

# ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY: GLOBAL TRENDS IN GENDER PARITY

*Literacy is a fundamental right and a springboard not only for achieving Education For All but also for eradicating poverty and broadening participation in society. Literacy is a vehicle to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and to empower the poor in particular. As a component of basic education and a foundation for lifelong learning, literacy is the key to enhancing human capabilities and achieving many other rights. It carries wide-ranging benefits not only for individuals but also for families, communities and societies. The UIS is responsible for monitoring international literacy targets associated with the MDGs and presents the most recent data by MDG region.*

## Adult literacy and gender

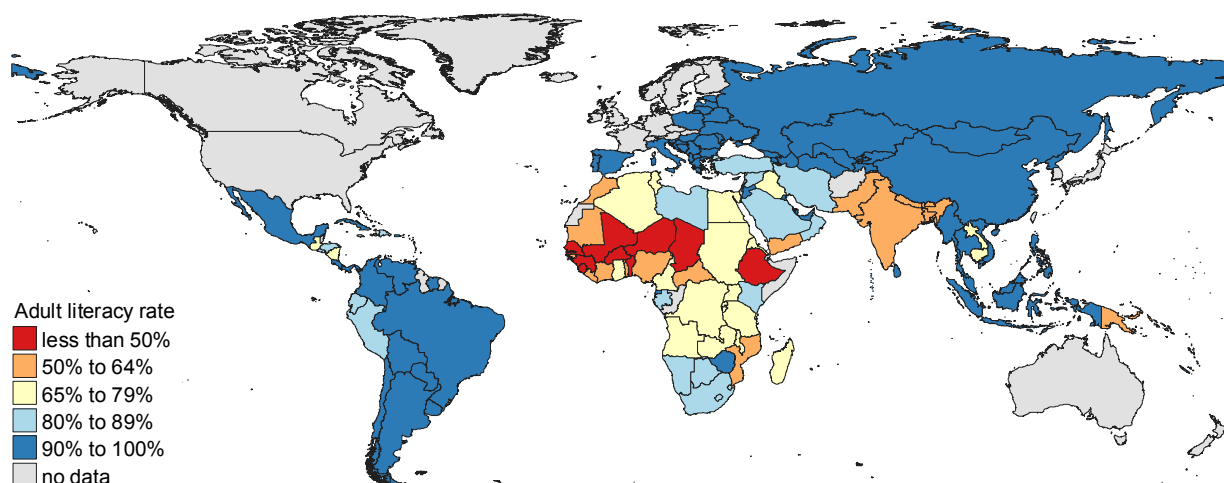
In 2008, 796 million adults worldwide (15 years and older) reported not being able to read and write and two-thirds of them (64%) were women (see **Table 1**). The global adult literacy rate was 83%, with a male literacy rate of 88% and a female literacy rate of 79%. More than half of those unable to read and write – 412 million – lived in Southern Asia. A further 176 million adults were in sub-Saharan Africa. Together, these two regions accounted for three-quarters (74%) of adults unable to read and write worldwide.

Among MDG regions, adult literacy rates were lowest in Southern Asia (62%), sub-Saharan Africa (63%), Oceania (66%) and Northern Africa (67%) (see **Figure 1**). In Western Asia, the adult literacy rate was 85% and in the remaining regions, at least 9 out of 10 adults reported being able to read and write. In the developed regions and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), almost all adults were able to read and write. At the national level, the lowest literacy rates were observed in sub-Saharan Africa. Less than half of the adult population was literate in ten countries – Mali (adult literacy rate 26%), Burkina Faso and Niger (29%), Chad (33%), Ethiopia (36%), Guinea (38%), Sierra Leone (40%), Benin (41%), Senegal (42%) and Gambia (45%).

Gender disparity was greatest in Southern Asia, where 73% of all men but only 51% of women had the ability to read and write. The gender parity index (GPI) – the ratio of female to male literacy rates – was 0.70 in this region. Similar disparities existed in sub-Saharan Africa (GPI 0.75) and Northern Africa (GPI 0.76). Gender disparity in adult literacy was also observed in Western Asia (GPI 0.84) and Oceania (GPI 0.89). In contrast, Eastern Asia (GPI 0.94) and South-Eastern Asia (GPI 0.95) are close to gender parity in adult literacy while parity (defined as GPI values between 0.97 and 1.03) has been reached in the developed regions and in the CIS.

The adult literacy rate increased by about 8 percentage points globally over the past 20 years – an increase of 6% for men and 10% for women. Progress was strong in Northern Africa, where the rate increased by 20%, and in Eastern and Southern Asia, which saw an increase of 15%. In other regions, adult literacy rates increased since 1990 as follows: Western Asia 11%; sub-Saharan Africa 9%; South-Eastern Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean 7%; and Oceania 4%. In developed regions and CIS countries, the increase was negligible as they were already close to universal literacy.

**Figure 1. What proportion of adults can read and write?**  
A global view of adult literacy rates, 2008



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Centre, stats.uis.unesco.org

**Table 1. Adult literacy rate by MDG region, 2008**

MDG region	Adult literacy rate (%)				Number of adults unable to read and write (000s)			
	Total	Male	Female	GPI	Total	Male	Female	% F
Developed regions	99.0	99.2	98.9	1.00	8,358	3,438	4,921	58.9
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	99.5	99.7	99.4	1.00	1,061	311	750	70.7
Northern Africa	67.3	76.7	58.1	0.76	36,290	12,882	23,408	64.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	62.5	71.6	53.6	0.75	175,871	65,748	110,123	62.6
Latin America and the Caribbean	91.0	91.9	90.3	0.98	36,056	15,945	20,111	55.8
Eastern Asia	93.8	96.8	90.7	0.94	70,233	18,656	51,577	73.4
Southern Asia	61.9	73.2	50.9	0.70	412,432	150,668	261,764	63.5
South-Eastern Asia	91.9	94.5	89.5	0.95	32,782	11,097	21,685	66.1
Western Asia	84.5	91.5	76.9	0.84	21,332	6,061	15,271	71.6
Oceania	66.4	70.2	62.6	0.89	1,750	783	967	55.3
World	83.4	88.2	78.9	0.90	796,165	285,588	510,577	64.1

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Centre, stats.uis.unesco.org

## Youth literacy and future trends

In almost all countries, youth literacy rates (i.e. for the population aged 15-24 years) were higher than adult literacy rates in 2008. Thus, adult literacy rates will continue to improve in the coming years due to progress among younger generations.

In 2008, 131 million youth worldwide lacked basic reading and writing skills. Among this group, 61% were female (see **Table 2**). A comparison of this share to the female share among adults (64%, see **Table 1**) indicates a move toward gender parity in literacy. The global youth literacy rate was 89% (92% for males and 86% for females). Similar to the adult population, youth unable to read and write were also concentrated in the same two regions – albeit much more so. Southern Asia (66 million youth) and sub-Saharan Africa (47 million) were home to 86% of all youths unable to read and write worldwide.

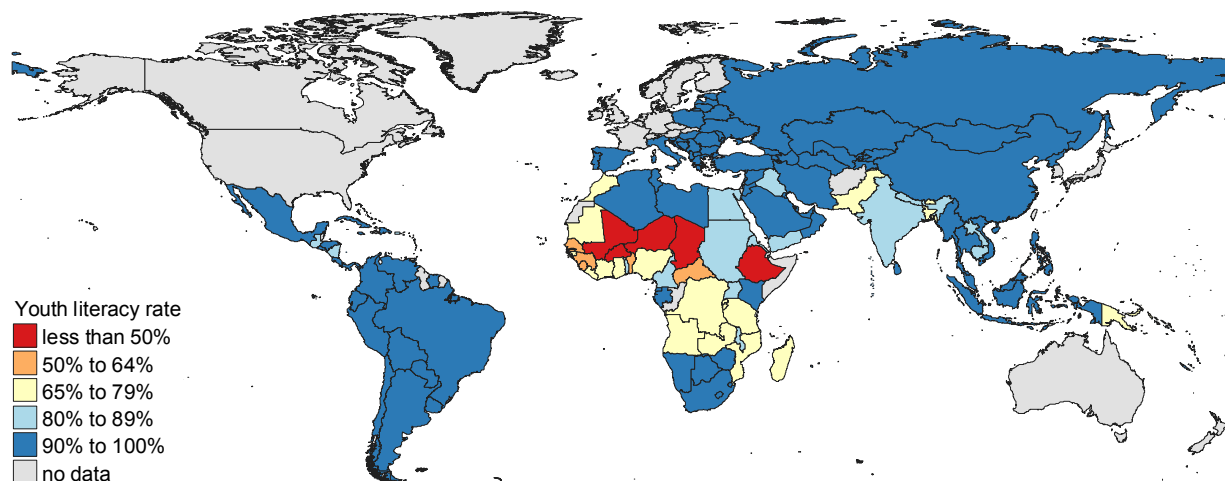
Among MDG regions, youth literacy rates were lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (72%), Oceania (73%), Southern Asia (79%) and Northern Africa (86%) (see **Figure 2**). In the remaining regions, youth literacy rates were above the global average: Western Asia (93%), South-Eastern Asia (96%), Latin America and the Caribbean (97%), and the developed regions, CIS, and Eastern Asia (99% or higher).

As with adult literacy, the lowest youth literacy rates at the national level were observed in sub-Saharan Africa. However, while ten countries had adult literacy rates of 50% or less, only five countries fell into this category with regard to youth literacy rates: Niger (37%), Mali (39%), Burkina Faso (39%), Chad (45%) and Ethiopia (50%). In addition, in all five countries, the youth literacy rate was significantly higher than the adult literacy rate, which inspires hope for further improvements in the share of the population with the ability to read and write.

Gender disparities were also less severe among the youth population compared to adults. Six of the ten MDG regions have reached gender parity: the developed regions, the CIS, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and Oceania. Western Asia (GPI 0.94) and Northern Africa (GPI 0.92) are approaching gender parity. Sub-Saharan Africa (GPI 0.87) and Southern Asia (GPI 0.86) are also catching up, as reflected by a comparison of the GPI among the adult and youth populations (see **Tables 1 and 2**).

Trend data show that the youth literacy rate has increased by about 6 percentage points at the global level over the past 20 years – the increase was 4% for male youth and 8% for female youth. Southern Asia and Northern Africa stand out as the two regions with the biggest improvement in youth literacy rates between 1990 and 2008, with increases of 19% and 18%, respectively. In sub-Saharan Africa, the youth literacy rate increased by 6%; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Asia, and Western Asia by 5%. In Oceania and South-Eastern Asia, progress was slower with an increase of 2%. Similar to the adult population, almost all youth in the developed regions and the CIS countries report the ability to read and write.

**Figure 2. What proportion of youths are able to read and write?**  
A global view of youth literacy rates, 2008



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Centre, stats.uis.unesco.org

**Table 2. Youth literacy by MDG region, 2008**

MDG region	Youth literacy rate (%)				Number of youth unable to read and write (000s)			
	Total	Male	Female	GPI	Total	Male	Female	% F
Developed regions	99.6	99.5	99.6	1.00	579	310	269	46.4
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	99.8	99.7	99.8	1.00	122	77	46	37.5
Northern Africa	86.1	89.8	82.2	0.92	4,778	1,779	2,999	62.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	71.9	76.8	67.1	0.87	46,581	19,299	27,282	58.6
Latin America and the Caribbean	96.9	96.7	97.2	1.01	3,181	1,749	1,432	45.0
Eastern Asia	99.3	99.4	99.2	1.00	1,669	772	898	53.8
Southern Asia	79.3	85.7	73.3	0.86	66,115	24,158	41,956	63.5
South-Eastern Asia	96.1	96.3	95.8	0.99	4,236	2,018	2,218	52.4
Western Asia	92.7	95.6	89.8	0.94	2,873	891	1,982	69.0
Oceania	73.0	72.0	74.1	1.03	450	240	210	46.6
World	89.0	91.7	86.4	0.94	130,584	51,292	79,292	60.7

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Centre, stats.uis.unesco.org

These figures provide a view of the broad landscape of global literacy with the understanding that literacy and numeracy skills are complex and range from very basic to more advanced skills. Directly measuring skills provides invaluable information on the specific challenges that individuals and societies face in a rapidly changing world.

The UIS has initiated the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) as an initiative intended to equip countries around the world with these techniques to directly measure literacy skills. The challenge is great as LAMP must take into account the linguistic, cultural and institutional diversity of UNESCO's Member States. The richness of the information that this programme will yield will serve as a substantive asset for literacy policy and programme development across the world.

Please consult the UIS website at [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org) to get more information, to access the database and to subscribe to an email alert service and receive news on the Institute's latest publications and data releases.