



Issue Brief

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The Critical Role of Youth in Global Development

Nearly half of all people in the world today are under the age of 25. Effectively addressing the special needs of these youth is a critical challenge for the future. Youth, individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, make up over one-sixth of the world's population, but are seldom recognized as a distinct group for the important role they will play in shaping the future.

More than any other group, today's young women and men will impact how people in rich and poor countries live in the 21st century. Unfortunately, hundreds of millions of youth—especially young women—lack education, skills and job training, employment opportunities, and health services effectively limiting their futures at a very early age. As a result, youth may react by unleashing risky or harmful behavior against themselves or society.

Although youth may often be perceived as contributing to society's problems, they are, in fact, important assets for the economic, political, and social life of their communities. Addressing key global threats—like the spread of HIV/AIDS, growing poverty, and political stability in developing countries—depends on protecting the rights of youth and providing them with the support they need to contribute to the health and well-being of society.

This fact sheet outlines the major challenges facing youth and highlights policy and program recommendations in the key issue areas of education and training, economic opportunities, and health and sexuality.

Challenges Facing Youth

The challenges facing today's youth have a tremendous impact on their quality of life. Their reactions will affect their families and communities, and the countries and regions in which they live.

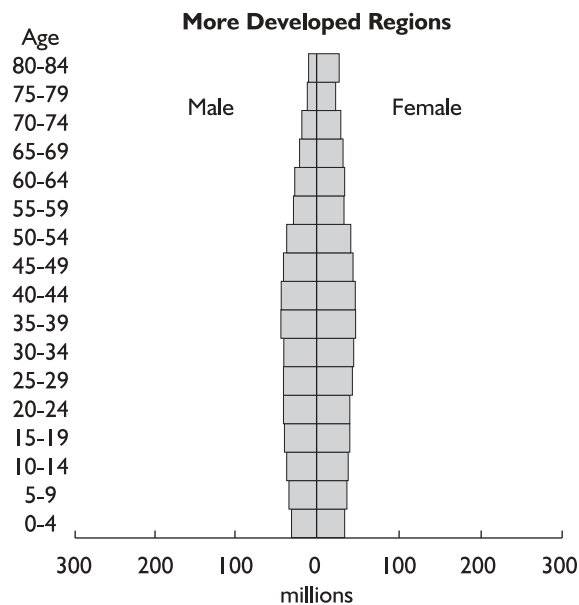
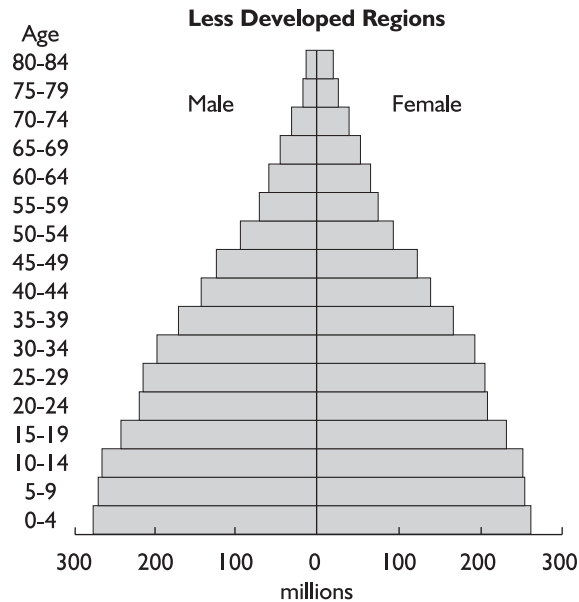
Defining Youth

The meaning of the terms “youth,” “adolescents,” and “young people” varies in different societies, as do the different roles and responsibilities ascribed to members of each group. In Egypt, for example, the average male enters the workforce at the age of 15, and in Niger about 75% of women give birth before their 20th birthday. This fact sheet uses the United Nations' definitions:

- ▶ **Adolescents:** 10-19 years of age (early adolescence 10-14; late adolescence 15-19)
- ▶ **Youth:** 15-24 years of age
- ▶ **Young People:** 10-24 years of age

- ▶ **The number of youth is growing.** At 1.1 billion, the world today has the largest number of youth ever, and this number is increasing.
- ▶ **Youth are poor.** About 85% of the world's youth live in poor countries.

Population by Age and Sex: Less and More Developed Regions, 2000



Source: United Nations Population Division, 1998

- ▶ **Youth are under-educated.** In the developing world, nearly one-third of youth are illiterate. In the least-developed countries, only 13% of girls and 22% of boys enroll in secondary education.
- ▶ **Youth are unemployed.** Approximately 70 million young people are unemployed worldwide.
- ▶ **Youth are susceptible to disease.** Young people ages 15-24 have the highest infection rates from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

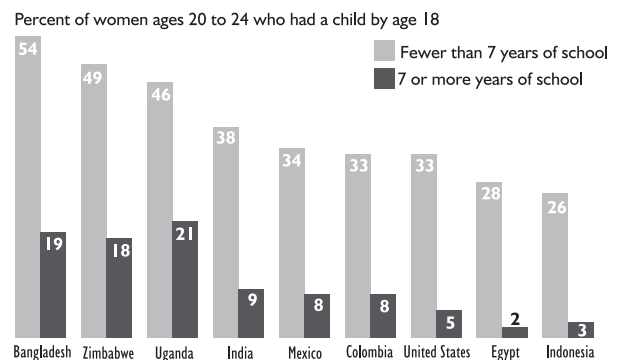
- ▶ **Youth are sexually active.** Half of all girls under age 18 are married in some countries. Further, 4.4 million adolescents undergo abortions every year—40% of which are performed under unsafe conditions. Only 17% of sexually active youth—the majority of them married—use contraception. Even fewer practice safe sex to protect themselves from HIV infection.

Special Challenges Facing Female Youth

Young women and girls between 15 and 24 years of age face special challenges in many developing countries. As a whole, females receive less education than their male counterparts, marry and become parents earlier, have fewer economic opportunities, heavy household responsibilities, and are often constrained by traditions and customs that do not apply to their male counterparts. It is estimated that 33-66% of sexual assaults worldwide are perpetrated against girls age 15 or younger.

Investing in girls has a disproportionately positive impact on their communities and countries. Women with more education are more likely to marry later and have fewer children. Studies show that women's earnings are directly invested in the health, welfare, and education of their children, resulting in a long-term cycle of poverty reduction that spans generations. Programs that position female youth to earn income throughout their lives, including education, training, health, and family planning assistance, have a magnifying effect of helping their children become healthy, educated, and productive citizens.

Mother's Education and Childbearing, Selected Countries



Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1998.

- ▶ **Youth become parents.** About 17 million women ages 15-19 give birth every year and have more children than women who start childbearing later. The risk of birth complications is 25 times higher for girls under age 15 and two times higher for those between ages 15-19.
- ▶ **Youth are frustrated.** Evidence suggests that youth with few economic prospects and limited political voice are more inclined to be radical, fundamentalist, revolutionary, or to abuse drugs or commit suicide.

Global Impacts of These Challenges

Many global problems have a particularly strong impact on youth. In some cases, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS or frustration due to political disenfranchisement, these problems have far-reaching consequences. Focusing on youth will substantially boost efforts by the United States and other nations to:

- ▶ Stop the spread of, and heal the suffering, caused by *HIV/AIDS* and other infectious diseases;
- ▶ Create a *stable global economic system* that equitably benefits people in all nations, both poor and rich;
- ▶ Promote *political stability* based on participation and human rights;
- ▶ Limit the number of economic and war-related *refugees*;
- ▶ Stem the tide of *fundamentalism*, terrorism, and hatred;
- ▶ Moderate *population growth*;
- ▶ Promote *equal rights for women*.

Three Critical Issue Areas Facing Youth

Research by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) indicates that three issue areas are especially vital to today's youth in developing countries:

- ▶ **Education and Training**
- ▶ **Economic Opportunities**
- ▶ **Health and Sexuality**

How these issues are addressed by governments in developing and developed countries, multilateral institutions like UNICEF or the World Bank, grassroots organizations, and individuals around the world will have a tremendous impact on the future of the planet.

1. Education and Training

Around the world, large percentages of school-age children are not attending school. In the least developed countries, fewer than one-third of secondary-age youth attend school. Millions of children and youth attend schools of very low quality or will leave school early. Many families cannot afford school fees, the children are needed at home to work, or they live in remote communities without access to schools. Families often keep girls out of school because they believe they do not need

education to fulfill the roles that determine their social status in many communities: those of wife and mother. Without education, the vast majority of these children will grow up to be poor, marginalized, and susceptible to a variety of social and physical problems.

“I had to get married at a very young age, when I was in the 8th standard [age 15]... I was not even allowed to continue studies by my parents as they thought them unnecessary... My in-laws were of the same opinion as I was going to be a housewife.

— **Rural Housewife in India**

Quality education is essential for youth to acquire the skills to enter adequately paid jobs and to have the knowledge to participate in the political processes and make informed decisions about their lives. Studies show a strong connection—particularly for girls—between basic education and improved earning potential, the growth of democracy, and protection of the environment. Decades of research also show that the education of girls and women is fundamentally linked to both their physical and economic health and that of their families.

Youth Policy Agenda: Education and Training

Access to high-quality primary and secondary education and appropriate training is perhaps the single most important investment countries can make in their youth, particularly for girls. ICRW recommends that policymakers:

- ▶ Promote programs and policies that make basic education available to every girl and boy worldwide, including programs to address why young children do not attend school.

- ▶ Make improvements in existing schools systems in developing countries, such as reducing student-teacher ratios, increasing teacher training and pay, increasing access and use of information communications technology.
- ▶ Review curriculum to ensure that it does not reinforce sex-role stereotypes, but promotes gender equality; employ women teachers as role models for girls.
- ▶ Increase access to secondary education, including subsidies for girls' education and scholarships for poor children, especially girls.
- ▶ Expand vocational training, including training for girls in nontraditional trades.
- ▶ Expand nonformal educational opportunities for young women and men to develop greater self-esteem, problem-solving and decision-making skills; access to sex education and reproductive health information; and a range of other life skills.

2. Economic Opportunities

Work is a complex issue relating to youth. In most cases, adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 are protected by a different set of laws and international agreements than those 15 years and older—who, in most circumstances, can legitimately participate in the workforce.

“It is difficult for many countries to meet the employment needs of millions of unemployed youth when they are struggling with external debts, deficits, lack of access to internal markets, low commodity prices and economic liberalization. At the same time, unemployment creates psychological stress for many young people... The difficult situation of youth unemployment exposes young people to the risk of social problems stemming from drug use and illegal activities.”

– U.N. Secretary-General
Kofi Annan

Why, how, and when a young person enters the labor force can set the stage for their future status and work opportunities.

About 250 million younger adolescents and children between the ages of 5 and 14 work for pay in some capacity and about 120 million work full time. While school and work are not always incompatible, children who

leave school to work at a young age are much more likely to remain poor and suffer from a variety of social and health problems.

For youth, work may be an economic necessity and can also increase their independence, self-esteem, and be the source of their family's future well-being. Girls and young women's ability to generate income may influence their ability to make choices about marriage and fertility. In some countries, unmarried females have emerged as the primary labor pool for the export-driven and high-tech industries. However, where youth occupy only the lowest paid, most dangerous, and most socially undesirable jobs, employment may be a dead end. Also, today's global economy with its growing technology and trade sectors requires workers with increasingly greater skill levels.

While age-inappropriate and dead-end employment is problematic, work in the informal sector, such as street vending, is insecure and potentially harmful, because it is unregulated and unprotected by labor laws. Without adequate support services and appropriate economic growth policies, the informal sector offers few prospects for a healthy and prosperous future for today's youth.

Unemployment is another important concern for youth. More than half of 15- to 24-year-olds in poor countries are both out of school and out of work, with myriad potentially negative consequences. Many factors contribute to unemployment including lack of skilled workers, government policies, and issues relating to globalization.

Youth Policy Agenda: Economic Opportunities

Providing youth with opportunities for meaningful work is important to creating stable societies. ICRW recommends that policymakers:

- ▶ Promote programs and enforce policies that protect young people from exploitation and human rights abuses, including labor laws, laws concerning minimum age of marriage, inheritance laws, and laws that prevent trafficking of humans.
- ▶ Establish national youth policies and promulgate laws that promote youth development, with particular focus on youth employment.
- ▶ Establish credit and savings programs and financial opportunities for youth business ventures.

- ▶ Increase training programs to teach youth marketable vocational skills to enhance youth job prospects, including programs targeted to young women.
- ▶ Promote programs and policies that address the causes of youth unemployment.
- ▶ Eliminate sex discrimination and ensure equal opportunity for young women and young men.

3. Health and Sexuality

The health of today’s youth population will have a tremendous influence on the economic and social future of their communities. However, many nation’s health policies and programs do not effectively address the most pressing threats to reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, many boys and girls become sexually active without accurate knowledge about basic issues, including why pregnancy occurs and the cause of sexually transmitted diseases.

About half of all new HIV/AIDS cases occur among people between the ages of 15 and 24, the highest rate for any group. Nearly 6,000 young people are contracting HIV/AIDS every day worldwide. Most of the estimated 11.8 million 15- to 25-year-olds living with HIV/AIDS are girls. Studies show that knowledge about how HIV/AIDS is contracted and passed on is very low among youth in many countries. HIV/AIDS prevalence rates are increasing in many nations, with potentially devastating consequences for youth.

Percentage of Women Married* by Age 18, Selected Countries



*Includes formal marriage and cohabiting unions

Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1998.

Pregnancy and childbirth is also a threat to many young women’s health and lives. In least developed countries, about one in six births are to women between the ages of 15 and 19. The risks of dying from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth for 15- to 19-year-olds is double that of women in their mid-twenties. These issues are complicated by the fact that many youth are married, which is often overlooked in reproductive health policy debates and program decisions. In Bangladesh, the average age at marriage of females is just over 14 years and in many African nations between one-quarter and one-half of 15- to 19-year-old women are married. Clearly these women need access to reproductive health information and services, but it is often not targeted to their age group.

Youth Policy Agenda: Health and Sexuality

Appropriate information and services related to pressing health needs should be targeted to young people. ICRW recommends that policymakers:

- ▶ Promote HIV/AIDS prevention strategies and other STD prevention strategies for youth.
- ▶ Promote and ensure access to voluntary family planning services focused on youth needs in developing nations.
- ▶ Implement health education programs and reproductive health services for married youth, particularly women.
- ▶ Implement effective sex education programs, beginning with pre-adolescent children.
- ▶ Create an environment that encourages delayed marriage and childbearing.
- ▶ Improve the ability and skills of adults and youth to communicate about youth sexuality.

“Communities need to provide all young people with sustained adult relationships through which they experience support, care, guidance, and advocacy. Caring and connectedness within and beyond the family consistently are found to be powerful factors in protecting young people from negative behaviors and in encouraging good social skills, responsible values, and positive identity.”

—General Colin L. Powell,
Founding Chairman,
America’s Promise—The
Alliance for Youth

Treating Youth as Partners

Young women and men flourish when they are surrounded by adults, families, and communities that value them by respecting their rights and recognizing their contributions. Youth involvement in the design and administration of programs and policies and in other decisions that affect their lives increases effectiveness and contributes to youth development.

Partnerships between adults and youth can lead to success where programs designed by adults for youth have failed. Recognition of the significant asset that our youth represent, and the fact that our future is tied to their development, is an essential ingredient for economic, political, and social stability—both today and tomorrow.

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