

# 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY: Literacy rates are on the rise but millions remain illiterate

UIS FACT SHEET

SEPTEMBER 2016, No. 38

To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Literacy Day on 8 September, this fact sheet presents the latest available literacy data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and an overview of national, regional and global trends over the past five decades. The data show remarkable improvement among youth in terms of reading and writing skills and a steady reduction in gender gaps. 50 years ago, almost one-quarter of youth lacked basic literacy skills compared to less than 10% in 2014. However, 758 million adults – two-thirds of whom are women – remain illiterate. Renewed efforts are therefore needed to reach the new literacy target of the Sustainable Development Goals: “by 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy”. The data are available via the [UNESCO eAtlas of Literacy](http://on.unesco.org/literacy), which features interactive maps and charts that can be shared and downloaded at <http://on.unesco.org/literacy-map>

## GLOBAL LITERACY TRENDS TODAY

Although literacy has been high on the development agenda over the past decades, UIS data show that 758 million adults – two-thirds of whom are women – still lack basic reading and writing skills, according to the latest available data for 2014 (see **Table 1**). 114 million of the illiterate population were between 15 and 24 years old. The global adult literacy rate was 85% in 2014, while the youth literacy rate was 91%.

**TABLE 1. WHAT ARE THE LATEST LITERACY FIGURES?**

**Global literacy rates and illiterate population of adults and youth, 2014**

Indicator	Adults (aged 15 years and older)	Youth (aged 15-24 years)
Global literacy rate	85.3%	90.6%
Literacy rate, men	89.2%	92.6%
Literacy rate, women	81.5%	88.6%
Literacy rate, gender parity index	0.91	0.96
Global illiterate population	758 million	114 million
Illiterate population, men	279 million	47 million
Illiterate population, women	479 million	68 million
Illiterate population, share of women	63%	59%

Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

According to UIS data, the majority of countries missed the Education for All goal of reducing adult illiteracy rates by 50% between 2000 and 2015. At the global level, the adult and youth literacy rates are estimated to have grown by only 4% each over this period.

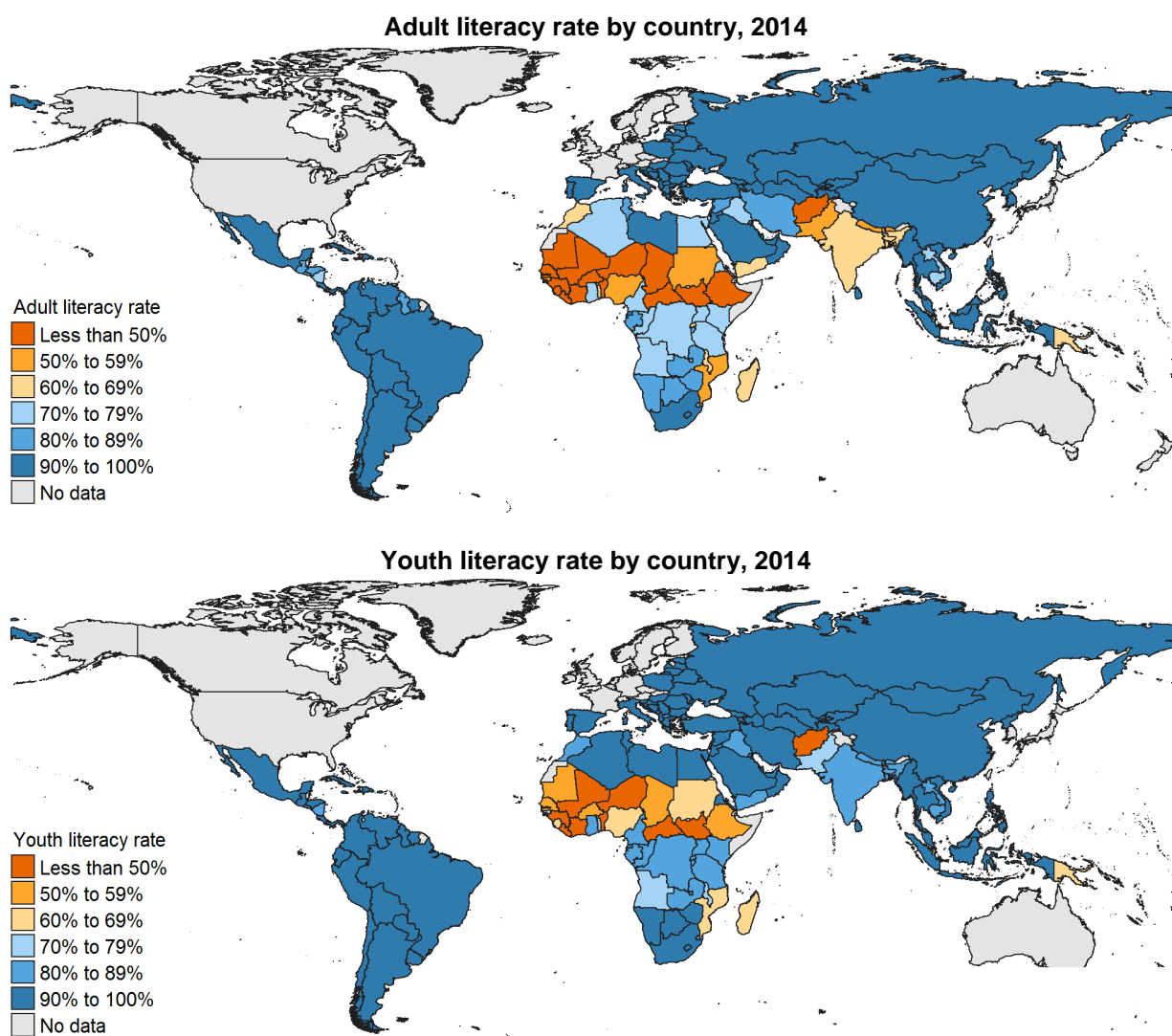
With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN General Assembly in September 2015, countries have pledged to achieve an ambitious new target for 2030: “ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy”. The statistics in this fact sheet represent the baseline for measuring progress towards the SDG literacy target. In line with the new monitoring framework, all regional data presented here refer to SDG regions.

## REGIONS WITH THE LARGEST ILLITERATE POPULATIONS AND COUNTRIES WITH THE LOWEST LITERACY RATES

Southern Asia is home to more than one-half of the global illiterate population (51%). In addition, 26% of all illiterate adults live in sub-Saharan Africa, 7% in Eastern Asia, and about 4% each in Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa, and South-Eastern Asia. Less than 4% of the global illiterate population live in the remaining regions combined (the Caucasus and Central Asia, developed regions, Oceania, Western Asia).

The lowest national literacy rates are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and in Southern Asia (see **Figure 1**). Adult literacy rates are below 50% in the following 16 countries: Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and South Sudan. Youth literacy rates, for the population aged 15 to 24 years, are generally higher than adult literacy rates, reflecting increased access to schooling among younger generations. Nevertheless, youth literacy rates remain low in several countries, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa, which suggests problems with low access to schooling, early school leaving or a poor quality of education.

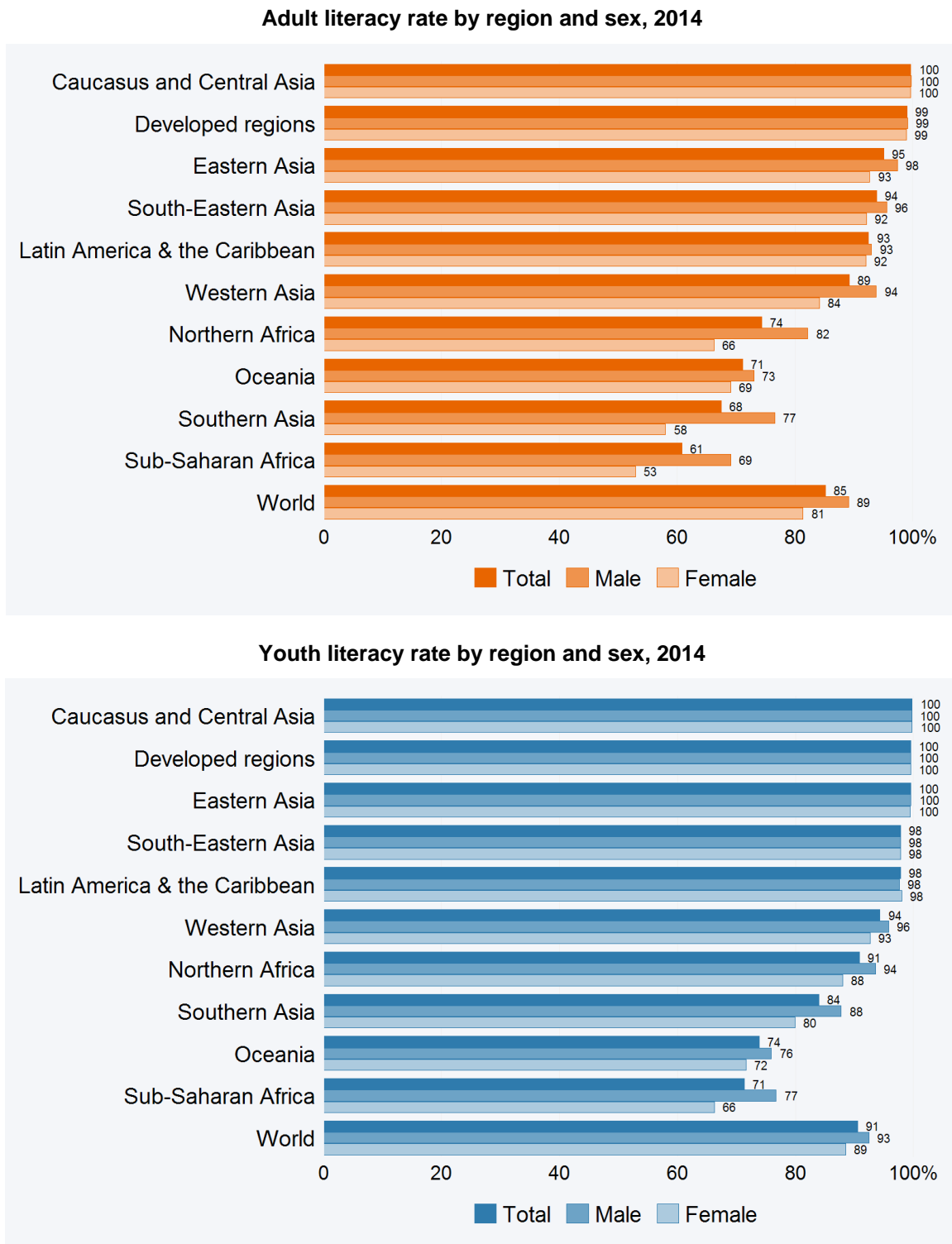
**FIGURE 1. WHERE ARE LITERACY RATES LOWEST AND HIGHEST IN THE WORLD?**



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

Adult literacy rates are at or near 100% in most countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia and in the developed regions (see **Figure 2**). Youth literacy rates are highest in the same two regions and in Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South-Eastern Asia.

**FIGURE 2. HOW DO LITERACY RATES FOR MEN AND WOMEN COMPARE ACROSS REGIONS?**



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

## GENDER GAPS PERSIST AMONG ADULTS BUT ALSO YOUTH

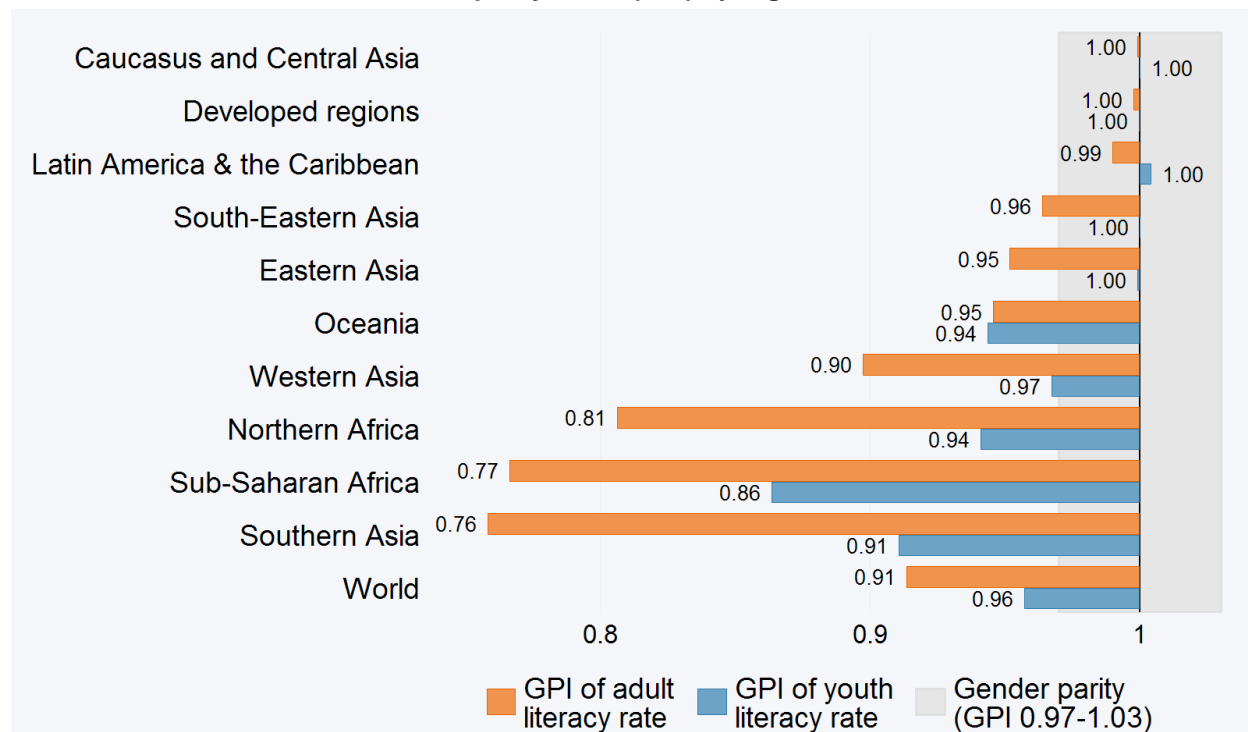
Figure 2 displays the male and female literacy rates in each region. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, the developed regions, and Latin America and the Caribbean there is no or little difference between male and female adult literacy rates. On the other hand, there are relatively large gender gaps to the detriment of women in Northern Africa, Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Western Asia. Among youth, gender disparities in literacy skills are generally smaller and improving more quickly over time; this is discussed in more detail in the section on trends over the past decades.

The gender parity index (GPI), which is calculated by dividing the female by the male literacy rate, represents a different way of looking at the relative literacy skills of men and women. A GPI value below 1 means that the female literacy rate is below the male literacy rate, while values between 0.97 and 1.03 are generally interpreted to indicate gender parity. **Figure 3** shows that three regions have achieved gender parity among adults and youth with regard to literacy: the Caucasus and Central Asia, developed regions, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and Western Asia have achieved gender parity for youth literacy but not for adult literacy.

Three regions – Northern Africa, Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa – are far from gender parity. In Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, GPI values of 0.76 and 0.77, respectively, for the adult literacy rate indicate that women aged 15 years and older are nearly one-quarter less likely to be literate than men in the same age group. At the global level, women aged 15 years and older are 9% less likely to be literate than men, and young women between 15 and 24 years are 4% less likely to be literate than young men.

**FIGURE 3. WHICH REGIONS HAVE REACHED GENDER PARITY IN ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY?**

**Gender parity index (GPI) by region, 2014**



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

## REGIONAL LITERACY TRENDS OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS

Projections to 2015 by the UIS show that at the regional level, Eastern Asia, Northern Africa, Southern Asia and Western Asia have made the greatest progress in improving adult literacy over the past 25 years (see **Figure 4**). In Northern Africa, the adult literacy rate rose from 47% in 1990 to 77% in 2015. For the other regions, the change in adult literacy over the same period was as follows: Southern Asia from 47% to 70%, Western Asia from 72% to 90%, and Eastern Asia from 79% to 96%.

The youth literacy rate increased the most in Northern Africa (from 68% in 1990 to 95% in 2015) and Southern Asia (from 60% to 87%). To a lesser extent, progress was also observed in all other regions for both adult and youth literacy.

Figure 4 also shows that female literacy rates – always lower than male literacy rates at the start of the period – generally grew faster than male literacy rates between 1990 and 2015 and gender gaps have therefore shrunk in all regions over the past 25 years.

## FIFTY YEARS OF FOSTERING LITERACY: AN ACCOUNT OF PROGRESS

Because of limited coverage in the UIS database, an examination of trends in observed adult and youth literacy is only possible for the period since 1990. For a longer perspective, it is possible to compare elderly literacy rates (for the population aged 65 years and older) in 2014 with youth literacy rates (for the population aged 15 to 24 years) in the same year. The comparison reveals trends in youth literacy over the past 50 years because the population 65 years and older today was 15 years and older in the mid-1960s. The literacy rate of those 65 and older can therefore be used as an estimate of the literacy rate of those 15 and older five decades ago.<sup>1</sup>

A focus on youth is appropriate because increasing literacy skills over time can be most readily observed among this age group. Adult literacy rates change more slowly because most improvement in literacy occurs through formal education at a young age. The literacy skills of the current elderly cohort may also have improved through participation in adult literacy programmes. However, such programmes rarely reach the entire population of illiterate adults, and previous studies have stressed their limited effect on national literacy figures.<sup>2</sup> Literacy skills can also be lost over time due to a lack of practice, but the effect on aggregate literacy rates of an entire cohort is likely to be small. Another factor to consider is that the composition of today's elderly population in a country – those aged 15 years and older 50 years ago – has changed over the years because of mortality and migration. Overall, the analysis in this section may slightly underestimate progress over the past 50 years with regard to youth literacy, but the opposite is unlikely.

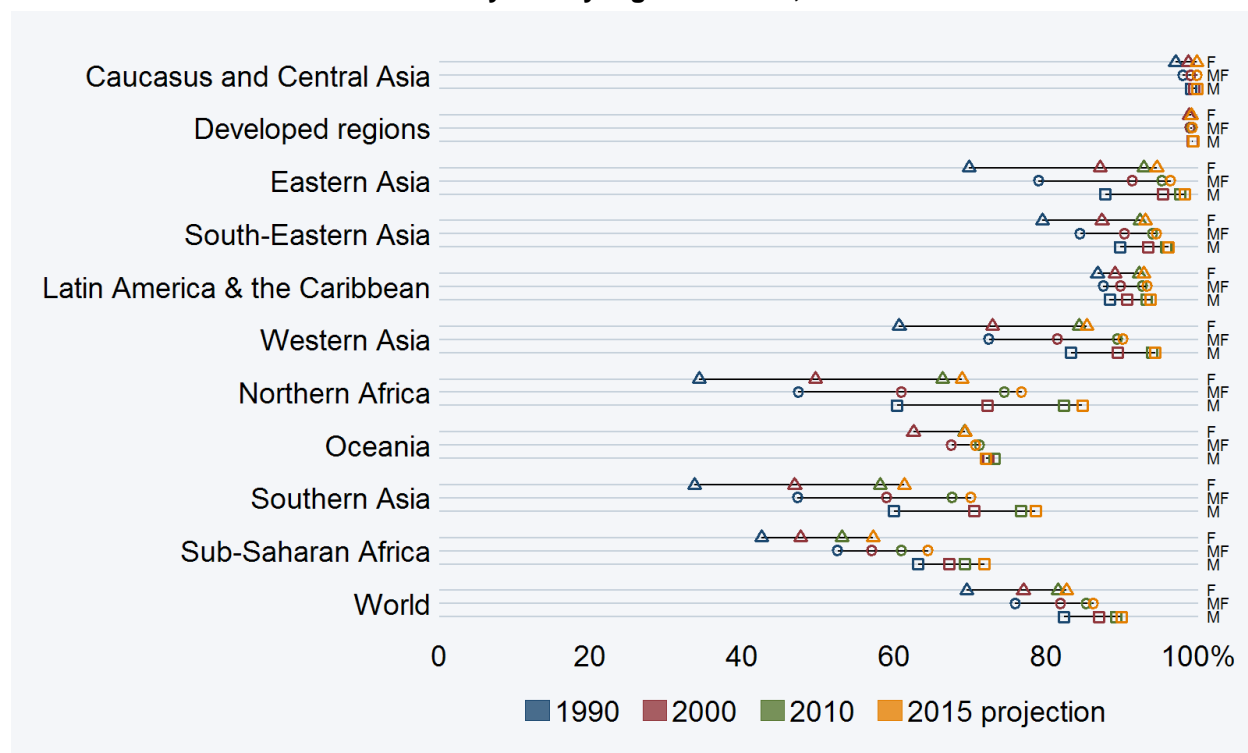
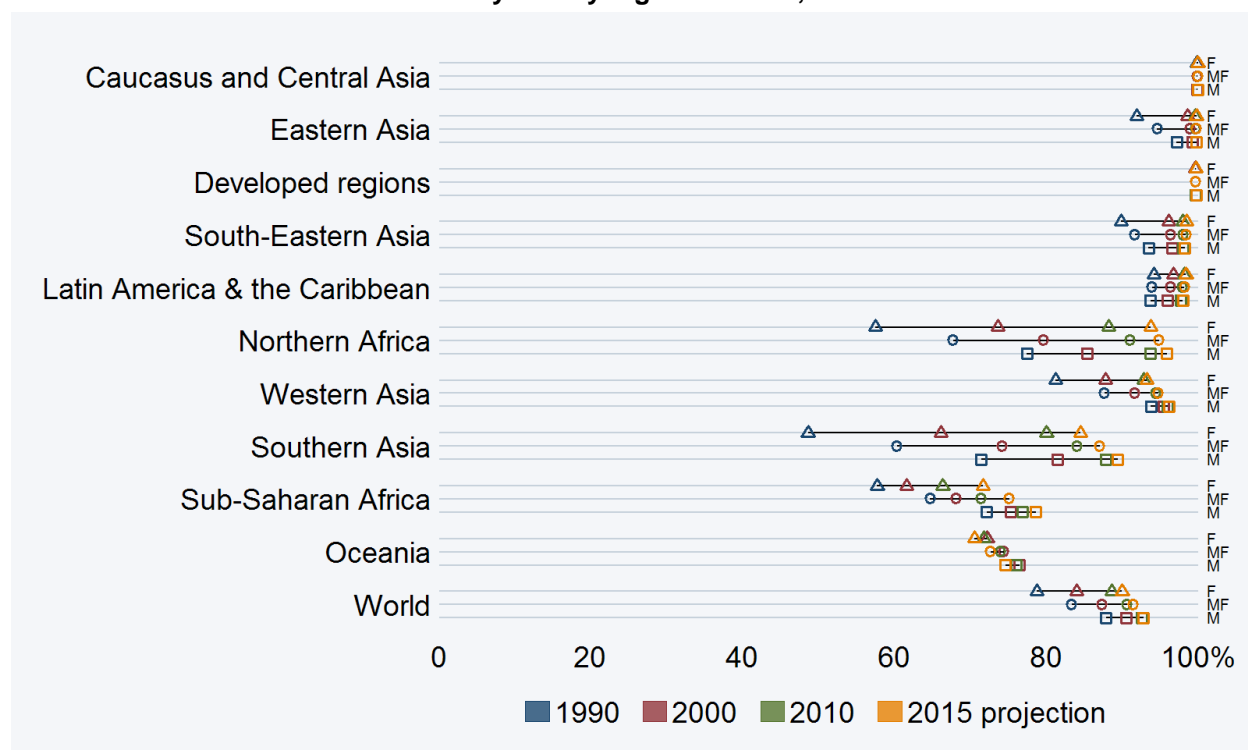
## YOUNG PEOPLE IN AFRICA AND ASIA ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE LITERATE THAN 50 YEARS AGO

At the global level, progress over the past 50 years is evident because the youth literacy rate is 15 percentage points higher than the elderly literacy rate (see **Figure 5**). In 2014, 91% of 15- to 24-year-olds were reported to have basic literacy skills, compared with 76% of adults aged 65 years and older.

From a regional perspective, the largest progress in literacy was seen in Northern Africa, followed by Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with differences between youth and elderly literacy rates amounting to 59, 45 and 37 percentage points, respectively. In Northern Africa, the youth literacy rate (91%) is almost three times as high as the elderly literacy rate (32%). Within the region, Algeria and Tunisia made the most progress. In these countries, only 20% and 26%, respectively, of the elderly population have basic literacy skills, compared with 94% and 97% of youth.

<sup>1</sup> It would be more precise to compare the literacy rate of those aged 65 to 74 years with the literacy rate of those aged 15 to 24 years, but due to data constraints the entire population aged 65 years and older was used in the analysis. 65- to 74-year-olds account for a large proportion of the entire population aged 65 years and older in all countries.

<sup>2</sup> Hanemann, U. (2015). *The Evolution and Impact of Literacy Campaigns and Programmes, 2000-2014*. UIL Research Series: No. 1. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Lind, A. (2008). *Literacy for All: Making a difference*. Paris: UNESCO-IIEP. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001597/159785e.pdf>.

**FIGURE 4. HOW HAVE ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY RATES CHANGED SINCE 1990?****Adult literacy rate by region and sex, 1990-2015****Youth literacy rate by region and sex, 1990-2015**

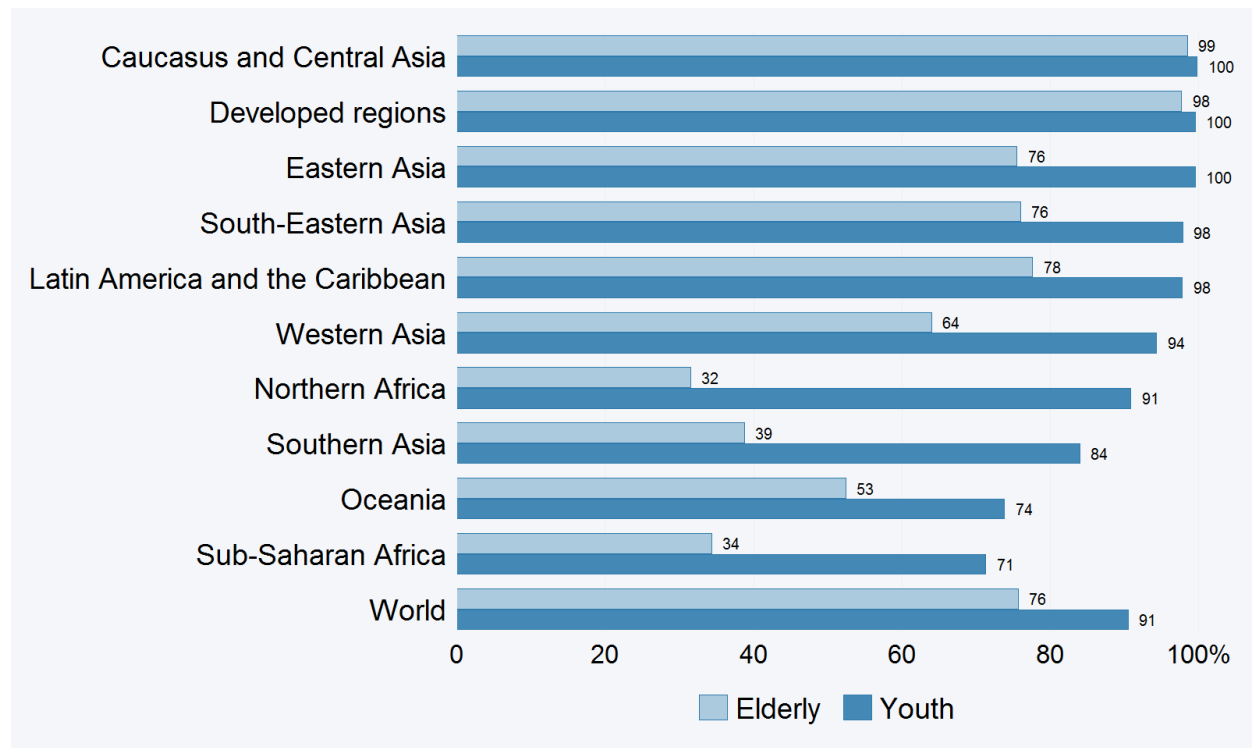
**Note:** Regions sorted by the projected literacy rate in 2015. 1990 data refer to the period 1985-1994, 2000 data refer to the period 1995-2004, 2010 data refer to the period 2005-2014.

Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

In Southern Asia, over twice as many individuals have basic literacy skills among the younger cohort (84%) compared with their elderly counterparts (39%). In the region, Bhutan and Nepal had the biggest increases in youth literacy over the past 50 years. The elderly literacy rate is very low in both countries with only about one-fifth of youth (15% and 21%, respectively) being able to read and write 50 years ago. Both countries were able to make tremendous progress over the years to reach a youth literacy rate of 87% and 85%, respectively, in 2014.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia and the developed regions, the difference between the two literacy rates is small because most young adults were already literate 50 years ago, and both the youth and elderly literacy rates are at or close to 100% today.

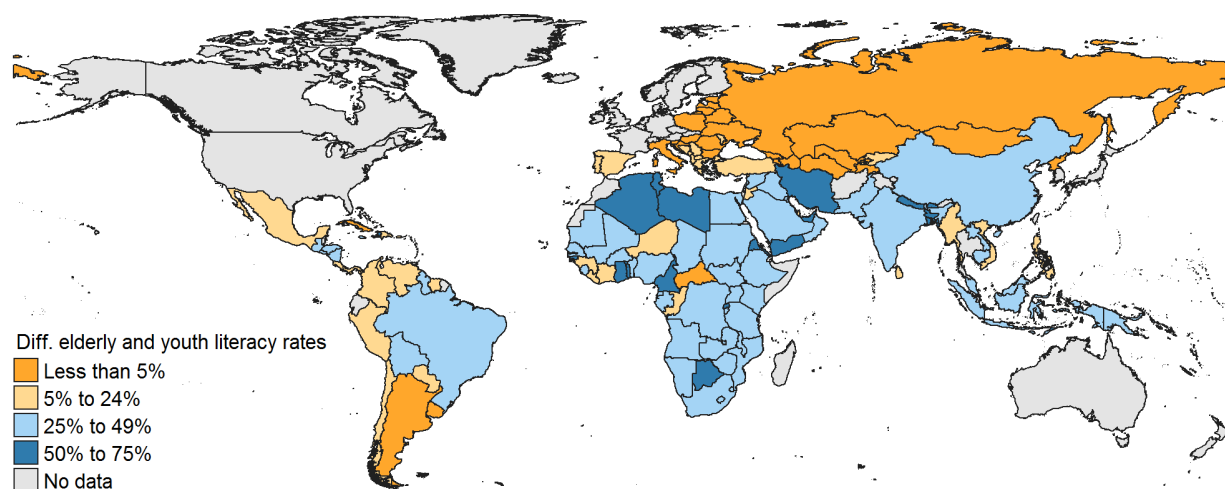
**FIGURE 5. HOW DO ELDERLY AND YOUTH LITERACY RATES COMPARE?**  
Elderly and youth literacy rate by region, 2014



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

**Figure 6** displays the magnitude of the progress made by countries over the last 50 years. Countries with a very large difference between the literacy rates of youth and elderly cohorts experienced a major increase in youth literacy. They generally had very low levels of youth literacy 50 years ago and managed to widely expand the share of the population that is able to read and write. The biggest differences between both rates – and thus the biggest improvements in youth literacy – are observed in sub-Saharan Africa. Cabo Verde and Togo are among the countries that performed remarkably well: they went from very low youth literacy 50 years ago (current elderly rate of 33% and 18%, respectively) to a significantly higher share of youth with basic literacy skills (98% and 80%, respectively) in 2014, mainly due to increased access to primary schooling. For reference, in 2014 the primary out-of-school rate in Cabo Verde and Togo was 2% and 7%, respectively.

**FIGURE 6. WHICH COUNTRIES MADE THE GREATEST PROGRESS IN YOUTH LITERACY?**  
Difference between elderly literacy rate and youth literacy rate by country, 2014



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

### LITERACY SKILLS IMPROVED MORE AMONG WOMEN THAN MEN

**Table 2** shows the difference between the elderly and youth literacy rate by region and sex. Among women, the youth literacy rate is 18 percentage points higher than the elderly literacy rate, compared with 11 points difference between younger and older men. Women thus made more progress than men since the 1960s. Globally, almost 90% of women aged 15 to 24 years had basic literacy skills in 2014, compared with only 71% of women from the older cohort. Improvements in female youth literacy are significantly greater than for men in all regions of the world, except in the Caucasus and Central Asia and in the developed regions, where there was hardly any gender gap in youth literacy 50 years ago.

**TABLE 2. HOW DOES MALE AND FEMALE PROGRESS COMPARE ACROSS REGIONS?**

Youth literacy rate and difference with elderly literacy rate by region and sex, 2014

Region	Youth literacy rate (%)			Difference with elderly literacy rate (%)		
	MF	M	F	MF	M	F
Caucasus and Central Asia	99.9	99.9	99.9	1.3	0.7	1.7
Developed regions	99.7	99.7	99.6	1.9	1.5	2.1
Eastern Asia	99.7	99.7	99.6	24.0	12.9	34.2
Latin America and the Caribbean	97.9	97.7	98.1	20.2	17.6	22.3
Northern Africa	91.0	93.7	88.2	59.3	48.9	69.8
Oceania	73.9	76.0	71.7	21.4	15.9	25.2
South-Eastern Asia	97.9	98.0	97.9	21.9	14.9	27.3
Southern Asia	84.1	87.9	80.0	45.2	34.9	55.2
Sub-Saharan Africa	71.4	76.9	66.4	36.9	30.2	43.1
Western Asia	94.4	95.9	92.8	30.4	17.7	40.7
<b>World</b>	<b>90.6</b>	<b>92.6</b>	<b>88.6</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>10.9</b>	<b>17.8</b>

Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

Northern Africa and Southern Asia are the regions where women progressed the most. Only around one-fourth of young women were able to read and write five decades ago in both regions (the current elderly literacy rates are 18% and 25%, respectively), whereas young women fared significantly better in 2014, with 94% and 88% of them being literate, respectively. In sub-Saharan Africa, a larger share of young women (66%) is also literate compared to 50 years ago (23%).



As shown in Figure 3, gender parity in youth literacy is close to achievement from a global perspective, with a GPI of 0.96 in 2014. This compares to a GPI for the elderly literacy rate of 0.87 in the same year. However, this global success conceals disparities across and within regions. Gender parity among youth has been reached in six of ten regions, with the exception of Northern Africa and Oceania, which are close to gender parity (GPI of 0.94), and Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (GPI of 0.91 and 0.86, respectively). The Caucasus and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the developed regions have maintained gender parity in youth literacy for the past 50 years.

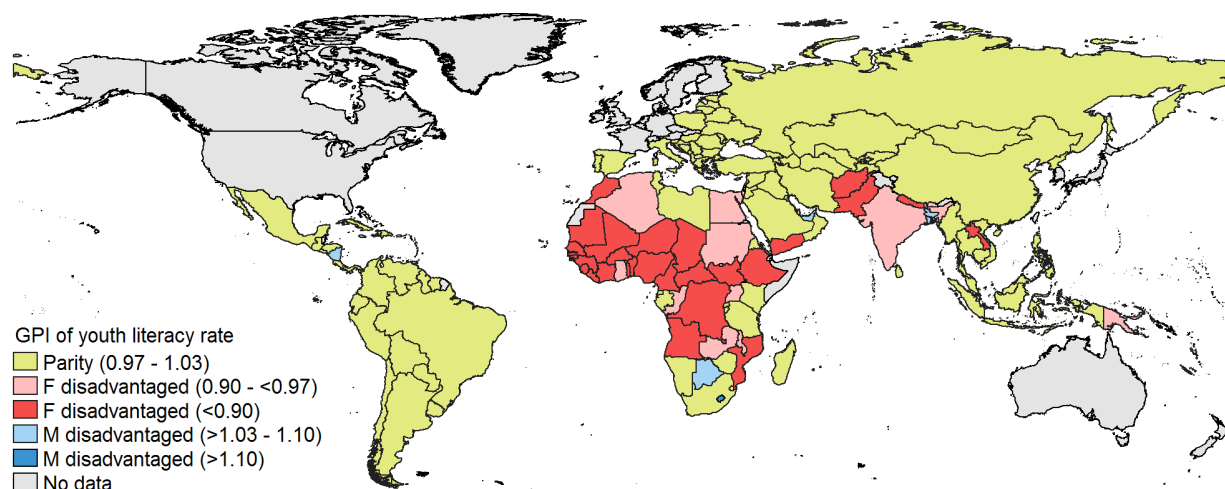
The other regions made remarkable progress, such as Northern Africa and Southern Asia: less than one-half as many women as men were literate 50 years ago (GPI of 0.41 and 0.47, respectively, for the elderly literacy rate), yet they were both close to gender parity (GPI of 0.94 and 0.91, respectively) for the youth literacy rate in 2014. Although still far from the goal of gender parity, there was also much progress in sub-Saharan Africa: the gender parity index for the youth literacy rate is 0.86, compared to only 0.50 for the elderly literacy rate, indicating that women of the youngest cohort are around 15% less likely to be literate than men, compared to a 50% gap in the older cohort. The literacy gap between young men and women is narrowing in sub-Saharan African, but continued efforts are needed.

### GENDER DISPARITY PERSISTS IN SOME COUNTRIES DESPITE PROGRESS

**Figure 7** shows the GPI for the youth literacy rate at the country level. Out of 158 countries with available data, 112 or 71% have achieved gender parity in 2014. Among those, 43 countries were already at gender parity 50 years ago, and 63 countries managed to close the gap between young males and females over the past decades.<sup>3</sup> Countries that have made the greatest progress include: Cambodia, Eritrea, Libya, Rwanda and Tunisia. In these countries, the female elderly literacy rate is less than one-third the male elderly literacy rate, but among 15- to 24-year-olds gender parity has been achieved.

Another 18 countries – located in Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean – are close to achieving gender parity among youth. In Bhutan, Gambia and Malawi, male literacy rates among the oldest cohort are five times as high as female literacy rates (the GPI of the elderly literacy rate is 0.16, 0.20 and 0.19, respectively) but women aged 15 to 24 years are nearly as likely to be literate as their male counterparts (GPI of 0.93, 0.92 and 0.94, respectively).

### FIGURE 7. WHICH COUNTRIES HAVE ACHIEVED GENDER PARITY IN YOUTH LITERACY? Gender parity index of youth literacy rate by country, 2014



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2016*

<sup>3</sup> The GPI value for the elderly literacy rate is missing for 6 countries so no conclusion can be made on their progress.

Despite the progress, gender disparity in youth literacy remains persistent in almost one in five countries. In 27 countries, mainly located in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, young women are still less likely than men to have basic reading and writing skills. One of the few exceptions is Lesotho, where there is a large disparity at the expense of young men. Nevertheless, tangible progress occurred in all countries, and although disparities still exist, they are not as large as they were 50 years ago. For example, in Burkina Faso, Liberia and Mozambique, the GPI of the elderly literacy rate is 0.14, 0.16 and 0.17, respectively, while among youth the GPI of the literacy rate has reached 0.77, 0.59 and 0.71, respectively.

The momentum of progress must be maintained and continuing efforts pursued in all countries to ensure that everyone, regardless of age and sex, acquire reading and writing skills, as called for in the new global education agenda. The data in this fact sheet underscore the need for strengthened investment in literacy and numeracy programmes around the world if the new SDG literacy goal is to be met by 2030.

Please consult the UIS website [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org) to access the UIS Data Centre and subscribe to eAlerts on the Institute's latest publications and data releases.

Explore the data in the **UNESCO eAtlas of Literacy**: <http://on.unesco.org/literacy-map>  
With just a couple of clicks, you can download interactive maps and charts.