made available within public primary healthcare systems, "seamlessly integrated" with sexual and reproductive healthcare (UNFPA, 2024). "Mental health" was one of the most frequent answers given by the 1.5 million respondents to the "What Young People Want" survey (Saran and others, 2025), and destigmatization of mental health needs was a key issue identified in the 2025 *World Youth Report* (UN DESA, 2026). The energy and vision are there – waiting to be matched by institutions and funding.

Digital influences

Yet near-ubiquitous connectivity has pushed digital influences to the forefront of adolescents' lives, with specific impacts on their health starting at the earliest ages in adolescence. Data from 31 middle-income countries showed that, by age 15, nearly 90 per cent of young people had their own smartphones (Demombynes and Uribe, 2024).

Adolescents, who are socially minded and highly attuned to peer criticism or approval, face significant developmental impacts from these influences, not least of which are the potential mental health effects and consumption of health misinformation and disinformation. Studies of 14-year-olds indicate a strong association between social media exposure and social comparison, worsened health and well-being, negative feelings, low self-worth and low life satisfaction, with girls faring worse than boys (Hayes and others, 2026; Hartas, 2021).

That said, no single consensus has emerged; instead, depending on factors such as patterns of use and adolescents' baseline well-being, digital influences may be harmful, neutral or even positive (Agyapong-Opoku and others, 2025; Conte and others, 2024). Adolescents are often able to find positive connections online, even as they find negative, health-harming ones. They are embarking on previously unexplored forms of relationships such as parasocial influencer–follower connections, in which adolescents are exposed to varying levels of covert and overt marketing while also developing personal relationships across cultural, geographic and economic barriers (Ghai and others, 2022; Engel and others, 2023).

Importantly, adolescent sexual expression is increasingly taking place online, from exposure to sexually explicit media to engaging in romantic and sexual activity over digital connections (Guzmán, 2026). Abusive, predatory and controlling intimate partner behaviours that adolescents might experience in the real world can now also take place online (Nesi and others, 2022). Additionally, because they have access to more sources of knowledge, and opinions, than ever before, they are filling in the gaps of formal education and effectively teaching themselves new skills. They are also exposed to mis- and disinformation actors, who are especially prevalent in the space of sexual and reproductive health and romantic relationships.

Yet health services and health education have not sufficiently grappled with these changes. Studies indicate that adolescents seldom receive information on how to safely navigate sexual

development as a digitally connected generation (Payne, 2023; Woodleyand others, 2025). Mis- and disinformation related to sexual health, and contraception in particular, have been identified as urgent threats to sexual and reproductive health access and equity (Malcolm and others, 2025), with evidence indicating that they perpetuate discriminatory social norms, reinforce the exclusion of marginalized voices and disrupt service delivery (Purnat and others, 2025).

Adolescent reliance on generative AI is another area where health experts are calling for close attention (Liu and Yip, 2026). Global data on AI use is scant, but polls from the United States suggest that 3 in 10 teens are daily users of AI (Faverio and Sidoti, 2025), and one in eight use it for mental health advice (McBain and others, 2025). Middle-income countries are heavy drivers of AI, although this pattern is not adolescent specific. With health and social information increasingly mediated by AI answer engines and chatbots, the potential for both expanding access to accurate health information and for communicating harmful mis- and disinformation is enormous.

Many experts indicate the current state of AI use has the potential to widen rather than close global health disparities (Chen, and others, 2025). AI, by design, flatters and validates its users, fostering emotional attachment and dependency to prolong engagement. Young people still developing interpersonal skills are seen as especially vulnerable to AI sycophancy and manipulation (Sanford, 2025; Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence, 2026). "AI psychosis" is an emerging area of investigation, especially for youth. Concerns over the potential of AI to de-skill users, usually discussed in the context of labour-market potential, should therefore be addressed in the remit of relationship skills and mental health as well.



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Yet young people are themselves convening and proposing solutions. Nascent efforts to engage young people in the regulation and governance of digital tools, such as initiatives of the Youth Internet Governance Forum (IGF, n.d.), have shown that young digital natives are eager to be engaged in crafting healthy approaches to digital influence.

Afrodescendant youth in Costa Rica champion health equity and gender equality

"I would like people to see Afrodescendant youth as leaders," said Kadry Thomas Mackenzie, 21. "We have spent almost our whole lives fighting for our rights."

Kadry is from Limón on the coast of Costa Rica, the province with the country's largest Afrodescendant population – who across Latin America and the Caribbean suffer significant inequalities in access to health, education and employment opportunities (CEPAL, 2020).

"I've been involved in leadership and activism for as long as I can remember," said Kadry. "My grandmother and my mother were my inspiration – they guided me along all their paths."

At 12, Kadry was elected to be a student representative at school. She organized fund-raising events to improve the school's services and became a tutor for pupils who were struggling



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academically. She also used sport to engage young people from vulnerable communities, helping them with their studies and creating spaces to keep them away from drugs and other risks. But as her leadership grew, she also began to discover the barriers that came with being a young Afrodescendant woman with limited economic resources.

From an early age, she was teased because of her skin colour, her hair and for speaking English Creole. A turning point came at age 18, when she attended a workshop on peace and diversity and another girl told her, "if you keep quiet, it will never end." From then on, Kadry said, "I started to raise my voice."

More than 153 million Afrodescendants live in Latin America and the Caribbean, but they and Indigenous Peoples face greater barriers than the rest of the population in accessing education, healthcare and employment opportunities. And although the region has made significant advances, such as reducing adolescent pregnancies, progress is deeply uneven across wealth, geographic and gender divides. Afrodescendant adolescent girls in Latin America and the Caribbean face a 50 per cent higher risk of pregnancy (UNFPA, 2025c) compared to non-Afrodescendant adolescents, limiting opportunities for young women and their families.

For Kadry, growing up on the Caribbean coast meant many opportunities were far from home. To study law, she had to move to the capital San José. "Young people from Limón have to migrate if they really want to pursue the career of their dreams," she explained. This has pushed many to abandon their studies.

There are cultural barriers, too. At school and in libraries, she couldn't find resources documenting Afrodescendant history in Costa Rica. This motivated her to create *Juventud 180*, a space where young people who face different hardships could connect. She worked with the Youth Council – an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Youth in Limón – and received training in comprehensive sexuality education that she said expanded her and her peers' knowledge of issues that were previously taboo. Now, said Kadry, "teenage girls are no longer afraid to say, 'I need a contraceptive method because I want to prevent a pregnancy during adolescence,' or 'I need to use a condom because I want to prevent an STI.'"

She hopes this is just the start for an empowered younger generation. "What I would like a 12-year-old girl to say ten years from now is that in Costa Rica she is respected, that she is taken into account, that she was able to study and become a professional without having to leave everything behind, without having to hide her culture and her ethnic pride."

Keeping adolescent health and well-being on national agendas

The world has made tangible progress on a limited set of adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues, achieved through sustained political commitment, focused investments, and the gradual shift towards coordinated and, increasingly, government-led programmes at scale. They demonstrate that progress is possible when attention, resources and action are aligned with robust community engagement.

These gains must now be expanded to other areas of health, including non-HIV STIs, gender-based violence, menstrual health, and areas beyond sexual and reproductive health such as mental health and substance use. In many of these areas, problems remain widespread or are worsening. Given limited human and financial resources, countries can build on existing platforms, for example by equipping health workers who already provide sexual and reproductive health services to address related issues such as mental health. They can invest in data generation in areas where evidence and implementation experience are still evolving, while engaging and empowering the communities most affected. And because health and well-being are not simply the absence of harm, services can work towards ensuring young people are also supported in the experiencing positive aspects of sexual and reproductive health, including desire, intimacy and healthy relationships.

Unfortunately, momentum is not currently on this side. Instead, many hard-won gains are at risk. Recent reductions in official development assistance, combined with a weakening of global and regional partnerships, have created a more constrained and uncertain environment for health overall, and for adolescent sexual and reproductive health in particular.

Early evidence points to immediate disruptions – cuts to prevention programmes, loss of outreach workers and erosion of community trust – while also exposing the fragility of gains that depended on sustained external support (Chandra-Mouli and others, 2025; Baird and others, 2025; Muriuki Gatheru and others, 2026). Estimates vary, but experts project that as many as 22 million additional preventable deaths could take place, across all ages, between 2026 and 2030 if funding cuts continue (Silva and others, 2026). As is noted in a contribution by researchers from Johns Hopkins University (page 56), these cuts represent a massive divestment in young people, as countries with the most youthful populations are disproportionately affected.

At the same time, countries are not standing still: Many are resetting priorities, integrating adolescent sexual and reproductive services into broader healthcare, investing domestic resources, and seeking new partnerships. In this context, keeping adolescent health on national agendas will require deliberate effort and clear justification, grounded both in its intrinsic importance and in its contribution to wider public health, economic and social goals. National champions will need to make a stronger, more strategic case for adolescent health, positioning it as both an end in itself and a means to achieving national priorities. This includes embedding adolescent health within broader health and development

agendas, integrating services where feasible, and using evidence to demonstrate returns in terms of improved health, productivity and social stability. At the same time, countries will need to diversify partnerships and financing, drawing on domestic resources and cross-sectoral collaboration to sustain momentum.

The lessons of recent history, shared in this chapter, can serve as a road map. A recent assessment noted that Benin has made steady progress in adolescent health using the same approach described elsewhere: government, civil society and young people themselves working together to liberalize laws, expand services and strengthen community engagement (Baird and others, 2025). The current moment calls not for retrenchment, but for learning and adapting (Chandra-Mouli and others, 2025; Baird and others, 2025; Muriuki Gatheru and others, 2026).

Imagining a truly equitable, truly universal approach

Recent public health achievements should not overshadow the fact that substantial proportions of adolescents and young people have not yet been reached. Individuals, families, communities and even entire countries have been left behind when it comes to youth sexual and reproductive health. Large disparities persist between and within countries; those who are poor, marginalized or living in fragile settings are least likely

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Comprehensive sexuality education is a window of opportunity

Comprehensive sexuality education not only improves sexual and reproductive health outcomes, but also contributes to a shift towards more gender-equitable attitudes that support young people in understanding their rights and strengthening their agency and capacity to form respectful relationships. It also represents a key entry point for the primary prevention of gender-based violence, at a time when norms related to power, consent and relationships are still forming (Goldfarb and others, 2026; Haberland, 2015).

In many countries, policies supporting the provision of sexuality education in schools and other educational institutions are in place, national curricula have been developed, and programmes of varying scope and quality are being implemented. However, studies show the content of these curricula is often limited and that delivery is uneven and frequently weak (UNESCO and others, 2021). Many programmes remain limited, addressing only a subset of issues such as puberty or STI prevention, even as studies show programmes addressing power, gender norms and relationships may achieve more positive outcomes (Bali and others 2025). Programmes are also more effective when facilitators and educators are well supported, delivery is participatory and skills based, and content is anchored in young people's lived realities, centring dialogue and skill-building rather than information transfer alone (Sell and others, 2023).

Unfortunately, there is concerted and often organized opposition against comprehensive sexuality education, including accusations that this education sexualizes children, undermines local cultural values or denies parents authority over their children (Choat, 2026) – even though international standards require that comprehensive sexuality education curricula actively engage local communities, youth and parents (UNESCO and others, 2018). While governments, international agencies, civil society and educators are working together to ensure the benefits of this proven intervention reach adolescents and young people everywhere, the opposition is often better resourced, organized and assertive (Ipas, 2023).

Much more effort is needed to generate the political will and dedicated investment needed to realize the health and societal benefits of comprehensive sexuality education at scale and for everyone.

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to benefit from either currently available interventions and services or emerging forms of care. To reach those still left behind, we need more deliberate and tailored approaches, from identifying who is being missed to adapting policies, programmes and service delivery to address their needs and barriers. It will require strengthening health systems to deliver equitable, accessible and acceptable services at scale, as well as actively ensuring that adolescent health – including sexual and reproductive health – remains visible as systems adapt to new funding realities.

Unfortunately, this is not happening. Today, health inequities are not closing; they are widening. A rapidly growing boutique medical industry is providing elite clients with bespoke treatments, even as whole populations of people are priced out of the minimum standards of care (Rylands and others, 2025; Hinckley, 2023). Ethicists worry that the health services and quality of care currently available to the richest countries and people may come at a cost to everyone else (Marquez and Lever, 2023).

One key remedy is basic universal health coverage, which has in recent years emerged as a central ambition of global leaders, endorsed by consensus as SDG target 3.7. And youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services are an integral part of realizing universal health coverage, young people say. This is a pillar of action that has been repeatedly urged by youth advocates, including in the 2023 Agenda for Action for Adolescents (PMNCH, 2023), the 2024 Cotonou Youth Action Agenda (UNFPA, 2024) and the ICPD25 Global Youth Report (UNFPA, 2023).

It is not a pipe dream. Studies show that health systems can feasibly be made responsive to the sexual and reproductive health and rights needs of adolescents across diverse low- and middle-income contexts (Simon and others, 2026). The world has the global agreement, the tools, and in many cases even the foundational policies needed to make this happen. What is needed is the holistic approach, marrying human rights, health, budgets and political will, that young people have been insisting upon.

Research shows that, even among places with supportive policy foundations for advancing universal health coverage for adolescent sexual and reproductive health, many still have fragmented approaches, for example emphasizing awareness and access to services but not providing the full range of essential care. Another problem is that policy environments are themselves fragmented, with countries enacting a mix of laws that sometimes affirm and sometimes restrict access to care. A review of policies in the Asia and Pacific region, for example, found that adolescents can legally consent to sex an average of three years before they can legally consent to healthcare (UNFPA, n.d.b).

As has been described extensively in this chapter, and as will be illustrated more deeply in the next, effective policies affecting young people – for health and everything else – require as a non-negotiable first step meaningful representation by those very young people. Without this, laws and services will continue to leave them behind, and our common vision of an equitable future will remain out of reach.

Championing positive gender norms for a new generation of fathers and partners in the Republic of Moldova

On a quiet evening, 25-year-old Ruslan Crețu cradles his 6-month-old son, Albert, gently singing a lullaby as the infant falls asleep. For Ruslan, this bedtime routine is not a chore but the core of what it means to be a parent and partner. “Fatherhood means being involved, not just helping,” he said.

In the Republic of Moldova, traditional societal expectations have often cast men as primarily financial providers, leaving caregiving and household duties almost exclusively to women. Today, Ruslan says these rigid domestic roles are fading as a new generation of men and women understand the need – and value – of having more balanced households.

This is clear in discussions at his local future fathers’ club. Ruslan initially joined it out of curiosity, and was surprised to find a space where men openly discussed parental responsibilities,

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“I realized that society is more open than I thought. Engaged fathers are no longer an exception.”

emotional well-being and shared caregiving (UNFPA in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2025). “I realized that society is more open than I thought. Engaged fathers are no longer an exception,” he said.

There are now future fathers’ club chapters in nine districts across Moldova, and more than 500 men have participated in their activities. The clubs were launched with the non-governmental Child Rights Information and Documentation Centre, and are supported by UNFPA and UN Women. Ruslan is now a facilitator at the clubs, inspiring other men and boys in his community to embrace positive social norms and gender equality. When he became a new father, he put those values into practice every day at home. “There are no fixed roles,” he emphasized. “Emotional involvement is just as important.”

Ruslan’s views are increasingly seen across Moldova, as well, according to findings from a recent study: Between 2015 and 2024, the proportion of men actively engaged in raising and educating their children rose from 55 per cent to 68 per cent. The share of couples who equitably divide daily household duties jumped from 30 per cent in 2015 to 58 per cent in 2024, while the percentage of men regularly accompanying their partners to prenatal medical appointments more than doubled to 50 per cent (UNFPA in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2025).

These kinds of gender-equal attitudes and behaviours can help young people meet their own aspirations. In UNFPA’s Demographic Futures Survey, women aged 18–39 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia consistently reported high levels of difficulty finding a partner who shared their goals and values. Meanwhile, 65 per cent of female respondents said that insufficient partner involvement in housework and childcare was an “important” or “very important” barrier to achieving their parenthood goals. These barriers are contributing to young adults’ decisions to potentially delay or forgo starting a family.

Championing equal partnership, engaged fatherhood, and support structures for men and women could therefore help to address these barriers. And this vision is catching on: One of Moldova’s largest banks is seeking to engage male employees as part of its family-friendly workplace programme. In schools, curricula are being revised to include discussions on gender stereotypes and equality. The National Agency for Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children is currently running a campaign to challenge gender inequality and promote positive examples of masculinity.

Ruslan and his wife Cristina show how these simple actions and attitudes – from attending prenatal check-ups together to sharing caregiving duties – can build a solid foundation for not only a healthier home environment, but also a more equitable and resilient society.

IN FOCUS

Where boys learn to be men: Digital spaces, masculinity and the future of gender equality

For decades, global efforts to improve adolescent well-being have focused on addressing the persistent disadvantages and gender inequities faced by girls and young women – work that remains essential today. Yet achieving gender equality also requires sustained attention to boys and young men, not only because they are critical partners in building more equitable societies, but also because they are navigating profound social, economic and digital transitions of their own. Growing concerns about gender polarization, backlash against gender equality and declining well-being among adolescent boys have brought renewed urgency to understanding their experiences and the forces that help shape them (Hayes and others, 2024; Barker and others, 2023; Equimundo, 2022).

Digital environments have become a primary site of socialization for adolescent boys. Social media platforms, podcasts, gaming communities and the broader "manosphere" – a loose ecosystem of online spaces promoting male grievance and traditional gender hierarchies – now compete with the influence of families, schools and peers in shaping boys' attitudes and identities (Hayes and others, 2024). While online spaces can offer connection, information and a sense of belonging, research increasingly documents their role in reinforcing harmful gendered norms, deepening social isolation, and undermining boys' capacity for emotional expression and healthy relationship formation (Robb and Mann, 2025). Because this exposure occurs during a critical period of identity formation, the gender norms and relational patterns boys internalize online can shape their behaviour and well-being well into adulthood (McNicholas and Harold, 2025). At a societal level, these dynamics may be contributing to broader trends of gender polarization and delayed or forgone partnerships – patterns that are increasingly visible across both high- and middle-income countries.

Across regions, social media and gaming platforms have become central spaces where boys negotiate peer relationships, seek advice, develop competencies and learn about masculinities (Hayes and others, 2024). In many low-income countries, adolescent boys and young men are substantially more likely than their female peers to be online, making them among the first young people exposed to digital environments (UNICEF, 2023a). Research from several countries finds that exposure to masculinity-related content is widespread and consequential – associated with greater adherence to restrictive masculine norms, increased emotional suppression, lower self-esteem and higher levels of loneliness (Hayes and others, 2024). Many boys report feeling

pressure to conform to unwritten online rules of masculinity that actively discourage vulnerability, empathy and emotional expression (Robb and Mann, 2025).

The implications extend beyond individual well-being. Digital platforms have become the arenas where ideas about gender are now produced, amplified and contested. Masculinity norms once shaped through families, peer groups, schools, religious institutions and traditional media are now increasingly formed, reinforced and challenged online (Hayes and others, 2024; Robb and Mann, 2025). Yet despite a substantial body of research on masculinities, the digital spaces where boys and young men spend their time have received relatively little programmatic attention (Center on Gender Equity and Health, 2025) – overlooking one of the most powerful forces shaping the next generation's attitudes towards gender, relationships and equality.

Rather than viewing digital spaces solely as sites of harm, they should also be seen as opportunities to engage boys and young men within the environments where their attitudes, identities and relationships are being shaped. Influencer-led campaigns, peer-generated content, online mentorship and interactive social media initiatives are beginning to demonstrate how trusted digital voices can promote empathy, emotional well-being, respectful relationships and gender-equitable attitudes. Critically, these approaches work with – rather than against – the dynamics of online influence, leveraging trusted peers, content creators and communities of belonging instead of relying on top-down messaging. Digital platforms are built around the same mechanisms that shape norms: peer approval, belonging, identity, status and diffusion of ideas. While these dynamics can reinforce harmful norms, they can also be harnessed to promote healthier and more equitable models of masculinity. Emerging programmes from organizations including Equimundo, Tearfund, Population Foundation of India, Girl Effect, Shujaaz and BRAC are exploring this potential through influencer partnerships, digital peer communities and online storytelling (Center on Gender Equity and Health, 2025; South Asia Social Norms and Agency Learning Collaborative, 2025). In Nigeria, for example, Tearfund is piloting a faith-based influencer initiative that works with trusted online voices to strengthen support for gender equality and healthy relationships among young men. This initiative is exploring how the same networks that can transmit misinformation and harmful norms can also foster positive masculinities and support norm change at scale.

Digital spaces are now among the primary environments where boys learn what it means to be a man – and where the next generation's gender norms are being formed. Responding to this reality requires investing not only in families, schools and communities, but also in the digital ecosystems that increasingly shape social expectations, identity and relationships. The same platforms that can amplify harmful narratives about masculinity can also promote empathy, respect, healthy relationships and gender equality. Reaching boys where they already are is no longer optional; it is essential for advancing gender equality, preventing gender-based violence, and ensuring that all young people can build lives and relationships grounded in dignity, respect and mutual care.

Text contributed by Rebecka Lundgren and Courtney McLarnon from the Center on Gender Equity and Health at the University of California, San Diego.







Nicaraguan youth paint a mural at a music school in a popular park in the capital city, Managua.

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Chapter 4

Standing for rights in a moment of regression

As is the case with youth health advocates, today's youth rights advocates can look to recent history for confirmation that progress is achievable – and has been achieved. Global consensuses were forged through treaties such as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989) and frameworks including the 1994 ICPD Programme of Action (UNFPA, 2014) and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995), which themselves followed major rights precursors like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). These achievements, earned through constant advocacy and iterative multilateral agreements, have established wide international legal and political support for young people to claim agency over their bodies, their health and their futures (See definitions of "young people" and other age categories on page 5.).

Yet, as is the case with youth public health, these gains have not been linear or evenly distributed. Challenges remain in sustaining agreed human rights frameworks and expanding access to sexual and reproductive health. Restrictive measures and shifting policy environments continue to limit young people's access to essential health services and information. And for many left-behind communities, conditions are worsening: LGBTQIA+ youth, young people with disabilities, those from rural or low-income backgrounds, those living in conflict settings, refugees and migrants, and young women and girls are recognized to experience persistent and growing discrimination in many places. For those who fall into multiple categories, the compounding inequalities can be even more acute.

These forces are eroding the very foundations that enabled progress. The rollback of legal protections, censorship of comprehensive sexuality education, and restrictions on bodily autonomy are just some of the current constraints undermining young people's access to the information and services they need to thrive.

Unfortunately, approaches seen in chapter 3 – where engagement with, and leadership from within, affected communities is understood to have contributed to much of the world's progress in youth public health – are underutilized and underprioritized in the broader political sphere. Decision-making forums, political institutions and governance structures offer limited opportunities for the meaningful participation of young people, including young rights advocates. At every level, young people see worsening rates of representation in political systems (IPU, 2026).

But that does not mean young people are sitting idly by. They are increasingly bypassing exclusionary systems by creating their own dynamic – and often effective – forms of political agency, including inventive litigation and both real-world and online mobilizations. Often these movements benefit from the digital

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transnational cross-pollination of ideas and tactics, shaping their activism and discourse in shared ways. Research from more than 70 countries highlights the extent to which young people are turning towards cause-based, digital and non-institutional forms of activism, a reflection of the leadership they are demonstrating outside of the governance processes that limit their participation (UNDP, 2026).

Making their voices heard

Youth-led movements, including protests, have been powerful drivers of change throughout history, and in particular in recent history. One analysis found that, between 1990 and 2020, 80 per cent of nonviolent movements calling for major reforms or self-determination featured substantial youth participation (Chenoweth and Cebul, 2026). Protest is the only form of civic engagement in which youth aged 18–35 are *more* engaged than their elders, according to surveys across 39 countries in Africa (Afrobarometer, 2025). The engagement of young people has even been credited with a recent wave of new leadership in a number of countries at a number of levels (Kurlantzick, 2026; Fong, 2025).

In response to youth-led calls for reform, critics often deploy rhetoric that "securitizes" youth advocacy – portraying vocal and politically engaged young people as extremist, burn-it-down revolutionaries, radicalized by dark corners of the Internet. Some leaders view larger youth cohorts as security threats, with troubling claims emerging in the 1990s that demographic youth "bulges" were correlated with increased violence. These assertions often carried racial, ethnic or religious undertones, and have been largely discredited (Pruitt, 2020). In conflict and post-conflict settings, youth are treated "as a problem to be solved, instead of as partners for peace", experts say (UNFPA, 2018).

But there is typically less introspection by such critics about why youth are so well represented in protest movements: Many young people view *existing* governance and leadership as sources of social division. A study in Canada, for example, found that polarized rhetoric was a strong disincentive for young people to be engaged in politics (C-Dem and others, 2025). The securitization of youth has been found to push many young people out of formal participation in political institutions (İlhanlı, 2026), and even, in some cases, towards more extreme actions (Kwak and others, 2020; Mosiashvili and Canali, 2026).

Rather than immediately regarding youth mobilizations as a threat to public order, leaders, institutions and others in influential roles should consider whether existing structures and systems are sufficiently inclusive of youth perspectives. Evidence shows that, most often, they are not. This is true even where youth movements have succeeded in ushering in new leadership. "[E]ven when mass protests are successful, they do not seem to result in direct improvements for young people, suggesting a lack of youth involvement in the movements' decision-making", a recent analysis found (Teixeira, 2024).

The lesson here is that high-level reforms are not sufficient to create real, meaningful inclusion. For that, whole systems need rethinking.

It starts at school: Social inclusion and financial independence for girls in Morocco

In Morocco, of the 2.9 million young people aged 15–29 who are not in education, employment or training, 69 per cent are girls. Many face overlapping structural obstacles, including transportation gaps, competing household responsibilities and gender-based discrimination.

Imane Lemrini, 21, in the northeast town of Guercif, knows this all too well. When she was 12, she had to stop going to school for three years as she lived too far away and there wasn't enough available public transport to get her to class.

The consequences for girls extend far beyond education: Interrupted schooling limits future employment opportunities, reinforces cycles of poverty, and increases girls' vulnerability to child marriage.

So when Imane learned about a programme offering girls a second chance to study and acquire life skills, she jumped at it. First she took tailoring classes, then she learned how to fix the sewing machines, then she studied electrical installation and maintenance – vocations traditionally dominated by male students.

"I was the only girl among the boys," she recalls. "But my brother and sister supported me. They weren't among those saying 'you can't do it because you're a girl.' Even my Dad said, 'don't pay attention to other people, think about what you want, about the field that interests you.'"

The programme is part of an initiative by the Government of Morocco together with UNFPA and the Spanish Agency for International Development and Cooperation, aiming to reach girls and youth in left-behind communities.

Before she joined the programme, Imane was shy and reluctant to speak in public. But now, she says, "I have a thirst for knowledge, I love discovering things."

She is focused on building the best foundation she can for her future. "I learned computing skills, which I used to struggle with but now manage well. I only have a month left in this course but I won't give up – I'll keep coming even if I'm no longer a student."

And Imane plans to pay it forward to the next generations. "I love the idea of teaching younger students, to show them that life doesn't have to stop just because of one small thing. We must keep up the fight if we want to achieve our goals."

In two years, over 2,100 adolescent girls were supported through tailored interventions that built up

their confidence, leadership and communication skills, as well as coaching in teamwork and decision-making. Meanwhile trained staff at safe spaces offered mentoring, mental health awareness sessions and psychological support.

These initiatives take place through girls' boarding schools, second-chance schools like Imane's, women's centres and youth-friendly health spaces, giving girls opportunities to develop their potential and strengthen their pathways towards education, vocational training, employment and entrepreneurship.

Other initiatives are reaching girls who are not in education, employment or training as well. TIBU Africa, for example, has reached more than 665 through sport programmes designed to boost their self-confidence, leadership, teamwork, perseverance, communication and problem-solving skills. Activities include direct engagement with local businesses and associations, helping participants to develop entrepreneurship skills, including how to develop a business plan, structure and pitch a project or start-up, identify funding opportunities, and explore employment pathways. Many are expressing a desire to pursue a career in sport – and succeeding. Ahlam, 23, became a certified sport coach and is training to become a professional football referee. Soumaya is working as a coach delivering MamaFit sessions for older women. Imane, Rabab and Wiam are looking to mobilize girls through local sport and well-being initiatives. Thirty-year-old Nadia, in Taroudant, received training in sport and mentoring, and is now passing her wisdom to those she coaches: "I tell the girls to balance exercising with studying. You can't go far in sport without being educated."



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Women in the Arab States region are employed in much lower numbers, across all age groups, compared to other regions of the world. Gender inequities in accessing the job market and unequal care burdens on women may be driving many of these differences – but supporting girls to reach their academic goals is a crucial first step on the path to countering these harmful norms.

"For me, women's financial independence is essential," said Nadia. "Even if your husband provides everything you need, being financially independent is an achievement in itself."

Real democracy requires young people

Underrepresented at the ballot box

Across the board, young people are voting less (Deželan, 2023; Afrobarometer, 2025; Anlar and others, 2025), a fact that is often treated as evidence that they are passive (Amnå and Ekman, 2014), apathetic (Vadnos, 2026), detached or distracted (Jäckle and Bauschke, 2025). While younger potential voters are indeed increasingly alienated from contemporary politics (Jäckle and Bauschke, 2025), it would be wrong to blame young people themselves for lower rates of electoral participation. The reality is that they are being excluded from democratic processes that have often failed to keep pace with their needs.

The Global Youth Participation Index scores over 140 countries on the extent to which they respect young people's economic and political rights and civil liberties, synthesizing these scores into a measure of how hospitable democratic systems are to young people. The index shows, in aggregate, poor global averages in the dimensions of political affairs, civic space and elections. "[Y]oung people tend to be locked out of political processes rather than supported to engage in them, which can lead to their alienation and disappointment in government and state institutions – while being blamed for not doing more to engage in the democratic process," the researchers find (Anlar and others, 2025).

The process of legally registering to vote is often complicated and onerous (Envoy on Youth, 2025). That and other processes should be reformed to support youth engagement on their own terms, such as through online access to government data and services and opportunities for digital participation, the Global Youth Participation Index report states. Its authors also emphasize the importance of securing equitable participation among women, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people and other marginalized groups – reflecting that today's young people are in fact incredibly diverse, and require inclusive approaches that protect and empower them (Anlar and others, 2025). Unfortunately, these and other protections are out of reach for many young people. In a review of 13 high- and middle-income countries, for example, only 60 per cent of young persons with disabilities were found to be literate, severely limiting their political participation when accommodations are not available (UN Youth Office and others, 2024).

Underrepresented in political establishments

A 2021 survey by the United Nations Youth Envoy's Office, reaching more than 27,000 people aged 15–30 in 26 countries, found that 76 per cent of these people believe politicians "do not listen to young people" (Envoy on Youth, 2025). These are not only perceptions. Very often, they are the reality.

Young people are turning away from political party membership and other modes of engaging with political leaders (Deželan, 2023; Anlar and others, 2025), an indication that existing political networks, generally speaking, are failing to create avenues to reach and hear from young people; that they are failing to sufficiently reflect the views of young people; or both. A 2025 review of 39 countries across Africa, for example, found that people under

age 35 are much less likely than older cohorts to "feel close to" a political party, or to contact traditional leaders or government officials (Afrobarometer, 2025).

The youth consultations undertaken by UNFPA found similar views, even among those who are highly engaged in community organizing and leadership: The global survey of 7,247 young peacebuilders affiliated with the Youth, Peace and Security agenda found that while 70 per cent said they had planned events to discuss political problems, 64 per cent said they do not consider themselves to be political actors (UNFPA, n.d.a). These are young leaders working in conflict, post-conflict and other insecure settings and engaging with international peacebuilding efforts – a sample population that can be assumed to be highly attuned to the realities of their communities and landscape of local civic actors. Yet 70 per cent have never tried to contact their local government representatives, and 78 per cent have never tried to contact their national government representatives. Reasons for this will vary – some peacebuilders are working in locations without functioning governing institutions, for example – but alienation from existing institutional mechanisms is likely also playing a role.

The youth consultation convened for this report also elicited strong reactions – from every corner of the world – to current political practices and institutions. Many spoke of tokenism, nepotism and manipulation. "There are people who do not qualify, but they are placed there by connections, and it leads to instability in governance across many countries," one participant said.

The reality is that [young people] are being excluded from democratic processes that have often failed to keep pace with their needs.

Underrepresented in leadership roles

Young people, by any definition, are greatly underrepresented in elected and leadership positions. Though people aged 18–30 make up 19 per cent of the human population (UN DESA, n.d.a), they hold just 2.8 per cent of parliamentary seats globally (IPU, n.d.a). Those in the 18–40 age range make up 35 per cent of the population (UN DESA, n.d.a), but they hold just 19 per cent of seats in parliament (IPU, n.d.a). Lack of experience is held against them, even by other young voters (*The Economist*, 2026) – but that is only one of many, more structural, obstacles they face.

Abundant financial resources and access to political networks are required to successfully mount a campaign for public office in most places (Stockemer and Anlar, 2024). A 2022 study of six countries found the cost of securing a spot on a ballot – including costs such as advertising, staff and travel – ranged from $7,000 to as much as $5 million. The cost of obtaining a nomination in Ghana was found to have quadrupled between 2000 and 2016 (Wardle, 2022). The need for private funding or wealthy benefactors limits access to elected positions not only for young people but also for women, those with disabilities and members of minority groups.

Laws governing both voting and candidacy for office also play a role. The 2021 United Nations Youth Envoy's survey found that about a third of respondents would consider running for office, yet "[w]orldwide, there is an average discrepancy of more than four years between when young people are eligible to vote and when they can run for elected office" (Envoy on Youth, 2025). Globally, about 70 per cent of parliamentary chambers have age limits that restrict people from vying for seats in parliamentary chambers even if they are old enough to vote. In 19 countries the minimum candidacy age for upper chamber seats is 30, in nine countries it is 40, and in two countries the minimum ages are 45 and 50 (IPU, 2026).

For young parliamentary candidates, these barriers are compounded by other intersecting forms of marginalization, such as gender or ethnic minority status. Young parliamentarians reported to the Inter-Parliamentary Union that they sometimes are compelled to hide their ethnicity to avoid backlash, for example, and those unable to do so often experienced discrimination (IPU, 2026).

Underrepresentation within and beyond national systems

The issue extends beyond national systems. In 2024, a report of the United Nations Secretary-General noted "a decrease in the number of references to young people in resolutions and in the number of young people briefing the Security Council and the Peacebuilding Commission" (United Nations, Security Council, 2024). Youth exclusion is also seen in other institutions such as civil society organizations. Researchers note that many youth activists view formal civil society groups, especially large non-governmental organizations, as elitist and conservative (Youngs, Panchulidze and Magoga, 2025).

The absence of young people from these and other policymaking spaces is problematic not only because it is disempowering but also because it hinders effective policymaking. Academics have found, for example, that older politicians tend to favour short-term rather than long-term goals, whereas younger politicians are thought to consider longer time horizons (McClean, 2021; Alesina and others, 2015). These tendencies may lead to an "intergenerational deficit" (Stockemer and Anlar, 2024), where the needs of younger people are more likely to go unmet.

Researchers are already seeing some signs of this in the world of work, where working conditions cultivated and managed by older employers are more likely to be considered by younger workers to be mentally unhealthy and unfair (Parry and others, 2022), not only because workers' standards have changed but also because they have experienced more precarity with fewer protections (Gigot, 2025). Cumulatively, this is contributing to phenomena like reduced career motivation and labour-market participation (Alhammadi and others, 2025; Ferrari, 2024), with potentially large-scale impacts on workforces and economies (Harter, 2022).

The absence of young people... is problematic because it is disempowering and hinders effective policymaking.

Sustainable development requires sustainable democracy

Concerns over democratic underrepresentation were raised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which noted "democracy, good governance and the rule of law" to be "essential for sustainable development, including sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger" (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015).

SDG target 16.7 calls on the United Nations to monitor and assure "responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels". Yet the data collected for this target consistently show that "[w]omen and young people remain sidelined in leadership roles and as chairs of powerful parliamentary committees – finance, defence and foreign affairs – with progress from 2020 to 2025 slow, uneven and showing signs of stalling" (UNDP, 2025).



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Evolving capacities: Balancing protection and autonomy

Why are systems failing to adapt to the needs of not just one, but multiple, generations of young people? One clue is in the increasingly contested space between the protection of children and adolescents and support for their evolving capacities. The two concepts are, in many ways, one and the same, articulated together as an obligation of States in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989). Adopted in 1989, the Convention recognizes the right to protection and guidance by family and state systems "in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child". This has enabled many of the human rights achievements seen in recent decades: Where precarity and gender norms once led to child labour and child marriage, protections now take the form of compulsory primary education and legal age minimums for labour and marriage. Similarly, it has enabled countries to establish a minimum age of criminal responsibility; many countries have also introduced separate justice systems for children (UNICEF, 2026).

Today, the concept of evolving capacities is understood to mean that "parents' responsibilities, rights and duties to guide their children is not absolute" and "when children reach a sufficient level of maturity and capacity to exercise their rights independently, there will be a decreasing need for parental direction and guidance". As children age and mature, greater weight should be given to their views (OHCHR, 2023). Yet rigid age-based frameworks often fail to accommodate the dynamic nature of adolescent development, potentially leaving them without protection when they are vulnerable or unduly restricting their autonomy when they are already capable (Neal and Engel, n.d.).

While robust protection systems are essential for safeguarding children and adolescents from abuse and exploitation, the language of child protection can be used to deny adolescents a level of decision-making commensurate with their growing maturity. This is particularly true when it comes to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights – despite international agreement that adolescents require increasing degrees of confidentiality, informed consent and sexuality education (UNFPA, 2014a). Minors often face onerous parental consent requirements for STI testing or contraceptive counselling (UNAIDS, 2019). Child protection language is also misapplied to undermine comprehensive sexuality education (Datta, 2021) and limit access to healthcare tailored to the needs of adolescents in all their diversity (Muller and others, 2023; Ashley, 2023). Such efforts deprive young people of information, services and skills that could enable them to recognize and avoid abuse. In some cases, punitive laws to protect adolescents from sexual abuse may even be designed or implemented in ways that penalize adolescents rather than predators (Strout and others, 2020), or that push child marriage and other practices underground (Girls Not Brides, 2026). In fact, experts call upon legislators to consider "a legal presumption that adolescents are competent to seek and have access to preventive or time-sensitive sexual and reproductive health commodities and services" (CRC, 2016).

Even when young people step fully into legal adulthood, the language of "protection" can be invoked to justify laws, policies and norms that restrict their rights and capacities. Women and people living with disabilities are regularly excluded from sexual and reproductive health information and services (UNFPA, 2018c), and sometimes required to obtain third-party consent before receiving these services (UNFPA, 2022b). Proponents of abortion restrictions often argue that abortion bans protect adult women from regret (Ben-Asher and Pollans, 2024), just as gendered job restrictions are said to protect adult women from violence or injury (WEF, 2018)

Just as the concept of evolving capacities should protect children from being "adultified", so should it empower them to make informed choices without being infantilized. A genuine balance between protection and autonomy requires removing barriers rather than creating them, and enabling the agency, voice and participation of all people, adolescents and onward, in matters that affect them.

New forms of civic engagement

Even as they are being excluded from systems of governance, young people are finding alternative means of making their views, priorities and needs heard. In other words, they are not disengaging. They are innovating. They are reinventing ways to engage. The task for everyone else is to catch up.

Using the law

The climate crisis offers one prominent example of intense youth engagement. Young people are poised to inherit this crisis, which they had no role in causing. Food shortages, housing insecurity, heat-related morbidity and mortality, HIV and other STIs, mental health conditions, gender-based violence, conflict, internal displacement, and migration are only a handful of ways in which climate change will shape the future to come (SAHM and IAAH, 2025).

Many young people are seeking legal redress for this injustice, and finding success, in the form of lawsuits. Among the advantages of these legal proceedings is the ability to set precedent in the interpretation of the law in ways that can be used across jurisdictions. These lawsuits began over two decades ago, and have been steadily increasing. In recent years, young climate activists have brought cases before the European Court of Human Rights, and in the Republic of Korea and Sweden at the national level, to name a few. They have demonstrated the extent to which climate is a real concern of younger generations, and that when barriers to access are overcome, young people can be powerful agents of legal and policy change (Rink and others, 2024).

These tactics are moving beyond climate change, with young people suing over broader environmental concerns (ACLU, n.d.; Our Children's Trust, n.d.) and issues like education (Associated Press, 2021). Still, litigation is expensive, slow moving and often inaccessible for young people, who remain locked out of relevant processes or only given token opportunities for engagement.

Digital democracy

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most young people's civic engagement is taking place online. This is greatly changing the face of youth participation in public discourse and also changing the very nature of civic engagement. Social media is a significant platform for civic mobilization and expression virtually everywhere. It allows young people to bypass traditional gatekeepers, and enables vibrant, decentralized campaigns rooted in a shared demand for economic justice. This speaks to a larger trend, where young people are no longer passive recipients of political messaging but are instead leveraging digital tools and a unifying sense of economic precarity and rejection of "business as usual" politics to build formidable movements that seek to challenge entrenched power structures.

The possibility of anonymity makes it particularly valuable for members of marginalized groups who might experience violence or discrimination as a result of their engagement, such as young people in Afghanistan (Faqiryar, 2026), as well as members of the LGBTIQ+ community, migrants and people of colour (Youngs and others, 2025). But there are other risk-mitigation strategies as well, including forms of creative and indirect expression and humour, which often support viral dissemination (Mosiashvili and Canali, 2026;

Ware, 2026). Online activism is also increasingly spilling over into real-world activism, often without a single central authority or mobilizer, helping movements to evade crackdowns on any single organizing entity (Youngs and others, 2025).

There are, of course, major limitations in these forms of primarily online mobilization. For one, international organizations and donors strongly prefer supporting civil society organizations with formal transparency and accountability mechanisms (IFES, 2025), while young people tend to engage in more decentralized efforts (United Nations, 2026). Many formal organizers worry this could contribute to splintering movements and diluted efficacy (Youngs, Panchulidze and Magoga, 2025), even as youth-led efforts bristle at how funding tends to stream into silos (Leclerc, 2025; Leclerc and others, 2025). Still, there are models in which new online organizers work alongside civil society organizations, amplifying efforts and benefiting both.

There are also concerns about overreliance on digital tools, and especially social media platforms. Many platforms are privately operated, act in compliance with state requirements, and have opaque privacy protections and moderation rules, putting users at risk of retaliation by state actors or doxxing by opposition individuals. Lack of transparency in how algorithms track and target users leaves digital activists vulnerable to disinformation on one hand and censorship on the other (Mosiashvili and Canali, 2026). Internet shutdowns are also increasingly being used to stymie protests, with more than 300 shutdowns documented across 52 countries in 2025 (Rosson and others, 2025).

The ongoing integration of AI into social systems also poses new threats to young people's autonomy and privacy. Their vast digital footprints, from social media activity to educational performance data, are training AI models that in turn will make critical determinations about their lives. This raises questions which are only beginning to be answered around data privacy, transparency, control and agency, and how systems affect the well-being of young people (Perez Vallejos and others, 2021). Data harvesting – by both corporations and state actors – additionally threatens privacy, autonomy and other core human rights concerns.

These threats are not distributed equally, and often amplified for young people at the margins and in countries with weaker regulations concerning data collection, storage and use. Women, for example, are highly vulnerable in jurisdictions where abortion is criminalized. Data from cycle-tracking apps, search histories and location data can be used to prosecute young people, turning their personal health data into tools for surveillance (Kalema and Al Futtaim, 2026). LGBTIQ+ youth also face particular and unique dangers where the law allows for information harvested from a young person using a platform in a country with legal protections to be shared with a government where their identity is criminalized. This creates new, transnational digital threats, where a young person's online expression or search for community could expose them to denial of entry, persecution, surveillance or worse.

Voices rising from the margins

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of youth leadership can be found in fragile and conflict settings, where there is often a power vacuum left by warring parties, gangs or other forms of insecurity. These places often experience a breakdown in the traditional systems that so often exclude young people, creating space for young people to become engaged and demonstrate leadership.

Reporting from conflict and post-conflict settings has found that young people are frequently engaged in community-building activities and service provision. They are also acutely aware of the limitations of the governance structures that exist, which may be more focused on building and maintaining a security apparatus than providing the basic services (UNFPA, 2018). Because they are pushed to take action outside of traditional institutions, young people tend to bring novel and creative approaches to peacebuilding, mutual aid and other forms of social support, research finds: "In the absence of inclusive and meaningful opportunities to participate socially, politically and economically, marginalized young people are strikingly creative in creating alternative ways of belonging and meaning through which to express themselves. This resourcefulness and resilience manifest in different ways across diverse stakeholder groups, sectors and social constituencies, in fragile and conflict-affected, as well as in relatively peaceful, contexts" (UNFPA, 2018).

One way that young people are embracing new approaches is by rejecting false dichotomies – moving beyond the divisions so often entrenched in existing institutions. Young people interviewed for an independent progress report on the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, for example, expressed dissatisfaction with common binaries such as citizens versus migrants, collectivism versus individualism, and men versus women. And this is reflected in their work. For instance, the work of promoting gender equality is not seen as simply protecting women and girls through empowerment programmes or safe spaces. It is also advanced in disarmament and reintegration efforts, where violent patriarchal norms are addressed and recognized as hurting all people, including the men and women who hold those views (UNFPA, 2018). Similarly, youth-led peacebuilders are normalizing mental health conditions, speaking candidly about the need for psychosocial support, and addressing the causes and consequences of trauma. Health is seen as not only its own area of work, but as an enabler of protection and violence prevention.

They are not disengaging. They are innovating. They are reinventing ways to engage. The task for everyone else is to catch up.



“For female candidates running in elections, people use social media to harass them, humiliate them, insult them.”

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

“We are seeing a regression with the government. Some are even talking about reviewing the criminalization of rape.”

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

“I am a male champion against gender-based violence.”

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

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This holistic approach may be more effective than efforts that compartmentalize issues. Research finds that youth, peace and security efforts yield significant returns on investment, not only to the young people engaged but to their communities as well (USAID, 2023). One programme in Kenya, targeting 2,000 young people in conflict resolution training and peacebuilding efforts, was found to generate $16.33–$32.54 in social value for every $1 invested (USAID, 2023a).

In fact, the resourcefulness and efficiency of young leaders in crisis-affected contexts has been widely recognized. For instance, the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. It called for United Nations agencies, donors and international civil society organizations to move beyond tokenistic consultation with young people, and to instead ensure young humanitarians and peacebuilders are provided with physical, legal, digital and psychosocial protection while leading emergency responses on the frontlines (Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, 2018).

Despite this decade-long acknowledgement, young people continue to be sidelined by the institutions whose gaps they are filling, from community leadership structures and political systems to civil society organizations and international donors (Youngs and others, 2025).

The young person's dilemma

Ultimately, young people, no matter where they live, face an increasingly complex and uncertain world. They cannot face those challenges alone, nor can they cede responsibility and choice over those challenges to older generations. Yet the persistent underrepresentation of young people is not receiving the attention or action it deserves. Underrepresentation is not a matter of statistical misalignment but of structural exclusion.

Unfortunately, many leaders and institutions are seeking remedies in the form of ad hoc participatory exercises, which are increasingly understood by young people themselves as tokenistic, paternalistic and out of touch. Tokenism was named a major barrier to real youth engagement in the Youth, Peace and Security dialogues across multiple regions of the world (UNFPA and YPS, n.d.), and is a noted grievance of youth advocates in civil society spaces as well. "Basically, it is a make-believe smokescreen to inclusion and participation in decision-making processes without giving people real influence or power," one young advocate said (MHPSS Collaborative, 2024).

Instead, they want to see coordinated responses across sectors, levels of government and national boundaries, with explicit attention to human rights, equity and justice. And most importantly, young people must be actively involved in shaping how these challenges are understood, framed and addressed. The health and well-being of the future depends on it.

IN FOCUS

Democracy's blind spot: Where are the young people?

Throughout history, young people have repeatedly stood at the forefront of societal progress and sparked innovative ideas for change. Young thinkers, activists, artists and scientists have challenged the status quo and inspired humanity to evolve. Life is constant movement, after all, and young people serve as the lifeblood of societies, pushing them forward, demanding changes that safeguard the future. Yet young people are systematically left out of political decision-making processes (Anlar and others, 2025).

Legal and informal barriers to participation are imposed to limit young people in their diversity from gaining adequate entry into political institutions, resulting in young people seeking alternative ways to express their opinions, such as protests, boycotts and other asymmetrical forms of expression. In that process, young people are losing faith in the institutions that govern them and calling for systemic change. A historic cycle of elections took place in 2024 across countries representing more than half the global population; this was directly followed by the recent wave of "Gen Z protests". This succession of events indicates that electoral processes are failing to instil confidence in young voters, who, in turn, are expressing their political will through other means.

The Global Youth Participation Index is a tool that can help measure these processes. Among four key dimensions, the political affairs dimension performs the worst, indicating that young people are significantly excluded from formal political engagement. This is not only in places where democracy is new or fragile; it is a global phenomenon (Anlar and others, 2025). Complicated and costly voter

It is time to innovate for more intersectional inclusion and move from entrenched political elitism towards genuine opportunities for meaningful political participation.

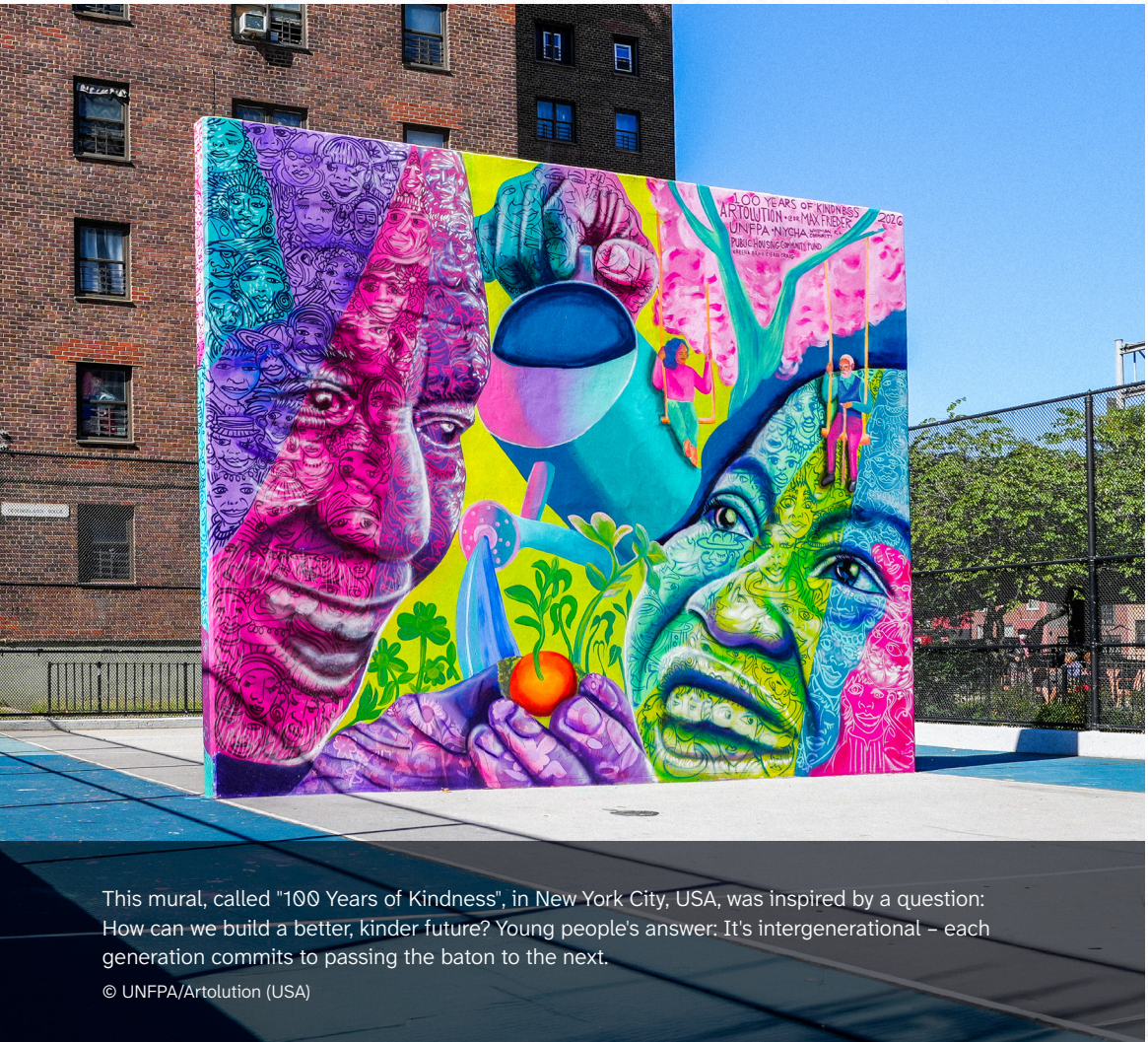
registration processes (Adams, 2026), as well as overly restrictive age limits for candidates, neglect by political party elites, and lack of resources for political engagement, including monetary and non-monetary support, all play a role (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, n.d.). Retention is also an issue: In one recent study of 100 young politicians, 77 said that young elected officials "get celebrated in public and shut out of real decisions". More than half said they had limited or no real influence (Kaushik, 2026).

Early findings of the research on Gen Z protest movements suggest that young people are increasingly mobilizing around key values, such as solidarity, justice and fairness, rather than specific political ideologies. Young people demand more transparency, accountability and innovation. Moving forward, this is an important signal for democratic systems: It is time to innovate for more intersectional inclusion and move from entrenched political elitism towards genuine opportunities for meaningful political participation.

The good news is that there are solutions to improve the representation of young people in politics and to introduce innovation into governance. A wide network of civil society organizations is working to advance this agenda. The Youth Democracy Cohort is one such movement, aiming to bring together a variety of local and international actors under one banner and one voice. Together, they are creating a bridge between protest movements and institutional processes that can enable meaningful change to happen. Other measures can also contribute to transformation, including improving civic education, advocating for the removal of barriers to democratic participation, introducing more participatory governance mechanisms, challenging cultural biases, and raising awareness of the importance of listening to young people. The status quo is increasingly unsustainable, and if the challenges facing youth are not addressed voluntarily, young people may ultimately demand change through more assertive forms of action.

Text contributed by Ana Mosiashvili and Jérémy Apert from the European Partnership for Democracy's Global Youth Participation Index (gypi.epd.eu).







This mural, called "100 Years of Kindness", in New York City, USA, was inspired by a question: How can we build a better, kinder future? Young people's answer: It's intergenerational – each generation commits to passing the baton to the next.

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Chapter 5

From consultation to action



As the world adapts to address the ongoing polycrisis and shifting world order, the responsibility of governments and institutions of power to ensure human rights protections has never been greater. The preceding chapters of this report have set the stage for the findings here. Chapter 1 illustrates the many ways in which younger generations occupy a reality and view of the world distinct from that of older leaders and policymakers. Chapter 2 demonstrates the concrete ways in which young people's very life courses are changing as systems fail to meet their needs. Chapter 3 shows us that conditions today are not inevitable for tomorrow. Major advances in youth health, bodily autonomy and well-being have been achieved, and more can still be achieved, but only with the meaningful engagement of affected youth populations. Chapter 4 shows us this can be true in the world of politics and human rights, as well, but only if the leaders of the world choose to listen.

When those leaders choose to listen, what will they hear? This chapter tells us. It draws on dedicated consultations held in March of 2026 with more than 300 young people from over 40 countries, spanning diverse political, economic and social contexts. But their input reflects more than their absolute numbers – these participants are members of vibrant youth networks, and thus draw upon the knowledge and views of the many communities and organizations they are a part of. Their recommendations also build from, and align with, prior youth-led calls to action, dialogues and outcome documents, representing thousands of cumulative voices from a deeply informed and civically engaged segment of the world's youth population. Even as this chapter synthesizes dozens of proposals, hundreds of insights and thousands of voices, it aims to honour young people as authors of their own vision, ensuring these recommendations remain genuinely their own.

Future-fit education and labour

Youth leaders are clear-eyed about the importance of economic security in the transition to independence. The Cotonou Youth Action Agenda, for example, expressly links economic empowerment and self-determination to quality education, comprehensive sexuality education,

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"Oftentimes grass-roots participation can be fragmented and dominated by local elites and people in power, which eliminates true representation."

– *State of World Population* consultation participant

employment, entrepreneurship and ending gender disparities in labour markets (UNFPA, 2024).

Yet when young people are engaged in policy discussions, they are often regarded as agents of production and engines of growth – a volatile but powerful force to be harnessed. What will they contribute to the economy, to the tax base, to the fertility rate, to stability? For young people, this is precisely backward: They are looking for purpose, partnership and family – which, after all, is recognized in the ICPD as the "basic unit of society" (UNFPA, 2014). They understand that achieving these goals is largely contingent on their access to jobs, and that their access to jobs depends on education and training programmes designed to support their independence. Economic security is not simply an avenue to attain status and comfort; it is also an important dimension of young people's partnering and reproductive decision-making.

Educate for tomorrow

Reforms must start in education systems, youth leaders are insisting – and they must be applied with the goal of equalizing the playing field for marginalized groups, including women and girls. "We demand that access to quality gender-transformative education and decent work become a reality for all, as these issues are essential to eliminating structural inequalities," the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda states (UNFPA, 2024). "Invest to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for their economic empowerment and self-determination."

These points were strongly emphasized in the *State of World Population* youth consultations, where participants stressed the need to move towards more practical and future-oriented skills development, including an emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy, AI fundamentals, creativity and communication skills, all of which are seen as essential for navigating an evolving global economy. "Right now, many young people spend years in school but still struggle to find stable, meaningful jobs. That's a system problem, not a personal failure," one participant said.

Consultation participants also called for a reform to education-to-employment pathways, recognizing that the disconnect between education and labour markets is not only a youth employment challenge but also a constraint on national productivity, innovation and long-term economic resilience. This work would extend beyond ministries of education and labour, requiring partnerships with the private sector. For example, institutionalizing practical work experience as a core component of secondary and tertiary education systems would require the buy-in of employers. These agreements could facilitate paid internships or apprenticeships, which, consultation participants emphasized, should be embedded within national curricula to ensure equitable access to real-world learning opportunities that benefit both individuals and the broader economy.

"Make real work experience mandatory," one participant said. "Every student should graduate with actual work experience."

Prepare for the future of work

State of World Population consultation participants urged education and employment systems to prepare for AI disruption across all disciplines, reflecting that every sector and job category is vulnerable to AI disruption. And they called for strategic investment in sectors where human labour remains essential and irreplaceable, including green economy initiatives, care work systems, agriculture, and humanitarian and social service sectors.

These recommendations build upon the recommendations in the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda with more recent insights into current AI-related job disruptions. In fact, these prescriptions are echoed in a new report of the United Nations Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, developed contemporaneously with the youth consultations, which calls for investment in skills, infrastructure and protective institutions: "Without these investments, AI risks widening inequality" and undermining the availability of jobs providing "fair compensation, worker autonomy and a reliable path to social dignity" (Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence, 2026).

Consultation participants also highlighted the growing precarity of informal, gig and platform-based work, arguing that workers performing roles comparable to traditional employees should be afforded equivalent protections. They called for extending core labour protections like minimum wage provisions, access to healthcare, pension schemes and broader employment rights, to ensure that gig and informal workers are not left outside national social protection frameworks. As noted by one participant: "Gig workers should have contracts like normal employees since they do the same work."

Here, too, the *State of World Population* consultation participants were reflecting a growing international consensus: Just months after this consultation, the International Labour Conference adopted the world's first global treaty calling for binding labour standards for gig work (International Labour Conference, 2026). The participants also recommended requiring platform-based companies (including delivery services, ride-sharing applications and freelance platforms) to contribute financially to national social protection funds, mirroring other recent proposals to use AI and tech industries to distribute the benefits of technology across the populations that have absorbed many of its disruptions (Brandom, 2026; Cappelletti, 2026).

Youth leaders, including those convened in Cotonou, are also looking towards other forms of youth employment, such as entrepreneurship training as a pathway to economic resilience and self-reliance. The consultation participants offered further recommendations: Youth entrepreneurship funds could provide accessible credit, mentorship and clear market linkages to help business ideas transition into sustainable enterprises. These programmes should prioritize inclusivity and accessibility, particularly for young people who face structural barriers to formal employment, ensuring that support is not limited to training alone but extends to practical implementation and market integration.

The consultation participants also raised the possibility of guaranteed youth employment programmes, building from recent initiatives piloted in the European Union following the Great Recession (OECD, 2015), where local government agencies supported the creation of jobs, job training and apprenticeships (European Social Network, 2013). "The government could provide employment or allow young people to start businesses to generate income," a *State of World Population* participant said.

Young social entrepreneurs are pioneering innovative solutions to address critical health gaps

Social entrepreneurship offers a solution to not only unemployment but also other social and community concerns. Social entrepreneurship programmes and funds can incentivize innovators to address societal problems while measuring impact and helping profits be reinvested back into social and community programming. In Zimbabwe, for example, Soul Canvas Creations brings mental health education into schools and communities through play-based activities. In Rwanda, Umubyeyi is providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights information for all stages of life through digital platforms, workplace wellness programmes and community-based interventions. Umubyeyi, for example, is a winning initiative of the Africa Young Innovators for Health Award, a programme that offers financial and in-kind support to youth-led social enterprises.

Despite the promise and impact of these kinds of programmes, young entrepreneurs face major obstacles to launching and sustaining their enterprises. They cite challenges moving from ideas to implementation, limited access to technology, weak institutional support, and slow adoption of new solutions. Often, they have to draw on approaches used by both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. "As a social entrepreneur, I want to ensure that children and families who need support most are not excluded because of cost, while also creating a business model that allows the work to continue and grow," said Michel Rutendo Mandiopera, the founder of Soul Canvas Creations. "I have achieved this through a blended approach that combines paid programmes for schools and organizations with community initiatives, partnerships, and subsidized access for underserved groups."

More such programmes are possible, but they require recognition as legitimate development partners; support from mentorship, leadership and incubation programmes; and access to grants, seed funding and innovation challenges. Engaging young people in policy discussions around these kinds of programmes is an important first step.

Bodily autonomy as a foundation for self-determination

Bodily autonomy is a fundamental human right, youth authors and advocates have asserted in multiple reports and outcome documents (UNFPA, 2023; 2024). Yet concerns about bodily autonomy remain major ones, the *State of World Population* consultation participants confirmed. They noted, for example, gaps in trust when receiving health services, and persistently high rates of unsafe abortion among young women in places with restrictive laws and attitudes around women's sexuality.

The consultation participants were particularly attuned to the intimate links between bodily autonomy and all other aspects of well-being and self-determination. Autonomy over one's body and sexual health, after all, is a precondition for exercising autonomy over virtually every other area of one's life. Many participants highlighted that gender-based violence suppresses women's economic participation, a remarkable degree of awareness considering that workplace protections for survivors is still only emerging as an area of policy development (Pillinger and Wintour, 2024; Led By HER and others, 2020).

Guarantee free, confidential, youth-responsive sexual and reproductive health

Across multiple youth declarations (ICPD Beyond 2014, 2013; UNFPA, 2024; Regional Consultation for Adolescents and Youth, 2023) young people have been calling for universal access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and information, including scientifically sound, age- and context-appropriate sexuality education. The *State of World Population* consultation participants, too, made this point, noting in particular the many barriers that stand in young people's way, including financial and legal restrictions. They also underscored the importance of confidential, youth-friendly healthcare. As one participant noted, "Many people refrain from seeking medical care due to costs and fear of lack of ethics among health personnel who often disclose private information."

As a solution, the consultation participants proposed that health regulatory bodies and professional associations mandate comprehensive professional ethics training for all health personnel, accompanied by enforceable confidentiality protocols, including anonymous reporting mechanisms that allow patients to safely report breaches.

These recommendations echo the forceful calls made in the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda for youth-centred, accessible, safe sexual and reproductive health services within universal health coverage programmes, and for the elimination of "all legal, structural, financial and systemic barriers, such as out-of-pocket expenditures" (UNFPA, 2024). These proposals also call to mind the programmes described in chapter 3 that have successfully addressed high adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality – strongly demonstrating the efficacy of the proposals made by the consultation participants.

Mandate gender-inclusive programming

Many youth organizations and movements are also calling for a recalibration of gender

equality, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-based violence programming to reflect the broader needs across genders, communities and generations. Men and boys, for example, have often gone neglected in gender-equality programming, sexual and reproductive health services, and comprehensive sexuality education. When they are engaged, the messages often do not resonate as relevant to their own lives.

This is not, the *State of World Population* consultation participants emphasized, a retreat from commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment. Rather, it is a reflection of the unintended consequences of programming that is often, by design, exclusionary. "Inclusive gender programming is not a concession, but a strategic necessity," one person said.

Greater involvement of men and boys – not simply as allies of women and girls but also as affected persons – could incentivize greater support and investment from those in positions of power. "We are so focused on women and youth that we forget to empower the men who most times have leadership positions bestowed on them. We should look at inclusion from a value-addition perspective."

Engagement across all groups within society is essential to achieve sustainable transformation. Female genital mutilation "is no more a woman issue. It is a human rights issue," another consultation participant said. "And in human rights, both men and women are equal – they have the opportunity to speak out."

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This approach would also be more effective in the long term, the consultation participants said, because engagement across all groups within society is necessary to achieve sustainable transformation.

Counter fertility pressure

Rights advocates are increasingly raising their voices about the ways in which global and national demographic changes interact with restrictive social norms, constraining the possibilities they see for themselves in the future (Jolly and others, 2025). The *State of World Population* consultation participants also raised these issues. Even though they came from very different countries and regions – with some belonging to relatively small pockets of youth within ageing societies, and others growing up within a booming youth population – they described feeling pressured to serve systems that do not prioritize or support them in equal measure.

For example, many emphasized that fertility pressure is both real and gendered, with young women in particular describing cultural, social and even state pressure to have children. At the same time, significant economic and workplace pressures make it difficult for young people to have the number of children they want for themselves. Meanwhile, legal and institutional responses are failing to adequately protect them from harm.

They urged efforts to address structural and social norms that constrain reproductive autonomy. They suggested, for example, working with labour, education and judicial ministries to prohibit discriminatory practices. They also called for gender and women's affairs ministries to work in partnership with civil society organizations and media to challenge deeply embedded social norms that continue to drive gender inequality – for both women and men.

These efforts should counter narratives that define women's primary role as motherhood, and men's primary role as breadwinners, instead affirming their rights to decide whether, when and how many children to have. As one participant emphasized: "We could run campaigns to break the social stigma that women's primary role is motherhood, focusing instead on their right to choose."

These recommendations recall the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda's call for leaders to "[a]ddress gender disparities in employment, caregiving responsibilities and unpaid care work", outlining the package of support needed by parents and employees to realize their own family goals on their own terms (UNFPA, 2024).

Reform approaches to gender-based violence

The lack of progress in stemming the global tide of gender-based violence calls for completely rethinking current efforts. That is just what young people consulted for this report insisted upon: They urged immediate efforts to align gender-based violence frameworks to the real lived experiences of survivors. One survivor shared, as an example, that her community's limited definition of rape had left her without justice: "There was no penetration, [so] it wasn't 'rape', so I couldn't do anything."

Legal definitions of sexual violence should be expanded to include harassment, coercion and abuse of power, moving beyond existing narrow interpretations, the consultation participants said. They also called for amendments to evidentiary requirements that are known to prevent survivors from accessing justice. "I wanted to file a complaint but was told I needed proof – videos, photos," the survivor expressed.

The consultation participants called for the establishment of psychological support services across schools, universities and workplaces. These services should be institutionalized with clear standards, trained personnel and ongoing monitoring to ensure they function as accessible and effective support systems. "Teachers' support for empowering young women is crucial," one consultation participant said.

They also called for shifting attention to the economic consequences of gender-based violence. Labour ministries, trade unions and employer associations could introduce provisions for paid leave for survivors, for example, which would ensure survivors are not forced to choose between economic stability and safety, recovery or pursuit of justice.

All of these recommendations align with international prescriptions made in the International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention (Pillinger and Wintour, 2024), the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women (Council of Europe, 2011), and other recommendations (Ribeiro and Ponthoz, 2017).

Political participation

Young people consistently described governance systems as being formally inclusive but substantively exclusionary, shaped by political interests, unequal power dynamics and limited accountability. This is the case even when young people are robustly engaged in community work. Youth-led organizations are delivering critical services, yet remain underfunded and excluded from policy processes, the *State of World Population* consultation participants emphasized. Even spaces designated for youth engagement are often controlled by older gatekeepers, ultimately limiting meaningful participation.

These factors – lack of meaningful representation, lack of accountability – are cited in the erosion of trust seen among young people. As one consultation participant observed: "For a long time I kept attending policy briefings, but my ideas and research were not given a second thought."

Similar concerns have been raised extensively across youth-focused spaces, including in many interviews with, and reports from, young peacebuilders (Kern, 2025; UNFPA and YPS, n.d.).

Share real influence in decision-making

The *State of World Population* consultation participants called for leaders to explore structural reforms to move beyond symbolic inclusion towards meaningful political representation. Examples include youth advisory bodies, participatory budgeting, political party inclusion and youth quotas.

Some policymakers will resist recommendations to bring young people into the fold of real, consequential decision-making, yet this has been a consistent recommendation of international reports, forums and dialogues for many years. The 2018 *World Youth Report* (UN DESA, 2018a) calls for more participatory budgeting exercises and more transparent, understandable budgeting communications. The global report of the United Nations Youth Envoy's Office calls to "give young people real power and influence, including in budgeting and programming" (Envoy on Youth, 2025). The Cotonou Youth Action Agenda calls for transparent budgeting for youth initiatives and for meaningful engagement in decision-making (UNFPA, 2024).

Youth quotas, too, are a commonly recommended mechanism by which to increase youth representation. Guidance to Member States reporting on SDG target 16.7, for example, states, "In cases where a group is significantly underrepresented or has experienced historical discrimination, temporary special measures including minimum quotas on representation may be introduced to redress such discrimination" (UN DESA, 2022). Youth quotas are a remedy to underrepresentation advocated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, n.d.c), which notes that there are currently such quotas in place in 16 chambers of parliament (IPU, 2026).

Still, quotas alone are insufficient, research from the Global Youth Participation Index reveals. "If young people perceive that the introduction of a youth quota in the legislature is designed to deflect demands for more far-reaching transformation, for example, it may increase rather than reduce their sense of alienation" (Anlar and others, 2025).

These quotas, consultation participants emphasized, must be complete with voting rights and decision-making authority. Youth representation could be embedded into electoral laws and financial decision-making, such as processes through which young people directly contribute to determining funding priorities. As one consultation participant stated: "We should have a say in the budget because, besides being the future of this country, we also work and pay taxes."

Align decision-making to impact

The underrepresentation of young people is perhaps most deeply felt, and even most consequential, when it comes to the issue of climate change. The median age for an energy-sector chief executive is in the mid-50s (Pearson Partners International, 2014), for example, and 68 per cent of parliamentarians globally are over age 45 (IPU, n.d.a). Yet the rate and scale of global climate change means the worst impacts – including biodiversity loss, food and water insecurity, disasters, displacement and conflict – will accrue to the youngest.

State of World Population consultation participants therefore insisted upon binding power to remedy what is, effectively, a moral hazard – the condition in which decision makers undertake risks for which they will not bear the consequences. As one consultation participant noted: "Getting invited to meetings isn't the same as having power. For young people to actually shape climate decisions, they need roles where their input is binding, funded and enforceable – not just advisory."

Consultation participants called for governments to mandate a minimum of 20 per cent youth representation in national delegations attending the Conference of the Parties, the decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. They also called for governments to introduce mandatory intergenerational equity assessments for all climate-related policies prior to approval and implementation. These assessments would evaluate the long-term impacts of current or near-term policy decisions on future generations, embedding a requirement for sustainability and fairness into international frameworks.

They also urged ground-level, in-person support systems during climate-related crises, especially in ensuring continuity of care, education and protection. One example was a dedicated financing mechanism to address the immediate and long-term impacts of climate-related loss and damage on the lives and futures of young people. Such mechanisms would address the fact that climate disasters often derail the education and employment trajectories of young people, with potentially lifelong impacts: "When climate disasters happen, young people can't finish education, lose jobs, or have to migrate."



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Prioritize community ownership
Crucially, youth leaders consistently voice concern not just for the decision-making authority of youth, but over the disempowerment of marginalized communities writ large. Within the *State of World Population* consultations, participants expressed comfort wearing multiple overlapping identities, acknowledging differences while expressing solidarity across those gulfs. They consistently emphasized that the issues under discussion are not confined to young people alone, but reflect broader structural challenges that shape the well-being, rights and opportunities of entire societies.

In the area of development financing, for example, they highlighted the disproportionate power of external funders over communities themselves: "Community-based action is underfunded across countries," one young consultation participant said.

"We have no say as they are the donors," another said.

The participants underscored the importance of direct, predictable support for local groups and youth-led organizations to ensure community-anchored sustainability. "Communities that are most affected by policy are the ones most excluded from shaping it," one participant explained.

They also recommended replacing short-term financing with multi-year, project-based financing models. This shift is essential to enable continuity, institutional growth and sustainable impact, particularly for youth-led initiatives, that are often constrained by fragmented and time-limited funding streams.

While bold, these recommendations build on existing efforts to strengthen youth inclusion at the highest levels (UNDP, 2023). The Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, for example, urges humanitarian and development funders to move away from intermediary-heavy structures and to instead allocate dedicated, multi-year funding directly to youth-led networks operating in crisis and post-conflict environments (Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, 2018).

Digital rights and online safety

Across contexts, young people describe digital spaces as both essential tools for civic engagement and contested environments where rights are inconsistently protected, if at all.

Youth activists from Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Nepal and Togo interviewed by *The Guardian* in 2025 described drawing inspiration and hope from watching their peers in other countries on social media as they staged similar protests, underscoring the power of digital organizing and social media to prompt transnational movements (Ahmed, 2025).

The *State of World Population* consultation participants agreed. A majority said they use the Internet for identity exploration and political organizing. However, this engagement is accompanied by significant risks, with about half reporting experiences of censorship, abuse or surveillance. Young women, in particular,

reported that their political participation online is frequently undermined.

"Digital technology today has a significant impact because it is a space that allows us to express ourselves freely, to share information. But we also experience harassment," one female participant noted. "They go as far as insulting you, sending horrific messages or threats."

The participants pointed to serious gaps in both platform and state accountability with online platforms and state regulators exerting extraordinary power over the information, interactions and safety of individuals. Yet neither are seen to have been transparent about their regulatory objectives or the motivations that can and do drive moderation policies. As one participant said: "Our young people face online issues… we don't know much about what the government's vision or progress is on this."

Mandate platform accountability for gendered and other discriminatory harassment

The *State of World Population* consultation participants called for immediate regulatory and platform-level reforms to address the growing normalization of gendered harassment in digital spaces. "Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is very prevalent these days," one participant said. "It can affect young people emotionally and mentally and economically."

Together, the participants asked for mandatory requirements for social media platforms to explicitly define and classify violations of platform standards. They acknowledged implementation would require national regulatory authorities, in collaboration with social media companies, to establish enforceable compliance frameworks that mandate the consistent identification, reporting and removal of accounts engaging in such behaviour.

Still, this recommendation is aligned with current calls for action by digital safety advocates, including a recent human rights brief (OHCHR, 2026b).

Establish protection from corporate and state surveillance

Critically, young people are adamant that necessary protections from digital violence not come at the cost of privacy. As explored more fully in chapter 4, information and communication technologies are important tools for youth civic engagement. In the recent UNFPA-supported survey of more than 7,000 young peacebuilders, most had used social media to plan community activities, and more than 70 per cent said social media and mobile phones contribute to peace (UNFPA, n.d.a).

To this end, the *State of World Population* consultation participants called for the establishment of stronger legal and regulatory frameworks to safeguard digital privacy and protect individuals from both state and corporate overreach. A central priority is the creation of robust encryption standards that preserve secure communication while limiting intrusive surveillance. "Social media companies should not have access to users' personal data," one participant said.

In parallel, national data protection authorities and relevant regional regulatory bodies are called upon to strengthen transparency and accountability in data governance. This includes requiring all digital platforms to fully disclose data-sharing agreements with governments and third parties, as well as enforcing a clear prohibition on the sale or transfer of personal data without explicit, informed and revocable user consent.

Balance disinformation response with free expression

Similarly, *State of World Population* consultation participants expressed concerns over both access to information and the dangers of mis- and disinformation. In the short term, they called for stronger responses to disinformation that protect both freedom of expression and human dignity, particularly for marginalized communities.

"Digital literacy among youth is rising. They have knowledge in their hands… But it also means they have to cross-check all their information, they have to find evidence and sources, and decide what is valid and authentic," a participant said.

To address this, consultation participants recommended, as a key priority, the establishment and sustained funding of independent, community-led fact-checking mechanisms. This would require dedicated financial and institutional support to fact-checking organizations that are led by, and accountable to, marginalized communities, including LGBTIQ+ groups, ethnic minorities and refugees. In this way, they said, those most impacted by disinformation will be central to designing and leading responses to it. These mechanisms must be structured to preserve legitimate expression while addressing harmful narratives, the consultation participants said.

Engage digital natives

One clear takeaway from these recommendations is that young people have the skills, insights and abilities to engage in technology governance efforts. Their proposals, in fact, are fully aligned with the statements and recommendations of international actors, including OHCHR, UNFPA and the Cotonou Youth Action Agenda, demonstrating fluency in both needs and solutions (OHCHR, 2026b; UNFPA and others, 2024; UNFPA, 2024). Perhaps no one is better equipped to ensure technology is inclusive, flattens hierarchies, and democratizes access to opportunities than young people themselves.

In fact, there are nascent efforts to engage with young people in the regulation and governance of digital tools, such as the Youth Internet Governance Forum (IGF, n.d.). Where education systems have struggled to address the use of AI in classrooms, teenagers have come together to craft thoughtful policies (Turner, 2026). These and other efforts demonstrate that young people can, indeed, cultivate the policy literacy needed to meaningfully engage in these issues, and to apply their comparative mastery over digital spaces towards strong decision-making. It is often the policymakers, legislators and regulators who still have to catch up.

Intergenerational equity and accountability

Finally, the participants emphasized the issue of trust. Central to that is intergenerational equity and accountability.

Intergenerational equity is perhaps most often invoked in the context of climate change, in which current and future youth bear the burdens of consumption patterns set by previous generations. But intergenerational equity and fairness are increasingly understood outside the realm of the environment. Researchers show that meaningfully engaging young people in decision-making spaces requires investments across generations – not only financial investment, but time and labour, in the form of "enduring opportunities for intergenerational interaction within formal politics, and the strengthening of generational ties in civic spaces to promote greater mutual understanding and respect" (Anlar and others, 2025).

These ideas are increasingly being integrated into planning and policy (European Commission, 2026; Roncarati and Im-Em, 2023), in no small part because of the advocacy of youth-led organizations. The *State of World Population* consultation participants called for more such efforts. While youth-led initiatives were noted as critical, they were seen as existing within a broader ecosystem of civil



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society engagement. For instance, they proposed a youth solidarity fund that could support wider cross-border collaboration among civic actors working on shared global challenges.

They also called for accountability mechanisms, which they felt were essentially non-existent. "Decision makers had evidence and international legal frameworks, yet political calculations led to non-enforcement," one consultation participant said, describing an experience common to many of the participants. In their view, the problem lies in the disconnect between articulation and implementation, where promises are made but not followed by measurable consequences.

They proposed several mechanisms that would ensure intergenerational accountability in national policymaking processes, such as legal frameworks requiring engagement of young people with binding authority on issues with long-term societal impacts. This was seen as providing a structural safeguard against short-term political decision-making. They also suggested international human rights mechanisms could be authorized to act when government actors fail to uphold human rights obligations.

Another proposal was embedding youth-defined indicators into international development agreements affecting young people, which would enable youth to create and monitor benchmarks. Stronger monitoring of government performance on youth-focused priorities could take place through progress reports and public scorecards. "We must make recommendations as visible as possible and congratulate, at an international level, governments that use policy for the benefit of youth; that is how we'll get their attention."

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Attention would also be needed where policymakers fail to heed the concerns of their electorates. Reflecting on the frustration that arises when youth voices are overlooked, one participant observed: "If leaders ignore clear, reasonable demands – especially about the future – then there have to be real, escalating consequences. Not symbolic anger, but pressure that affects what they care about: power, money, reputation and legitimacy." Youth participants stressed that these consequences should rely entirely on non-violent civic engagement, such as public advocacy, sustained collective action and dialogue. "If governments don't act, we have to talk and make even more noise so that there's a change."

These recommendations are aligned with efforts currently under way in other forums, where youth- and grass-roots-created "shadow reports" are offering independent supplemental and alternative views to institutional publications (UN DESA, 2018; New Tactics, 2010).

From diagnosis to prescription

It is ironic that, even as young people are treated as radicals and forces of destabilization, their repeated and consistent solution has been to reach across borders, communities and generational barriers. Few young people today, if any, are calling to reorient society in ways that privilege the young. Neither are they seeking to exclude older leaders as they have themselves been excluded. After all, today's young people are tomorrow's elders.

But they are not content to be partners-in-waiting. They are, in all their diversity, ready partners today.

Young people have provided the diagnosis: Efforts to realize bodily autonomy, advance equality, support self-determination and contribute to a collective future have been, for too long, treated as separate projects. But they are one and the same. Yet when people struggle across any of these dimensions – to access contraception, to find a job, to start a family, to see their concerns and values represented in their leaders – their challenges are treated as disconnected failures. Failure to achieve independence, failure to secure housing, failure to vote.

Young people have also provided the prescription. It is time to treat these issues for what they are: flaws in our systems. The solution is to open those systems up for collective, collaborative and transparent repairs, to create more entry points into inclusive decision-making, to forge more paths to independence and self-determination. Across many forums – dialogues, surveys, consultations, questionnaires, desk reviews and research – young people have provided clear and actionable policy recommendations, identified responsible actors, and proposed enforcement mechanisms. Again and again, they have called for inclusive, intergenerational, holistic action rooted in the dignity and rights of every person.

What remains is the political will to walk with them, under their leadership or hand-in-hand.

This report has been co-created by young people. The question now is whether the world will listen.



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INDICATORS

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Sexual and reproductive health

Regions

	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) (deaths per 100,000 live births)[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), lower estimate[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), upper estimate[a]	Births attended by skilled health personnel, per cent	Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population	Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15–49, per cent				Unmet need for family planning, women aged 15–49, per cent		Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods, all women aged 15–49	Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, per cent	Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index
						Any method		Modern method						
						All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union			
	2023	2023	2023	2025	2024	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2022	2023
World	**197**	**174**	**234**	**87**	**0.16**	**49**	**64**	**44**	**58**	**8**	**11**	**77**	**76**	**71**
More developed regions	10	9	12	–	0.14	58	71	52	63	7	8	81	87	85
Less developed regions	215	190	255	–	0.17	47	63	43	57	9	11	77	72	68
Least developed countries	313	277	368	77	0.31	33	43	29	38	15	19	61	71	48
Arab States	133	98	184	89	0.05	33	53	28	45	10	15	66	65	63
Asia and the Pacific	102	89	120	92	0.07	52	70	47	63	6	9	81	74	73
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	18	15	22	99	0.11	43	63	35	49	8	12	68	84	78
Latin America and the Caribbean	77	68	88	96	0.21	58	75	55	71	8	9	83	75	79
East and Southern Africa	276	233	352	80	0.77	36	44	32	40	15	20	64	72	51
West and Central Africa	669	538	920	65	0.26	23	25	19	22	16	21	50	70	48

Countries, territories and other areas

	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) (deaths per 100,000 live births)[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), lower estimate[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), upper estimate[a]	Births attended by skilled health personnel, per cent	Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population	Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15–49, per cent				Unmet need for family planning, women aged 15–49, per cent		Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods, all women aged 15–49	Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, per cent	Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index
						Any method		Modern method						
						All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union			
	2023	2023	2023	2004–2025	2024	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2022	2023
Afghanistan	521	339	942	68	0.04	21	31	19	27	15	23	52	56	42
Albania	7	3	13	100	0.04	47	64	21	27	10	13	37	79	71
Algeria	62	46	87	99	0.06	32	60	28	52	6	11	72	–	70
Angola	183	117	286	50	0.55	18	19	17	18	26	34	39	62	44
Antigua and Barbuda	35	19	55	99	–	41	62	39	60	10	13	76	–	81
Argentina	33	26	41	99	0.11	58	71	57	68	10	11	83	92	80
Armenia	19	15	30	100	0.21	37	61	21	34	7	12	47	87	69
Aruba	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Australia	2	2	3	99	–	58	67	56	64	7	10	86	–	89
Austria	6	4	11	99	–	66	73	63	70	5	7	89	–	84
Azerbaijan	18	12	29	100	0.04	34	58	16	26	8	13	37	–	67
Bahamas	76	50	130	100	0.13	45	66	43	64	10	12	78	–	80
Bahrain	17	12	25	99	0.04	37	63	27	45	7	12	61	73	78
Bangladesh	115	82	167	70	0.01	54	65	47	57	8	10	75	–	54
Barbados	35	18	56	99	0.35	51	63	47	60	12	14	75	44	82
Belarus	1	1	2	100	–	52	62	45	54	10	11	73	83	80
Belgium	4	3	5	–	0.04	61	67	60	66	6	8	91	–	86
Belize	67	39	111	95	0.47	44	58	41	55	13	17	72	43	70
Benin	518	393	740	81	0.09	20	24	17	19	21	29	40	91	38
Bhutan	47	30	69	99	0.11	41	62	39	61	8	12	82	83	69
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	146	98	243	98	0.16	45	69	35	52	10	15	63	94	67
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6	3	10	100	–	39	51	21	24	9	13	44	70	64
Botswana	155	96	268	100	1.83	59	71	57	70	8	10	87	64	60
Brazil	67	52	88	98	0.27	67	80	65	78	6	7	90	–	84
Brunei Darussalam	36	25	52	100	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	41	84
Bulgaria	6	3	9	94	0.03	66	80	52	61	5	7	74	62	73

Sexual and reproductive health

	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) (deaths per 100,000 live births)[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), lower estimate[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), upper estimate[a]	Births attended by skilled health personnel, per cent	Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population	Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15–49, per cent				Unmet need for family planning, women aged 15–49, per cent		Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods, all women aged 15–49	Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, per cent	Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index
						Any method		Modern method						
						All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union			
	2023	2023	2023	2004–2025	2024	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2022	2023
Burkina Faso	242	155	367	96	0.13	33	38	31	36	13	16	68	81	47
Burundi	392	251	611	75	0.10	22	36	19	32	15	26	53	65	48
Cabo Verde	40	22	65	98	0.41	45	60	44	59	11	15	78	84	71
Cambodia	137	96	239	99	0.07	44	64	33	47	8	11	63	98	62
Cameroon	258	196	359	69	0.46	25	26	21	20	15	21	52	–	48
Canada	12	8	18	98	–	73	82	70	80	3	4	92	–	92
Central African Republic	692	333	1,299	–	0.61	22	25	18	20	21	25	41	77	39
Chad	748	493	1,248	47	0.21	8	9	8	8	19	25	27	59	26
Chile	10	7	13	99	0.20	66	78	61	72	6	8	86	–	84
China	16	11	21	100	–	67	85	65	83	3	3	92	–	85
China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region	–	–	–	–	–	50	71	48	68	7	9	84	–	–
China, Macao Special Administrative Region	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Colombia	59	45	76	98	–	64	82	60	77	5	6	87	96	82
Comoros	179	103	308	97	0.01	13	18	10	14	22	32	29	–	52
Congo	241	144	453	94	1.70	43	46	31	31	14	18	56	55	45
Costa Rica	24	19	28	99	0.23	55	74	53	72	9	10	84	84	84
Côte d'Ivoire	359	237	568	84	0.27	30	30	26	26	17	21	55	64	46
Croatia	3	2	4	100	0.01	46	71	33	48	4	8	67	98	76
Cuba	35	29	42	100	0.17	63	62	62	61	10	13	84	–	86
Curaçao	–	–	–	–	–	40	47	37	44	15	20	68	–	–
Cyprus	14	8	25	100	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	72	76
Czechia	3	2	4	100	–	63	84	57	76	4	4	84	79	83
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	67	38	114	100	–	62	75	59	72	7	8	86	83	77
Democratic Republic of the Congo	427	283	775	85	0.21	27	31	18	18	19	25	38	–	41
Denmark	4	3	5	97	0.01	63	77	59	73	5	6	87	87	85
Djibouti	162	80	337	87	0.37	17	33	16	32	12	24	55	–	47
Dominica	36	22	61	100	–	48	63	46	61	11	13	78	–	75
Dominican Republic	124	86	185	100	0.36	57	73	54	70	8	10	84	–	73
Ecuador	55	48	66	97	0.10	54	80	50	73	7	6	82	92	78
Egypt	17	11	23	97	0.05	42	63	40	61	8	11	81	–	71
El Salvador	39	25	63	98	0.15	52	74	49	69	8	10	82	92	79
Equatorial Guinea	174	103	309	68	–	19	20	17	16	22	30	40	–	49
Eritrea	291	176	483	34	0.10	10	16	9	15	16	28	36	–	40
Estonia	5	3	9	100	0.04	63	75	52	63	5	6	77	98	79
Eswatini	118	72	209	93	4.15	47	63	46	61	12	16	79	98	72
Ethiopia	195	128	332	50	0.07	29	40	29	39	15	21	65	73	33
Fiji	30	20	47	100	1.45	26	39	23	34	15	22	55	–	69
Finland	8	5	14	100	–	79	82	74	78	3	5	91	98	86
France	7	6	10	98	–	67	78	64	75	4	4	91	–	82
French Guiana	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
French Polynesia	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Gabon	233	134	424	95	0.67	26	28	20	20	20	28	44	58	48
Gambia	354	245	504	84	0.41	15	23	15	21	15	24	47	–	53
Georgia	20	13	27	100	0.15	32	49	24	36	12	17	54	94	71

Sexual and reproductive health

	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) (deaths per 100,000 live births)[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), lower estimate[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), upper estimate[a]	Births attended by skilled health personnel, per cent	Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population	Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15–49, per cent				Unmet need for family planning, women aged 15–49, per cent		Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods, all women aged 15–49	Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, per cent	Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index
						Any method		Modern method						
						All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union			
	2023	2023	2023	2004–2025	2024	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2022	2023
Germany	4	3	5	96	0.03	55	68	54	67	6	9	88	87	87
Ghana	234	155	344	88	0.47	31	38	24	31	14	22	54	66	56
Greece	5	3	8	100	0.05	50	74	37	53	4	7	69	72	77
Grenada	48	29	95	100	–	46	65	42	60	10	12	76	–	78
Guadeloupe	–	–	–	–	–	40	58	36	52	11	15	72	–	–
Guam	–	–	–	–	–	37	66	33	56	7	10	75	–	–
Guatemala	94	82	106	96	0.08	43	65	37	55	8	12	72	–	58
Guinea	494	337	764	55	0.32	16	16	15	15	18	23	44	79	43
Guinea-Bissau	505	313	851	54	0.41	34	26	32	25	15	19	65	80	43
Guyana	75	59	103	98	0.69	30	40	29	39	19	27	59	87	73
Haiti	328	218	569	76	0.50	31	41	28	38	22	31	53	65	44
Honduras	47	37	62	94	0.04	50	73	47	67	8	10	80	80	64
Hungary	12	8	18	99	0.02	50	70	46	63	7	9	80	93	80
Iceland	3	1	6	98	0.05	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	90
India	80	73	87	89	0.05	51	68	45	59	6	9	78	74	69
Indonesia	140	93	235	97	0.09	39	55	38	54	10	14	78	77	67
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	16	10	22	99	0.02	57	82	46	66	3	4	77	63	81
Iraq	66	41	116	96	0.02	39	58	28	42	8	12	60	59	64
Ireland	4	3	5	100	0.03	65	70	63	67	5	9	89	–	82
Israel	2	1	4	100	–	39	73	31	57	5	8	70	–	85
Italy	6	5	9	100	0.07	59	67	49	53	5	9	77	–	82
Jamaica	130	96	175	99	0.40	37	66	34	61	9	10	74	76	74
Japan	3	2	4	100	–	51	60	46	52	9	14	77	85	86
Jordan	31	24	41	100	0.00	33	60	23	41	6	11	58	56	74
Kazakhstan	10	7	14	100	0.11	43	55	41	52	10	14	77	65	83
Kenya	379	267	547	89	0.37	47	65	44	61	6	9	82	48	57
Kiribati	80	34	152	92	–	24	33	20	27	16	22	50	–	51
Kuwait	8	5	12	100	–	36	61	30	50	8	13	68	–	84
Kyrgyzstan	42	33	55	100	0.13	26	44	25	41	10	17	68	73	74
Lao People's Democratic Republic	112	75	182	80	0.16	40	62	36	56	9	13	73	96	64
Latvia	19	13	28	99	0.09	58	72	52	63	6	9	81	70	77
Lebanon	15	11	21	98	–	32	62	25	47	6	12	64	–	67
Lesotho	478	298	725	89	1.94	50	68	49	67	9	13	84	–	55
Liberia	628	436	913	84	–	29	30	28	29	24	30	53	–	49
Libya	59	23	154	100	0.06	16	42	11	28	10	24	43	–	71
Lithuania	8	5	12	100	0.06	47	71	39	58	6	8	74	87	78
Luxembourg	12	7	19	100	0.07	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	83
Madagascar	445	326	652	46	0.51	42	53	37	47	12	14	69	–	33
Malawi	225	153	352	96	0.58	50	67	49	66	12	13	80	79	52
Malaysia	26	24	34	100	0.08	31	51	23	38	11	19	55	83	80
Maldives	32	22	50	100	0.01	18	26	14	20	20	28	38	93	71
Mali	367	268	498	66	0.17	21	23	20	22	20	23	49	–	41
Malta	8	4	14	100	0.09	54	80	43	63	3	5	76	–	82
Martinique	–	–	–	–	–	40	60	37	54	10	14	73	–	–
Mauritania	381	263	561	70	0.04	12	17	11	16	20	30	35	65	40
Mauritius	66	44	105	100	–	37	67	26	47	7	9	60	75	75

Sexual and reproductive health

	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) (deaths per 100,000 live births)[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), lower estimate[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), upper estimate[a]	Births attended by skilled health personnel, per cent	Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population	Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15–49, per cent				Unmet need for family planning, women aged 15–49, per cent		Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods, all women aged 15–49	Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, per cent	Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index
						Any method		Modern method						
						All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union			
	2023	2023	2023	2004–2025	2024	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2022	2023
Mexico	42	32	50	88	0.16	53	73	51	70	9	10	82	86	79
Micronesia (Federated States of)	129	56	302	100	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	65
Mongolia	41	27	58	100	0.01	41	59	38	53	12	15	71	–	70
Montenegro	6	3	10	99	0.05	23	28	17	17	14	21	45	52	70
Morocco	70	51	94	87	0.03	41	71	35	62	7	10	75	–	65
Mozambique	82	60	113	68	2.87	29	30	28	29	21	25	56	–	50
Myanmar	185	124	311	60	0.20	35	60	34	58	8	13	80	91	52
Namibia	139	91	223	96	1.56	54	62	53	62	10	14	84	88	66
Nepal	142	99	234	80	0.02	44	57	36	47	15	20	62	48	58
Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	4	3	6	–	–	63	73	60	70	5	7	88	100	85
New Caledonia	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
New Zealand	7	4	9	96	0.01	64	81	60	75	4	5	88	95	89
Nicaragua[1]	60	45	77	97	–	59	82	57	79	5	6	89	75	70
Niger	350	227	563	44	0.04	13	15	12	15	16	20	42	–	39
Nigeria	993	718	1,540	46	0.21	21	24	17	19	15	19	47	–	47
North Macedonia	3	1	5	100	0.03	44	55	23	23	9	13	42	–	69
Norway	1	1	2	99	–	67	85	63	80	3	4	89	100	89
Oman	13	9	19	100	0.02	22	40	16	28	13	24	45	70	73
Pakistan	155	107	241	68	–	28	42	21	33	10	16	56	69	56
Panama	37	30	43	96	0.33	48	61	45	57	13	17	75	72	82
Papua New Guinea	189	119	307	56	1.05	29	40	24	33	17	24	52	–	32
Paraguay	58	42	81	98	0.18	59	73	55	68	8	8	83	76	79
Peru	51	40	62	94	0.19	54	78	43	60	5	7	72	85	68
Philippines	84	64	119	90	0.27	35	60	26	44	7	12	61	80	69
Poland	2	1	3	100	–	54	74	45	59	6	8	74	89	82
Portugal	15	9	24	99	0.08	58	74	50	63	4	7	81	95	83
Puerto Rico	11	7	19	100	–	52	82	47	74	7	5	80	–	–
Qatar	4	2	6	100	0.05	33	51	28	43	9	14	66	71	84
Republic of Korea	4	3	5	100	–	51	83	45	71	4	6	82	–	88
Republic of Moldova	19	13	27	100	0.24	48	59	39	47	12	15	66	–	71
Réunion	–	–	–	–	–	51	72	50	70	8	8	84	–	–
Romania	12	7	18	98	0.02	53	71	45	59	6	8	77	98	77
Russian Federation	9	6	15	100	–	49	68	43	58	7	9	76	70	81
Rwanda	229	158	373	94	0.18	40	67	37	62	9	12	76	82	59
Saint Kitts and Nevis	74	36	118	99	–	48	60	45	56	12	14	75	–	80
Saint Lucia	44	26	77	100	–	49	61	46	57	12	14	76	33	75
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	56	32	87	99	–	48	66	46	63	10	12	79	81	80
Samoa	101	46	233	89	–	14	22	13	21	26	41	33	22	62
San Marino	8	3	16	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	74
Sao Tome and Principe	75	42	138	97	–	39	52	36	48	19	24	63	46	60
Saudi Arabia	7	5	11	100	0.04	23	42	19	35	11	20	56	–	83
Senegal	237	173	365	94	0.16	21	29	20	28	13	19	59	75	48
Serbia	11	8	16	100	0.03	47	59	30	31	6	11	57	99	73
Seychelles	42	26	64	100	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	80
Sierra Leone	354	249	537	87	0.28	30	29	29	29	19	23	60	65	48
Singapore	6	4	11	100	–	34	68	30	60	5	10	78	46	88

Sexual and reproductive health

	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) (deaths per 100,000 live births)[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), lower estimate[a]	Range of MMR uncertainty (UI 80%), upper estimate[a]	Births attended by skilled health personnel, per cent	Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population	Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15–49, per cent				Unmet need for family planning, women aged 15–49, per cent		Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods, all women aged 15–49	Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education, per cent	Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index
						Any method		Modern method						
						All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union	All	Married or in union			
	2023	2023	2023	2004–2025	2024	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2022	2023
Sint Maarten (Dutch part)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Slovakia	4	3	7	97	0.02	55	79	48	67	5	6	80	86	78
Slovenia	3	2	6	100	0.01	49	80	41	67	3	5	80	–	84
Solomon Islands	123	65	231	86	–	24	33	20	27	14	18	54	–	47
Somalia	563	244	1,089	32	–	8	11	3	3	17	26	11	–	30
South Africa	118	92	137	97	3.06	52	60	51	59	10	13	83	95	74
South Sudan	692	400	1,254	40	0.50	7	9	7	9	22	29	23	16	41
Spain	3	2	4	100	0.07	64	68	62	67	5	11	89	–	84
Sri Lanka	18	15	25	100	0.02	46	69	38	56	5	7	74	86	72
State of Palestine[2]	16	9	26	100	–	40	62	30	47	7	10	65	68	65
Sudan	256	159	415	78	0.14	12	18	11	17	17	27	38	57	48
Suriname	84	54	121	100	0.73	36	49	35	49	14	21	71	–	74
Sweden	4	3	6	–	–	59	71	56	68	6	8	87	100	85
Switzerland	5	4	8	–	0.03	73	73	68	68	4	7	89	94	87
Syrian Arab Republic	20	11	38	96	0.00	35	63	27	47	7	12	63	81	70
Tajikistan	14	8	25	98	0.03	24	35	22	32	14	21	58	–	72
Thailand	34	26	49	100	0.11	41	76	39	74	4	7	89	–	82
Timor-Leste	192	125	288	69	0.11	21	37	19	33	12	22	57	–	48
Togo	349	219	526	69	0.37	26	30	24	27	21	28	51	–	42
Tonga	67	30	156	98	–	18	34	16	29	13	25	51	–	71
Trinidad and Tobago	54	40	69	100	–	32	42	26	37	16	22	54	27	75
Tunisia	36	23	53	98	0.06	31	57	27	50	8	14	70	–	76
Türkiye	15	11	22	97	–	43	72	30	50	6	9	63	78	77
Turkmenistan	5	2	8	100	–	36	54	34	51	8	12	77	94	81
Turks and Caicos Islands	–	–	–	100	–	38	40	36	39	18	22	65	–	–
Tuvalu	170	75	409	100	–	20	27	18	24	19	27	46	–	65
Uganda	170	116	298	88	0.79	42	53	37	47	15	20	66	–	54
Ukraine	15	9	25	100	–	53	69	45	56	6	9	76	95	80
United Arab Emirates	3	2	4	100	0.01	38	54	30	43	11	16	62	–	84
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	8	6	12	–	–	71	76	65	69	4	7	86	96	88
United Republic of Tanzania	276	192	429	85	0.64	33	41	28	35	15	20	58	–	49
United States of America	17	13	21	99	–	61	76	53	67	5	6	80	–	88
United States Virgin Islands	–	–	–	–	–	53	75	49	70	8	8	81	–	–
Uruguay	15	11	20	100	–	58	79	55	77	6	7	87	97	85
Uzbekistan	26	18	40	99	–	47	63	45	60	8	11	82	92	79
Vanuatu	100	38	265	91	–	38	49	33	42	15	19	62	–	52
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)[3]	227	148	371	99	0.29	54	76	51	72	7	9	83	–	75
Viet Nam	48	31	69	98	0.06	58	79	48	66	4	5	79	54	71
Western Sahara	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Yemen	118	71	212	61	0.04	32	48	24	36	13	21	53	65	43
Zambia	85	61	126	94	1.55	39	56	37	53	14	17	70	91	62
Zimbabwe	358	236	484	85	0.91	51	70	50	69	8	9	86	73	59

Notes

– Data not available.

[a] The MMR has been rounded according to the following scheme: <100, rounded to nearest 1; 100–999, rounded to nearest 1; and ≥1000, rounded to nearest 10.

[1] The Government of Nicaragua reports the strengthening of its maternal and neonatal health services and a progressive decrease in MMR, officially publishing a rate of 16 per 100,000 live births for the year 2025. www.minsa.gob.ni/centro-de-medios/noticias/salud-materna-en-revolucion, accessed 22 September 2026.

[2] On 29 November 2012, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 67/19, which accorded Palestine "non-member observer State status in the United Nations…"

[3] The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela reports success in progressively reducing maternal mortality through a historic and structured effort that has, since 2016, prioritized strengthening access to contraception and the capacities of healthcare personnel. The Concerted Intervention Strategy for the Reduction of Maternal Mortality and Neonatal Mortality was created in 2018, combining governance measures, the Maternal Care Pathway, and supplies. By 2025, Vigilancia Epidemiológica Materna e Infantil reported a preliminary MMR of 60.72 per 100,000 live births, a figure currently undergoing audit confirmation.

Definitions of the indicators

Maternal mortality ratio: Number of maternal deaths during a given time period per 100,000 live births during the same time period (SDG indicator 3.1.1).

Births attended by skilled health personnel: Percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel (doctor, nurse or midwife) (SDG indicator 3.1.2).

Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population: Number of new HIV infections per 1,000 person-years among the uninfected population (SDG indicator 3.3.1).

Contraceptive prevalence rate: Percentage of women aged 15–49 years who are currently using any method of contraception.

Contraceptive prevalence rate, modern method: Percentage of women aged 15–49 years who are currently using any modern method of contraception.

Unmet need for family planning: Percentage of women aged 15–49 years who want to stop or delay childbearing but are not using a method of contraception.

Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods: Percentage of total demand for family planning among women aged 15–49 years that is satisfied by the use of modern contraception (SDG indicator 3.7.1).

Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education: The extent to which countries have national laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education (SDG indicator 5.6.2).

Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index: Average coverage of essential services based on tracer interventions that include reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases and service capacity and access, among the general and the most disadvantaged population (SDG indicator 3.8.1).

Main data sources

Maternal mortality ratio: United Nations Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-agency Group (WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, The World Bank, and the United Nations Population Division), 2025.

Births attended by skilled health personnel: Joint global database on skilled attendance at birth, 2025, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organisation (WHO). Regional aggregates calculated by UNFPA based on data from the joint global database.

Number of new HIV infections, all ages, per 1,000 uninfected population: UNAIDS 2024 HIV Estimates.

Contraceptive prevalence rate: United Nations Population Division, 2025.

Contraceptive prevalence rate, modern method: United Nations Population Division, 2025.

Unmet need for family planning: United Nations Population Division, 2025.

Proportion of demand satisfied with modern methods: United Nations Population Division, 2025.

Laws and regulations that guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education: UNFPA, 2022.

Universal health coverage (UHC) service coverage index: WHO, 2026.

Note: The years indicated in the data sources refer to the year of publication/release and may differ from the years of the indicators presented in the tables.

Gender, rights and human capital

Regions

	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls ages 15–19)	Child marriage by age 18, per cent	Female genital mutilation prevalence among women ages 15–49, per cent	Intimate partner violence, past 12 months, per cent	Decision-making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, per cent	Decision-making on women's own healthcare, per cent	Decision-making on contraceptive use, per cent	Decision-making on sexual intercourse, per cent	Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education	Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education
	2026	2025	2024	2023	2024	2024	2024	2024	2023	2023	2023	2023
World	**37**	**18**	**–**	**14**	**56**	**75**	**88**	**75**	**84.35**	**0.99**	**67.14**	**0.99**
More developed regions	8	–	–	–	87	98	96	92	–	–	–	–
Less developed regions	41	–	–	–	56	74	88	75	–	–	–	–
Least developed countries	87	35	–	20	46	68	86	68	–	–	–	–
Arab States	44	17	72	17	58	92	91	67	–	–	–	–
Asia and the Pacific	19	18	–	15	63	79	91	81	–	–	–	–
East and Southern Africa	90	29	–	20	48	76	88	67	–	–	–	–
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	18	10	–	11	70	89	91	81	–	–	–	–
Latin America and the Caribbean	48	18	–	7	72	86	91	90	–	–	–	–
West and Central Africa	89	33	27	17	26	44	80	55	–	–	–	–

Countries, territories and other areas

	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls ages 15–19)	Child marriage by age 18, per cent	Female genital mutilation prevalence among women ages 15–49, per cent	Intimate partner violence, past 12 months, per cent	Decision-making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, per cent	Decision-making on women's own healthcare, per cent	Decision-making on contraceptive use, per cent	Decision-making on sexual intercourse, per cent	Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education	Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education
	2001–2023	2006–2025	2004–2024	2023	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025
Afghanistan	62	29	–	39.7	–	–	–	–	–	–	45	0.55
Albania	10	12	–	2.3	62	92	83	77	95	0.93	99	0.99
Algeria	11	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	22	0.99	80	1.11
Angola	163	23	–	21.9	43	79	73	65	78	0.97	49	0.90
Antigua and Barbuda	33	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	99	–	91	0.99
Argentina	26	16	–	10.6	92	98	95	99	99	–	93	1.07
Armenia	11	5	–	3.6	62	96	83	76	97	0.98	88	1.04
Aruba	12	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Australia	7	–	–	1.8	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	94	1.04
Austria	4	–	–	2.1	96	99	99	98	99	1.00	92	1.02
Azerbaijan	37	15	–	6.9	–	–	–	–	92	0.99	78	0.96
Bahamas	28	–	–	4.2	–	–	–	–	84	1.02	79	1.03
Bahrain	7	–	–	–	87	93	92	79	97	1.02	98	1.01
Bangladesh	71	47	–	15.7	64	77	94	86	76	1.24	72	1.06
Barbados	48	29	–	–	–	–	–	–	98	0.99	93	1.07
Belarus	12	5	–	5.6	–	–	–	–	96	1.00	95	1.03
Belgium	4	0	–	5.3	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	98	1.00
Belize	52	34	–	8.2	–	–	–	–	93	1.02	63	1.09
Benin	77	28	9	9.5	32	52	66	59	53	0.91	32	0.79
Bhutan	6	9	–	5.9	–	–	–	–	90	1.16	79	1.20
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	71	15	–	15.2	–	–	–	–	92	0.99	81	1.01
Bosnia and Herzegovina	9	4	–	3.2	–	–	–	–	98	1.02	77	1.08
Botswana	48	–	–	16.7	–	–	–	–	91	1.01	69	1.07
Brazil	40	26	–	2.4	–	–	–	–	96	0.99	92	1.01
Brunei Darussalam	9	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	97	1.02	74	1.04
Bulgaria	37	–	–	3.7	–	–	–	–	93	1.00	88	0.97

Gender, rights and human capital

	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls ages 15–19) 2001–2023	Child marriage by age 18, per cent 2006–2025	Female genital mutilation prevalence among women ages 15–49, per cent 2004–2024	Intimate partner violence, past 12 months, per cent 2023	Decision-making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, per cent 2007–2024	Decision-making on women's own healthcare, per cent 2007–2024	Decision-making on contraceptive use, per cent 2007–2024	Decision-making on sexual intercourse, per cent 2007–2024	Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education, per cent 2017–2025	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education 2017–2025	Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education, per cent 2017–2025	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education 2017–2025
Burkina Faso	93	51	56	10.2	12	33	56	41	41	1.17	24	1.21
Burundi	58	19	–	25.3	40	72	88	60	63	1.07	29	1.15
Cabo Verde	50	8	–	13.9	–	–	–	–	34	1.67	83	1.10
Cambodia	48	18	–	4.8	80	92	93	91	82	1.06	51	1.16
Cameroon	98	30	1	10.7	35	55	74	67	53	0.93	35	0.87
Canada	5	–	–	8.5	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	85	0.99
Central African Republic	184	61	22	25.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Chad	138	61	34	14.2	27	47	81	63	41	0.79	20	0.70
Chile	6	0	–	3.9	–	–	–	–	99	0.99	99	0.99
China	6	3	–	10.6	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region	1	–	–	2.2	84	96	88	98	99	0.97	99	0.98
China, Macao Special Administrative Region	0	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	92	1.00	90	1.02
Colombia	39	23	–	14.8	–	–	–	–	96	1.01	87	1.03
Comoros	74	21	–	6.0	21	47	71	47	72	1.08	53	1.17
Congo	111	27	–	–	27	41	87	71	–	–	–	–
Costa Rica	25	17	–	5.7	–	–	–	–	92	1.00	89	1.02
Côte d'Ivoire	96	26	37	12.7	19	43	53	47	69	1.04	52	1.02
Croatia	7	–	–	2.3	95	100	97	98	99	–	93	1.07
Cuba	49	29	–	5.1	–	–	–	–	92	0.99	77	1.04
Curaçao	20	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	77	1.04	64	1.08
Cyprus	8	–	–	6.3	–	–	–	–	100	1.02	99	1.02
Czechia	7	–	–	2.8	95	99	98	98	100	1.00	93	1.00
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	1	0	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Democratic Republic of the Congo	109	30	–	33.2	24	55	63	51	–	–	–	–
Denmark	1	1	–	2.9	95	99	97	99	99	1.00	91	1.01
Djibouti	21	7	90	5.90	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Dominica	49	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	93	0.90	89	0.97
Dominican Republic	77	32	–	22.8	77	88	92	93	90	1.04	69	1.13
Ecuador	50	22	–	9.8	87	100	92	95	86	1.02	88	1.04
Egypt	37	16	87	17.2	–	–	–	–	93	1.01	70	0.96
El Salvador	50	20	–	5.3	–	–	–	–	54	1.30	47	1.23
Equatorial Guinea	176	30	–	37.0	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Eritrea	76	41	83	–	–	–	–	–	63	0.85	56	0.82
Estonia	5	–	–	2.7	–	–	–	–	97	1.00	90	1.01
Eswatini	87	2	–	17.1	73	95	94	79	93	0.97	76	1.08
Ethiopia	72	40	65	20.1	38	82	91	46	45	1.03	27	1.03
Fiji	31	4	–	24.8	62	86	84	77	97	–	85	1.08
Finland	3	0	–	2.7	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	95	1.01
France	3	–	–	3.4	96	99	98.70	98	100	1.00	96	1.02
French Guiana	50	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
French Polynesia	24	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Gabon	100	13	–	22.2	48	60	90	86	64	1.03	54	1.05
Gambia	65	23	73	10.0	20	49	87	45	86	1.21	57	1.28
Georgia	22	9	–	1.3	65	95	79	84	98	–	95	0.96

Gender, rights and human capital

	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls ages 15–19)	Child marriage by age 18, per cent	Female genital mutilation prevalence among women ages 15–49, per cent	Intimate partner violence, past 12 months, per cent	Decision-making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, per cent	Decision-making on women's own healthcare, per cent	Decision-making on contraceptive use, per cent	Decision-making on sexual intercourse, per cent	Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education	Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education
	2001–2023	2006–2025	2004–2024	2023	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025
Germany	6	–	–	4.7	–	–	–	–	100	1.01	89	1.00
Ghana	63	16	2	13.4	52	76	84	72	95	0.96	42	0.66
Greece	7	–	–	4.6	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	97	1.00
Grenada	31	–	–	6.7	–	–	–	–	87	–	57	1.04
Guadeloupe	10	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Guam	26	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Guatemala	58	30	–	7.2	65	77	91	89	68	0.97	34	1.03
Guinea	128	47	95	19.7	15	41	76	40	–	–	–	–
Guinea-Bissau	84	26	52	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Guyana	65	32	–	11.8	71	92	90	83	73	0.96	63	1.08
Haiti	55	15	–	12.5	57	77	93	79	–	–	–	–
Honduras	97	34	–	6.0	70	84	88	94	56	1.06	38	1.18
Hungary	17	–	–	5.2	–	–	–	–	97	1.00	90	1.01
Iceland	3	–	–	2.4	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	81	1.01
India	11	23	–	22.4	66	82	92	83	86	1.02	58	1.05
Indonesia	36	16	51	3.6	–	–	–	–	98	1.06	72	1.03
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	23	17	–	–	–	–	–	–	92	1.01	78	1.04
Iraq	70	28	7	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Ireland	3	–	–	4.6	–	–	–	–	100	–	99	1.01
Israel	6	1	–	5.4	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	98	1.02
Italy	3	–	–	2.8	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	94	1.00
Jamaica	35	27	–	5.9	–	–	–	–	66	1.33	86	0.99
Japan	2	–	–	3.7	–	–	–	–	100	–	97	1.02
Jordan	17	10	–	10.0	76	94	96	83	98	0.98	91	1.08
Kazakhstan	17	6	–	4.7	73	94	88.10	84	96	0.98	99	1.00
Kenya	46	13	15	14.6	65	87	92	77	–	–	62	0.69
Kiribati	51	18	–	42.2	–	–	–	–	94	0.99	87	1.16
Kuwait	0	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	77	1.17	73	1.14
Kyrgyzstan	29	9	–	12.8	77	94	95	85	97	1.02	67	1.11
Lao People's Democratic Republic	89	31	–	6.0	0	70	35.20	50	64	1.01	34	0.93
Latvia	9	–	–	2.4	–	–	–	–	97	1.01	92	1.03
Lebanon	17	6	–	–	–	–	–	–	68	1.06	45	1.26
Lesotho	53	13	–	21.2	69	94	94	76	68	1.10	42	1.20
Liberia	131	25	32	33.6	59	79	84	82	56	1.04	54	1.00
Libya	11	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Lithuania	6	0	–	3.6	–	–	–	–	100	–	96	1.02
Luxembourg	3	–	–	5.3	–	–	–	–	98	1.01	89	1.05
Madagascar	143	39	–	13.6	72	87	93	88	61	1.05	31	1.00
Malawi	136	39	–	20.9	42	73	87	62	75	1.06	31	0.90
Malaysia	6	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	82	1.06	65	1.09
Maldives	8	2	13	14.6	54	89	84	70	91	1.02	57	0.81
Mali	145	49	89	17.9	3	18	59	18	44	0.86	23	0.74
Malta	10	–	–	4.2	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	90	1.03
Martinique	8	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Mauritania	90	37	64	6.10	25	63	79	44	70	1.09	45	1.03
Mauritius	21	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	87	1.03	81	1.08

Gender, rights and human capital

	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls ages 15–19)	Child marriage by age 18, per cent	Female genital mutilation prevalence among women ages 15–49, per cent	Intimate partner violence, past 12 months, per cent	Decision-making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, per cent	Decision-making on women's own healthcare, per cent	Decision-making on contraceptive use, per cent	Decision-making on sexual intercourse, per cent	Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education	Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education
	2001–2023	2006–2025	2004–2024	2023	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025
Mexico	40	18	–	7.0	–	–	–	–	91	1.03	72	1.09
Micronesia (Federated States of)	33	–	–	23.6	–	–	–	–	78	1.02	64	1.06
Mongolia	17	8	–	12.1	63	85	84	80	94	1.03	95	1.09
Montenegro	9	6	–	4.2	–	–	–	–	100	1.00	87	1.05
Morocco	22	14	–	21.6	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	81	1.06
Mozambique	158	48	–	14.0	31	70	67	47	72	0.89	33	0.95
Myanmar	36	16	–	10.5	68	85	98	81	89	1.07	64	1.17
Namibia	22	7	–	17.1	71	91	83	94	99	1.03	80	0.99
Nepal	71	35	–	12.3	63	72	91	91	99	1.00	86	0.99
Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	2	–	–	5.2	98	99	99	99	99	1.00	98	1.00
New Caledonia	10	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
New Zealand	11	–	–	1.2	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	94	1.02
Nicaragua	71	35	–	–	–	–	–	–	83	0.90	63	0.99
Niger	150	76	2	12.5	7	21	77	35	20	1.00	12	0.92
Nigeria	75	33	14	19.6	29	49	67	50	–	–	–	–
North Macedonia	14	8	–	3.8	88	98	99	90	–	–	–	–
Norway	1	0	–	4.0	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	92	1.02
Oman	5	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	91	1.01	70	0.97
Pakistan	41	18	–	13.1	32	52	85	55	68	0.99	49	0.93
Panama	52	26	–	5.2	79	94	89	95	80	1.02	72	1.05
Papua New Guinea	68	27	–	45.3	57	86	84	76	69	0.95	38	0.95
Paraguay	72	22	–	3.6	–	–	–	–	85	1.01	72	1.04
Peru	29	18	–	8.0	–	–	–	–	100	1.01	94	0.99
Philippines	27	9	–	3.1	82	95	91	92	87	1.02	78	1.05
Poland	6	–	–	1.7	–	–	–	–	100	1.00	99	1.01
Portugal	6	–	–	4.6	–	–	–	–	99	1.01	100	1.01
Puerto Rico	12	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	84	1.02	74	1.04
Qatar	4	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	93	1.01	82	1.05
Republic of Korea	0	–	–	8.4	–	–	–	–	97	1.00	96	0.99
Republic of Moldova	23	12	–	9.2	72	97	97	77	99	–	86	1.05
Réunion	17	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Romania	31	7	–	10.6	–	–	–	–	84	1.00	73	1.02
Russian Federation	13	6	–	–	–	–	–	–	100	1.01	55	0.94
Rwanda	24	6	–	18.4	61	83	95	76	94	1.04	72	1.07
Saint Kitts and Nevis	74	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	95	–	81	1.36
Saint Lucia	24	24	–	–	–	–	–	–	87	1.11	78	1.05
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	38	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	96	–	93	1.05
Samoa	55	7	–	27.3	–	–	–	–	99	–	77	1.13
San Marino	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	94	1.00	40	0.90
Sao Tome and Principe	86	28	–	19.4	46	69	78	79	–	–	–	–
Saudi Arabia	8	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	100	1.00
Senegal	67	30	20	10.7	8	35	62	22	36	1.25	19	1.29
Serbia	14	6	–	3.6	84	100	86	98	95	0.95	76	1.01
Seychelles	49	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	96	1.00	76	1.09
Sierra Leone	102	30	83	41.0	28	44	78	68	96	1.14	72	1.10
Singapore	2	0	–	2.6	–	–	–	–	100	1.00	99	1.00

Gender, rights and human capital

	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls ages 15–19)	Child marriage by age 18, per cent	Female genital mutilation prevalence among women ages 15–49, per cent	Intimate partner violence, past 12 months, per cent	Decision-making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, per cent	Decision-making on women's own healthcare, per cent	Decision-making on contraceptive use, per cent	Decision-making on sexual intercourse, per cent	Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education	Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education, per cent	Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education
	2001–2023	2006–2025	2004–2024	2023	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2007–2024	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025	2017–2025
Sint Maarten (Dutch part)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Slovakia	25	–	–	5.6	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	93	1.00
Slovenia	3	–	–	3.0	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	97	1.01
Solomon Islands	49	21	–	34.1	–	–	–	–	77	1.04	64	1.07
Somalia	116	45	99	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
South Africa	40	4	–	10.6	61	94	85	72	90	1.02	87	1.04
South Sudan	158	52	–	38.9	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Spain	5	–	–	2.4	–	–	–	–	98	1.00	94	1.01
Sri Lanka	16	10	–	8.0	–	–	–	–	93	1.02	78	1.05
State of Palestine[1]	43	13	–	20.8	–	–	–	–	94	1.01	76	1.15
Sudan	87	34	87	28.6	–	–	–	–	65	0.94	33	1.08
Suriname	40	36	–	6.9	–	–	–	–	60	1.22	44	1.32
Sweden	2	–	–	4.3	–	–	–	–	100	1.00	97	1.00
Switzerland	1	–	–	4.3	–	–	–	–	100	1.00	91	1.00
Syrian Arab Republic	54	13	–	–	–	–	–	–	49	1.11	27	1.19
Tajikistan	39	9	–	16.8	33	55	67	62	–	–	–	–
Thailand	18	17	–	14.3	–	–	–	–	99	1.02	81	1.12
Timor-Leste	42	15	–	33.7	36	93	92	40	87	1.06	73	1.07
Togo	79	25	3	10.3	30	47	84	75	73	0.97	45	0.85
Tonga	30	10	–	13.0	–	–	–	–	93	1.05	71	1.07
Trinidad and Tobago	36	4	–	6.5	–	–	–	–	98	1.02	93	1.05
Tunisia	4	2	–	5.8	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Türkiye	12	15	–	13.3	–	–	–	–	99	0.98	99	0.99
Turkmenistan	22	6	–	3.5	43	86	68	65	97	0.99	87	1.04
Turks and Caicos Islands	13	23	–	8.0	–	–	–	–	90	0.85	80	0.90
Tuvalu	36	2	–	26.3	–	–	–	–	88	1.01	52	1.34
Uganda	111	34	0	24.2	59	74	88	86	–	–	–	–
Ukraine	13	9	–	8.9	81	98	95	86	90	1.01	86	1.06
United Arab Emirates	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	100	1.02	100	1.00
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	9	0	–	4.0	–	–	–	–	99	1.00	95	1.02
United Republic of Tanzania	112	29	8	23.8	50	74	85	68	49	1.12	15	0.86
United States of America	14	–	–	7.4	–	–	–	–	99	1.01	95	1.03
United States Virgin Islands	25	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Uruguay	23	25	–	4.7	92	99	96	97	99	1.00	89	1.06
Uzbekistan	37	3	–	–	70	89	90	85	97	1.00	99	1.00
Vanuatu	81	21	–	36.4	63	83	82	77	94	1.00	82	0.82
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	76	–	–	10.6	–	–	–	–	99	1.03	78	1.08
Viet Nam	29	15	–	11.2	–	–	–	–	98	0.96	68	1.11
Western Sahara	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Yemen	77	30	19	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Zambia	135	24	–	19.6	50	84	79	67	88	1.03	34	0.99
Zimbabwe	87	34	–	15.1	60	87	93	72	87	1.03	50	1.01

Notes

– Data not available.

[1] On 29 November 2012, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 67/19, which accorded Palestine "non-member observer State status in the United Nations..."

Definitions of the indicators

Adolescent birth rate: Number of births per 1,000 adolescent girls aged 15–19 (SDG indicator 3.7.2).

Child marriage by age 18: Proportion of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in a union before age 18 (SDG indicator 5.3.1).

Female genital mutilation prevalence among girls aged 15–49: Proportion of girls aged 15–49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation (SDG indicator 5.3.2).

Intimate partner violence, past 12 months: Percentage of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15–49 who have experienced physical and/or sexual partner violence in the previous 12 months (SDG indicator 5.2.1).

Decision making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights: Percentage of women aged 15–49 years who are married (or in union), who make their own decisions on three areas – their healthcare, use of contraception, and sexual intercourse with their partners (SDG indicator 5.6.1).

Decision making on women's own health care: Percentage of women aged 15–49 years who are married (or in union), who make their own decisions on their healthcare (SDG indicator 5.6.1).

Decision making on contraceptive use: Percentage of women aged 15–49 years who are married (or in union), who make their own decisions on use of contraception (SDG indicator 5.6.1).

Decision making on sexual intercourse: Percentage of women aged 15-49 years who are married (or in union), who make their own decisions on sexual intercourse with their partners (SDG indicator 5.6.1).

Total net enrolment rate, primary education: Total number of students of the official age group for primary education who are enrolled in any level of education, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population.

Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, primary education: Ratio of female to male values of total net enrolment rate for primary education.

Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education: Total number of students of the official age group for lower secondary education who are enrolled in any level of education, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population.

Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education: Ratio of female to male values of total net enrolment rate for lower secondary education.

Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education: Total number of students of the official age group for upper secondary education who are enrolled in any level of education, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population.

Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education: Ratio of female to male values of total net enrolment rate for upper secondary education.

Main data sources

Adolescent birth rate: United Nations Population Division, 2024. Regional aggregates are from World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Child marriage by age 18: UNICEF, 2026.

Female genital mutilation prevalence among girls aged 15–49: UNICEF, 2026.

Intimate partner violence, past 12 months: Violence Against Women Inter-Agency Group on Estimation and Data (WHO, UN Women, UNICEF, UNSD, UNODC, and UNFPA), 2023.

Decision making on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights: UNFPA, 2026.

Decision making on women's own health care: UNFPA, 2026.

Decision making on contraceptive use: UNFPA, 2026.

Decision making on sexual intercourse: UNFPA, 2026.

Total net enrolment rate, primary education: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026.

Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, primary education: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026.

Total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026.

Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026.

Total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026.

Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2026.

Note: The years indicated in the data sources refer to the year of publication/release and may differ from the years of the indicators presented in the tables.

Demographic indicators

Regions

	Population	Population change	Population composition					Fertility	Life expectancy	
	Total population in millions	Population annual doubling time, years	Population aged 0–14, per cent	Population aged 10–19, per cent	Population aged 10–24, per cent	Population aged 15–64, per cent	Population aged 65 and older, per cent	Total fertility rate, per woman	Life expectancy at birth, years, 2026	
	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	male	female
World	**8,301**	**84**	**24**	**16**	**24**	**65**	**11**	**2.2**	**71**	**76**
More developed regions	1,288	–	15	11	17	63	21	1.5	77	83
Less developed regions	7,013	71	26	17	25	66	9	2.3	70	75
Least developed countries	1,244	31	38	22	31	58	4	3.8	65	69
Arab States	448	36	33	20	29	62	5	3.1	70	74
Asia and the Pacific	4,262	129	22	16	23	68	10	1.8	72	77
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	256	–	22	15	21	66	12	2.0	72	79
Latin American and Caribbean	668	111	22	15	23	68	10	1.8	73	79
East and Southern Africa	734	28	40	23	32	57	3	4.0	63	68
West and Central Africa	546	31	40	24	33	57	3	4.3	58	60

Countries, territories and other areas

	Population	Population change	Population composition					Fertility	Life expectancy	
	Total population in millions	Population annual doubling time, years	Population aged 0–14, per cent	Population aged 10–19, percent	Population aged 10–24, per cent	Population aged 15–64, per cent	Population aged 65 and older, per cent	Total fertility rate, per woman	Life expectancy at birth, years, 2026	
	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	male	female
Afghanistan	45.1	26	42	24	34	55	2	4.6	65	68
Albania	2.8	–	16	12	18	65	18	1.3	78	82
Algeria	48.0	58	29	18	25	64	7	2.6	76	78
Angola	40.2	23	44	24	32	53	3	4.9	63	68
Antigua and Barbuda	0.1	–	17	13	20	70	13	1.6	75	81
Argentina	46.0	–	20	16	24	67	13	1.5	75	80
Armenia	2.9	–	19	13	19	66	15	1.7	72	80
Aruba[1]	0.1	–	16	13	19	65	18	1.6	74	79
Australia[2]	27.2	76	18	12	18	64	18	1.6	83	86
Austria	9.1	–	14	10	15	64	22	1.3	80	85
Azerbaijan[3]	10.5	130	21	16	22	70	10	1.7	72	78
Bahamas	0.4	–	17	13	21	70	12	1.4	71	79
Bahrain	1.7	38	18	12	19	78	4	1.8	81	82
Bangladesh	177.8	58	27	18	28	66	7	2.1	74	77
Barbados	0.3	–	17	12	19	65	18	1.7	74	79
Belarus	8.9	–	15	12	17	66	19	1.2	70	80
Belgium	11.8	–	15	12	18	63	21	1.4	80	85
Belize	0.4	52	26	17	26	69	5	2.0	71	77
Benin	15.2	29	41	23	32	56	3	4.3	60	63
Bhutan	0.8	99	20	16	25	73	7	1.4	72	76
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	12.8	53	29	19	28	65	6	2.5	67	72
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.1	–	13	10	15	64	24	1.5	75	81
Botswana	2.6	43	32	19	28	64	4	2.6	67	72
Brazil	213.6	–	19	14	21	69	12	1.6	73	79
Brunei Darussalam	0.5	96	20	14	21	72	8	1.7	74	78
Bulgaria	6.7	–	14	10	15	63	22	1.7	73	80
Burkina Faso	24.6	32	41	25	34	57	3	3.9	59	64
Burundi	14.7	30	43	26	35	54	3	4.6	62	66
Cabo Verde	0.5	–	24	18	27	69	7	1.5	73	80
Cambodia	18.1	63	29	19	27	64	7	2.5	68	74
Cameroon	30.6	28	41	23	32	56	3	4.1	62	67

Demographic indicators

	Population	Population change	Population composition					Fertility	Life expectancy	
	Total population in millions	Population annual doubling time, years	Population aged 0–14, per cent	Population aged 10–19, percent	Population aged 10–24, per cent	Population aged 15–64, per cent	Population aged 65 and older, per cent	Total fertility rate, per woman	Life expectancy at birth, years, 2026	
	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	male	female
Canada	40.5	87	15	11	17	64	21	1.3	81	85
Central African Republic	5.7	21	48	27	37	50	2	5.7	56	60
Chad	21.6	27	46	24	32	52	2	5.8	54	58
Chile	20.0	–	16	12	19	69	15	1.1	80	84
China[4]	1,412.9	–	15	12	18	70	15	1.0	76	82
China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region[5]	7.4	–	10	8	11	65	25	0.8	83	89
China, Macao Special Administrative Region[6]	0.7	–	13	10	14	71	16	0.7	81	86
Colombia	53.9	75	20	14	22	70	11	1.6	76	81
Comoros	0.9	39	37	22	31	59	4	3.7	65	70
Congo	6.6	30	39	24	33	57	3	4.0	65	68
Costa Rica	5.2	–	18	14	21	69	13	1.3	79	84
Côte d'Ivoire	33.5	30	40	24	33	57	3	4.1	60	65
Croatia	3.8	–	14	10	15	62	24	1.5	76	82
Cuba	10.9	–	15	11	17	68	18	1.5	76	81
Curaçao[1]	0.2	–	14	12	18	68	18	1.1	73	81
Cyprus[7]	1.4	86	16	10	16	69	15	1.4	80	84
Czechia	10.5	–	15	11	16	64	21	1.5	78	83
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	26.6	–	19	12	19	68	13	1.8	72	76
Democratic Republic of the Congo	116.5	22	46	23	32	51	3	5.8	60	65
Denmark[8]	6.0	–	15	11	17	63	21	1.5	81	84
Djibouti	1.2	53	28	19	29	66	5	2.5	64	69
Dominica	0.1	–	17	13	19	69	13	1.5	69	75
Dominican Republic	11.6	92	26	17	26	66	9	2.2	71	77
Ecuador	18.4	83	23	17	25	68	9	1.8	75	81
Egypt	120.1	48	31	20	29	63	5	2.7	70	74
El Salvador	6.4	–	24	17	26	68	8	1.7	68	77
Equatorial Guinea	2.0	30	37	21	29	59	4	4.0	63	66
Eritrea	3.7	34	37	24	34	59	4	3.6	67	71
Estonia	1.3	–	15	11	16	63	22	1.4	76	83
Eswatini	1.3	64	33	21	30	63	4	2.6	62	67
Ethiopia	138.9	28	39	22	32	58	3	3.7	65	72
Fiji	0.9	–	27	18	26	67	7	2.2	66	70
Finland[9]	5.6	–	14	11	17	61	25	1.3	80	85
France[10]	66.8	–	16	12	18	61	23	1.6	81	86
French Guiana[11]	0.3	42	31	19	27	62	7	3.3	75	80
French Polynesia[11]	0.3	–	18	15	22	70	13	1.5	82	87
Gabon	2.7	34	36	21	29	60	4	3.5	66	72
Gambia	2.9	32	39	24	33	58	3	3.7	65	68
Georgia[12]	3.8	–	20	14	20	63	16	1.8	70	79
Germany	83.6	–	14	9	14	62	24	1.5	80	84
Ghana	35.7	39	35	22	31	61	4	3.3	64	69
Greece	9.9	–	13	10	16	63	25	1.3	80	85
Grenada	0.1	–	19	14	21	68	13	1.5	73	79
Guadeloupe[11]	0.4	–	16	12	18	59	26	2.0	79	86
Guam[13]	0.2	100	26	16	23	61	14	2.7	74	82
Guatemala	19.0	47	30	21	30	64	5	2.2	71	75
Guinea	15.4	31	40	23	32	56	3	4.0	60	62
Guinea-Bissau	2.3	33	38	23	33	59	3	3.6	62	67
Guyana	0.8	118	29	18	26	64	7	2.4	67	74
Haiti	12.0	64	30	20	29	65	5	2.6	62	69

Demographic indicators

	Population	Population change	Population composition					Fertility	Life expectancy	
	Total population in millions	Population annual doubling time, years	Population aged 0–14, per cent	Population aged 10–19, percent	Population aged 10–24, per cent	Population aged 15–64, per cent	Population aged 65 and older, per cent	Total fertility rate, per woman	Life expectancy at birth, years, 2026	
	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	male	female
Honduras	11.2	44	30	19	29	65	5	2.4	71	76
Hungary	9.6	–	14	10	15	64	21	1.5	74	81
Iceland	0.4	75	17	12	19	66	16	1.5	82	85
India	1,476.6	81	24	17	26	69	8	1.9	71	74
Indonesia	287.9	94	24	17	24	68	8	2.1	69	74
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	93.2	91	22	15	21	69	9	1.7	76	80
Iraq	48.0	34	35	23	32	61	4	3.1	71	74
Ireland	5.4	79	18	14	20	66	17	1.6	81	85
Israel	9.7	51	27	17	25	60	13	2.7	81	85
Italy	58.9	–	11	9	14	63	26	1.2	82	86
Jamaica	2.8	–	18	14	22	73	9	1.3	69	74
Japan	122.4	–	11	9	14	59	30	1.2	82	88
Jordan	11.6	33	30	20	29	65	5	2.5	76	81
Kazakhstan	21.1	62	29	18	24	62	9	2.9	71	79
Kenya	58.6	37	36	23	33	61	3	3.1	62	67
Kiribati	0.1	49	34	21	28	62	5	3.1	65	69
Kuwait	5.1	50	18	12	17	79	3	1.5	80	82
Kyrgyzstan	7.4	50	31	20	27	62	6	2.7	69	76
Lao People's Democratic Republic	8.0	55	29	19	28	66	5	2.3	67	72
Latvia	1.8	–	15	11	16	62	23	1.4	72	81
Lebanon	5.9	83	25	19	27	64	11	2.2	76	80
Lesotho	2.4	63	34	22	31	62	4	2.6	56	61
Liberia	5.9	32	39	24	33	58	3	3.7	61	64
Libya	7.5	62	26	19	27	68	5	2.2	73	78
Lithuania	2.8	–	14	10	15	64	21	1.2	72	81
Luxembourg	0.7	70	16	11	16	68	16	1.4	81	84
Madagascar	33.5	30	39	22	31	58	4	3.8	63	66
Malawi	22.8	27	40	24	34	58	3	3.5	65	71
Malaysia[14]	36.4	63	21	15	24	71	8	1.5	75	80
Maldives	0.5	–	18	14	20	76	5	1.5	80	83
Mali	25.9	24	45	25	34	52	2	5.3	60	63
Malta	0.6	–	13	9	14	66	21	1.1	82	86
Martinique[11]	0.3	–	15	11	16	58	27	2.0	80	86
Mauritania	5.5	26	42	24	33	55	3	4.5	67	71
Mauritius[15]	1.3	–	14	11	18	71	15	1.2	72	79
Mexico	133.0	89	24	17	25	68	9	1.9	73	78
Micronesia (Federated States of)	0.1	–	31	21	30	62	6	2.7	64	72
Mongolia	3.6	64	31	20	27	63	6	2.5	68	77
Montenegro	0.6	–	18	13	19	64	19	1.8	74	81
Morocco	38.8	83	25	17	25	66	9	2.2	74	78
Mozambique	36.6	25	44	24	33	53	3	4.5	61	67
Myanmar	55.2	117	24	16	24	68	8	2.1	64	71
Namibia	3.2	37	36	21	29	60	4	3.1	64	72
Nepal	29.6	–	28	19	29	66	7	1.9	70	73
Netherlands (Kingdom of the)[16]	18.5	136	15	11	17	64	21	1.4	81	84
New Caledonia[11]	0.3	84	21	14	21	67	12	1.9	77	82
New Zealand[17]	5.3	106	18	13	19	64	18	1.6	81	84
Nicaragua	7.1	55	28	19	28	66	6	2.2	73	78
Niger	28.8	22	46	25	34	52	3	5.6	61	63
Nigeria	242.4	34	40	24	34	57	3	4.2	55	55
North Macedonia	1.8	–	16	12	18	65	19	1.5	76	80
Norway[18]	5.7	–	16	12	18	65	19	1.4	82	85

Demographic indicators

	Population	Population change	Population composition					Fertility	Life expectancy	
	Total population in millions	Population annual doubling time, years	Population aged 0–14, per cent	Population aged 10–19, percent	Population aged 10–24, per cent	Population aged 15–64, per cent	Population aged 65 and older, per cent	Total fertility rate, per woman	Life expectancy at birth, years, 2026	
	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	male	female
Oman	5.7	25	24	14	22	73	3	2.4	79	82
Pakistan	259.3	44	36	22	32	60	4	3.4	66	71
Panama	4.6	59	24	16	24	66	10	2.1	77	83
Papua New Guinea	11.0	41	33	20	29	63	4	3.0	64	69
Paraguay	7.1	60	28	18	26	65	7	2.4	71	77
Peru	34.9	71	23	16	24	67	10	1.9	76	81
Philippines	117.7	87	26	20	29	68	6	1.9	67	73
Poland	37.8	–	14	11	15	65	21	1.3	76	83
Portugal	10.4	–	13	9	15	62	25	1.5	80	86
Puerto Rico[13]	3.2	–	11	10	16	63	26	0.9	79	86
Qatar	3.2	42	15	9	15	83	2	1.7	82	84
Republic of Korea	51.6	–	10	9	14	69	21	0.8	82	88
Republic of Moldova[19]	3.0	–	19	14	19	63	17	1.7	67	76
Réunion[11]	0.9	–	20	15	21	63	17	2.1	81	87
Romania	18.8	–	15	11	17	64	20	1.7	73	80
Russian Federation	143.4	–	17	13	18	65	18	1.5	68	79
Rwanda	14.9	33	37	22	32	59	4	3.5	66	71
Saint Kitts and Nevis	0.1	–	18	12	19	69	12	1.5	69	76
Saint Lucia	0.2	–	17	12	20	73	10	1.4	70	77
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	0.1	–	20	16	22	67	13	1.7	69	75
Samoa	0.2	125	38	24	32	56	6	3.7	70	74
San Marino	0.03	–	11	10	15	65	24	1.2	85	87
Sao Tome and Principe	0.2	36	37	23	33	59	4	3.5	67	74
Saudi Arabia	35.2	41	23	15	23	73	3	2.3	78	82
Senegal	19.4	31	37	23	32	59	4	3.7	67	72
Serbia[20]	6.6	–	14	10	15	62	23	1.5	74	81
Seychelles	0.1	45	20	13	19	71	9	2.1	70	77
Sierra Leone	9.0	35	37	23	32	59	3	3.5	61	64
Singapore	5.9	124	12	8	17	73	15	1.0	82	87
Sint Maarten (Dutch part)[1]	0.0	63	15	12	18	70	15	1.4	74	80
Slovakia	5.5	–	15	11	15	65	20	1.6	76	82
Slovenia	2.1	–	14	11	15	63	23	1.6	80	85
Solomon Islands	0.9	30	36	22	31	60	4	3.4	70	73
Somalia	20.3	21	47	23	32	51	3	5.8	57	62
South Africa	65.5	66	26	16	24	67	7	2.2	63	70
South Sudan	12.4	34	37	26	36	60	3	3.6	55	61
Spain[21]	47.9	–	12	10	16	66	22	1.2	81	87
Sri Lanka	23.4	–	21	15	23	66	13	1.9	75	81
State of Palestine[22]	5.7	37	37	23	31	59	4	3.1	75	80
Sudan	53.3	23	40	22	32	57	3	4.1	64	70
Suriname	0.7	84	25	17	25	66	9	2.2	71	77
Sweden	10.7	–	16	12	18	62	21	1.5	82	85
Switzerland	9.0	–	15	10	15	64	21	1.5	82	86
Syrian Arab Republic	26.5	23	28	20	32	67	5	2.6	71	76
Tajikistan	11.0	40	35	21	29	60	4	3.0	70	74
Thailand	71.6	–	14	11	18	69	17	1.2	73	81
Timor-Leste	1.4	53	33	22	32	62	5	2.5	67	70
Togo	8.8	32	39	23	32	58	4	4.0	63	64
Tonga	0.1	–	34	24	34	59	7	3.0	70	77
Trinidad and Tobago	1.5	–	17	12	19	69	14	1.5	71	77
Tunisia	12.4	135	23	16	23	67	10	1.8	75	80
Türkiye	87.9	–	21	15	22	69	11	1.6	76	81

Demographic indicators

	Population	Population change	Population composition					Fertility	Life expectancy	
	Total population in millions	Population annual doubling time, years	Population aged 0–14, per cent	Population aged 10–19, percent	Population aged 10–24, per cent	Population aged 15–64, per cent	Population aged 65 and older, per cent	Total fertility rate, per woman	Life expectancy at birth, years, 2026	
	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	2026	male	female
Turkmenistan	7.7	47	31	18	25	64	5	2.6	67	73
Turks and Caicos Islands[23]	0.1	118	16	11	16	72	12	1.4	76	81
Tuvalu	0.0	–	33	20	28	60	7	3.1	64	71
Uganda	52.8	27	43	24	34	55	2	4.0	66	72
Ukraine[24]	39.5	–	13	11	17	67	19	1.0	70	80
United Arab Emirates	11.6	41	16	10	18	82	2	1.2	83	85
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland[25]	69.9	133	17	12	18	63	20	1.5	80	84
United Republic of Tanzania[26]	72.6	25	42	23	32	55	3	4.4	65	70
United States of America[27]	349.0	–	17	13	19	64	19	1.6	77	82
United States Virgin Islands[13]	0.1	–	16	11	17	60	24	2.1	71	82
Uruguay	3.4	–	18	14	21	66	17	1.4	75	82
Uzbekistan	37.7	40	31	17	23	62	6	3.4	70	76
Vanuatu	0.3	32	38	22	30	58	4	3.5	70	74
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	28.6	–	24	19	27	65	10	2.0	69	77
Viet Nam	102.2	126	22	16	23	68	10	1.9	70	80
Western Sahara	0.6	44	23	15	22	70	7	2.1	70	74
Yemen	43.0	25	41	22	31	57	3	4.3	68	72
Zambia	22.5	25	41	24	33	57	2	3.9	64	69
Zimbabwe	17.3	37	40	25	35	57	4	3.6	61	66

Notes

– Data not available.

[1] For statistical purposes, the data for Netherlands do not include this area.

[2] Including Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Norfolk Island.

[3] Including Nagorno-Karabakh.

[4] For statistical purposes, the data for China do not include Hong Kong and Macao, Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of China, and Taiwan Province of China.

[5] As of 1 July 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. For statistical purposes, the data for China do not include this area.

[6] As of 20 December 1999, Macao became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. For statistical purposes, the data for China do not include this area.

[7] Refers to the whole country.

[8] For statistical purposes, the data for Denmark do not include Faroe Islands and Greenland.

[9] Including Åland Islands.

[10] For statistical purposes, the data for France do not include French Guiana, French Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mayotte, New Caledonia, Réunion, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, Saint Barthélemy, Saint Martin (French part) and Wallis and Futuna Islands.

[11] For statistical purposes, the data for France do not include this area.

[12] Including Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

[13] For statistical purposes, the data for United States of America do not include this area.

[14] Including Sabah and Sarawak.

[15] Including Agalega, Rodrigues and Saint Brandon.

[16] For statistical purposes, the data for Netherlands do not include Aruba, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten (Dutch part).

[17] For statistical purposes, the data for New Zealand do not include Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau.

[18] Including Svalbard and Jan Mayen Islands.

[19] Including Transnistria.

[20] For statistical purposes, the data for Serbia do not include Kosovo (United Nations administered region under Security Council Resolution 1244).

[21] Including Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla.

[22] Including East Jerusalem.

[23] For statistical purposes, the data for United Kingdom do not include this area.

[24] Including Crimea.

[25] Refers to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For statistical purposes, the data for United Kingdom do not include Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands (Malvinas), Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, Montserrat, Saint Helena and Turks and Caicos Islands.

[26] Including Zanzibar.

[27] For statistical purposes, the data for United States of America do not include American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and United States Virgin Islands.

Definitions of the indicators

Total population: Estimated size of national populations at mid-year.

Population annual doubling time, years: The number of years required for the total population to double in size if the annual rate of population change would remain constant. It is calculated as ln(2)/r where r is the annual population growth rate. Doubling time is computed only for fast growing populations with growth rates exceeding 0.5 per cent.

Population aged 0–14, per cent: Proportion of the population between age 0 and age 14.

Population aged 10–19, per cent: Proportion of the population between age 10 and age 19.

Population aged 10–24, per cent: Proportion of the population between age 10 and age 24.

Population aged 15–64, per cent: Proportion of the population between age 15 and age 64.

Population aged 65 and older, per cent: Proportion of the population aged 65 and older.

Total fertility rate: Number of children who would be born per woman if she lived to the end of her childbearing years and bore children at each age in accordance with prevailing age-specific fertility rates.

Life expectancy at birth: Number of years newborn children would live if subject to the mortality risks prevailing for the cross section of population at the time of their birth.

Main data sources

Total population: World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Population annual doubling time, years: World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Population aged 0-14, per cent: UNFPA calculation based on data from World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Population aged 10-19, per cent: UNFPA calculation based on data from World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Population aged 10-24, per cent: UNFPA calculation based on data from World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Population aged 15-64, per cent: UNFPA calculation based on data from World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Population aged 65 and older, per cent: UNFPA calculation based on data from World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Total fertility rate: World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Life expectancy at birth: World Population Prospects 2024 revision. United Nations Population Division, 2024.

Note: The years indicated in the data sources refer to the year of publication/release and may differ from the years of the indicators presented in the tables.

Technical notes

The statistical tables in the *State of World Population 2026* include indicators that track progress towards the goals of the Framework of Actions for the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the areas of maternal health, access to education and reproductive and sexual health. In addition, these tables include a variety of demographic indicators. The statistical tables support UNFPA's focus on progress and results towards delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

Different national authorities and international organizations may employ different methodologies in gathering, extrapolating or analysing data. To facilitate the international comparability of data, UNFPA relies on the standard methodologies employed by the main sources of data. In some instances, therefore, the data in these tables differ from those generated by national authorities. Data presented in the tables are not comparable to the data in previous *State of World Population* reports due to regional classifications updates, methodological updates and revisions of time series data.

The statistical tables draw on nationally representative household surveys such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), United Nations organizations estimates, and inter-agency estimates. They also include the latest population estimates and projections from *World Population Prospects: The 2024 revision*, and *Model-based Estimates and Projections of Family Planning Indicators 2024* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division). Data are accompanied by definitions, sources and notes. The statistical tables in *State of World Population 2026* generally reflect information available as of April 2026.

Regional classifications

UNFPA regional aggregates presented at the end of the statistical tables are calculated using data from countries and areas as classified below.

Arab States Region: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen.

Asia and Pacific Region: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Mongolia, Myanmar, Naoero, Nepal, Niue, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Viet Nam.

East and Southern Africa Region: Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

Latin American and the Caribbean Region: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Curaçao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Montserrat, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sint Maarten, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

West and Central Africa Region: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

More developed regions are intended for statistical purposes and do not express a judgment about the stage reached by a particular country or area in the development process, comprising the United Nations Population Division regions of Europe, Northern America, Australia/New Zealand and Japan.

Less developed regions are intended for statistical purposes and do not express a judgment about the stage reached by a particular country or area in the development process, comprising all UNPD regions of Africa, Asia (except Japan), Latin America and the Caribbean plus Melanesia, Micronesia (Federated States of) and Polynesia.

The least developed countries, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolutions (59/209, 59/210, 60/33, 62/97, 64/L.55, 67/L.43, 64/295 and 68/18) included 44 countries (as of December 2024): Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Yemen and Zambia. These countries are also included in the less developed regions. Further information is available at un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/ldc_list.pdf.

Notes on specific indicators

Maternal mortality ratio. This indicator presents the number of maternal deaths during a given time period per 100,000 live births during the same time period. The estimates are produced by the Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-agency Group (MMEIG) using data from vital registration systems, household surveys and population censuses. Estimates and methodologies are reviewed regularly by MMEIG and other agencies and academic institutions and are revised where necessary, as part of the ongoing process of improving maternal mortality data. Estimates should not be compared with previous inter-agency estimates.

Births attended by skilled health personnel. Percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel (doctors, nurses or midwives) is the percentage of deliveries attended by health personnel trained in providing life-saving obstetric care, including giving the necessary supervision, care and advice to women during pregnancy, labour and the post-partum period; conducting deliveries on their own; and caring for newborns. Traditional birth attendants, even if they receive a short training course, are not included.

Adolescent birth rate. The adolescent birth rate represents the risk of childbearing among adolescent women 15–19 years of age. For civil registration, rates are subject to limitations which depend on the completeness of birth registration, the treatment of infants born alive but dead before registration or within the first 24 hours of life, the quality of the reported information relating to age of the mother, and the inclusion of births from previous periods. The population estimates may suffer from limitations connected to age misreporting and coverage. For survey and census data, both the numerator and denominator come from the same population. The main limitations concern age misreporting, birth omissions, misreporting the date of birth of the child, and sampling variability in the case of surveys.

Contraceptive prevalence, any method and any modern method. Model-based estimates are based on data that are derived from sample survey reports. Survey data estimate the proportion of all women of reproductive age, and married women (including women in consensual unions), currently using, respectively, any method or modern methods of contraception. Modern methods of contraception include female and male sterilization, the intrauterine device, the implant, injectables, oral contraceptive pills, male and female condoms, vaginal barrier methods (including the diaphragm, cervical cap and spermicidal foam, jelly, cream and sponge), lactational amenorrhea method, emergency contraception and other modern methods not reported separately (e.g., the contraceptive patch or vaginal ring).

Unmet need for family planning (any method). Model-based estimates are based on data that are derived from sample survey reports. Women who are using a traditional method of contraception are not considered as having an unmet need for family planning. All women or all married and in union women are assumed to be sexually active and at risk of pregnancy. The assumption of universal exposure to possible pregnancy among all women or all married or in union women may lead to lower estimates compared to the actual risks among the exposed. It may be possible that, when contraceptive prevalence increases, unmet need for family planning also increases, particularly at low levels of contraceptive prevalence. Both indicators, therefore, need to be interpreted together.

Proportion of demand satisfied, any modern method. Modern contraceptive prevalence divided by total demand for family planning. Total demand for family planning is the sum of contraceptive prevalence and unmet need for family planning.

Note on the Demographic Futures Survey

Data for this survey were collected in Q4 of 2025 and Q1 of 2026 by two professional online survey firms operating in 73 countries and territories. Kantar Lightspeed collected data from Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechia, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Thailand, Uganda, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uruguay, Viet Nam and Zambia. GeoPoll collected data in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cambodia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao People's Democratic Republic, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Somalia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kosovo*. A full methodological annex for the survey, including details on regional groupings and post-stratification weighting, are available in UNFPA's *Lives, Choices and Futures* report.

The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with a team of experts from Bocconi University, and reviewed by an external advisory committee of leading scholars in family demography and survey research. The final analytic sample comprises 108,926 respondents after excluding cases with missing values or very small subgroup sizes that would have produced unreliable estimates. Because online surveys tend to over-sample more urban and more educated respondents, especially in lower-income settings, the Demographic Futures Survey is not nationally representative.

Note on the milestone achievement analysis, figures 1 and 2. This analysis identifies the age cohort at which 50 per cent or more Demographic Futures Survey respondents achieve a certain life milestone. Respondents were identified as having children based on survey Question 22, "How many living children do you currently have (please include biological and adopted children, but do not include step children)?" They were identified as being

in a stable relationship when their responses to Question 9, "Which of the following best describes your current relationship and living arrangement?" included "In a stable relationship but not cohabiting", "Cohabiting but not married", "Legally married or in a registered partnership but not living with spouse/partner" or "Legally married or in a registered partnership and living with spouse/partner". The latter two responses were also used to identify respondents' marital status. They were identified as living with their natal family if their response to Question 42, "Which of the following describes your household living arrangement?" included "Living with parents" or "Living with other relatives". Respondents were identified as being employed when their response to Question 41, "Which of the following best describes your current employment status?" was either "Employed" or "Self-employed". A person was identified as a student when their response to Question 41 was "Student".

Note on figure 3. The denominator for this figure is respondents, aged 25–39, who answered Question 9 with "Dating but not living with a partner" or "In a stable relationship but not legally married or in a registered partnership and not living with partner". The numerator is respondents, aged 25–39, who answered Question 19, "People have different preferences for relationships and living arrangements; in an ideal world, which of these would you choose?" with "Living with a partner, followed later by marriage" or "Getting married and then living together".

Note on figure 4. This figure represents responses to survey Question 32, which asked, "How does the number of children you currently have compare with the number you would like for your age?" Response options were: "I have more children than I would like for my age", "I have the right number of children for my age", "I have fewer children than I would like for my age", "I am unsure" and "Prefer not to answer".

Note on figure 5. Question 35 of the survey asked, "For you personally, how important are the following reasons for having/having more children?" Response options were: "Not important at all", "Not particularly important", "Neither important nor unimportant", "Important" and "Very important". The reasons were: "To bring joy and happiness", "To continue tradition and the family line", "There are strong expectations from peers, society, religion, family or my partner to have children", "Parenthood fulfils religious values related to family", "Being a parent brings status and respect", "Having children strengthens and stabilizes the relationship with one's partner", "Having a child will provide me with support later in life", "Children are needed so that someone will work for our country in the future" and "My government encourages having children". (For analysis, "Children are needed so that someone will work for our country in the future" and "My government encourages having children" are clustered as "Policy and societal drivers"; "To continue tradition and the family line", "There are strong expectations from peers, society, religion, family or my partner to have children", "Parenthood fulfils religious values related to family" and "Being a parent brings status and respect" are all clustered as "Social and cultural expectations".)

Note on figure 6. This figure explores associations between Question 43 and Question 7. Question 43 asked, "A household may have different sources of income, and more than one household member may contribute to it. Thinking of your household's total monthly income, how easily can your household make ends meet?" Possible answers were "With great difficulty", "With difficulty", "With some difficulty", "Fairly easily", "Easily" and "Very easily". Note these are subjective measures of perceived financial comfort. Question 7 asked, "Looking at today's situation and thinking about the future, how worrying do you find each of the following?" The situations were "Artificial intelligence", "Terrorism", "Climate change", "Overpopulation/population pressure", "Population ageing and decline", "Economic crisis", "Increased number of refugees", "High unemployment", "Organized crime", "Conflict and wars", "Global epidemics", "Weakened democracy", "Increased social inequality" and "Political instability". The response options were "Very worrying", "Somewhat worrying", " Neutral", "Not particularly worrying" or "Not worrying at all". Only "Economic crisis", "Unemployment" and "Social inequality" were found to have notable associations with responses to Question 7. This figure shows estimates from OLS regression.

Note on figure 7. This figure explores associations among Question 1a, Question 7 and fertility intention. Question 1a asked, "How positive, if at all, do you feel about the future?" with the option to respond "Very negative", "Somewhat negative", "Neither positive nor negative", "Somewhat positive" or "Very positive". Question 28 asked non-parents, "How many children (biological and adopted) do you intend to have?", and asked parents, "How many more children (biological and adopted) do you intend to have?" Fertility intention was determined by adding responses to Question 28 with responses to Question 22. Only "Overpopulation", "Population ageing", "Economic crisis", "Unemployment", "Weakened democracy" and "Social inequality" were associated with increased or decreased fertility intention. This figure shows estimates from OLS regression.

Note on figure 8. Question 2 asked, "Thinking about your life and that of young people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" The statements were: "Young people like me have a lot of opportunities in life", "The government in my country provides a lot of support for young people", "There are a lot of inequalities between young people in my country", "The government in my country provides a lot of support for parents with young children" and "Employers in my country are good at supporting work–family balance". For each statement, respondents could answer "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Neither agree nor disagree", "Agree" or "Strongly agree."

Note on figure 9. This figure brings together responses to Question 2 and fertility intention. This figure shows estimates from OLS regression.

*All references to Kosovo should be understood in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

Note on youth consultations

Dedicated youth consultations were held for this report. The State of World Population consultations involved a multi-stage process designed to capture both broad global perspectives and enable deeper exploration of key issues. The methodology was grounded in three integrated theoretical approaches: An intersectionality framework, a life-course approach, and a social contract lens.

An open-ended global questionnaire served as the foundation of the consultation process. It was designed to identify the key issues and priorities that young people are facing across different regions and demographic groups. This helped to map concerns across the areas covered in the report, ensuring the report's priorities are aligned with the priorities of young people themselves. The questionnaire received 325 responses across multiple regions. These insights were followed by an in-depth recommendation-focused dialogue bringing together 34 participants from across regions with both plenary discussions and breakout sessions, both facilitated with live interpretation. As a policy-focused dialogue, this session focused on collecting real-world, first-person experiences and testimonials from empowered youth advocates; many of their interventions are directly quoted in and throughout this report. To further strengthen inclusivity and address participation barriers, particularly time zone constraints affecting Asia Pacific and Latin America, a follow-up policy questionnaire was conducted, allowing for the integration of additional perspectives from these regions. The youth participant inputs were analysed in two stages: First, authors (themselves seasoned youth advocates) coded questionnaire responses by globally recurring themes, giving particular attention to emerging issues not referenced in the structured response options. Second, a cross-regional comparative synthesis was conducted to identify patterns of convergence, divergence and consistency. Finally, the recommendations were evaluated to ensure they are concrete, actionable, and address clearly articulated systemic barriers or gaps.

More than half of participants were adolescents, defined as those between 10 and 24, while almost 30 per cent were between 25 and 29, and under 20 per cent were between 29 and 35. Participants were identified through a number of youth networks affiliated with UNFPA and its external authors and researchers, and therefore represent an informed and civically engaged segment of the youth population.

In addition, young people, variously defined, were engaged in all other aspects of report development, including former youth advocates, current students and youth consultation experts. For chapter 3, a wide range of consultations took place involving health professionals of all ages, including multiple cross-regional dialogues, resulting in the development of 20 country-level case studies and an overarching background paper. In addition, four young professionals were engaged to provide further analysis, development and review of the chapter.

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