

## IX. ADULT ILLITERACY

### International goals

*[The goals include] reducing the adult illiteracy rate ... to at least half its 1990 level, with an emphasis on female literacy ... (para. 36(k) of WSSD Programme of Action).*

*Eradicate illiteracy among women (Strategic objective B.2 of FWCW Platform for Action).*

*Eliminate the gender gap in basic and functional literacy, as recommended in the World Declaration on Education for All (para. 81(c) of FWCW Platform for Action).*

*The World Declaration on Education for All, adopted at the World Conference on Education for All, set the goal of reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to half of its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates (para. 8). The year 1990 was International Literacy Year.*

*The World Summit for Children and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development also endorsed the goal of reducing the adult illiteracy rate to half of its 1990 level.*

### DEFINITION

Adult illiteracy refers to the proportion of the adult population who cannot, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on everyday life. Here, the literacy rate is expressed as a percentage of the population aged 15 years or above.

### RECENT SITUATION

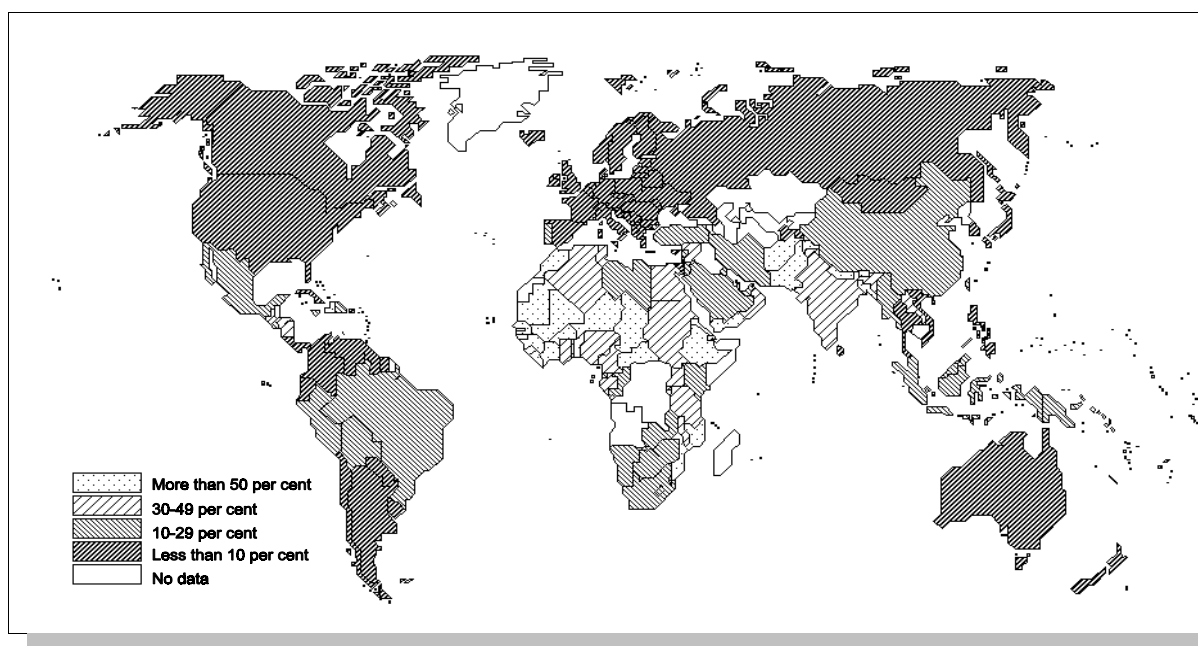
The adult illiteracy rate has been steadily declining in all countries, particularly during the past few decades. It is estimated that the overall illiteracy rate in the world had fallen to 23 per cent in 1995, and is projected to reach 21 per cent at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In addition, the absolute number of illiterate adults in the world reached its peak in the early 1990s and has begun to decline (UNESCO, 1999). Nevertheless, just as the school enrolment ratio shows that there are still a large number of young people who do not have access to education (see chap. VIII), the adult illiteracy rate demonstrates that even larger numbers of illiterate adults in the developing world today continue to be deprived of the educational advantages they were denied as children (UNESCO, 1990). Regional and gender disparities remain wide as well.

In the less developed regions, the majority of the adult population is illiterate in nearly one quarter of the countries, although a similar number of countries report that less than 10 per cent of their adult population is illiterate (table IX.1 and fig. IX.1 and IX.2). It should be particularly noted that more than half of the least developed countries report that the majority of their adults are illiterate. Considering the importance of literacy in individual well-being as well as in a country's social and economic development, low literacy levels among the least developed countries pose a serious challenge to those countries.

Among the major regions, illiteracy rates are relatively low in Latin America and the Caribbean, where Haiti is the only country with an adult illiteracy rate greater than 50 per cent. Six countries in Asia and Oceania (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Yemen) also have illiteracy rates higher than 50 per cent. The situation is far worse for Africa, where 40 per cent of countries with data available have illiteracy rates higher than 50 per cent. No country in Africa reports a rate lower than 10 per cent, but around 60 per cent of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean do so. In Asia and Oceania, nearly 40 per cent of the countries have illiteracy rates between 10 and 30 per cent, and over one third have illiteracy rates of less than 10 per cent.

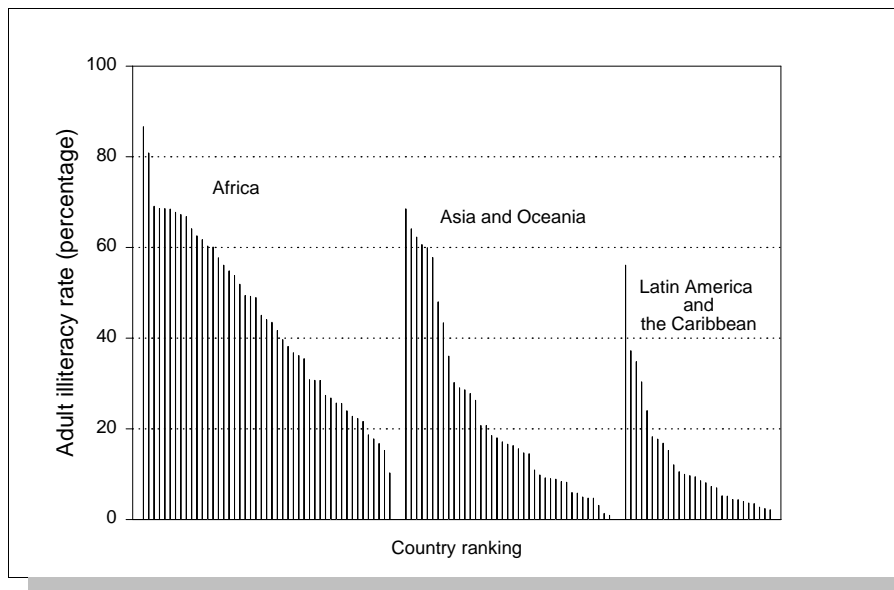
In less developed regions, there are still close to 900 million adults who are illiterate (fig. IX.3). About 2 billion are literate.

**Figure IX.1.** Adult illiteracy rate, 1995 (both sexes)



*Source:* Data furnished by UNESCO, providing results of the 1998 UNESCO literacy estimates and projections.

*NOTE:* Estimates are not presented for countries or areas with populations under 150,000. Countries from the more developed regions are assumed to have illiteracy rates below 10 per cent.



**Figure IX.2.** Adult illiteracy rate, 1995, by country ranking and region

*Source:* Data furnished by UNESCO, providing results of the 1998 UNESCO literacy estimates and projections.

NOTE: Bars show level of illiteracy rate for individual countries.

**Table IX.1.** Distribution of countries in the less developed regions according to adult illiteracy rate, 1995

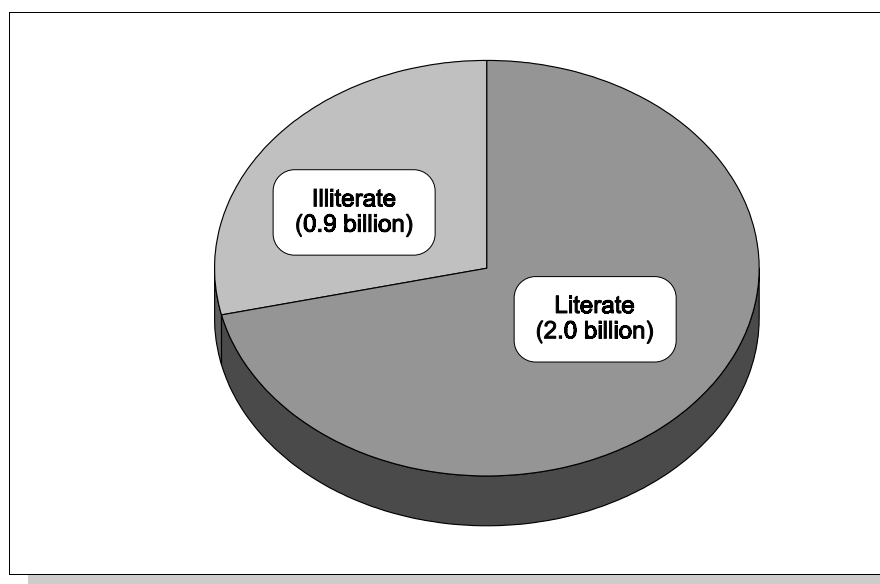
|                                 | Percentage of countries with adult illiteracy rate of: |                |                |                     |       | Number of countries |       |
|---------------------------------|--|----------------|----------------|---------------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
|                                 | Less than 10 per cent                                  | 10-29 per cent | 30-49 per cent | 50 per cent or more | Total | With data available | Total |
| Less developed regions          | 27   | 31             | 19             | 23                  | 100   | 114                 | 141   |
| Least developed countries       | 3  | 11             | 25             | 61                  | 100   | 36                  | 45    |
| Africa                          | 0  | 28             | 32             | 40                  | 100   | 47                  | 53    |
| Asia and Oceania <sup>a</sup>   | 36   | 38             | 10             | 15                  | 100   | 39                  | 57    |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 61   | 25             | 11             | 4                   | 100   | 28                  | 31    |

*Source:* Data furnished by UNESCO, providing results of the 1998 UNESCO literacy estimates and projections.

NOTE: Excludes countries and areas with populations under 150,000. Due to rounding, the sum of the subcategories may not be equal to 100 per cent.

<sup>a</sup> Excluding Japan, Australia and New Zealand, which are included in the more developed regions.

**Figure IX.3.** Distribution of adult population in the less developed regions, by adult illiteracy rate, 1995



Source: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1999 (Paris, UNESCO Publishing and Berman Press, 1999).

**Table IX.2.** Distribution of countries in the less developed regions according to percentage point difference in adult illiteracy between sexes, 1995

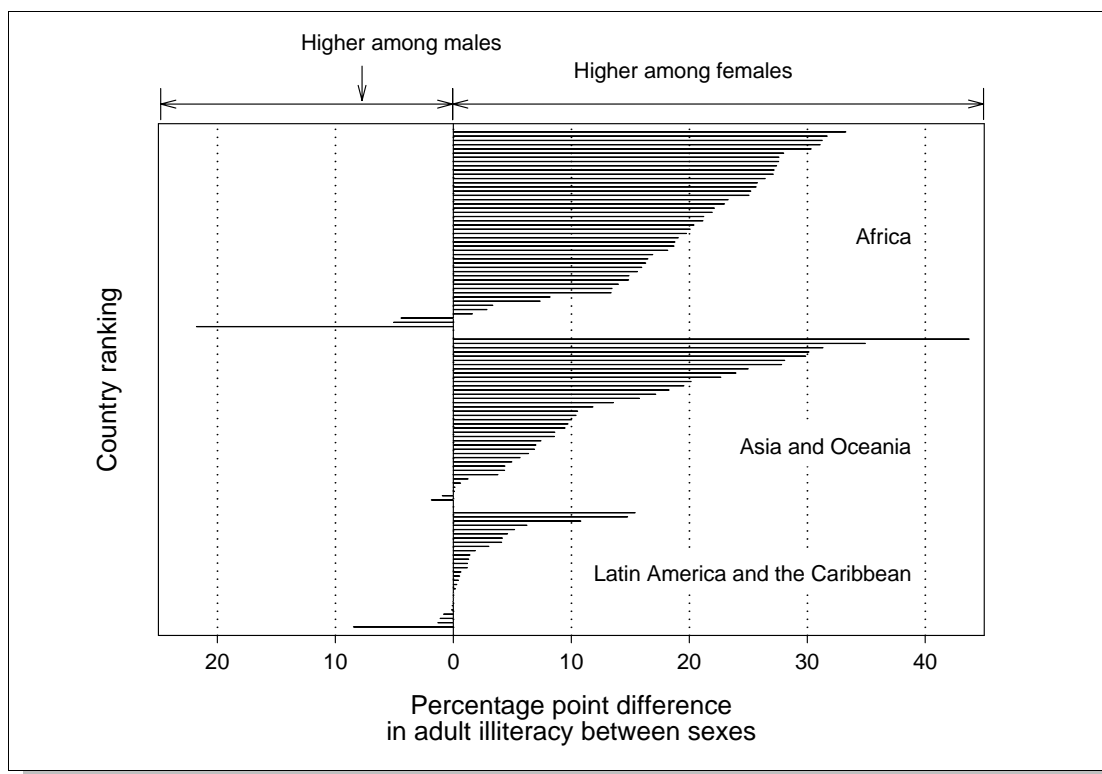
|                                 | Percentage of countries with adult illiteracy rate of: |                                      |                               |   |       | Number of countries |       |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|-------|---------------------|-------|
|                                 | Female higher than male: 20 points or more             | Female higher than male: 5-19 points | Difference less than 5 points | Male higher than female: 5 points or more | Total | With data available | Total |
| Less developed regions          | 32   | 34                                   | 30                            | 4   | 100   | 114                 | 141   |
| Least developed countries       | 64   | 31                                   | 3                             | 3   | 100   | 36                  | 45    |
| Africa                          | 53   | 34                                   | 6                             | 6   | 100   | 47                  | 53    |
| Asia and Oceania <sup>a</sup>   | 31   | 44                                   | 26                            | 0   | 100   | 39                  | 57    |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 0  | 21                                   | 75                            | 4   | 100   | 28                  | 31    |

Source: Data furnished by UNESCO, providing results of the 1998 UNESCO literacy estimates and projections

NOTE: Excludes countries and areas with populations under 150,000.

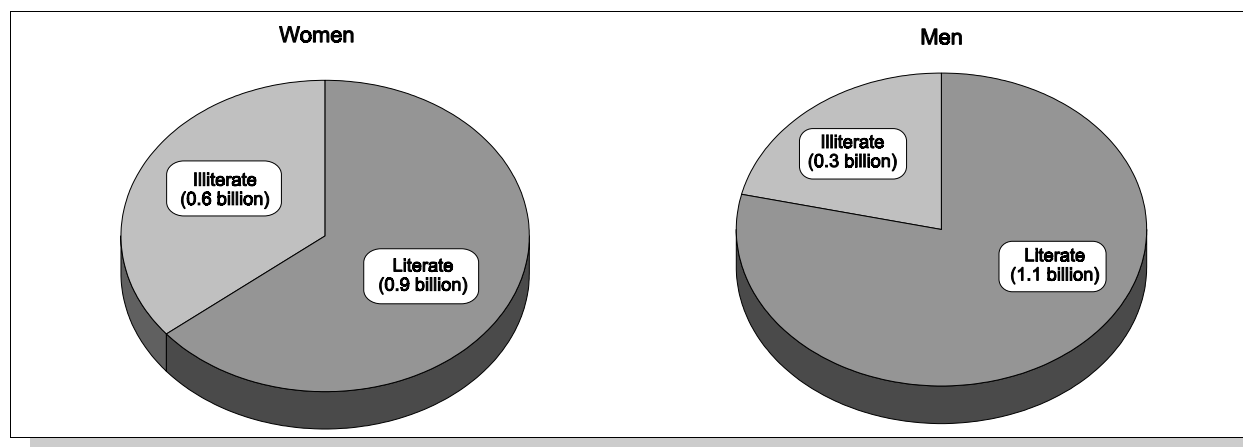
<sup>a</sup> Excluding Japan, Australia and New Zealand, which are included in the more developed regions.

**Figure IX.4.** Sex difference in adult illiteracy rate, 1995, by country ranking and region



Source: Data furnished by UNESCO, providing results of the 1998 UNESCO literacy estimates and projections.  
NOTE: Bars show point difference in adult illiteracy rate between sexes for individual countries.

**Figure IX.5.** Distribution of the female and male adult populations in the less developed regions, by literacy status, 1995



Source: UNESCO *Statistical Yearbook 1999* (Paris, UNESCO Publishing and Bernan Press, 1999).

Comparing male and female illiteracy rates (table IX.2 and fig. IX.4), wide gaps are most common in Africa, where more than half of the countries have female illiteracy rates at least 20 points higher than male rates. However, in one country (Lesotho) the illiteracy rate for men exceeds that for women by over 20 points. In Asia and Oceania about one third of countries have gender differences in illiteracy rates of 20 points or more. In contrast, in Latin America and the Caribbean, no country has such a wide gender gap. Nearly all of the least developed countries have a substantial gap in illiteracy rates, and in two thirds of the least developed countries illiteracy is higher among women by 20 percentage points or more.

Compared with the school enrolment ratio, discussed in chapter VIII above, the adult illiteracy rate indicates a more serious gender gap in education, at least among the adult population. (Although the school enrolment ratio tends to be lower for girls than for boys, there are quite a few countries with enrolment ratios higher for girls than for boys.)

The majority of illiterates in the less developed regions are women (fig. IX.5). About 0.6 billion women living in those regions are illiterate, compared to about 0.3 billion men. The illiteracy rate among women is about 38 per cent, and that among men 21 per cent, or a percentage point gap of 17 points.

#### **SOURCE OF DATA, COVERAGE AND QUALITY**

The most recent estimates come from the 1998 UNESCO literacy estimates and projections (UNESCO, 1999). Data are available for 114 countries in the less developed regions (about four fifths of the countries). The limited data for countries in the more developed regions are included in the annex table. No recent data are available for most countries in the more developed regions because many developed countries, where high levels of literacy have been attained, no longer collect literacy statistics during national population censuses. UNESCO estimates that illiteracy averaged around 1 per cent in those countries in 1995.

Statistics on adult illiteracy are primarily collected during national population censuses and demographic surveys, including household surveys, labour-force surveys and literacy surveys, supplemented by additional data from national publications and reports as well as special ad hoc surveys.

Literacy ideally should be determined by the measurement of reading, writing and numeracy abilities of each person within a social context. It may however be too time-consuming, costly and operationally complex to organize such measurements during national population censuses. Literacy status is therefore usually based on self-declaration or declaration by the head of household, which sometimes gives rise to concerns about data reliability and consequently comparability, especially for women in many developing countries. According to UNESCO, most countries follow the standard definitions, while the criteria and practices used during actual data collection to determine whether a person is literate or not can vary from country to country.

According to UNESCO, the reliability of the literacy estimates and projections varies from country to country. Reliability is relatively high for the 78 countries that have provided the latest literacy statistics from the 1990 population census round. The use of statistics gathered during the 1980 round of population census has produced literacy estimates and projections of acceptable quality for 30 countries. These are supplemented by estimates of lesser quality obtained either through the use of literacy statistics collected prior to 1980 or by means of sample surveys or derived using a method based on data other than literacy rates.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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