

Gender trends: adult and youth literacy

Enhanced access to education at the primary and secondary levels eventually pays off in higher levels of educational attainment and literacy skills among the adult population as a whole. At the same time, current literacy rates continue to reflect social patterns and educational policies of the past.

The overall global adult literacy rate has risen from 76 percent in 1990 to 83 percent in 2009. Consistent with this increase, the number of illiterates worldwide has decreased over time, including in some highly populated countries like China. Despite these gains, however, there are still an estimated 793 million adults lacking basic literacy skills – two-thirds of them (508 million) are women. Even though the size of the global self-reported illiterate population is shrinking, the female proportion has remained virtually steady at 63 to 64 percent.

1. Significant progress made in push for universal adult literacy

Map 7.1.1 shows how the proportions of adult literates vary among 148 countries. Fourteen percent of the countries register near universal rates of 99 to 100 percent, while another half (47 percent) have adult literacy rates in the range of 85 to 99 percent. Only a dozen countries (7 percent) are in a situation where less than half of adults are literate.

The global increase in adult literacy rates is mirrored in all regions. Table 7.1.1 shows that three regions – Central Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and North America and Western Europe – began with relatively high rates in 1990 and are now close to universal adult literacy. Despite considerable gains over the two decades, three other regions – Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa – continue to struggle with adult literacy rates that are well below the global average. More than one-half of the world's adult self-reported illiterates (52 percent) are found in South and West Asia, which hosts 410.5 million out of the 793 million self-reported illiterates.

Table 7.1.1
Global gains in adult literacy mirrored in all regions

Region	1990	2000	2009
Arab States	55.4	66.9	72.7
Central and Eastern Europe	95.9	97.3	97.9
Central Asia	98.0	99.0	99.4
East Asia and the Pacific	82.1	91.6	94.0
Latin America and the Caribbean	84.3	89.7	91.1
North America and Western Europe	98.7	98.8	99.0
South and West Asia	47.3	58.8	62.3
Sub-Saharan Africa	53.1	57.2	61.9
World	75.7	81.8	83.7

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Map 7.1.1 Adult literacy rates vary across different regions

Adult literacy rate

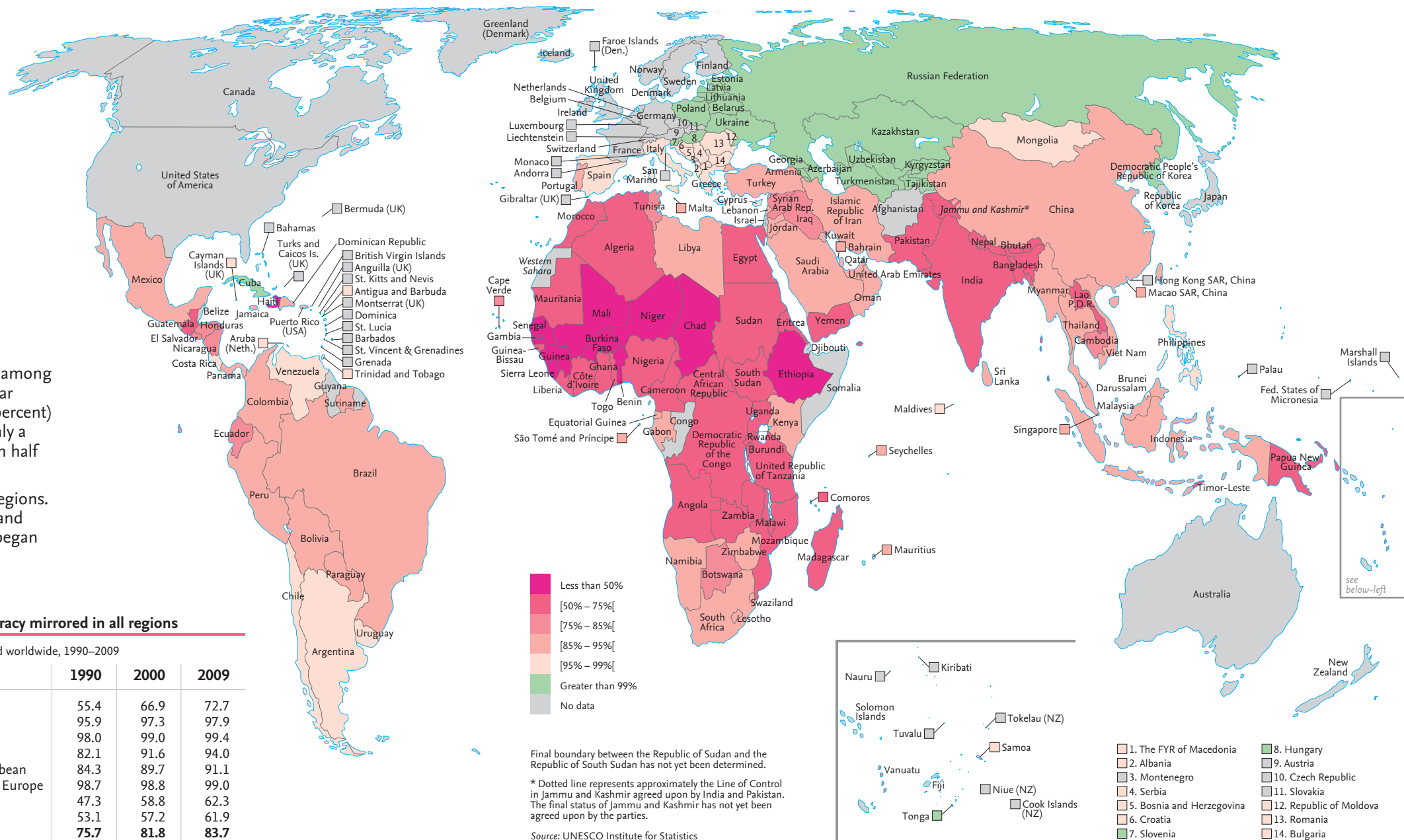
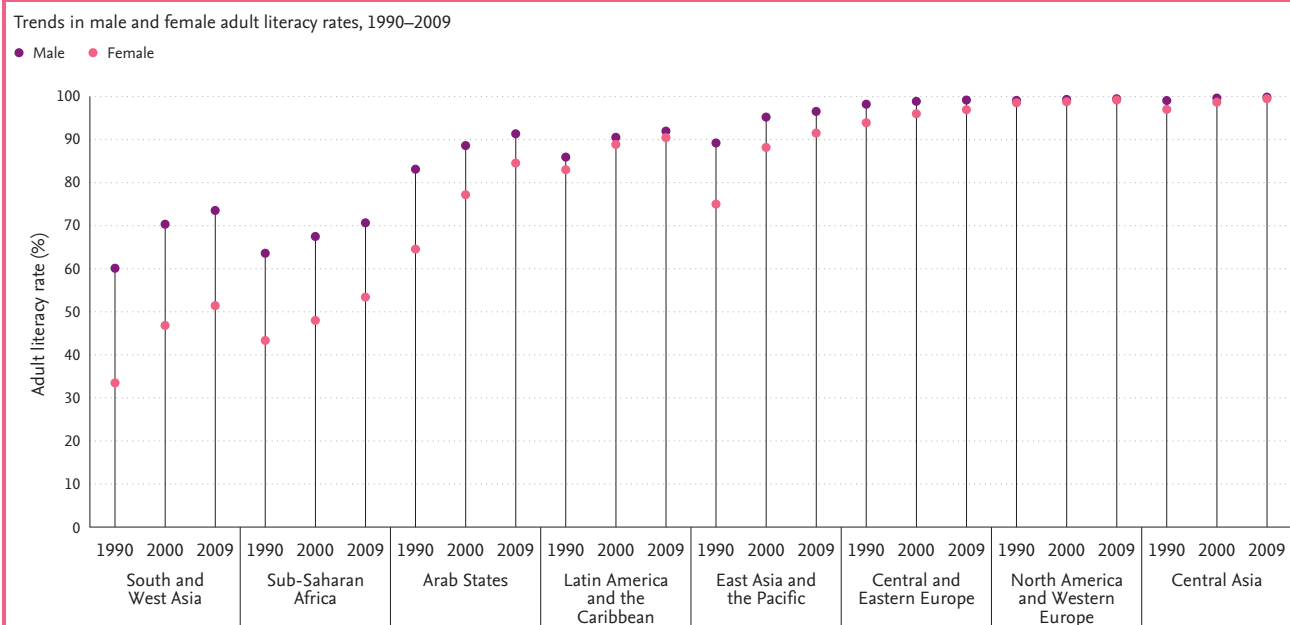


Figure 7.1.1 **Despite gains, women still account for substantial majority of adult illiterates**



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Women account for a substantial majority of self-reported adult illiterates, even though the gap has narrowed from 12.9 in 1990 to 9.1 percent in 2009. Figure 7.1.1 shows that women made particularly significant gains in South and West Asia, the Arab States, and East Asia and the Pacific between 1990 and 2009. Nevertheless, the overall proportion of adult female literates in 2009 remains well below what the rate was for men in 1990.

Adult literacy rates continue to be higher for men than for women in all eight regions. The male advantage is minimal in North America and Western Europe but remains striking in South and West Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, where the gaps favouring males are 22 and 17 percentage points respectively.

Consistent with these trends in adult literacy, the global gender parity index for adult literacy has increased from 0.84 in 1990 to 0.90 in 2009, which is still well below the 0.97 threshold for parity.

As shown in Figure 7.1.2, the GPI in three regions of the world – the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa – remains less than 0.80. There are no regions in which women have an edge in adult literacy rates, although parity has been reached in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America and Western Europe.

The greatest gains for women have been among regions that had the furthest to go, notably the Arab States, sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia.

Rates and patterns of adult literacy differ widely among individual countries, as do their rates of progress. Figure 7.1.3 presents the situation for six selected countries that account for much of the illiterate adult populations and documents the progress that they made between 1990 and 2009.

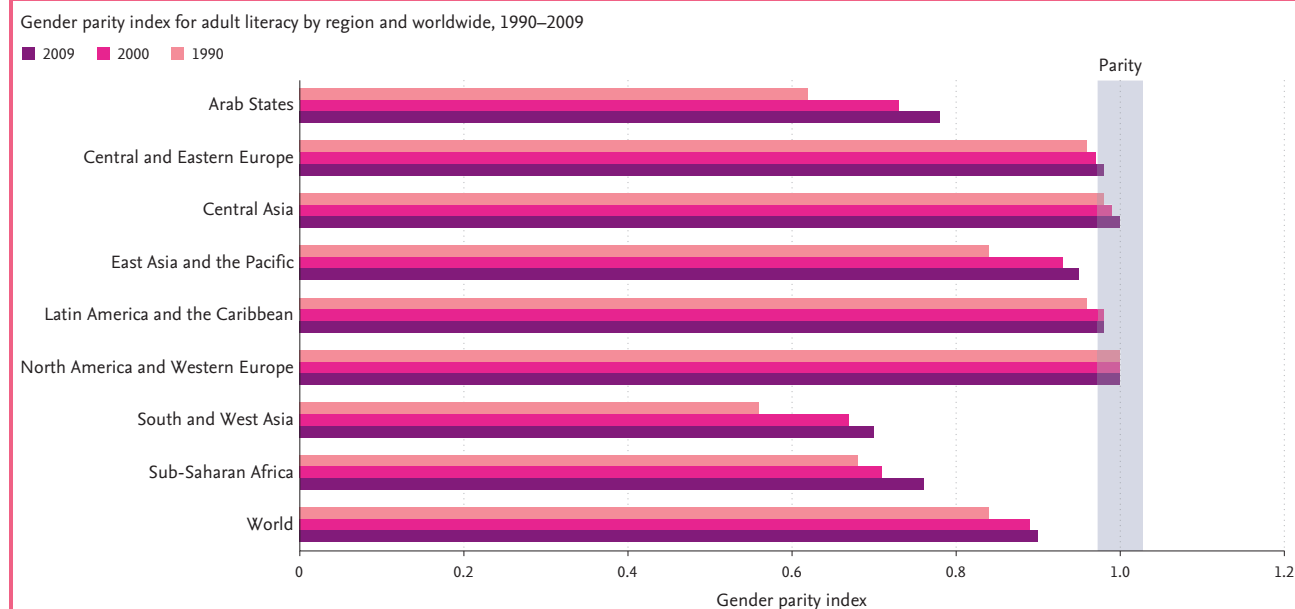
By far the largest number of self-reported adult illiterates live in India, where 99 million males and 184 million females are unable to read and write. They account for one-quarter of the male population and half of females in India. Bangladesh is home to 22 million self-reported adult illiterate males and 27 million self-reported adult illiterate females – accounting for 40 percent of the overall male population and half of all females in that country.

The largest numerical gains in reducing adult illiteracy have been observed in China. Since 1990 the number of male illiterates has fallen from 55 to 17 million while the male literacy rate jumped from 87 to 97 percent. Likewise, the number of female illiterates dropped from 127 to 47 million, while the female literacy rate rose from 68 to 91 percent.

As discussed in Chapter 1, increases in school enrolment from the primary through the tertiary levels has kept pace with, and in many countries surpassed, overall growth in the school-age population. Data on adult literacy present a very different picture. Whereas about one-third saw absolute increases in the number of

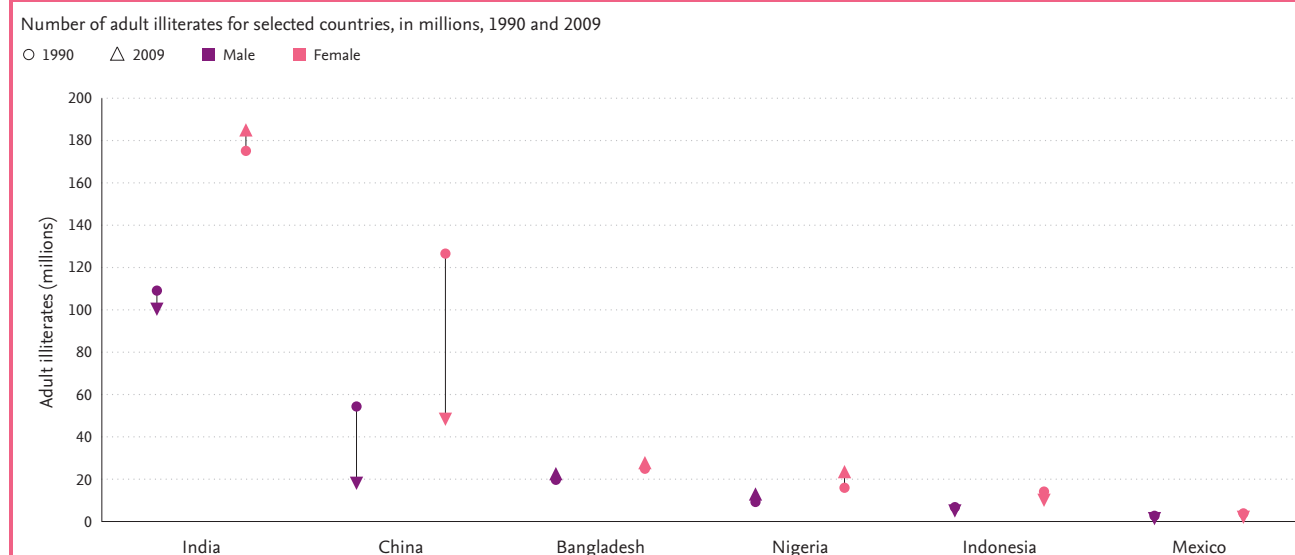
illiterate adults of both sexes, all countries registered an increase in their literacy rates. In Nigeria, for example, the absolute number of self-reported illiterates increased by nearly 4 million males and around 7 million females, nevertheless the literacy rate rose by 4 points for males and 6 points for females.

Figure 7.1.2 **Greatest gains in female literacy seen in Arab States and South and West Asia**



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Figure 7.1.3 **Largest number of adult illiterates live in India**



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

2. Youth literacy on the rise

Given the consistent increases in enrolment at all levels over recent decades and widespread narrowing of gender gaps, it is no surprise that literacy rates for youth – defined as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 – have also increased.

Map 7.2.1 presents youth literacy rates for 147 countries for which data are available. It shows that well over half (61 percent) of countries have youth literacy rates of 95 percent or higher. This proportion compares favourably with the situation for adults, where only 31 percent of countries have such high literacy rates. Another 35 percent of countries have youth literacy rates between 50 and 95 percent. There are only five countries in which less than half of young people are reported as literate – compared to 11 such countries among adults.

As with adult literacy, the youth literacy rates of males remain larger than those for females in some regions. As seen in Figure 7.2.1, the youth literacy rate for males was higher in the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa in 1990 and remained so in 2009. In each region, however, the gap had narrowed since 2000.

Map 7.2.1 Youth literacy rates higher than those for adults

Youth literacy rate

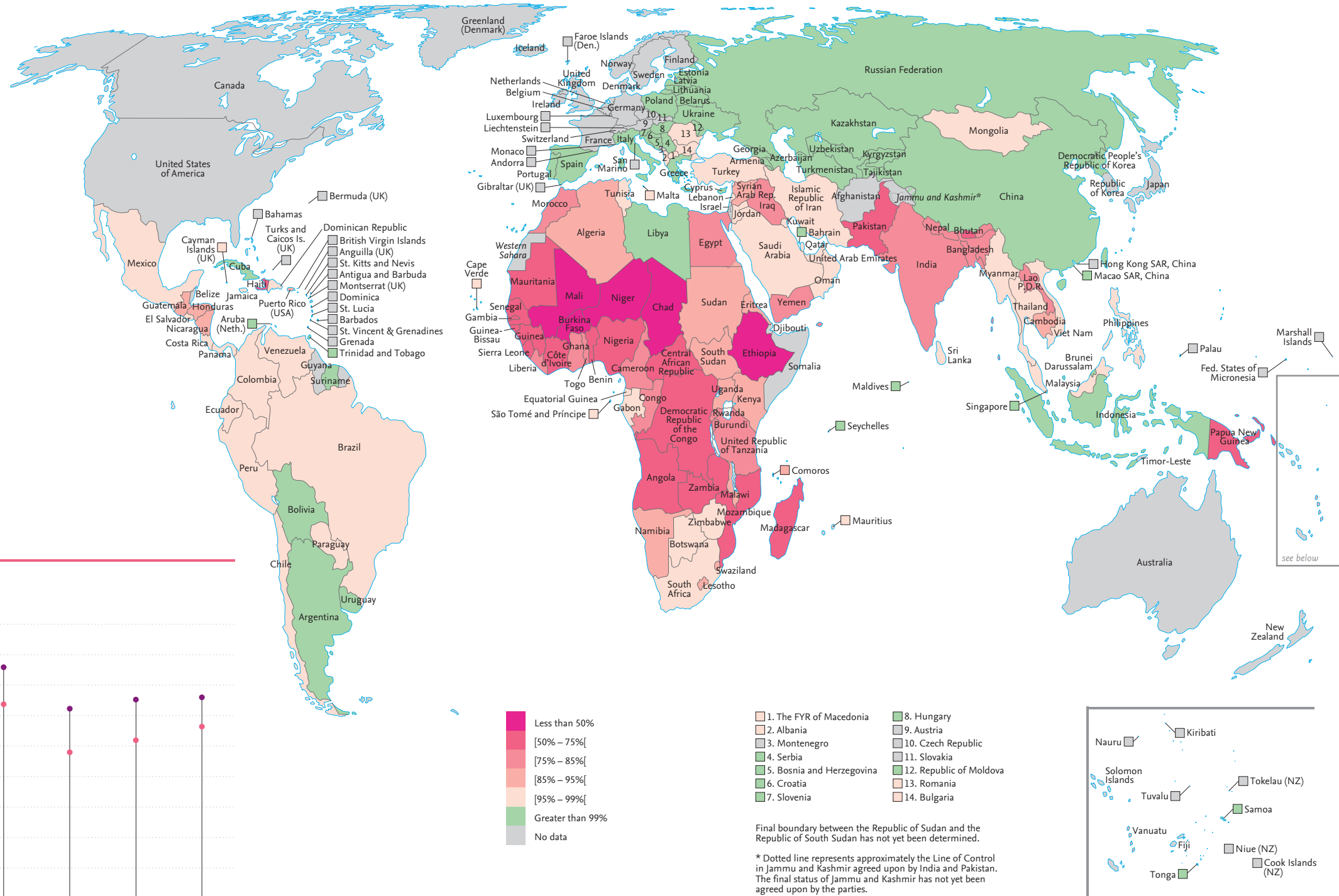
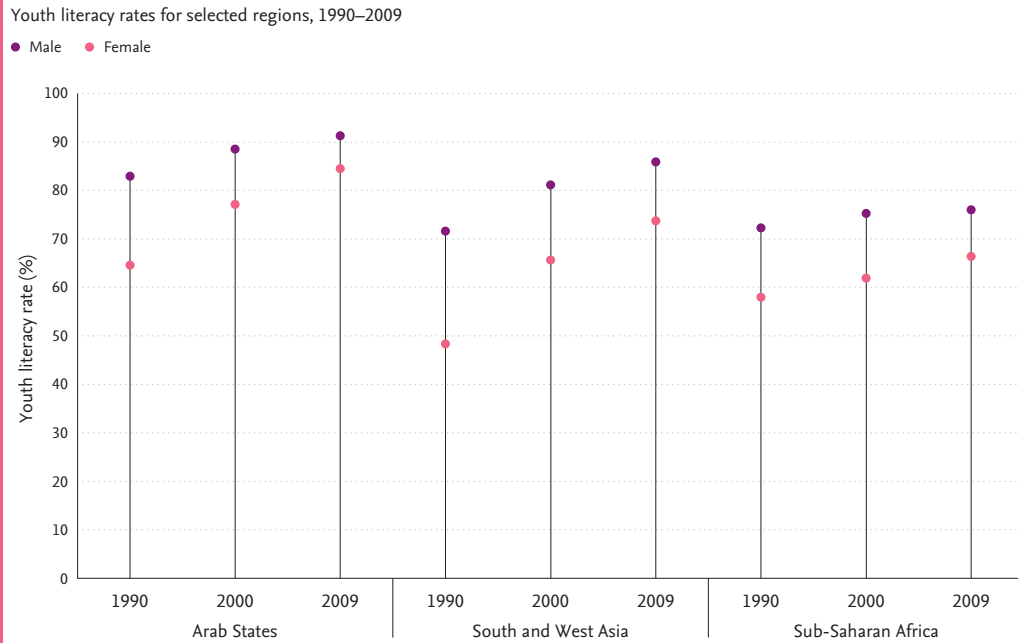


Figure 7.2.1 Males still have an edge in some regions



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics