

WORLD  
CHILDREN'S  
DAY 20 NOVEMBER

unicef 

# Rights denied

The impact of  
discrimination  
on children



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## **COVER PHOTO**

Fetiya (right) is a talented student and the oldest of three siblings. Yet in the Benishangul-Gumuz region of western Ethiopia, Fetiya and her family lost everything when they fled the conflict that threatened them. At the Bambassi camp for internally displaced people, Fetiya has been able to continue classes at the UNICEF-supported school and make new friends.

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Rohima Akter, 13, stands outside a UNICEF learning centre in Cox's Bazar. More than 400,000 school-aged children live in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. With approximately 300,000 of them attending learning centres, UNICEF and partners are running a mammoth education operation in what is the largest refugee settlement in the world.

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# Foreword

Catherine Russell  
UNICEF Executive Director



Each 20 November, UNICEF commemorates World Children's Day on the anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 1989, against the backdrop of a changing world order, world leaders came together and made this historic commitment to protect and fulfil the rights of every child. The Convention recognizes that childhood is a special, protected time – and that ensuring that the rights of every child to grow, learn, play and flourish is the cornerstone of a more peaceful, prosperous world for all.

The right to equality and non-discrimination is at the core of the Convention, which clearly states that governments must protect children against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of their families' status, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion and other grounds. Yet as this report shows, such discrimination against children is rife in countries across the world.

Recently, more than 407,000 young people participated in a poll on discrimination through UNICEF's U-Report, a messaging tool that empowers young people around the world to speak up about the issues that matter to them. The majority of respondents – 63 per cent – said that discrimination is common in their schools or communities. Almost half feel discrimination has impacted their lives or that of someone they know in a significant way.

This is not merely a matter of perception. By limiting access to critical services, discrimination and exclusion negatively impact children's health, nutrition, and education, in turn, deepening intergenerational deprivation and poverty. Discrimination is also stressful and insidious. Racial discrimination especially has been categorized as a chronic source of trauma with persistent and long-term impacts on children's well-being and mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed deep inequities and discrimination in societies around the world. The impacts of climate change and conflict continue to mount, fueling new threats to children's rights, children's lives and children's futures.

But we are not powerless to change this. We can – and we must – take action to protect the rights of every child to be free from discrimination and exclusion. The hope, vision and commitment of world leaders in 1989 led to the Convention that has upheld child rights for over 30 years. It is now up to us today to carry that work forward.

This World Children's Day, UNICEF is calling on governments, international partners, the private sector, and communities around the world to stand up for children everywhere – and commit to building a world free from discrimination, for every child.

# 01. Introduction





# Rights denied: The impact of discrimination on children

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**All children everywhere have the right to a full childhood with dignity, respect and worth. The right to a childhood free from discrimination and exclusion is crucial to child well-being and accessing the services needed to survive and thrive.**

**Yet racism and discrimination against children based on their nationality, ethnicity, language, religion and other grounds are rife in countries across the world. Systemic and institutional racism and discrimination prevent children from accessing their rights and puts them at risk of a lifetime of deprivation.**

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This report focuses on discrimination against children based on their ethnicity, language, religion, or nationality along with racial discrimination, based on the United Nations' definitions and categories of minorities.<sup>1</sup> It provides a wide range of examples from a diverse set of countries to show how children from minority or marginalized backgrounds continue to be left behind.

This World Children's Day, UNICEF is calling on partners and supporters to speak out for the equity and inclusion for every child, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. By highlighting the experiences of young people combating discrimination, the impacts of discrimination on children and the deep disparities across sectors and countries, this report sheds light on the many ways discrimination endures and argues for urgent, sustained action for inclusion.

Many of the barriers children face in accessing services, resources and equal opportunities are not simply due to accidents of fate or a lack of resources. They are the result of laws, policies and social practices that leave particular groups of children further behind. Children are dependent on adults to voice their complaints and have little recourse to independently challenge discrimination.

Discrimination fosters exclusion with negative impacts on entire societies. Exclusion and discrimination breed grievance, xenophobia, hate crimes and conflict – including the targeting of ethnic or religious minorities, migrants and other marginalized groups. Children who are discriminated against are restricted from exercising and claiming their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. When they reach adulthood, they are further restricted from economic, political and social institutions. Discrimination has long-term intergenerational consequences as well, as its impacts often perpetuate from one generation to the next.

This is an age of increasing division, with mounting impacts of climate change, and ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that has exposed pre-existing systemic racism and discrimination in children's lives. A true commitment and sustained action to fight discrimination and ensure inclusion for every child must be realized.

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**Discrimination defined:** Any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, [skin] colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation.<sup>2</sup>

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## Why focus on discrimination?

In every country in the world, people belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority groups contribute to their societies. Although minorities enrich countries' diversity, they also face multiple forms of discrimination resulting in marginalization and exclusion. A 1992 United Nations Declaration defines minorities based on four often-overlapping categories: national, ethnic, religious and linguistic.<sup>3</sup>

In the past half century, significant social progress often led by young people has opened opportunity, protected rights, and battled injustice. On average, at least 9 in 10 people in young and older generations agree that treating minorities equally is important.<sup>4</sup> And yet, entrenched and systemic discrimination persists across regions, countries and income groups.

Discrimination is complex and can take place based on multiple grounds. The concept of intersectionality in discrimination recognizes the ways in which social identities overlap and create compounding experiences of discrimination and concurrent forms of oppression based on two or more grounds such as gender identity or expression, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, descent or inherited status, age, class, disability or health status. It recognizes the diversity within groups or communities and the need to appreciate the unique experiences and needs of individuals affected by intersectional discrimination and oppression. This understanding is key to the development of effective policies and programmes that address, redress and prevent marginalization, discrimination and inequality.<sup>5</sup>

For example, an indigenous girl living in a rural community in a low-income country faces a higher risk of exclusion from educational opportunities for multiple reasons: because of her gender, because the urban-rural digital divide makes remote learning impossible for students in her community, because high levels of household poverty require that she work, and because of explicit discrimination due to her indigenous background.<sup>6</sup>

Although national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities often face deeply embedded discrimination across countries, it is important to note that in some societies, majority groups can also be marginalized based on their ethnicity and race and structural discrimination. For example, Black children in South Africa and the majority Hausa ethnic group in Nigeria have the highest under-five mortality rates in their countries.<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, the fight against discrimination and for inclusion is today's central cause that cuts across the urgent issues facing children and young people including climate change, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare deep inequalities and disparities between groups.



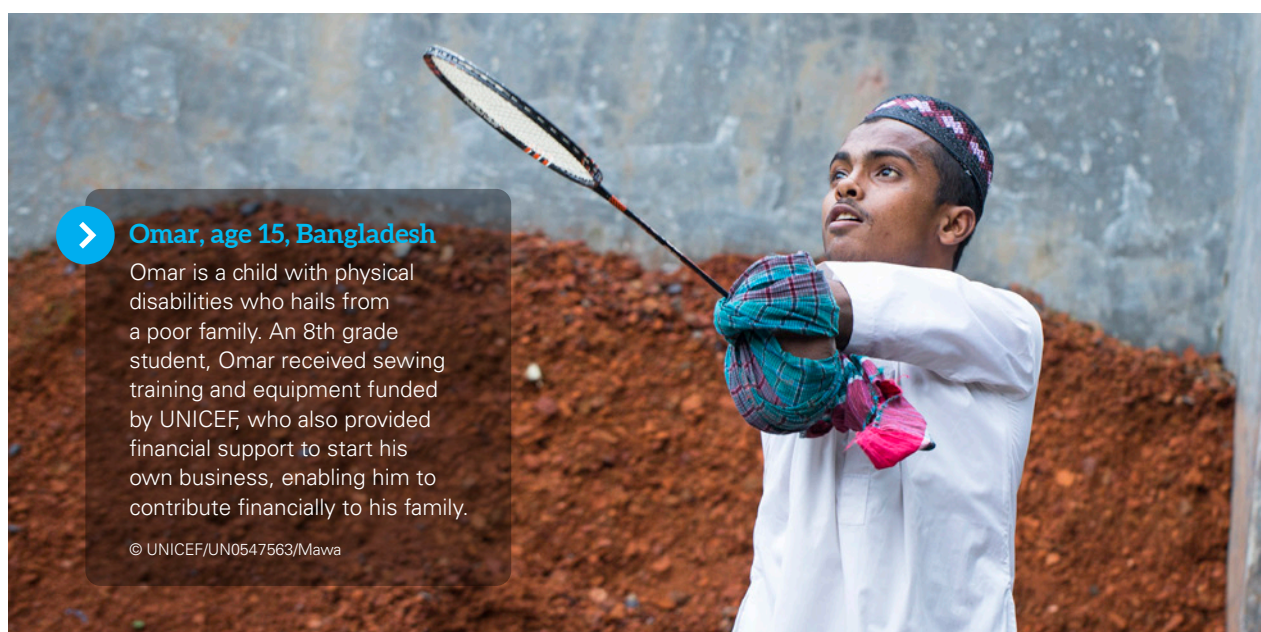
## Non-discrimination is enshrined in international law

Discriminating against children based on their identity – including their nationality, ethnicity, language and religion – is a breach of international human rights law and a violation of their rights. The right for all children to equality and non-discrimination is at the core of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** and its Article 2 which sets out the right to, and the principle of, non-discrimination:

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.

In addition, article 30 of the Convention states, 'In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language'.

Every year, on 20 November, UNICEF celebrates World Children's Day coinciding with the anniversary of the signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely signed treaty in history. With non-discrimination as one of its guiding principles, this occasion reminds us of the unfinished work to ensure the inclusion of every child.





## The expansion of national anti-discriminatory laws

A positive development since 2000 has been the expansion of anti-discrimination laws in countries ranging from South Africa to Moldova to the Plurinational State of Bolivia to the United Kingdom, aligning domestic laws with international legal obligations. The laws are not just a formality. They signify a recognition of the values of dignity, inclusion and diversity and that addressing discrimination is key to creating more equal societies. These laws translate international commitments into concrete actions and legally protected rights, giving tools to those who face discrimination to challenge this treatment and receive justice.

South Africa's Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act in 2000 was one of the earliest attempts to enact comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. In the years since, it has provided the foundation for other similar anti-discrimination laws and best practices.

In Chile, tragedy led to the passage of groundbreaking legislation in 2012 following a vicious attack on 24-year-old Daniel Zamudio by a group of neo-Nazis in a park in Santiago. The law prohibits discrimination on the basis of grounds 'such as race and ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic situation, language, ideology or political opinion, religion or belief, union membership or participation in or lack of union organizations, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status'.

Brazil has been recognized by the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent as 'a regional leader in affirmative action policies in education for Afro-Brazilians and other marginalised groups'. A decree in 2003 led to the creation of the *National*

*Policy for the Promotion of Racial Equality in Brazil*, providing affirmative action on the basis of race and ethnicity. Since 2004, quotas have been in operation in some universities which have enabled greater access to higher education and in 2012, the Quota Law was adopted to establish a minimum quota of 50 per cent access to federal universities. In a 2017 report, Brazil reported that the number of vacancies allocated to Afro-Brazilians in higher education more than doubled from 37,100 in 2013 to 82,800 in 2015.

In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act of 2010 has led authorities to identify and eliminate barriers to educational attainment for children from minority ethnic and religious communities.

The law in the Republic of the Congo goes beyond protecting disadvantaged communities to a proactive approach by committing to implementing educational programmes that are appropriate to the specific needs and lifestyles of indigenous peoples, forbidding any form of instruction or information that disparages the cultural identities, traditions, history or aspirations of indigenous people and special measures to ensure that indigenous children benefit from financial assistance at all levels within the educational system.

While legal frameworks are not a guarantee against discriminatory abuse and practices, they are a key enabling factor. Some countries with strong anti-discrimination laws continue to see discrimination against minorities. In order to tackle discrimination, a multipronged approach is essential, including the implementation or enforcement of existing legislation, to address not only the manifestations of discrimination but also their root causes.



## Extent and manifestations of discrimination

Children in all countries face varying levels of discrimination based on aspects of their background. In low-, middle- and high-income countries alike, long-standing discrimination has pushed certain populations to the fringes of society, marginalizing them and diminishing their rights to equal participation in societies and economies, particularly among indigenous, minority religious or ethnic groups.

In its most extreme form, discrimination can breed armed conflict, displacement and humanitarian crises.

Although some forms of discrimination exist in all countries, national-level data fail to capture the full extent of exclusion for some groups of children. In order to fully understand the scope and breadth of discrimination, we need to go beyond the country level and explore how exclusion and marginalization manifests at local levels. Discrimination can be either institutional (for example, in education, health or criminal justice institutions) and systemic (for example, anti-minority practices by law enforcement and discrimination enacted through laws, policies, social norms and practices).

Young people today tend to view discrimination as a bigger problem than older people. UNICEF's Changing Childhood Project surveyed two cohorts – younger and older generations – in 21 countries in 2021 and found that more young people are more dissatisfied with progress in tackling discrimination. In richer countries, younger people express greater concern about equal treatment and discrimination than older people.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, a 2021 Pew Survey found that in most countries surveyed, a greater percentage of young people under 30 saw discrimination as a problem in their own societies. For example, in Spain, 69 per cent of those under 30 think racial and ethnic discrimination in their own society is a serious problem, compared with 44 per cent of those aged 65 and older.<sup>9</sup>

From protests around gender identity and equality, indigenous rights, same sex marriage and the climate movement that is calling for compensation for damage caused by industrialized countries, today's younger generation is not only aware of, but actively fighting against discrimination and injustice, recognizing our interconnected, global society.



15-year-old Noor Lazim lost her mother, her sister and 11 other family members in a suicide attack in the Old City, Mosul, when she was 13. She survived, but was badly injured, with severe burns sustained to her face and forehead.

© UNICEF/UN0613847/lbarra Sánchez



19-year-old Poyowari Piyáko lives in the indigenous village Apiwtxa in Northern Brazil, which belongs to the Ashaninka people and is located on the banks of the Amônia River near the Peruvian border.

© UNICEF/UN0578498/Cézar



CASE STUDY



Indigenous children

In 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council released *Study on the Rights of the Indigenous Child*, which highlighted the many ways indigenous children are discriminated against and marginalized across countries and societies.

Indigenous children face marginalization and multiple disparities in the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights, frequently due to structural discrimination and colonial legacies. They experience disproportionate rates of preventable childhood diseases and often have unequal access to health care, WASH services and education.

While the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples prohibits the forcible removal of children from indigenous groups and forced assimilation or destruction

of their culture, assimilationist and discriminatory policies have often led to the removal of indigenous children from their communities and subsequent institutionalization.

Even in rich countries, indigenous peoples often live in abhorrent conditions in grossly inadequate housing lacking even basic amenities such as water and toilets. Poor housing conditions, such as mould and damp, have been linked to increased respiratory health problems in indigenous children.

The study also highlights the lack of disaggregated data on indigenous children, which is crucial for identifying gaps and developing appropriate policies to counter the discrimination faced by indigenous children.



## The effects of discrimination on children

What causes discrimination in childhood? A complex web of forces influence the individual child including parents, caregivers, teachers and peers along with broader societal and systemic forces. Entrenched, historical socio-economic power imbalances transmit systemic inequality into individual prejudices. Social identity or group identity explains ethnic and racial conflict, ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination.<sup>10</sup>

Childhood is an important time in developing lifelong beliefs and identity. Our self-concept of race and ethnicity and our role in society come from everyday experiences, conversations and behaviors with caregivers, the stories we are exposed to and peer interactions. Parental attitudes and discriminatory preferences can also be transmitted to younger generations. For example, a 2021 study in Jordan found that the ways in which parents communicated about the refugee crisis were correlated with the degree of their children's discrimination against Syrian refugee children.<sup>11</sup>

Discrimination and exclusion deepen intergenerational deprivation and poverty. Discrimination pushes children from discriminated against groups into inequity through limited access to – or substandard – critical services. As a result, discriminated-against children often suffer from poorer health, nutrition and learning outcomes, higher likelihood of incarceration, higher fertility among adolescent girls and lower employment rates and earnings in adulthood. They fall behind their peers, further widening inequities.

Discrimination and racism are often recognized as forms of violence and toxic stressors that underlie health disparities. They also limit the ability of parents and communities to provide support that promotes resiliency and child development. Exposure to racial discrimination is a chronic source of trauma in the lives of many children

of colour that negatively influences mental and physical outcomes as well as parent and community support and functioning.<sup>12</sup> Several studies have found that discrimination in childhood can lead to a range of negative impacts on health. A study in Australia to understand the impact of exposure to racism on child health among indigenous children found that exposure to racial discrimination led to poor mental health effects (emotional or behavioural difficulties).<sup>13</sup>

The experience of facing discrimination can be highly stressful. Facing daily discrimination during adolescence, whether it is denied access to services or bullying or assault, for example, has been shown to increase cortisol levels – the body's primary stress hormone, which can lead to further health problems including fatigue, headaches, anxiety or depression and increased blood pressure.<sup>14</sup>

Discrimination is insidious. Experiencing racial discrimination has been categorized as a chronic source of trauma for discriminated-against children that not only hurts the mental and physical health of children but also parents and broader community support.<sup>15</sup>

These persistent mental health effects can have long-term ramifications. The accumulation of stress over time may have an aggregate impact on mental health. Internalizing negative stereotypes has been shown to contribute to poor educational outcomes and gaps in educational achievement.<sup>16</sup>

# 02.

## How young people are challenging discrimination



Fatima, 10, Syria

© UNICEF/UN0581829/



## ZAMBIA

## Changing the public's perceptions of refugee children

Children on the move are exposed to increased child rights violations ranging from child labour to child marriage and gender-based violence. They require special attention to ensure their rights are protected. To better understand their situation, address the challenges they face and find solutions, UNICEF Zambia recently organized a Changemaker Workshop in Lusaka. What started as a conversation focused on water, sanitation and hygiene turned into much more.

'Change starts with me' said 15-year-old Songa, who wants to be a changemaker so that he can change the lives of refugees and ensure they get access to basic services.

Twenty children aged 13 to 19 participated in the initiative, which championed issues they cared about while building their advocacy and digital storytelling skills.

In sharing how it feels to be a refugee, participants mentioned that people leave their homes because of conflict or lack of safety, they highlighted the adversities faced when being on the move and while waiting for their request for asylum being processed. Some participants opened up about being an orphan, being raised in child-headed households, the feeling of not belonging, and the difficulties with living without knowing what will happen next. Participants also expressed their eagerness to learn and get an education, requesting books so they could learn on their own or teach others. They highlighted that children on the move are also human beings, children that have rights.

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**'Change starts with me' said 15-year-old Songa, who wants to be a changemaker so that he can change the lives of refugees and ensure they get access to basic services.**

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© Kinny Siakachoma



### > Zambia, 2022

Adolescents participate in a *Children on the Move Change Makers Workshop*, aimed at giving migrant and refugee children an opportunity to participate in a consultative processes on issues that affect them.

© UNICEF/UN0711414/Siakachoma

In the process of learning advocacy and storytelling for positive change, participants identified solutions such as:

- Providing child-friendly information about:
  - Processing of their papers
  - Accessing clean hygiene and sanitation services, including access to menstrual hygiene management products
  - Protecting the environment
  - Reporting security issues safely
- Offering learning opportunities inside the centre
- Creating peer-to-peer activities and adolescent and youth groups to teach each other skills, practice reading and writing and organize sports
- Accessing clean and safe water and sanitation facilities
- Engaging the whole community in efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle

Participants agreed to take actions to trigger the change they want to see. The changemakers workshops continue to enable and strengthen adolescents' right to meaningful participation. UNICEF Zambia is working with partners to find safe spaces for children, adolescents and youth to raise their voice and find solutions to issues that are important to them.

'As a changemaker I want to change how people think of refugee children', said Lydia, 18. 'I want them to know that being a refugee child is not a choice'.



## VIET NAM

**Lo Thi Say: When dreams travel beyond boundaries**


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***'My name is Lo Thi Say and I am from the mountainous province of Lao Cai, a poverty-stricken small village, where girls hardly have the chance to complete their education.'***

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In 2017, I went to Hanoi as a first-year student at the University of Languages and International Studies. It was a life-changing experience. Slowly I started to engage in school activities and after some time, I volunteered for community activities.

In 2019, I became the leader of a Mong students' group working on voluntary projects for our ethnic community. The same year, I organized a free-of-charge English class for the children in my village and the neighborhood. The number of kids coming to the class grew instantly to over 100.

The desire to do more in 2020 led me to the United Nations in Viet Nam. Since then, I have frequently participated in consultations on the voices of ethnic minority youths on the Viet Nam Youth Law hosted by UNICEF and UNESCO in the country. On those occasions, I fight for the rights to be heard, to be empowered in matters that relate to and concern us.

My parents supported our education, and they faced a lot of negative opinions from our neighbours. I was not always there for the criticism, however, as I was constantly in boarding schools for ethnic minority children. In these second homes, I was trained to live independently and with confidence, which gave me the motivation to try harder every day.

My wish for ethnic minority children and young people like me is to live in an inclusive world where dreams do not stop at the gate of our villages but travel as far as they can go. We want to be able to integrate into our society in all areas of life and take ownership of our futures. And it all starts with, I believe, equity in access and opportunities right at those open village gates.'



> Sophia and Honoré (center and right) with their tutor Federica (bottom) and Yodit (left), members of the UNICEF Italy team.

© UNICEF/Maddalena Grechi



## ITALY

## OPS! Campaign counters racial discrimination by targeting racial prejudices and stereotypes

Italy has become a destination and transit country for migrants and refugees since the 1980s. More than 6 million people with a foreign nationality reside in Italy and racism and xenophobia are still an issue. The 'OPS! Campaign' (Your Opinion, against any Prejudice, beyond any Stereotype!), launched by UNICEF in Italy is an awareness campaign to counter racism and xenophobia through content and messages generated 'by young people, for young people'.

As part of the campaign, 12 young migrants, selected through a U-Report art contest, participated in customized skills-building programmes in partnership with private sector enterprises. In addition, 68 secondary school students ages 16–18 were trained to identify, assess and counter their own unconscious racial biases through a web-based app. The participants discussed many challenges that need to be addressed, including:

- The persistence of negative narratives about migrants and refugees on both traditional and social media
- The maintenance of a culture of impunity and invisibility of hate speech online
- The widespread representation of migration as an 'all-encompassing crisis'
- The limited coverage of actions aimed at promoting a positive narrative about migrants and refugees
- Low levels of media and functional literacy among the population

One lesson from the campaign is that online outreach initiatives should be integrated with face-to-face initiatives to maximize engagement when working with adolescent and young migrants and refugees.

The campaign's content, created by the participants with the support of UNICEF, has had more than 1.3 million unique viewers and nearly 745,000 impressions.




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***'The battle against racism is still very long, but historical figures have shown us that even only one individual can make a difference; and we are many, even if every now and then we seem to be alone.'***

**Sophia, 15**

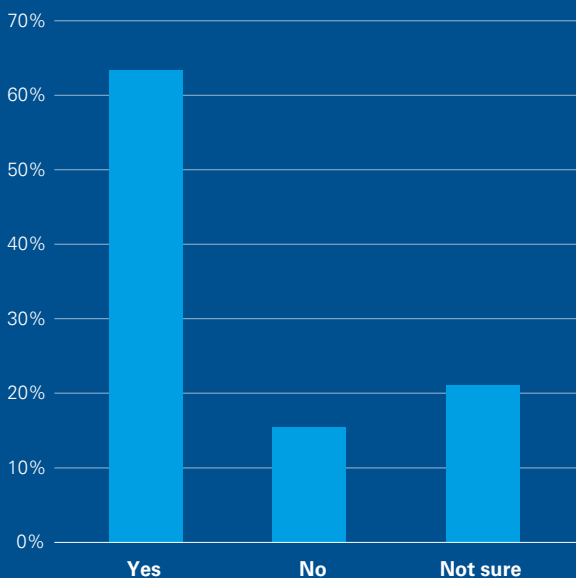
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# U-report finds discrimination is common for young people worldwide

In September-October 2022, over 407,000 young people participated in a UNICEF U-Report poll on discrimination to understand how young people are experiencing and addressing discrimination and exclusion.

## » SOME KEY RESULTS

Is discrimination common in your environment (e.g., schools, community, workplace, etc.)?



**63**  
per cent

of respondents say discrimination is common in their environments such as school, community or workplace



**National origin**  
(20 per cent)



**Age**  
(17 per cent)



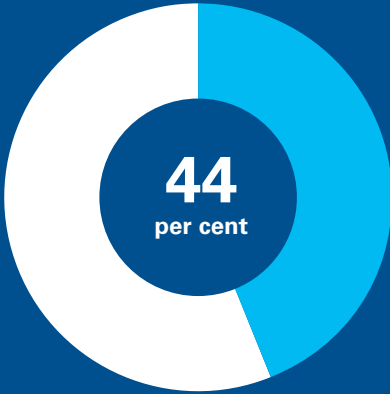
**Gender identity**  
(15 per cent)

**are cited as major reasons for discrimination**

- A higher percentage of younger respondents say **age is the major reason for discrimination**. Older respondents cite national origin and education/income as the main reasons for discrimination.
- A higher proportion of respondents from East Asia and the Pacific and Middle East and North Africa **identify education or income level as the major reason** for discrimination. Respondents from North America cite skin colour as the main reason.
- When faced with discrimination, **more than a third** of respondents worked hard to prove the person who discriminated against them wrong.
- A higher proportion of younger respondents **confronted the person**, whereas a larger share of older respondents **worked hard to prove the person wrong**.

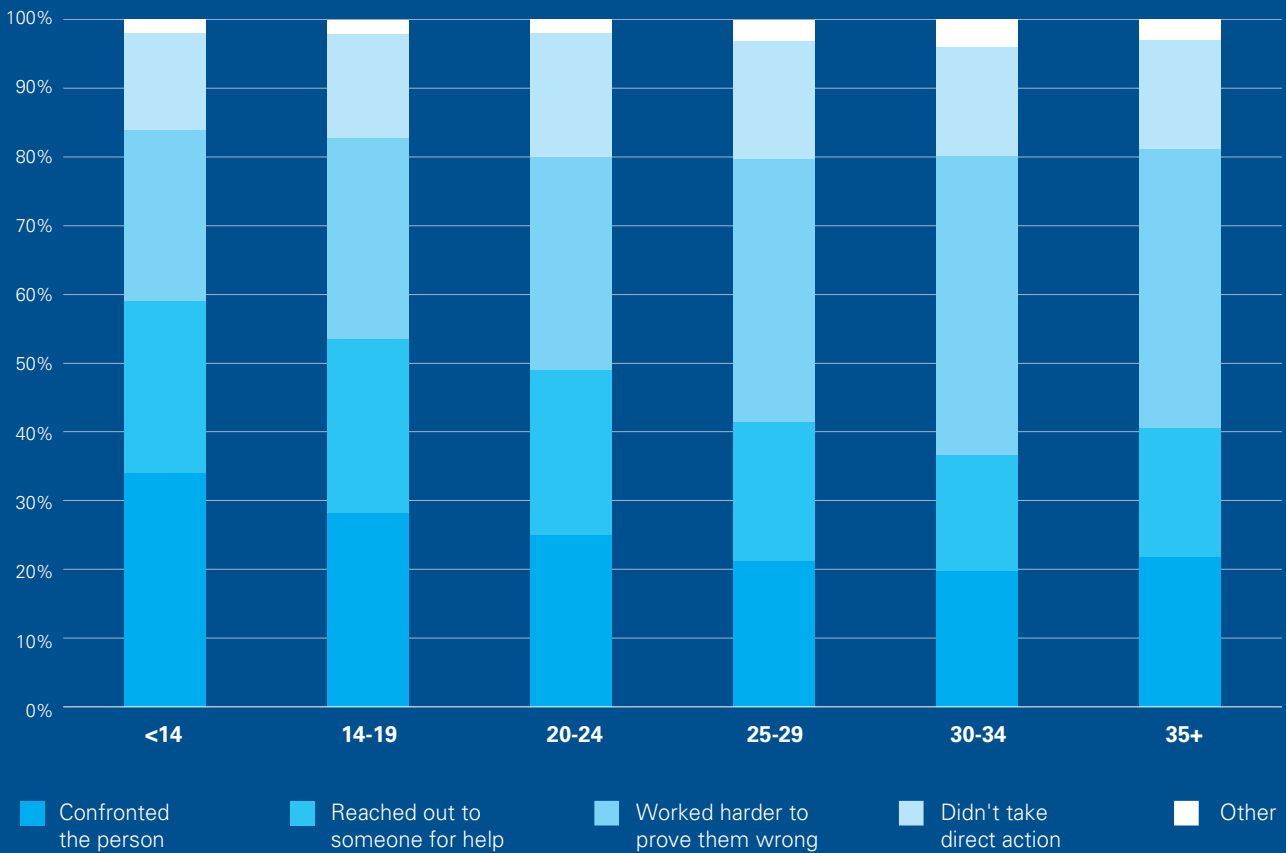


Almost half of the respondents felt **discrimination had impacted their lives** or that of someone they know **in a significant manner**.



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### How did you respond to being discriminated against? (by age)



For the full results, visit <https://ureport.in/opinion/5984/>

# 03.

## Ethnic and racial disparities persist across sectors



### **Papua, Indonesia, 2022**

For indigenous children in rural and remote areas of Indonesia, getting to school is a struggle: almost 50 per cent of children over 5 years old in remote areas of Papua Province have never attended school, compared with 5 per cent in urban areas.

© UNICEF/UN0711537/Clark



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**Significant disparities in access for children persist across countries for a range of critical services including education, birth registration, water and sanitation and immunization. Although a range of evidence points to deep disparities between minority groups, these are not by themselves evidence of discriminatory practices due to race, ethnicity, or religion. There may be multiple reasons why some religious and ethnic groups have lower levels of access to services including place of residence given that minority groups may be more likely to live in remote or rural areas where access to services is more difficult, which is itself a manifestation of discrimination based on where people live. However, they do highlight ongoing entrenched inequality that must be overcome in order to realize the rights of every child.**

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## Education

In many countries, wide disparities persist between the foundational reading skills among children with different ethnic, religious, and language backgrounds. UNICEF analysis of 22 countries reveals that ethno-linguistic and religious minority groups are associated with lower levels of foundational reading skills. On average, the most advantaged group is more than twice as likely to have foundational reading skills compared to the minority group.

For example, in Sierra Leone, 27 per cent of Fullah students ages 7–14 have foundational reading skills compared to just 6 per cent of Koranko students, a minority ethnic group.

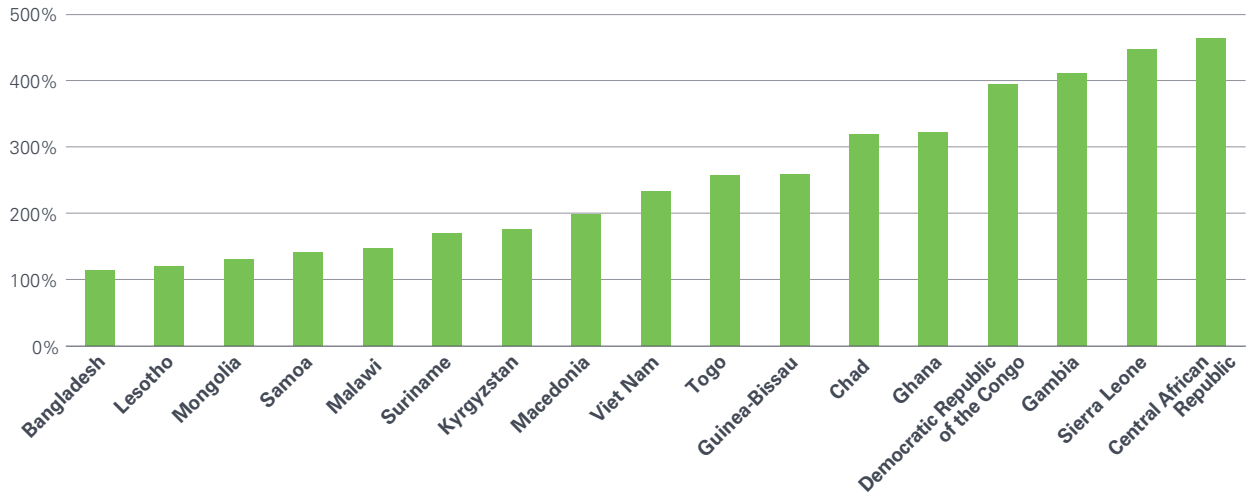
School policies, teachers' expectations, and attitudes and behaviours among peer students often all play a role in entrenching discrimination in education for some children. For example:

Black students are disproportionately affected by school disciplinary policies in the United States. Studies have found that Black students are nearly four times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than white students in grades K-12.<sup>17</sup>

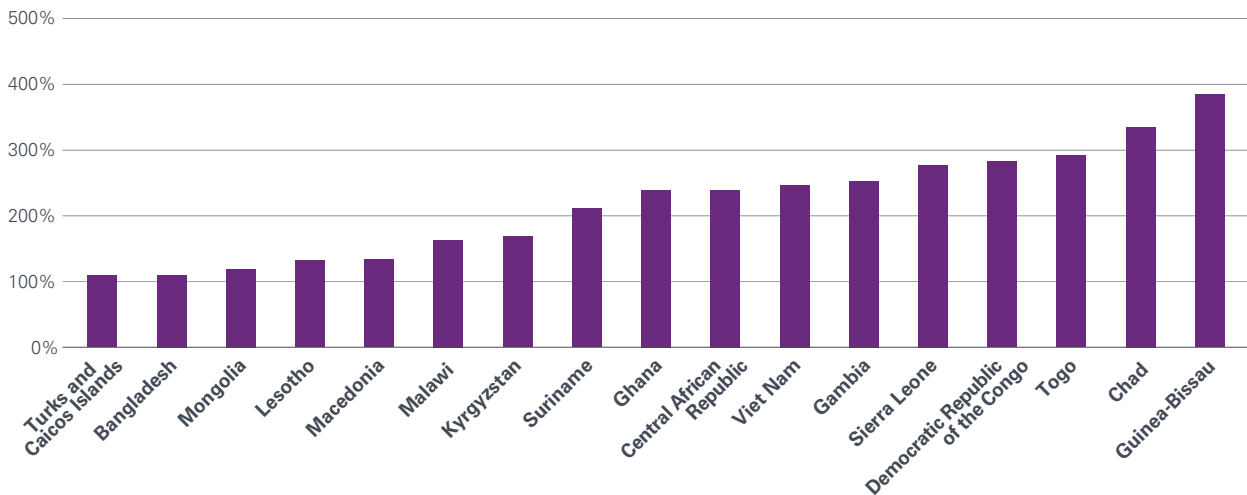
The expectations of teachers are correlated with students' educational outcomes. When teachers expect more from their students, learning outcomes improve and completing higher education is more likely. Yet often, teachers' expectations differ depending on the student's ethnicity, race, economic status or national origin. For example, a study in the United Kingdom found that Eastern European secondary school students experience racism and low expectations from teachers.<sup>18</sup>

The attitudes and behaviors among students can also lead to discrimination. In Australia, children from minority groups reported more racial discrimination than their peers with Australian-born parents. Indigenous children reported the highest risk of bullying victimization and racial discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

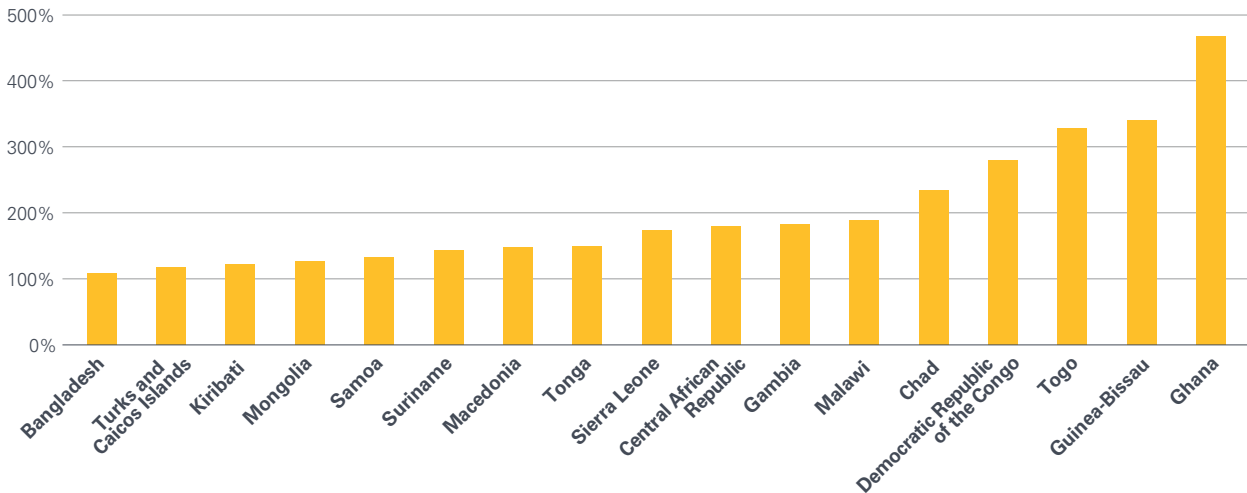
**FIGURE 1** Ratio of the most advantaged ethnic group to the least in foundational reading skills



**FIGURE 2** Ratio of the most advantaged language group to the least in foundational reading skills



**FIGURE 3** Ratio of the most advantaged religion group to the least in foundational reading skills



Source: Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys Round 6 (2017–2022)





In Serbia, the *Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma 2016–2025* aims to reduce poverty and eliminate discrimination against Roma in strategic areas including education.

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## CASE STUDY



## The Roma and education

With approximately 12 million people, the Roma are the largest ethnic minority group in Europe. Discrimination against the Roma has deep historical roots going back centuries. Roma children are among the most marginalized from their earliest moments of life, facing stereotypes, discrimination and exclusion. Roma face higher rates of poverty and lower chances of attending school and participating in the labour market, while confronting intolerable discrimination and a lack of access to social services and support.

Compared to the national average, children in Roma settlements are less likely to attend school, more likely to be enrolled in classes where they are older than their peers and thus face higher risk of dropout, less likely to complete primary and secondary education, and have a lower chance of acquiring foundational skills across education levels, age groups and countries. For example, 6–20 per cent of children of primary school age are out of school in Roma settlements, while the national rates are 1–3 per cent. National out-of-school rates are as low as 0–3 per cent for lower secondary school while out-of-school rates in Roma settlements

are to 8–26 per cent. More than 20 per cent of children in Roma settlements are excluded from school education in Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Travelling and mobility pose another challenge for some Roma children in school enrolment, attending class and learning as expected.

The disparities are even wider among the poorest children during the pre-primary school years – 87 per cent of children in the poorest quintile are out of school at the pre-primary level in Montenegro and North Macedonia, followed by Kosovo at 78 per cent.

The spread of early marriage in Roma communities also reduces opportunities for education, especially for girls. The risk of child marriage is much higher for Roma girls than non-Roma girls due to poverty, gender norms and cultural and social practices. Early marriage also increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy.

Engagement in child labour is associated with an increased likelihood of school exclusion by 11–29 percentage points in Roma settlements in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia.

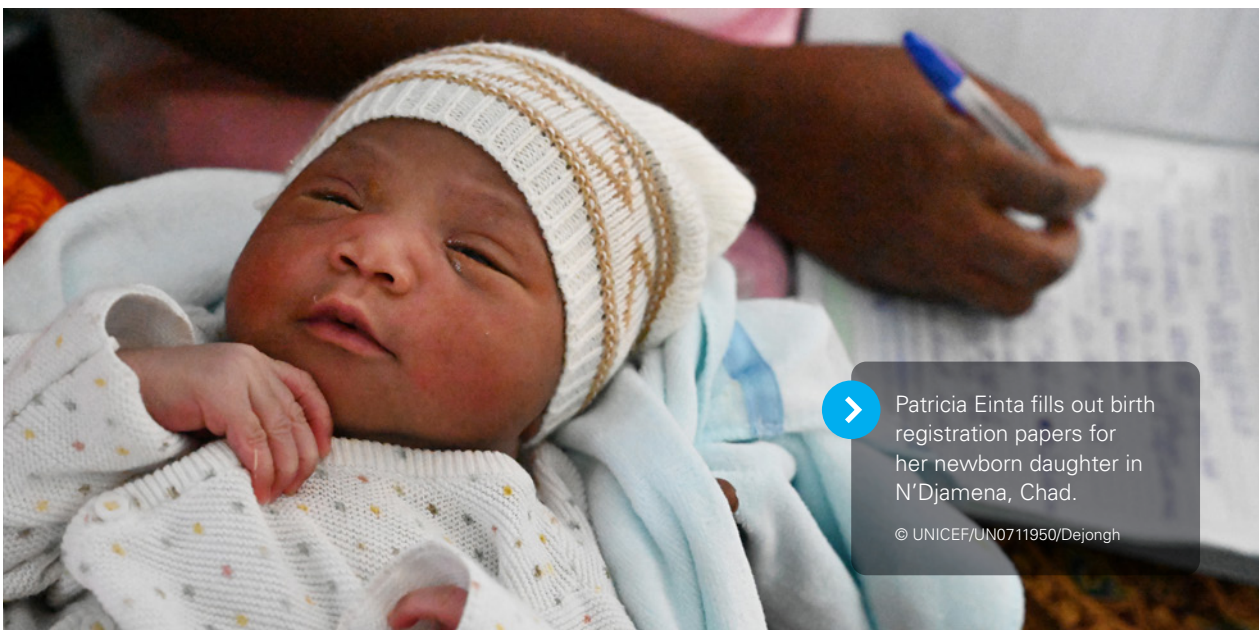
## Birth registration

One of the most important events in a child's life, and an essential process for exercising child rights is birth registration. Without birth registration, children are invisible in official statistics and lack legal identity, depriving them of their basic rights and exposing them to exclusion, exploitation and violence. The benefits of birth registration extend beyond securing a name and nationality. Unregistered children are harder to reach by community health workers, often cannot enrol in schools, and since there is no way to legally prove a child is a juvenile, they can be susceptible to abuse in the justice system.<sup>20</sup>

Religion and ethnicity appear to have some influence over birth registration levels in some countries. In certain cultures and population groups, more emphasis and value may be placed on traditional customs or practices (such as naming ceremonies) than the formal process of birth registration. Ethnicity can affect birth registration levels in other ways since, in some countries, minority groups are more likely to live in remote areas where birth registration services are

either lacking or difficult to access. In Honduras, for example, children with a Miskito background (whose communities continue to largely inhabit traditional areas outside of urban centres) have less access to services and rights partly due to their geographic location and are significantly less likely to have their births registered than children from all other ethnic groups in the country. Similarly in the case of Lao People's Democratic Republic, children living in Mon-Khmer households (which represent an indigenous minority ethnic group in the country) are significantly less likely to be registered than children in households of all other ethnic groups.

Significant disparities in birth registration levels can also be observed among children of different religious groups. In Zimbabwe, for instance, birth registration levels among children whose families are from the minority traditional religious group are significantly less likely to be registered than children whose families are affiliated with other religious groups (with the exception of Zion and Other religions).

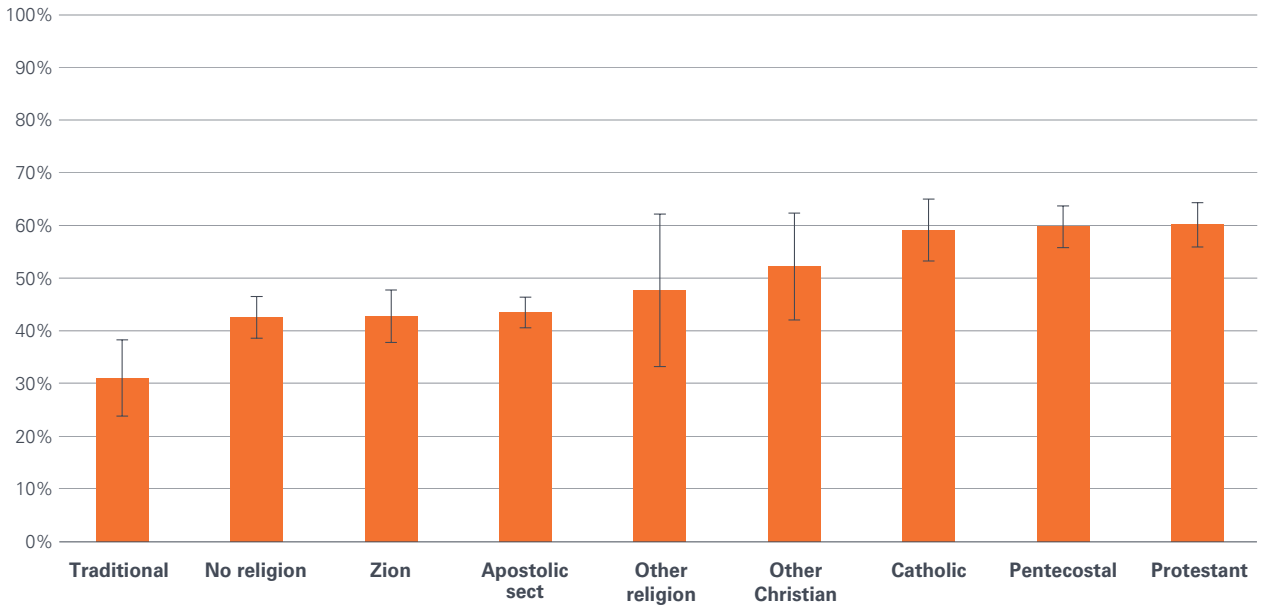


Patricia Einta fills out birth registration papers for her newborn daughter in N'Djamena, Chad.

© UNICEF/UN0711950/Dejongh

**In some countries, levels of birth registration differ among children in households with different ethnic and religious backgrounds**

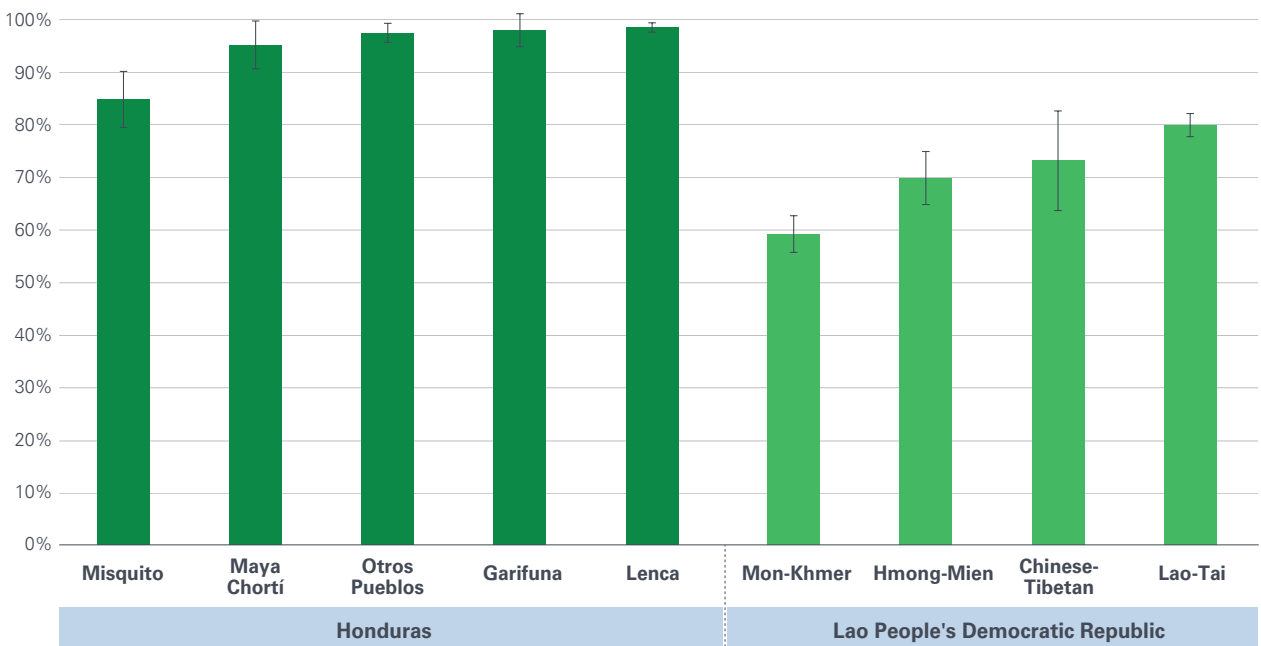
**FIGURE 4** Percentage of children under 5 whose births are registered, by religion of the household head, Zimbabwe



**Notes:** The chart includes error bars to show the 95 per cent confidence interval for the estimate within which the true value for the population can reasonably be assumed to fall. These data are descriptive and not meant to convey causality. There can be multiple reasons for the observed differences between religious groups and the results should not be interpreted as reflecting evidence of discriminatory practices around birth registration in a country.

**Source:** UNICEF global database, 2022, based on MICS 2019.

**FIGURE 5** Percentage of children under 5 whose births are registered, by ethnicity of the household head



**Note:** The chart includes error bars to show the 95 per cent confidence interval for the estimate within which the true value for the population can reasonably be assumed to fall. These data are descriptive and not meant to convey causality. There can be multiple reasons for the observed differences between ethnic groups and the results should not be interpreted as reflecting evidence of discriminatory practices around birth registration in a country.

**Source:** UNICEF global database, 2022, based on MICS 2019 (Honduras) and MICS 2017 (Lao People Democratic Republic).





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## Birth registration among religious and ethnic minorities in Zimbabwe

The main ethnic minority groups in Zimbabwe, the San, Tonga, Shangaan, and Doma communities, are settled in remote and poor areas and according to the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, face several birth registration and documentation challenges:

- High illiteracy and poverty levels make it difficult to access documentation.
- Health facilities in communities where ethnic minorities live are scarce, with no access to birth registration.
- Language barriers often exacerbate access to documentation.
- Civil registration services are not sufficiently decentralized to cover these communities.
- Lack of awareness of the value of birth certificates and identity documents.

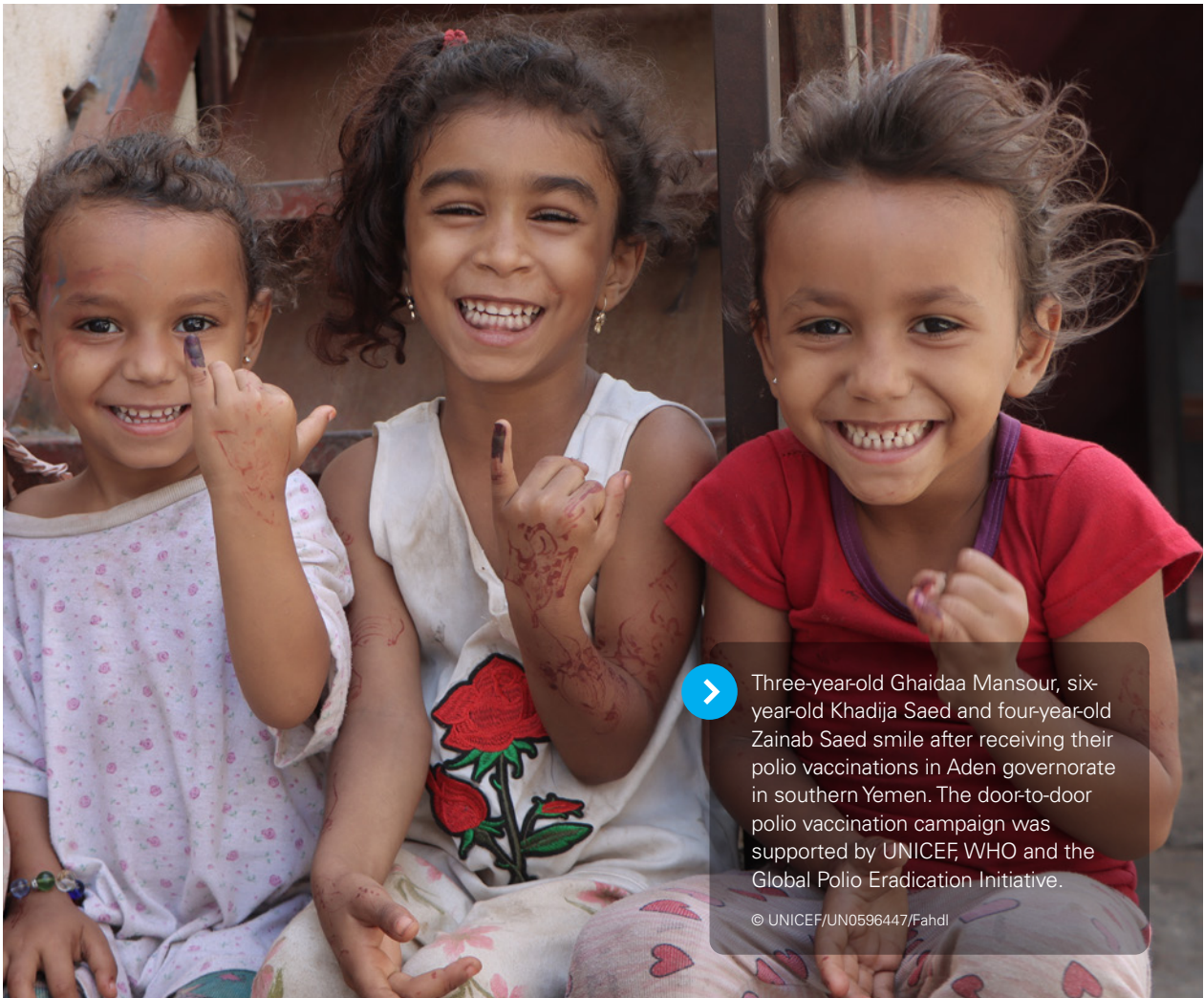
The religious groups presented in Figure 4 are found throughout Zimbabwe, including in the ethnic minority groups highlighted above. Their religious beliefs are a barrier to accessing birth registration and identity documents. Children from an ethnic minority group and whose families are members of the Apostolic sects, face the double barrier of religious restrictions to registration and marginalization by living in communities facing discrimination.

To help address civil registration constraints faced by some of the ethnic minority groups, UNICEF in partnership with the Civil Registration Department, supported targeted mobile registration for the San community in Tsholotsho district in 2021. A total of 8,415 children and adults received services through the mobile civil registration exercise.

## Immunization and child mortality

A 2022 study of 64 countries found that children from minority ethnic groups faced lower immunization rates in over half of the countries. In five countries, there were gaps of 50 percentage points or more. Children in a majority ethnic group had 29 per cent lower prevalence of zero-dose compared to other ethnic groups in the study. The study also found that children belonging to the majority ethnic group in a country tended to have lower zero-dose prevalence compared with the rest of the population. Disparities found with immunization services are similar across other child health services as well.<sup>21</sup>

More than two-thirds of the 36 low- and middle-income countries studied on under-five mortality found a significant difference by ethnic group. The median mortality ratio among all countries was 3.3. Ethnic disparities are persistent. In nearly all countries studied, adjusting for wealth, education and place of residence did not affect gaps in mortality between ethnic groups.<sup>22</sup>



Three-year-old Ghaidaa Mansour, six-year-old Khadija Saed and four-year-old Zainab Saed smile after receiving their polio vaccinations in Aden governorate in southern Yemen. The door-to-door polio vaccination campaign was supported by UNICEF, WHO and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

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### London

A bronze statue of Lady Justice surmounts the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, commonly referred to as the Old Bailey.

© Tony Baggett

## CASE STUDY



## Youth in the United Kingdom justice system

A 2020 UNICEF UK report found that at nearly every level of the criminal justice system in the country, Black, Asian and minority ethnic children (BAME) are overrepresented. Many child-rights' organizations have raised concerns in recent years over the use of spit hoods (a mesh bag placed over the head of a detained person), stop and search, and tasers by police on BAME youth. In England and Wales, Black children are four times more likely be arrested than White children.

The use of tasers by police is disproportionate against minority groups. Black children are most at risk and according to data from 29 police forces in 2017 and 2018, 51 per cent of children who are tasered are BAME. From January to October 2019, BAME children represented 74 per cent of taser use on children.

The report includes 45 recommendations for the Government of the United Kingdom and devolved administrations to consider including:

- Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age
- Stopping the use of inhumane practices on children such as solitary confinement, tasers and spit-hoods
- Committing to ensuring the anonymity of children who come into contact with the law and appear at court
- Investing in research to better understand the true impact of diversion and how it relates to girls, BAME, school-excluded and care-experienced children.



## Water and sanitation

In some countries, disproportionate numbers of indigenous peoples, pastoralists and/or nomadic communities lack access to safe water and sanitation. In Latin America, indigenous groups are significantly disadvantaged. Language, literacy and religion determine access to WASH services.

Migrant workers or asylum-seekers often face difficulties in accessing water and sanitation, as host States do not make such facilities available to them. Migrants in irregular situations – such as those residing in a country without a required permit – are in a persistently vulnerable position, for fear of approaching public authorities.<sup>23</sup>

**In the United States**, race is the strongest predictor of access to water and sanitation. African-American and Latino households are nearly twice as likely to lack complete plumbing than white households, while Native American households are 19 times more likely.<sup>24</sup>

**Bangladesh** has made great, but unequal, progress in recent decades. While access to improved drinking water sources is almost universal for the Bengali population, only 61 per cent of the minority ethnic population has access. There is a 25-percentage point gap between the proportion of households with handwashing facilities with water and soap between Bengali and minority ethnic households and a 35-percentage point gap between Bengali and minority ethnic households for improved sanitation.<sup>25</sup>





Margot, 6, helps with lunch at her family home in Brooklyn, New York.

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## CASE STUDY



## Nutrition in the United States

Childhood obesity is a serious public health concern in the United States, with 19.7 per cent of children and adolescents aged 2 to 19 years (about 14.7 million) affected.<sup>26</sup> Yet childhood obesity is significantly higher among racial and/or ethnic minority children in the United States. Obesity is more prevalent among American Indian and/or Native Alaskan (31.2 per cent), non-Hispanic black (20.8 per cent), and Hispanic (22 per cent) children compared with their white (15.9 per cent) and Asian (12.8 per cent) peers.

A 2018 study concluded that differences in rapid infant weight gain contribute substantially to racial and/or ethnic disparities in obesity during early childhood. African American children had the highest prevalence of risk factors, whereas Asian children had the lowest prevalence.<sup>27</sup>



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*“We can – and we must – take action to protect the rights of every child to be free from discrimination and exclusion. The hope, vision and commitment of world leaders in 1989 led to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that has upheld child rights for over 30 years. It is now up to us today to carry that work forward.”*

*This World Children’s Day, UNICEF is calling on governments, international partners, the private sector, and communities around the world to stand up for children everywhere – and commit to building a world free from discrimination, for every child.”*

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 **Catherine Russell**  
**UNICEF Executive Director**



# Endnotes

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It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.

**WORLD  
CHILDREN'S  
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