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**ADOLESCENT GIRLS
IN WEST AND
CENTRAL AFRICA:**

DATA BRIEF

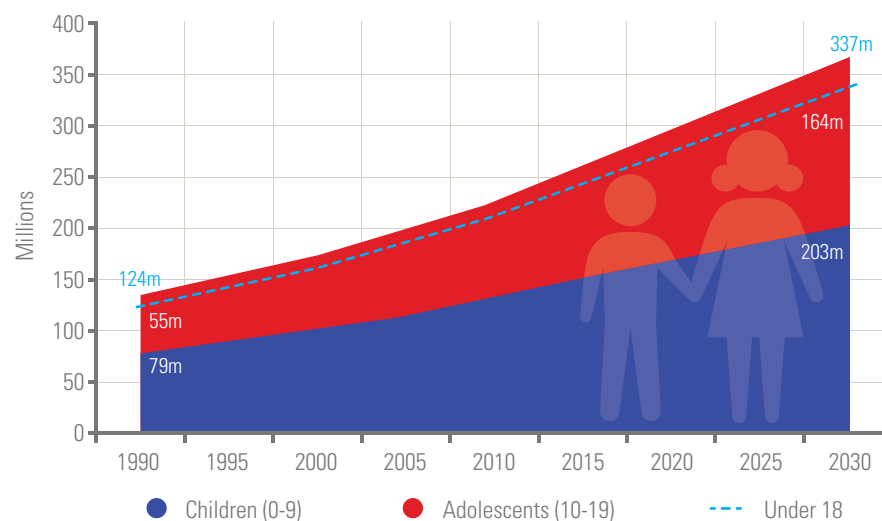
ADOLESCENT SHARE OF WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA'S POPULATION

West and Central Africa is on the cusp of a population shift that has the potential to transform the region. In 2019, adolescents—persons aged 10-19—constituted 23 per cent of the population in West and Central Africa—the highest proportion of any region in the world alongside Eastern and Southern Africa. According to projections, this population will further grow by 32 per cent between 2019 and 2030, from 124 million to 164 million.

This means that the proportion of the population that is of working age and able to contribute to economic productivity will be larger than ever. Gender equality will be key for countries in West and Central Africa to realize the benefits. Today's adolescent girls therefore must be equipped to realize their potential and fully participate in political, economic, and social life.

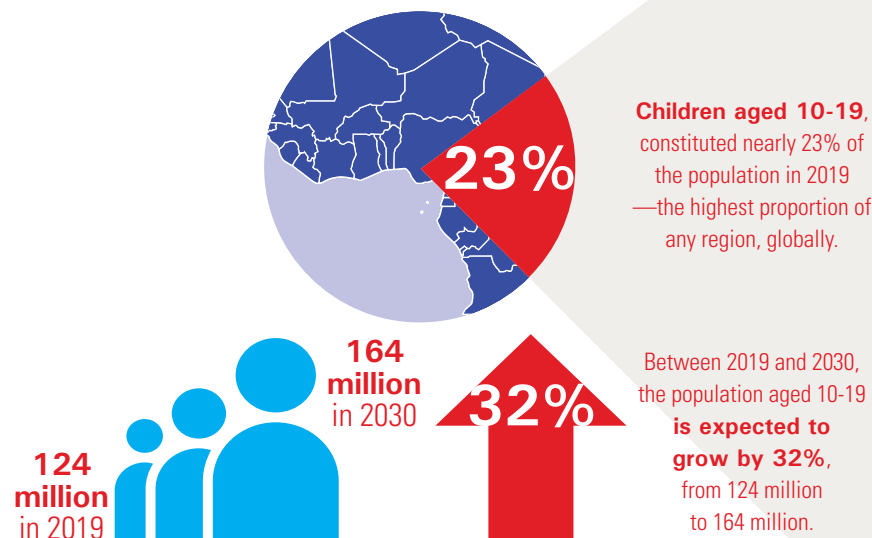


Population aged 0-19, 1990-2030, West and Central Africa

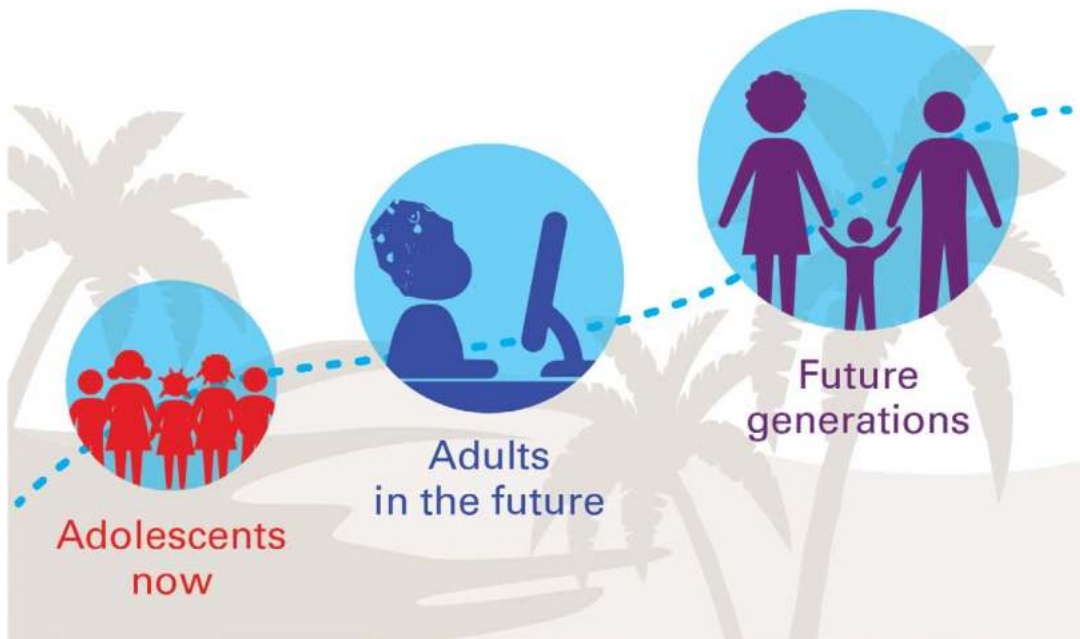


Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision.

West and Central Africa: Key figures about the adolescent population



Investments in adolescent girls bring a triple benefit



This data brief shows how adolescent girls in the region encounter multiple and over-lapping deprivations that put their rights and well-being (including health and education) at risk. Countries must urgently tackle the social norms and institutions that deny women and girls educational opportunities, constrain access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and condone harmful practices such as child marriage.

Gender Inequality Index in West and Central African countries: SIGI components¹

Country (n=16)	Category	SIGI value	Discrimination within the family	Restricted physical integrity	Restricted access to productivity & financial resources	Restricted civil liberties
Burkina Faso	Medium	32.4	44.9	35.5	32.9	13.8
Ghana	Medium	34.5	59.5	20.2	30.7	22.7
Senegal	Medium	37	64.9	41.9	27.6	3.6
Chad	Medium	39.5	53	35.1	46.4	27.2
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Medium	39.5	53	35.1	46.4	20.7
Benin	Medium	39.8	40.5	27.7	36.2	53.3
Gabon	High	40.1	50.5	37.3	45.5	26
Côte d'Ivoire	High	42.8	29.7	35.6	76.1	20.4
Central African Republic	High	45.4	55.8	32.2	61.9	54.2
Mali	High	46	63.5	48.4	39.9	28.9
Nigeria	High	46	54.8	32	41.4	53.9
Sierra Leone	High	46.6	53.7	50.4	44.8	40.9
Liberia	High	47.5	60	33.5	41.5	52.8
Togo	High	49.5	63.1	24.7	43.5	62
Cameroon	Very high	51.8	51.1	26.3	77.7	45.4
Guinea	Very high	56.7	87.7	56.9	28.8	44.4

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2019.
 Note: Does not include Cabo Verde, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Mauritania, Niger and São Tomé and Príncipe due to data unavailability.

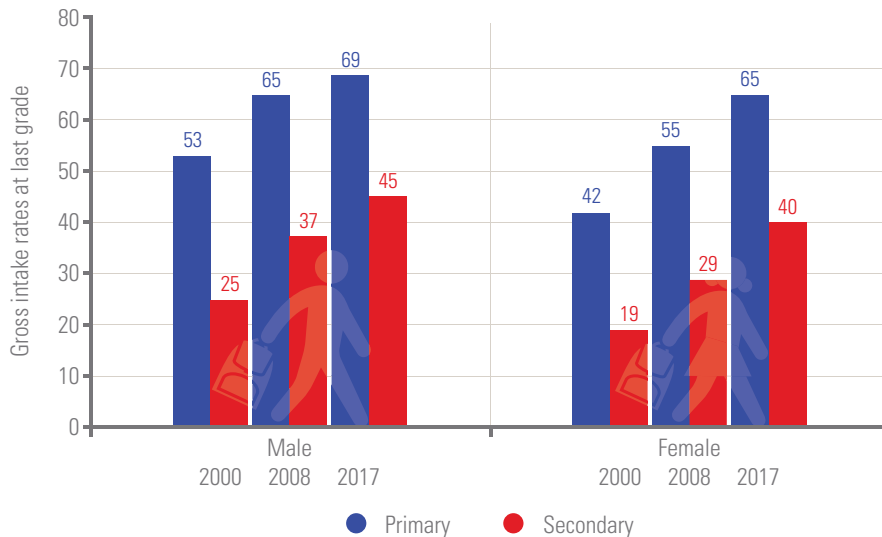
¹ The SIGI is a multidimensional index capturing both the de jure and de facto discrimination of social institutions, through information on laws, attitudes and practices. The index has four sub-indices—discrimination within the family, restricted physical integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources and restricted civil liberties. Countries are classified into five levels of gender discrimination based on the SIGI values—very low, low, medium, high and very high. For details on the SIGI visit: <https://www.genderindex.org/team/>. The 'number of countries with high or very high levels of gender discrimination as defined by the SIGI' has been included as an indicator in UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

EDUCATION

The West and Central Africa region has registered notable progress in girls' education over the last two decades. Between 2000 and 2017, the proportion of girls entering the last grades of both primary and secondary schools—the gross intake ratio—increased. Trends in gender parity indices (GPI)² of completion rates in primary and lower secondary school also show a closing gap in most countries. Girls' completion rates at the primary level even surpassed those of boys in Burkina Faso, Gambia, Mauritania, São Tomé and Príncipe and Senegal.

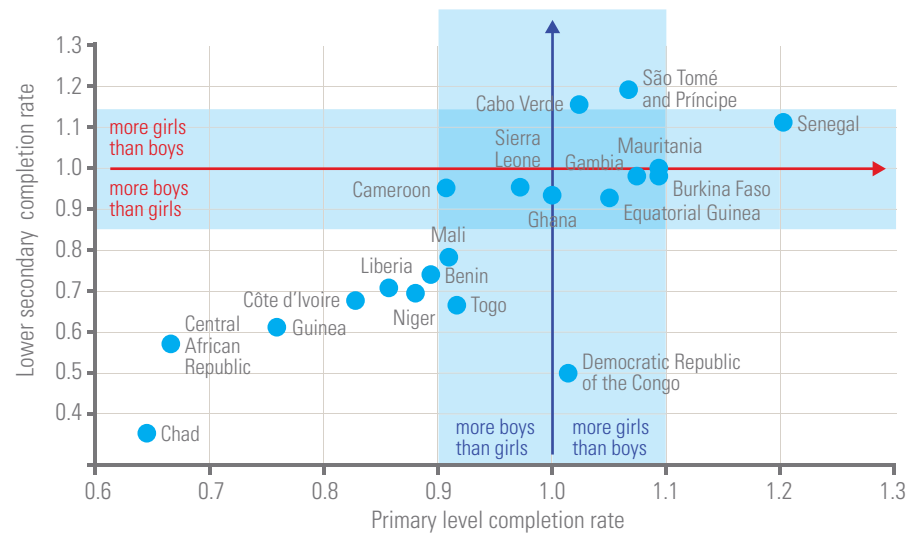
Meanwhile, the region still has the highest gender gaps in education in the world. In 2012, 19 million boys and girls of primary school age and 12.5 million of lower secondary school age were out of school—with 57 per cent of the former and about 53 per cent of the latter being girls.³ While primary education is essential for children, secondary education is critical for the empowerment of women as it lays the foundation for a healthy and productive life and access to decent work. Yet, gender gaps in completion rates can be stark at the lower secondary level.

Trends in gross intake rates to the last grades of primary and secondary schools by sex, West and Central Africa



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018.

Gender parity index, completion of primary and lower secondary in 2017⁴



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018.
 Note: Does not include Congo, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria due to data unavailability.



² GPI is a measure of the relative access to education of boys and girls. A GPI value of one depicts gender parity, below one means that girls lag behind boys, and greater than one indicates that girls are doing better.

³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and UNICEF (2015). Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children. Montreal: UIS. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15220/978-92-9189-161-0-en>

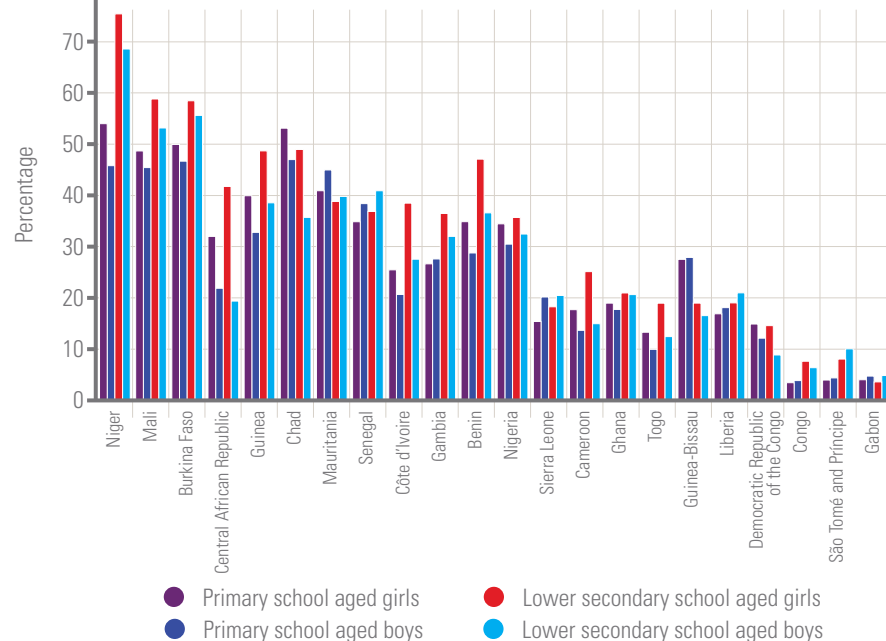
⁴ Shaded areas indicate where gender parity is more or less achieved, within a 10 per cent interval. Countries to the left of the blue vertical arrow along the x-axis (primary level completion rate) show disparity "at the expense" of girls and those to the right of the blue vertical arrow show disparity "at the expense" of boys. Similarly, for secondary completion rates, countries below the red horizontal arrow show disparity "at the expense" of girls and above the red horizontal arrow "at the expense" of boys.

Poverty and the need for children to contribute to their families' income generation is one reason why children are out of school. Across all countries, significantly more children from poorer households are out of school compared to their wealthier peers.

Protracted conflicts, exclusion, low quality of education and lack of re-entry policies after childbirth and school-based sexual violence also result in children, especially girls, dropping and staying out of school. For example, in Equatorial Guinea and Sierra Leone, pregnant students in public schools are expelled,⁵ and a study in Cameroon found that 15 per cent of sexual violence against adolescent girls occurs in the school environment.⁶ Seventy-five per cent of children in Ghana and 80 per cent of children in Senegal identified teachers as main perpetrators of violence in their schools.⁷

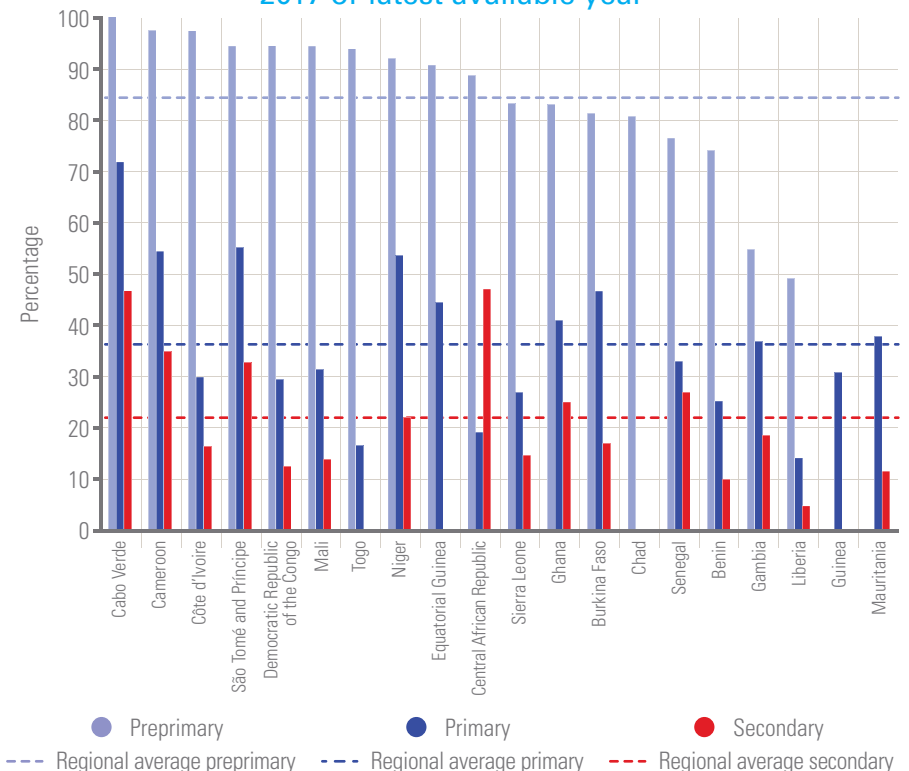
Having female teachers as role models is crucial for girls' educational outcomes. However, less than 25 per cent of teachers in secondary school are female—a figure that has barely changed since 2000.

Percentage of primary or secondary school-aged children who are not enrolled in primary or secondary school ("out-of-school children") by sex, 2010-2018



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, most recent values from 2010 to 2018. Note: Does not include Cabo Verde and Equatorial Guinea due to data unavailability.

Percentage of female teachers by level of education, 2017 or latest available year



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018. Note: Does not include Congo, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria due to data unavailability.

⁵ Human Rights Watch (2018). Leave No Girl Behind in Africa: Discrimination in Education against Pregnant Girls and Adolescent Mothers.

⁶ Menick, D.M., 2002. Sexual abuse at schools in Cameroon: results of a survey-action program in Yaounde. *Medecine tropicale: revue du Corps de sante coloniale*, 62(1), pp. 58-62.

⁷ Plan International (2012) Because I am a girl: State of the World's Girls 2012.

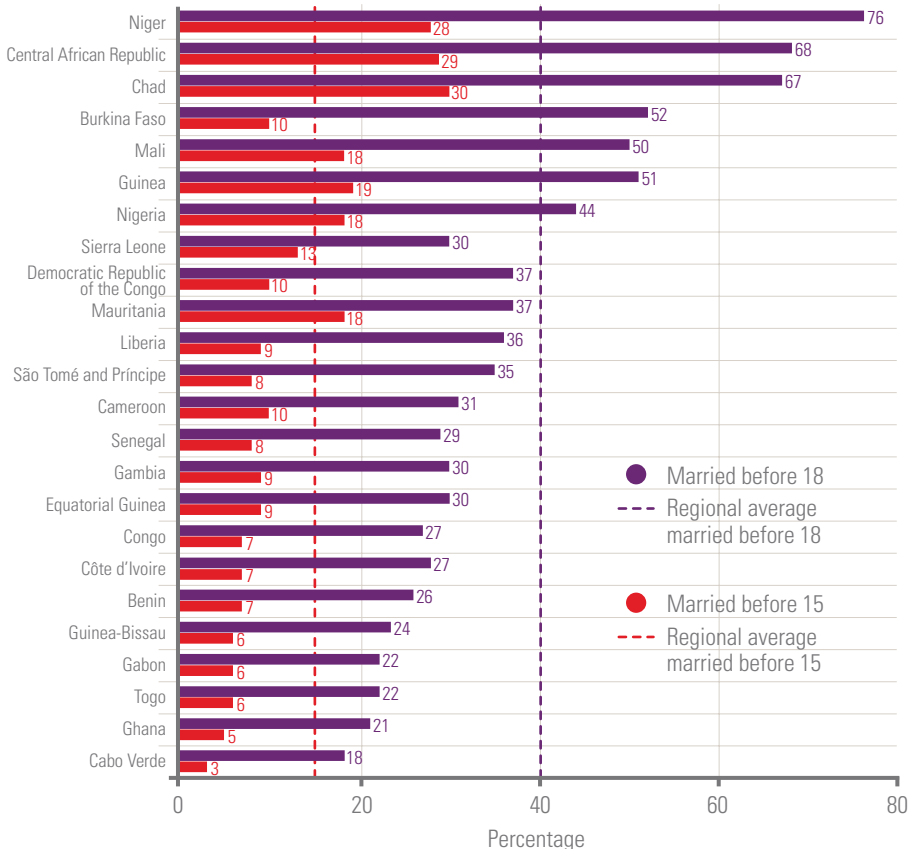


CHILD MARRIAGE AND EARLY PREGNANCY

Compared to other regions, girls in West and Central Africa face the highest risk of marrying in childhood. On average, four in 10 young women in the region were married or in union before age 18, and 15 per cent were married before age 15.

Large spousal age gaps are common in West and Central Africa. Across all countries in the region with available data, the majority of young women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18 were married to someone five or more years older than them. In Gambia, Guinea and Senegal, around 2 in 3 child brides were married to a partner 10 years or more their senior.

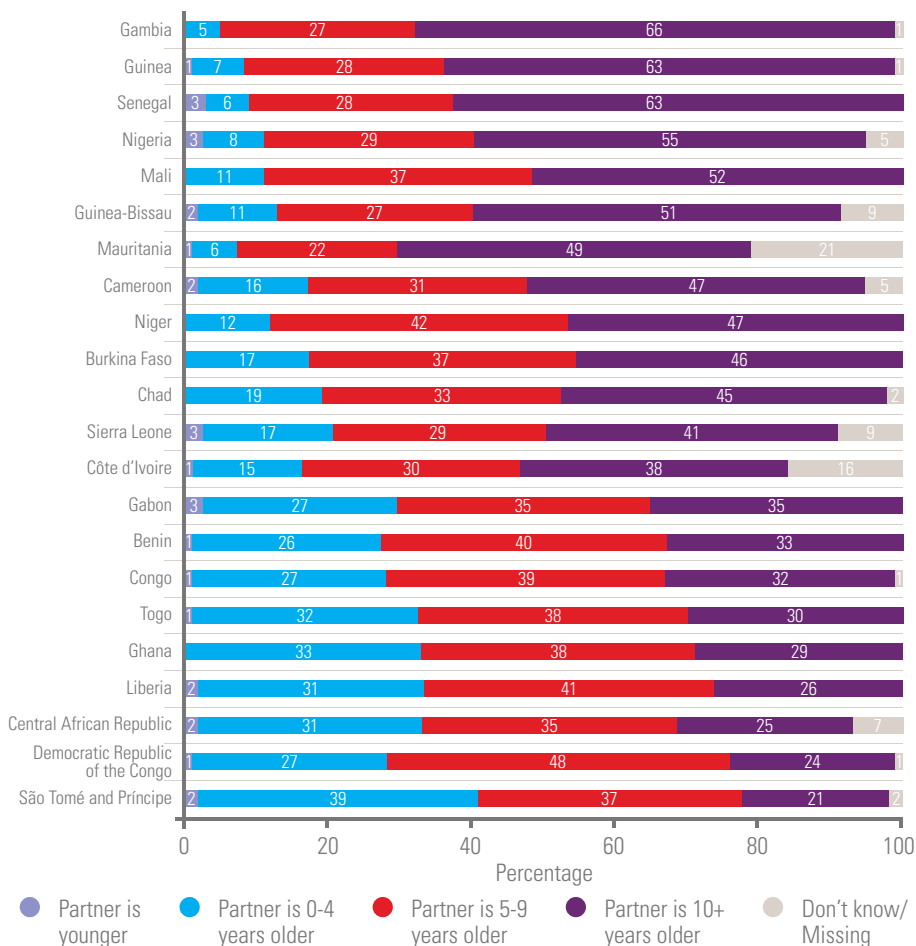
Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were first married or in union before age 15 and before age 18, 2012-2018



Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2019, based on DHS, MICS and other national surveys, 2012-2018. Note: Data for Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso and Equatorial Guinea refer to reference years outside of those specified in the chart title and are not included in the calculation of the regional average.

Child marriage is more common in rural areas and more prevalent among women living in the poorest households than among women living in the richest households. Child marriage is also more prevalent among young women with no or low levels of education. Yet, quality education is one of the most powerful alternatives to prevent and respond to child marriage. Girls in school are not only protected from child marriage, but gain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed throughout their lives.

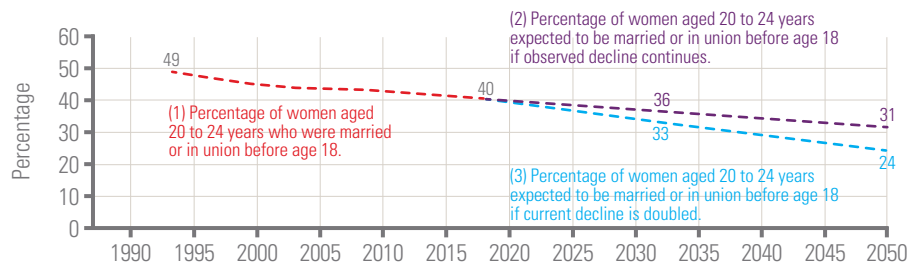
Percentage distribution of women aged 20-24 who were first married or in union before age 18, by spousal age gap, 2010-2018



Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2019, based on DHS and MICS 2010-2018. Note: Does not include Cabo Verde and Equatorial Guinea due to data unavailability.

The pace of progress in reducing child marriage remains too slow. Even if progress is doubled, one in three girls will still be a child bride in 2030.

Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were first married or in union before age 18, observed and projected, 1990-2050



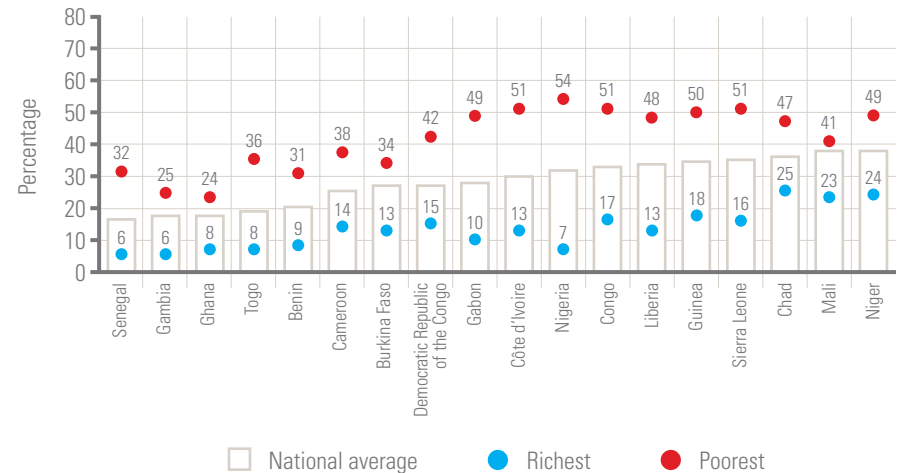
Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2019, based on DHS and MICS 2010-2018.
 Note: The projected percentage applies the annual rate of reduction observed over the past 25 years (red dotted line), and a doubling of the observed rate of reduction (purple dotted line).

Early childbirth and the overall number of births over a woman's lifetime are strongly linked to child marriage. On average, child brides in the region have more children while still young. For example, in Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Gambia, more than three in five women aged 20-24 who married before their 15th birthday have three or more children, compared to less than 10 per cent of women of the same age who married as adults.

Like child marriage, adolescent childbearing is linked to socio-economic status in West and Central Africa. In all countries in the region, adolescent childbearing is highest among the poorest households.

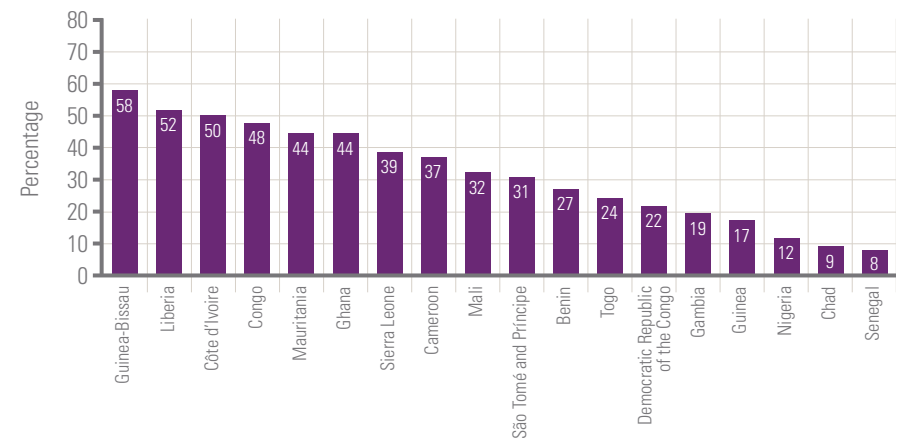
Adolescent childbirth also occurs outside of marriage and cohabitation, although this varies greatly from country to country. For example, in Guinea-Bissau and Liberia, more than 1 in 2 women aged 20-24 who had a birth during adolescence did so outside of marriage or cohabitation. In Chad and Senegal, fewer than 1 in 10 women did.

Percentage of adolescent girls aged 15-19 who have begun childbearing by household wealth, 2010-2017



Source: DHS Surveys 2010-2017.
 Note: Does not include Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and São Tomé and Príncipe due to data unavailability.

Percentage of women aged 20-24 who had a birth outside of marriage/cohabitation during adolescence among all women aged 20-24 who gave birth during adolescence, 2013-2017

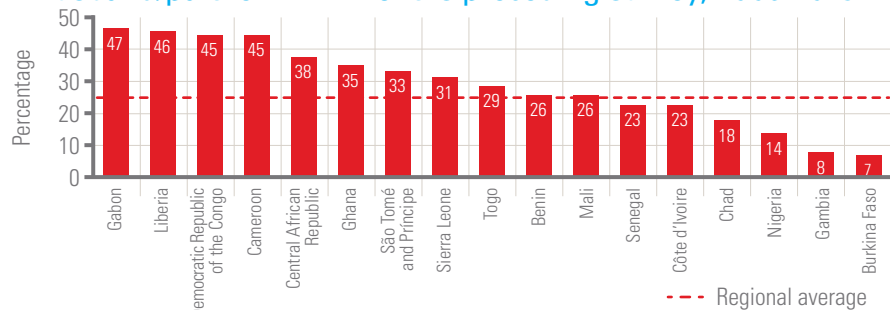


Source: UNICEF Global Databases based on DHS and MICS 2013-2017.
 Note: Does not include Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Niger due to data unavailability.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

One in four adolescent girls aged 15-19 who have ever been married, has experienced emotional, physical or sexual violence at the hands of a husband or partner. The prevalence rates in Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Gabon are particularly stark—nearly half of ever-married adolescent girls experienced intimate partner violence in the 12 months preceding the survey.

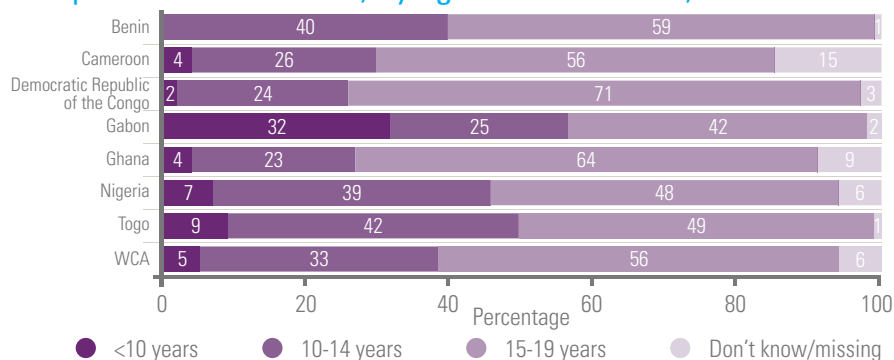
Percentage of ever-married adolescent girls aged 15-19 who experienced any physical, emotional or sexual violence by their husband/partner in 12 months preceding survey, 2006-2018



Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2019, based on DHS and MICS, 2006-2018.
 Note: Data for Côte d'Ivoire refers only to currently married girls. Does not include Cabo Verde, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Niger due to data unavailability.

Nearly ten per cent of adolescent girls aged 15-19 in West and Central Africa have experienced forced sex. Girls in the region become particularly vulnerable after age 10. One in three adolescent victims report that it happened for the first time between the ages of 10 and 14, and more than one in two say that the violence occurred for the first time between the ages of 15 and 19.

Percentage distribution of adolescent girls aged 15-19 who ever experienced forced sex, by age at first incident, 2008-2018

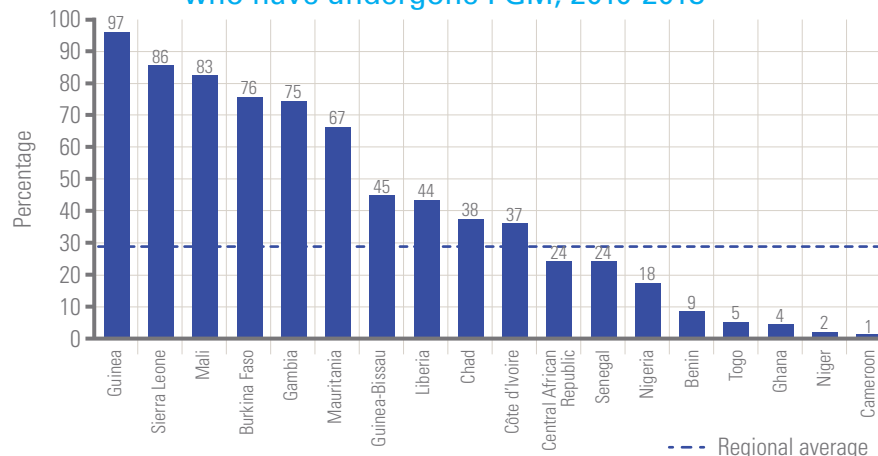


Source: UNICEF Global Databases, 2019, based on DHS and MICS, 2008-2018.
 Note: Data should be interpreted with caution since there are significant proportions of girls who could not recall the exact age at which they first experienced forced sex and there is missing data overall in many countries. Only those countries where the proportion of "don't know/missing" was less than 20 per cent are included in the chart. Does not include Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal and Sierra Leone due to data unavailability.

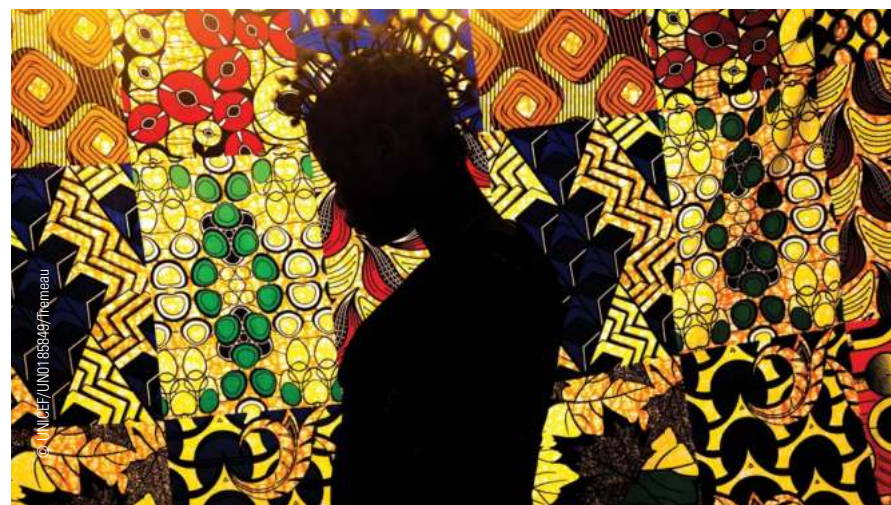
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM)

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a violation of girls' and women's rights. In West and Central Africa, nearly 30 per cent of girls and women aged 15-49 have undergone FGM in practicing countries in the region. Prevalence varies from a low of one per cent in Cameroon to a high of 97 per cent in Guinea. A number of countries are home to high prevalence of FGM in the region: at least 3 in 4 girls and women in Gambia, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone and Guinea have undergone the practice.

Percentage of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone FGM, 2010-2018



Source: UNICEF 2019 Global Database based on MICS, DHS and other national surveys, 2010-2018.
 Note: Data on the prevalence of FGM are based on available data from only practising countries with nationally representative data and therefore reflect the situation among those living in these affected countries within the region, and not the region as a whole, as there are some non-practising countries in each region as well. In Liberia, girls and women who have heard of the Sande society were asked whether they were members; this provides indirect information on FGM since it is performed during initiation into the society. Data for Cameroon refer to a reference year outside those specified in the chart title and are not included in the calculation of the regional average.



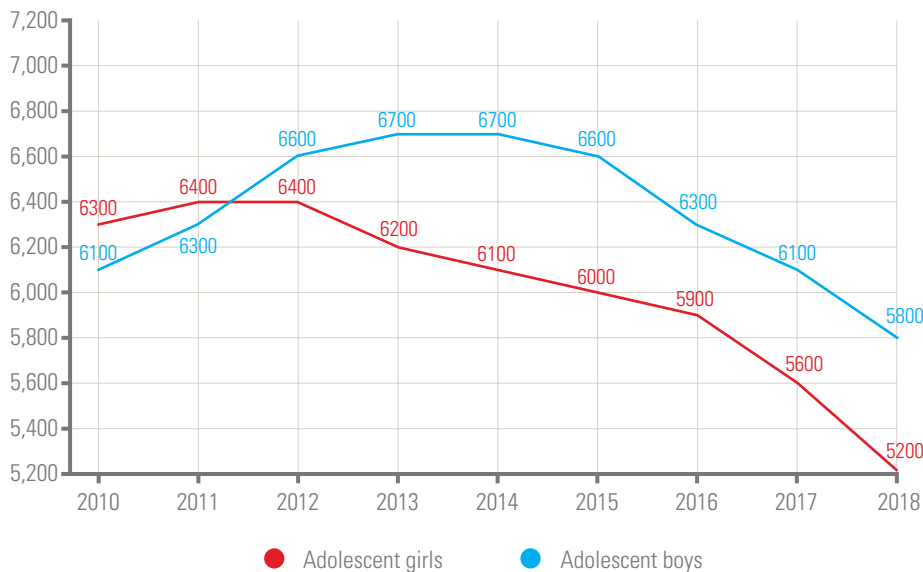


In 2018, more than 1 in 5 of the world’s adolescent population living with HIV resided in West and Central Africa. Of the 340,000 adolescents in the region living with HIV, 58 per cent are girls aged 10-19. Adolescent girls also accounted for 76 per cent of the estimated 37,000 new infections among adolescents in the region in 2018.

The number of AIDS-related deaths among girls reached its peak in 2012, and for boys in 2014. One contributing factor is that most adolescent boys acquired HIV perinatally and have been living with the virus for a long time, which puts them at higher risk for AIDS-related mortality. In contrast, a higher proportion of girls have been infected with HIV recently through sexual transmission. Boys also test less for HIV and in general exhibit lower rates of antiretroviral therapy initiation and coverage.

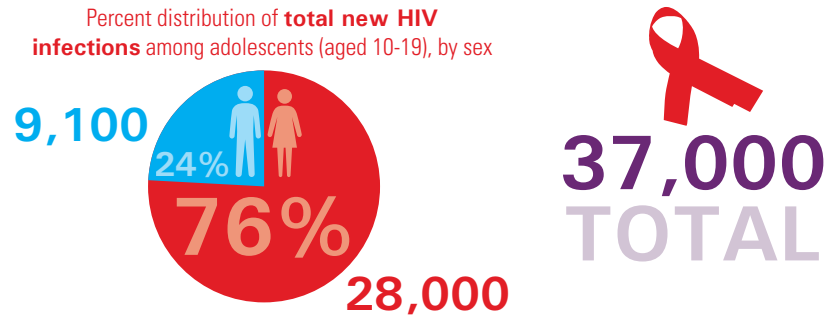
Except for Liberia, Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau, adolescent boys aged 15-19 report more comprehensive knowledge of HIV, on average, than girls of the same age. However, the generally low knowledge of HIV amongst adolescents in the region hinders informed decision-making.

Number of AIDS-related deaths among adolescents aged 10-19, by sex, West and Central Africa, 2010-2018

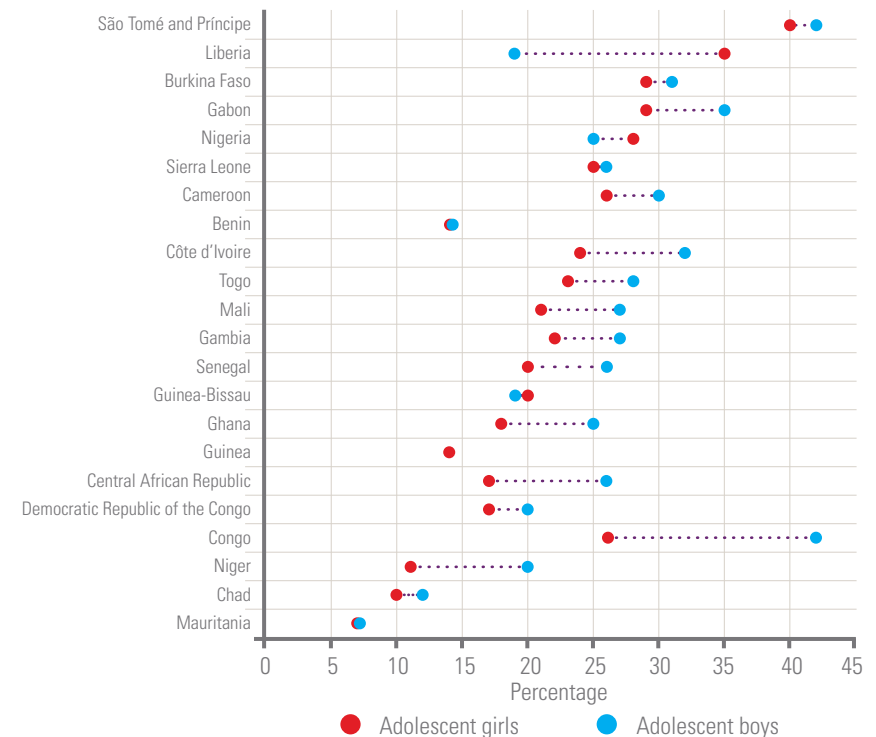


Source: UNAIDS 2019 estimates.

Total new infections among adolescents aged 10-19 in 2018



Percentage of adolescents aged 15-19 who have comprehensive knowledge of HIV, by sex, 2012-2018

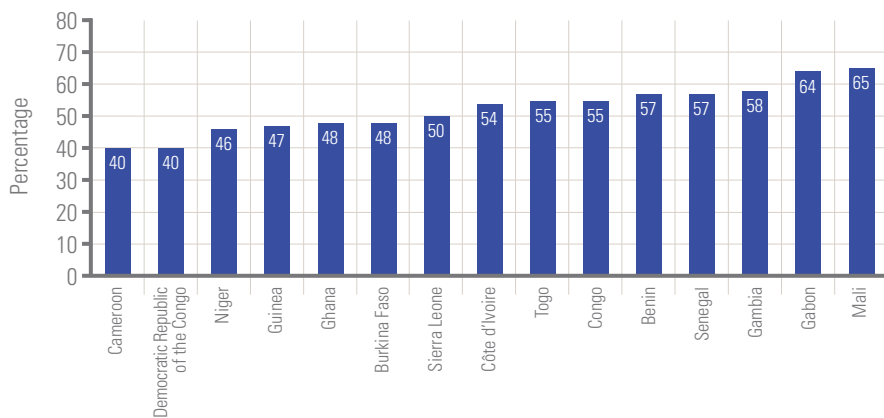


Source: UNICEF database based on nationally representative population-based surveys, including MICS, DHS, AIS, and other household surveys 2012-2018.
Note: Does not include Cabo Verde and Equatorial Guinea due to unavailability of data; data on adolescent boys not available for Guinea.

INTERGENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF ADOLESCENT CHILDBEARING

The well-being of adolescent mothers, including their health and educational outcomes as described above, influences the survival and development status of their children. For example, anaemia, which is highly prevalent among younger pregnant girls in West and Central Africa, can create health complications for both adolescent mothers and their babies.

Percentage of adolescent girls aged 15-19 classified as having anaemia, 2010-2018



Source: Demographic Health Survey Stat Compiler 2010-2018 and World Health Organization, Global Health Observatory Data Repository /World Health Statistics.
 Note: Does not include Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria and São Tomé and Príncipe due to data unavailability.

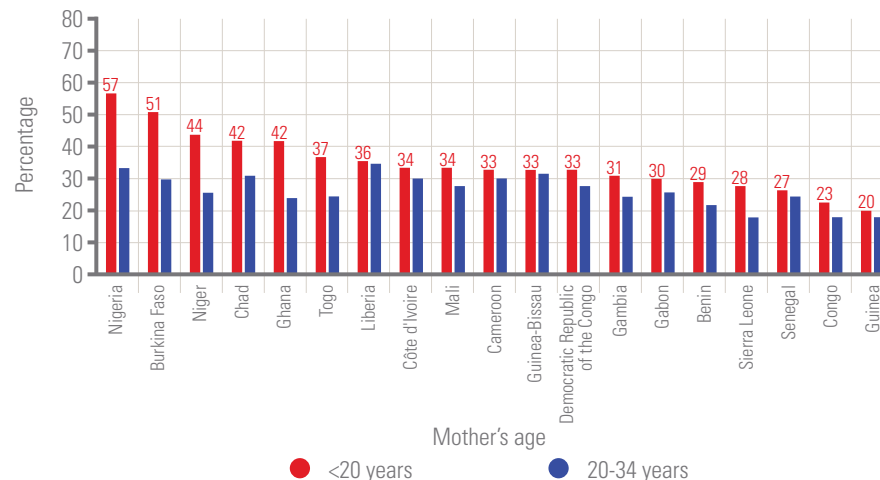


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Child mortality

Across all countries in West and Central Africa with available data, children born to mothers younger than 20 years of age face a higher risk of dying within the first 28 days of their lives than children born to women aged 20 or older.

Neonatal deaths per 1,000 live births, by mother's age, 2010-2017



Source: UNICEF Global Databases based on MICS, DHS and other nationally representative survey data, 2010-2017.
 Note: For Côte d'Ivoire, Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the age group of older mothers is 20-34 and 20-29 for other countries shown. Does not include Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Mauritania and São Tomé and Príncipe due to data unavailability.

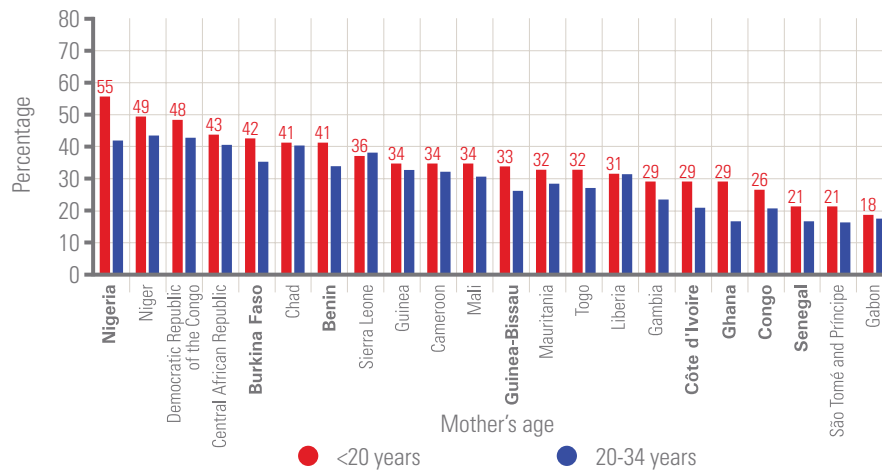


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Malnutrition among children under five years of age

Inadequate nutrition or malnutrition can have debilitating effects on children's development. Children stunted by malnutrition are more susceptible to diseases, tend to do poorly in school, and earn less as adults than their well-nourished peers.⁸

Percentage of children under 5 who are stunted, by mother's age at child's birth, 2010-2017

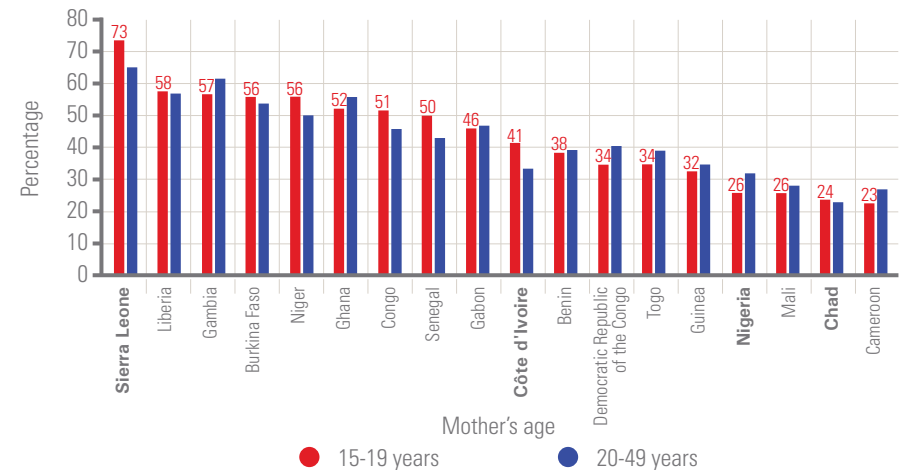


Source: UNICEF Global Databases, estimates are based on MICS and DHS, 2010-2017.
 Note: Moderate and severe stunting refers to the number of under-fives falling below minus 2 standard deviations from the median height-for-age of the reference population. Countries in **bold** are those where the percentage difference between the two age groups of women is statistically significant with disaggregated data from 2010 onwards. Does not include Cabo Verde and Equatorial Guinea due to data unavailability.

Adolescent mothers' health-seeking behaviour

Children's health outcomes also depend on their mothers seeking healthcare, but a number of barriers stand in the way for adolescent mothers, including their decision-making power, ability to cover healthcare costs and perception of healthcare providers' attitudes towards them. Overall in West and Central Africa, adolescent mothers tend to seek care for children with diarrhea, fever, or pneumonia slightly less often than older mothers.

Percentage of mothers who sought treatment from a health facility or provider for a child under age 5 with diarrhea, fever, or suspected pneumonia in past two weeks, 2008-2016



Source: Pelotas University Health Indicators Dataset, 2018.
 Note: Countries in **bold** are those where the percentage difference between the two age groups of women is statistically significant. Does not include Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and São Tomé and Príncipe due to data unavailability.

⁸ Branca, F. and Ferrari, M. (2002). "Impact of Micronutrient Deficiencies on Growth: The Stunting Syndrome," *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism* 46, no. 1 (2002): 8-17.



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