

UN-HABITAT

STATE OF THE WORLD'S CITIES 2006/7



Urban Features: Children, Slums' First Casualties

The average age of the developing world's population is 16 years compared to a global average of 28 years.

Nearly half the global population was born less than a quarter century ago. With 1.2 billion people under 15, it can be said that the world belongs to young people. But for the millions of youth in slums, the present as well as the future is grim.

Children who are born in a sprawl of overcrowded shacks or tenement buildings start life on poverty's front line. They die before they are five years old from indoor air pollution and easily preventable disease. For those who survive, hard living conditions thrust them prematurely into adult responsibilities and rob them of the learning processes and joys of childhood. Unlike youngsters living in the higher income urban areas, millions of adolescents in slums go to work instead of school, head a household and are parents in and outside marriage. In Uganda, 34% of young men living in slums head a household compared to 5% of the young men living in non-slum areas. UN-HABITAT argues that even simple improvements in the living conditions of slum families will enable children to reach maturity and give them the head start needed to make something of their lives.

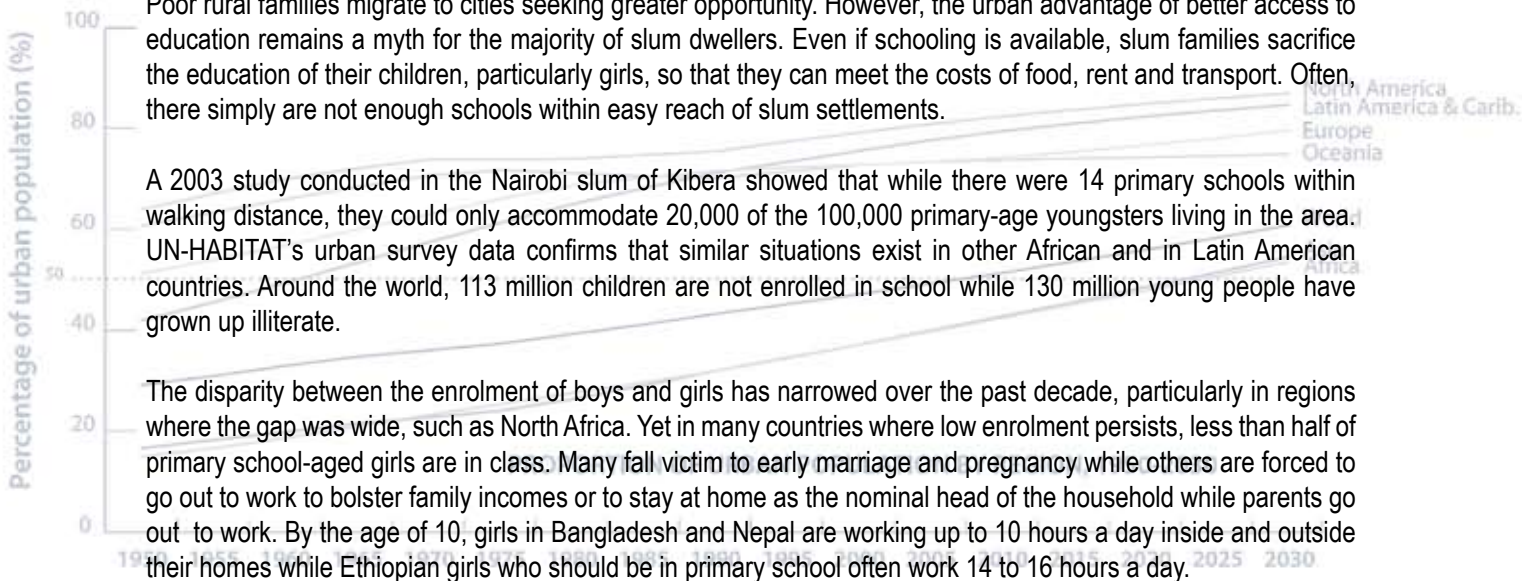
Whether or not a child can survive the first five years of his or her life is a reliable indicator of progress, or its absence, in human and economic development. In countries where a large proportion of the urban landscape is covered with slums the rates of malnutrition and mortality amongst children are high, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This is clearly linked to inequalities in access to shelter, health care, employment and education. In Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Nepal and Niger, 2 out of 5 slum children are malnourished, a ratio that is twenty times higher than that of developed countries.

The five illnesses that cause more than half of the deaths amongst children are pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria, measles and HIV/AIDS. Studies indicate that the prevalence of these killer diseases in urban slums is due to bad living conditions rather than income levels. For instance, municipal supplies of safe drinking water rarely penetrate slums. It is common for pit latrines to be shared by thousands of people. Children from slums have higher rates of diarrhoea than children of the poorest rural families because they are exposed to contaminated water and food. Pneumonia and diarrhoea each kill more than 2 million children in developing countries annually.

Poor rural families migrate to cities seeking greater opportunity. However, the urban advantage of better access to education remains a myth for the majority of slum dwellers. Even if schooling is available, slum families sacrifice the education of their children, particularly girls, so that they can meet the costs of food, rent and transport. Often, there simply are not enough schools within easy reach of slum settlements.

A 2003 study conducted in the Nairobi slum of Kibera showed that while there were 14 primary schools within walking distance, they could only accommodate 20,000 of the 100,000 primary-age youngsters living in the area. UN-HABITAT's urban survey data confirms that similar situations exist in other African and in Latin American countries. Around the world, 113 million children are not enrolled in school while 130 million young people have grown up illiterate.

The disparity between the enrolment of boys and girls has narrowed over the past decade, particularly in regions where the gap was wide, such as North Africa. Yet in many countries where low enrolment persists, less than half of primary school-aged girls are in class. Many fall victim to early marriage and pregnancy while others are forced to go out to work to bolster family incomes or to stay at home as the nominal head of the household while parents go out to work. By the age of 10, girls in Bangladesh and Nepal are working up to 10 hours a day inside and outside their homes while Ethiopian girls who should be in primary school often work 14 to 16 hours a day.

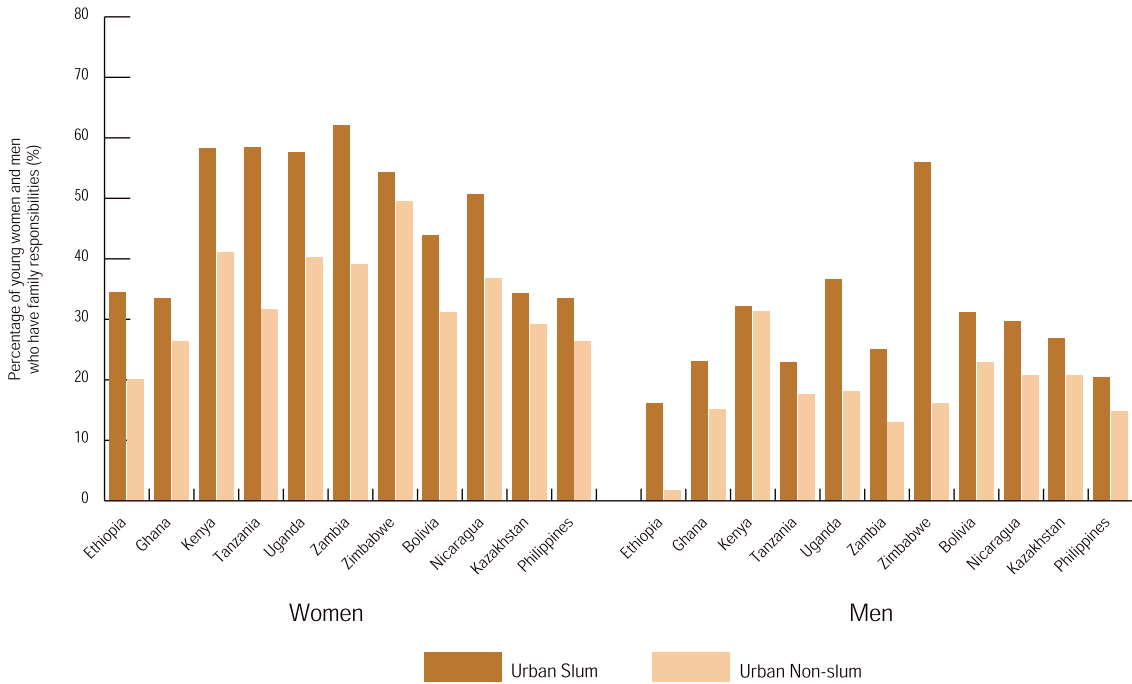


About 85% of all new employment opportunities around the world occur in the informal economy. There is scant data on this sector, but UN-HABITAT's analysis of existing data indicates that the majority of young people working in the urban informal sector live in slum areas. The informal sector provides a short-term solution to urban unemployment, but it is characterised by job insecurity, low wages and dangerous work. As a result, slum and low-income youth remain hostage to perpetual poverty. The data also highlights a gender bias even in the limited opportunities provided by the informal sector. In many developing world societies, young women are burdened with domestic responsibilities at an early age and are unable to leave home to earn any sort of income.

Many countries in the developing world show youth bulges in their demographic profile with children and adolescents comprising at least 40% of the population. In the developing world, home to 85% of youth, unemployment rates are high. This kindles frustration, anger and violence which in turn triggers civil unrest and violent crime. In 2005 the French riots over employment conditions for school leavers underscored the volatility of marginalised young people. Worldwide, the majority of criminal offences are committed by youth between the ages of 12 and 25.

There is another downside to high levels of unemployment amongst youth. The inability of cities to absorb the labour market has a negative impact on economic growth and poverty reduction, a trend that undermines the endeavours of UN member states to achieve the targets set by the Millenium Development Goals.

FIGURE 3.5.4 PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN WHO HAVE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES IN SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: UN-HABITAT 2005, Global Urban Observatory.

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