

## SOWC Key Facts

### General facts

In 2009, there were an estimated 1.2 billion adolescents in the world, forming around 18 per cent of the global population. An adolescent is defined as an individual aged 10-19 by the UN.

The vast majority of the world's adolescents – 88 per cent – live in developing countries. The least developed countries are home to roughly 16 per cent of all adolescents.

Adolescents represent only 12 per cent of people in the industrialized world. In contrast, they account for more than 1 in every 5 inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the least developed countries.

More than half of all adolescents live in Asia, with both South Asia and East Asia and Pacific each containing roughly 330 million adolescents.

On current trends, however, the regional composition of adolescents is set to alter by mid-century; by 2050, sub-Saharan Africa is projected to have more adolescent than any other region, marginally surpassing the number in either of the Asian regions.

Adolescents today face a unique set of challenges, including an uncertain global economic outlook and high levels of youth unemployment, an increasing number of humanitarian crises and conflicts, climate change and environmental degradation, and rapid urbanization. The severity of challenges is expected to worsen over the next decade.

### Physical well-being

Adolescents across the world are generally healthier today than in previous generations. Yet in 2004, nearly 400,000 adolescents died of unintentional injuries such those caused by road accidents.

More than 70 million girls and women aged 15–49 have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), usually by the onset of puberty.

The available evidence from 14 developing countries suggests that adolescent females run a greater risk of nutritional difficulties than adolescent males, notably anaemia. For both sexes, obesity is a serious and growing concern in both industrialized countries and the developing world.

Worldwide, one third of all new HIV cases involve young people aged 15–24. The risk of HIV infection is considerably higher among adolescent females and young women than adolescent males and young men. Among adolescents aged 15-19 in the developing countries, only 30 per cent of males and just 19 per cent of females have correct, comprehensive knowledge of HIV.

Adolescents with disabilities are likely to suffer forms of discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization. Access to transportation, educational facilities and other resources is crucial to ensure that adolescents with disabilities can enjoy the same opportunities as their peers.

It is estimated that around 20 per cent of the world's adolescents have a mental health or behavioral problem, with depression being the most frequently experienced disease.

Evidence shows that some adolescents engage sexual relations in early adolescence (10-14 years). To stay healthy and safe adolescents need access to high-quality sexual and reproductive health services and information from an early age.

### **Education and employment**

Almost half the world's adolescents of the appropriate age do not attend secondary school. The lowest rates of attendance are in Eastern and Southern Africa, with net enrolment ratios of 24 per cent for boys and 22 per cent for girls.

In 2008, youth were almost three times as likely to be unemployed as adults, and suffered disproportionately from a deficit of decent work. This means that in many cases the first experience of work for young people is one of wasted talent, disillusionment, underemployment and continued poverty.

### **Protection**

Around 150 million children aged 5–14 are currently engaged in child labour, with incidence highest in sub-Saharan Africa.

Worldwide, UNICEF estimates that at any given moment more than 1 million children are in detention by law enforcement officials.

At present, 1 in every 5 adolescent females aged 15-19 in the developing world excluding China are married or in union. This rate rises to 28 per cent South Asia, the region with the highest incidence, and 59 per cent in Niger.

Adolescent marriage – defined as a marriage or union where one or more of the spouses is age 19 or younger – is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. New figures from 31 countries in these two regions show that most adolescent marriages take place between the ages of 15 and 18.

In Africa, 25 per cent of women aged 20-24 gave birth before the age of 18. In South Asia this rate falls to 22 per cent, marginally higher than Latin America and the Caribbean (18 per cent).

Adolescents are sometimes targeted for recruitment by military groups, whether to carry weapons and participate in combat or to act in effect as sexual slaves or other types of servitude.

### **Participation**

The right of children to express their views freely on all matters affecting them is a guiding principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In addition to being a right, participation stimulates the full development of a personality. Through meaningful civic engagement young people prepare to be active citizens.