

# The **Changing** **Childhood** Project

A multigenerational, international  
survey on 21st century childhood



## Changing childhood in a changing world

### About the Changing Childhood Project

We are living through a time of rapid transformation. As the world changes – becoming more digital, more globalized, and more diverse – childhood is changing with it. The Changing Childhood Project, a collaboration of UNICEF and Gallup, was created to explore these shifts, and to better understand what it means to be a child in the 21st century. By surveying young and older people in 21 countries around the world, the Project seeks to answer two questions: ‘What is it like growing up today?’ and ‘How do young people see the world differently?’ To answer them, we wanted to hear from children and young people themselves. Comparing the experiences and views of young people with those of older adults offers a powerful lens through which to view how childhood is changing, and where cleavages between the generations are emerging. The ultimate goal of the project is to centre young people – their experiences and perspectives – in the work of improving life for all children, today and into the future.

### Learn more

This report is available in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic.

We also encourage you to visit our [immersive website](#), which UNICEF commissioned to enable people worldwide, especially children and young people, to engage with the Project’s questions – including those posed in the survey – and to explore some of its key findings. Users who wish to explore further may download the [methodology](#), the [survey](#), the [microdata](#), and the [codebook](#). We would love to hear what you discover from your own analyses. If you have any questions, or would like to tell us how you are using the Project, please email us at [changing-childhood@unicef.org](mailto:changing-childhood@unicef.org).

## Project partners

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential, from early childhood through adolescence – and we never give up.

UNICEF's Office of Global Insight and Policy serves as its internal think tank, assisting the organization in interpreting, and engaging in, a rapidly changing world.

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviours of employees, customers, students, and citizens than any other organization in the world.

## Design

CLEVER°FRANKE is a strategic data design and technology consultancy that crafts custom data-driven graphic design and digital experiences.

## Acknowledgements

The Changing Childhood Project survey was conducted in 21 countries. Staff from UNICEF Country Offices and National Committees in these countries contributed to the conception, design, execution, and funding of the project. In addition, colleagues from a range of regional offices and headquarters divisions gave valuable input throughout the project. Two senior advisors, Prof. Ariel Kalil of the University of Chicago and Prof. Marit Skivenes of the University of Bergen, provided background analyses that helped shape the project, and Dory Li undertook valuable data analyses. We are also grateful to the thousands of people, young and old, who took the time to respond to this survey and share their opinions.

Quotes from a subset of survey participants represent the personal views of the individuals and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United Nations Children's Fund.

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## Methodology and terminology

The Changing Childhood Project interviewed more than 21,000 people by telephone in 21 countries. All samples are probability-based and nationally representative of two distinct populations in each country: people aged 15–24 and people aged 40 and older. The coverage area is the entire country, including rural areas, and the sampling frame represents the entire civilian, non-institutionalized population within each age cohort with access to a telephone. A subset of survey respondents in the United States, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Bangladesh, and Kenya who agreed to be re-contacted for additional research participated in in-depth, qualitative interviews in which they shared their opinions and experiences about topical issues the world is facing.

Given the size of the country samples, and the division of the sample into two age cohorts, most of the results presented in this report have a margin of error of approximately  $\pm 4$  percentage points at the 95 per cent confidence level. Margins of error will be larger for smaller subgroups within a population.

The results and analysis presented in this report – including Figures 2 through 19 – draw directly from the UNICEF-Gallup survey data. All references to an overall figure or average – e.g., “on average”, “an average of”, or “21-country median” – refer to the survey results for a given question for the median country across the 21 surveyed. Similarly, the “average” for a given country income group is derived from poll results from the median country in that group of countries. Further information on interpreting the results can be found in the [methodology section](#).

## Summary of key findings

### Overview

The UNICEF-Gallup Changing Childhood survey is the first international poll asking different generations for their views on childhood. Comparing the experiences and views of young people with those of older adults offers a powerful lens through which to understand how childhood is changing in a world of rapid transformation.

The survey was conducted between January and June 2021, in 21 countries across the globe. In each country, we surveyed approximately 1,000 people – 1,500 in India – providing a representative sample of two age cohorts: young people (aged 15–24) and those aged 40+. The results of the cross-generational survey are showcased in this report as well as in an immersive website at [changingchildhood.unicef.org](https://changingchildhood.unicef.org).

Our survey reveals a vast gap between the generations in terms of how the young identify with the world around them, their outlook, and in some areas, their values. In the face of unfolding crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, and despite rising inequality and struggles with mental health, young people are more likely to believe that the world – and childhood itself – is getting better with each generation.

Born into a more digital, interconnected, and diverse reality, young people see a world that is largely a better place for children than the one their parents grew up in – a safer and more abundant world that offers children better education, opportunities, and hope for the future. At the same time, young people are not complacent. They report greater struggles with mental health. Amid a sea of mis- and disinformation, they report low levels of trust in the information sources they use most. In their eyes, the world needs significant action on climate change and equality for LGBTQ+ people – and decision-makers need to listen to children's voices.

**Our survey reveals a vast gap between the generations in terms of how the young identify with the world around them, their outlook, and in some areas, their values.**

In many cases, generational cleavages cut across country income levels, gender, and other factors. But overall, the generation gap is stronger in wealthier countries than in developing countries. And young women and men are overall more likely to be aligned with each other than males and females within the older age group.

### Digital divides

More than any other issue the survey covers, the deepest divide between young and old relates to digital technology. A generational gap exists not only in the use of digital technologies, but also in perspectives about its benefits for, and risks to, children.

Young people are far more likely than those over 40 years old to be online every day. Overall, a median of 77 per cent of young people across 21 countries surveyed say they use the internet daily, versus just 52 per cent of older people. In almost all countries surveyed, young people are substantially more likely than older people to use the internet this often.

Young people rely far more on online platforms than on traditional sources for news and information. Today's 15-to-24-year-olds most often turn to online sources – primarily social media – to stay informed about current events. By contrast, people aged 40 and older are more likely to turn to television to stay up to date on current events.

Compared with any other single survey item, reliance on social media marks the greatest divide between generations. A 28 percentage-point gap separates the cohorts on this question, with young people accessing those platforms to stay informed far more often (45 per cent on average) than older people (17 per cent).

Young internet users express less concern about privacy online than older internet users. On average, 25 per cent of young internet users say they are very concerned that their personal information could be collected and shared when they are online, compared with 36 per cent of older internet users.

Compared with any other single survey item, reliance on social media marks the greatest divide between generations. A 28 percentage-point gap separates the cohorts on this question.

Overall, young people also see greater benefits, and fewer risks, from children's online lives compared with older generations

### Progress for children

Beyond digital technology, young people are more likely than older generations to recognize other important markers of progress in children's lives.

Large majorities of young people believe that childhood has improved in important ways. Young people in at least 15 of 21 countries surveyed are more likely than older people to say conditions have improved in terms of physical safety, quality of education and health care, opportunities to play, and access to clean water and healthy food.

While young people point to improvements in most aspects of childhood, enthusiasm is muted in one area: mental well-being. Less than half (48 per cent on average) of young people say mental well-being is better for children now than it was for their parents growing up. These results are largely driven by sentiment in high-income countries, where both young and older people see mental well-being as worse for children today.

Both young (59 per cent on average) and older people (56 per cent on average) agree that children today face greater pressure to succeed than they did when their parents were growing up.

Today's 15- to 24-year-olds are more likely to self-report often feeling anxiety and depression compared with adults in the 40 and older age group. On average, more than one in three (36 per cent) young people across the 21 countries say they often feel anxious, worried, or nervous, compared with 30 per cent of older people. One in five young people (19 per cent) on average say they often feel depressed or have little interest in doing things, versus 15 per cent of older people.

**36 per cent of young people across the 21 countries say they often feel anxious, worried, or nervous, compared with 30 per cent of older people.**

## Agency

The survey found strong support across generations for children's agency and empowerment in many realms of life. An average of 58 per cent of 15- to 24-year-olds and 53 per cent of those aged 40 and older share the view that it is very important for political leaders in their countries to listen to children's voices when making decisions.

The survey's findings reveal a desire for children in developing countries to hold off on pursuing work until close to adulthood. The reported ideal age for when a person should be able to start paid work skews older than the International Labour Organization's minimum age, with the bulk of young and older people in low- and middle-income countries seeing the ideal as at least 17 years of age or older.

In most developing countries surveyed<sup>01</sup> – and in several developed ones – young and old alike would prefer an older legal marriage age for both males and females than the prevailing one.

In certain countries, a significant proportion of both young and older people propose a minimum voting age below the current legal age in their country. This preference is especially evident in high-income countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom.

## World views

Young people are more optimistic about the future of the world than their older counterparts. Across all 21 countries surveyed, a median of 57 per cent of young people say the world is becoming a better place with each new generation, versus 39 per cent of older people.

Today's 15- to 24-year-olds tend to think that when children in their countries grow up, they will be better off economically than their parents are now. On average, 54 per cent of young people across all countries surveyed say today's children will be better off, versus 45 per cent of older people.

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01 Refers to countries with an established legal minimum marriage age.

But in high-income countries, there is little faith in economic progress. Young people there are twice as likely to think children will be worse off than their parents (59 per cent on average) as they are to think they will be better off (31 per cent on average).

Young people are far more likely than members of older generations to embrace global citizenship. Young people are almost twice as likely as older people to say they identify most with being part of the world, as opposed to feeling primarily part of their local community or country. A one-year increase in age is associated, on average, with about a 1 per cent lower likelihood in identifying as a global citizen.

Most young people, and older people in nearly every country, agree that they would be safer from threats like COVID-19 if their governments, worked in coordination with other countries. Young people in most of the 21 countries surveyed are more likely than older people to support this cooperation.

Today's young people are generally more trusting than older people of institutions as sources of information, including national governments, doctors, scientists, health care workers, and international news media. One key exception is religious institutions. Among all sources the survey cites, young people express the greatest trust in information from doctors and health care workers. Young people do not report high levels of trust in social media as an information source; an average of just 17 per cent say they trust information on these platforms "a lot".

**Young people are almost twice as likely as older people to say they identify most with being part of the world, as opposed to feeling primarily part of their local community or country.**

## Climate action

Climate change awareness among young and older people is far from complete. On average, only 80 per cent of young people say they have heard of climate change. When young people who have heard of climate change were asked to identify its correct definition, only 56 per cent chose correctly.

Among those who have an awareness and understanding of climate change, majorities of young and old are aligned in the belief that it is possible to mitigate it, and that governments must take action to do so.

## Equity matters

Young and older generations agree about the importance of treating women and members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities equally. On average, at least 80 per cent say it is somewhat or very important that members of these groups are treated this way.

Young people are more likely to say that it is important that members of the LGBTQ+ community be treated equally. On average, 71 per cent of young people say it is somewhat or very important to treat LGBTQ+ people equally, versus 57 per cent older people.

Overall, young women express greater concern for equality than young men. For example, young women (55 per cent on average) are more likely than young men (45 per cent) to say that it is “very important” that members of the LGBTQ+ community be treated equally. Of all items in the poll, this question reveals the largest gap between young women and young men.

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# Introduction

## Introduction

There is an emerging narrative about a growing intergenerational divide worldwide. Youth-led protests around climate change, racial justice and corruption, diverging electoral preferences, and young people's heavier reliance on the internet have helped reinforce this storyline. In the media and in popular culture, the young are often portrayed as impatient, militant, outspoken, and even entitled, in contrast to more sober temperaments among older people.

The concept of intergenerational tension is not new. What may be new, however, is the speed with which our world is changing – and with it, childhood. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic upended the world nearly two years ago, far-reaching change was upon us. Over the past quarter century, our world has transformed, becoming more digital, more globalized, and more exposed to diversity. These changes form the backdrop for children's formative years, shaping their experiences and attitudes. Exploring what is, and is not, dividing old and young in this fast-evolving context can help shed light on exactly how childhood is changing, and its consequences.

It is this line of inquiry that animates the Changing Childhood Project. By probing the purported generational divide – How big is it? Where and on what issues do we see the biggest gaps? – we set out to improve our understanding about how childhood is changing. The goal of the project is to centre young people – their experiences and perspectives – in the work of improving life for all children, today and into the future.

Our survey, a partnership between UNICEF and Gallup, is the first international poll asking multiple generations of people for their views on what it is like to be a child today and how they see the world. The results of the cross-generational survey of young and older people in 21 countries are showcased in this report, as well as in an immersive microsite: [changingchildhood.unicef.org](https://changingchildhood.unicef.org).

Exploring what is, and is not, dividing old and young in this fast-evolving context can help shed light on exactly how childhood is changing, and its consequences.

Explore the findings and interact with the data at [changingchildhood.unicef.org](https://changingchildhood.unicef.org)

The UNICEF–Gallup survey was conducted between January and June 2021 in 21 countries across the globe. In each country, we surveyed approximately 1,000 people – 1,500 in India – providing a representative sample of two age cohorts: young people (aged 15–24, in line with the United Nations’ definition of youth) and those aged 40+. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, all respondents were reached by telephone.

The survey instrument was developed with the help of a range of experts and included questions that had been tested in other surveys as well as new questions specially developed for the Changing Childhood Project. The survey questions are available [here](#), and more information about the methodology can be found [here](#).

Survey questions and more information about the methodology can be found [here](#).

We also conducted qualitative research that posed open-ended questions across five of the survey countries: Argentina, Bangladesh, Kenya, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>02</sup> Six 30-minute interviews were conducted in each of these countries via telephone or video conference with a mix of survey respondents aged 15–24 and 40+.

The countries surveyed represent a diverse group by region and income level – from less than \$1,000<sup>03</sup> per capita annual income in Mali to more than \$60,000 in the United States.<sup>04</sup> They also vary in the size of their young populations; in Mali, for example, the vast majority of the population is under age 24, while the majority in Japan is 40+.

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02 To protect the identity of respondents, references include first names only.

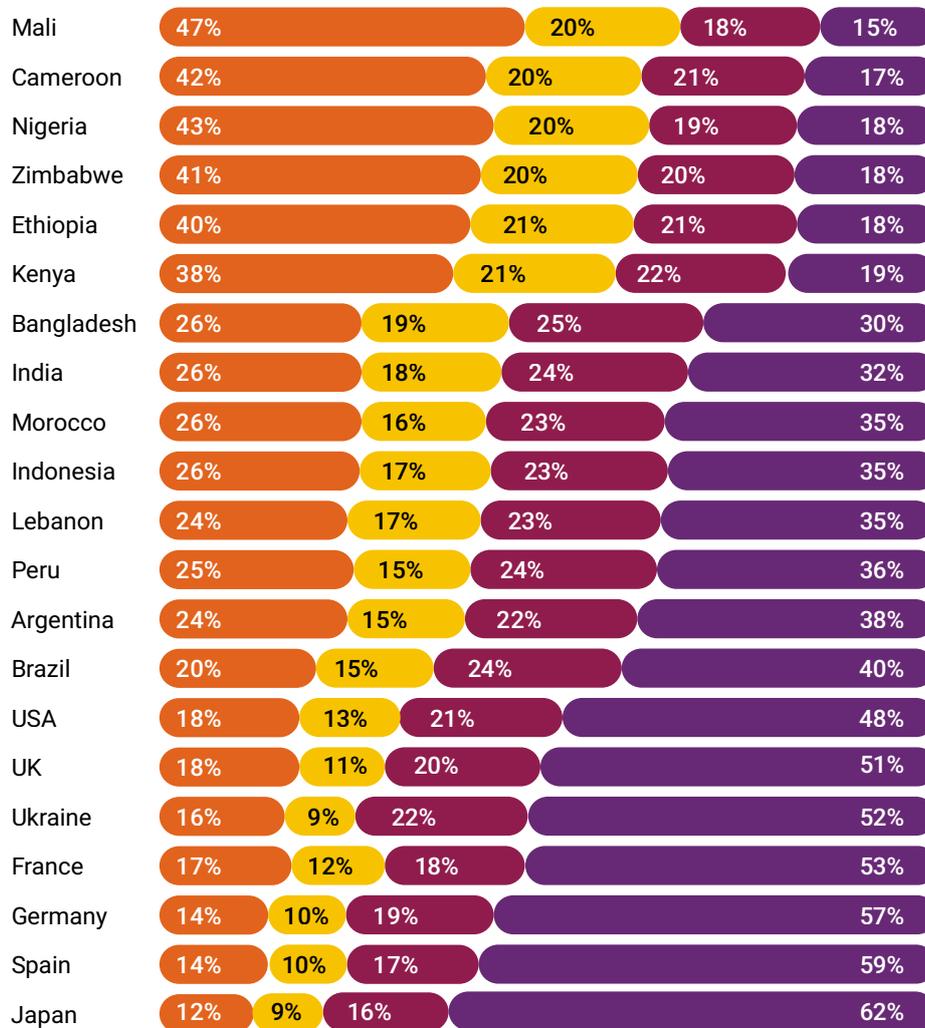
03 All amounts shown are in United States dollars.

04 The survey was carried out in the following countries: Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe (low- and lower middle income); Argentina, Brazil, Lebanon, and Peru (upper-middle income); France, Germany, Japan, Spain, United Kingdom, and the United States (high income).

### FIGURE 1: OLD AND YOUNG COUNTRIES

Age distribution of population among 21 countries surveyed, 2021 source: UN Population Division

- 0-14 YEAR-OLDS
- 15-24 YEAR-OLDS
- 25-39 YEAR-OLDS
- 40+ YEAR-OLDS



#### A quarter-century of rapid global change

The most noticeable changes to life over the past several decades result from the spread of digital technology. At a speed far exceeding previous technologies, mobile phones and online access have spread around the world. From the launch of Google search (1997) to Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), the first iPhone (2007), WhatsApp (2009), Instagram (2010), and TikTok (2016), the digital landscape has transformed within an extremely compressed timeframe.

The diffusion of digital technology has meant unprecedented access to information, as well as human interactions, in real time and without geographical boundaries.

The pace of these developments cannot be overstated. It took 100 years for steamship technology to spread from rich to poor nations; today, technology diffuses almost instantly.<sup>05</sup> In the developing world, the proliferation of digital technology far surpasses growth in access to basic services.<sup>06</sup> In 1996, 1 per cent of the world's population had access to the web. By 2017, that number was 49 per cent and growing.

Notwithstanding the digital divide, today's 15- to 24-year-olds have only ever known a connected world. Born between 1997 and 2006, these young people live in a world that is profoundly shaped by the internet and for the youngest among them, social media has always existed. For many in this generation, there is no distinction between online and offline life.

As active digital users, many young people have been more exposed to different ideas and cultures throughout their lives than those of any generation before them, shaping how they see their place in the world.

Other connections accelerated in the same period. The 1990s marked the start of globalization's second wave,<sup>07</sup> reflecting the sharp increase in the growth of trade and the spread of foreign capital, made possible by the opening of emerging markets, and symbolized by China's admittance to the World Trade Organization in 2001. The rapid ascent of emerging economies and rising flow of capital, goods, and people across borders linked people from distant places.

**In the developing world, the proliferation of digital technology far surpasses growth in access to basic services.**

**For many in this generation, there is no distinction between online and offline life.**

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05 Comin, D., '[The Evolution of Technology Diffusion and the Great Divergence](#)', Paper presented at Brookings Blum Roundtable, Session III: Leap-Frogging Technologies, Aspen, Colorado, 8 August 2014.

06 World Bank, '[World Development Report 2016: Digital dividends](#)', The World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2016.

07 Chandy, L., and B. Seidel, '[Is Globalization's Second Wave About to Break?](#)', The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., October 2016.

These forces, combined with the internet, have perhaps made real what the media theorist Marshall McLuhan prophesized as “the global village”.

Arguably the greatest embodiment of a global village is the modern city. Since 2007, more than half the world’s population has lived in urban areas – a share that continues to rise. In other words, most of the world has lived in cities or towns for most of the lives of children and young people. These urban environments serve not just as a place to make a living for contemporary workers, but also as playgrounds for their children. Their diversity and density shape and intensify the interactions to which younger generations are exposed.

Amid these shifts, we have witnessed important social progress around much of the world, including an expansion of gay rights<sup>08</sup> and a sharp narrowing of the gaps in the average years of schooling between boys and girls in many countries.<sup>09</sup> While still low, the number of women heads of state or government has reached an all-time high.<sup>10</sup> In 1996, when the first of our young cohort were born, only 33 countries had ever had a female head of state; that number now stands at 88.

In 1996, when the first of our young cohort were born, only 33 countries had ever had a female head of state; that number now stands at 88.

### Changing world, changing childhood

Our survey reveals a dramatic distance between the generations in terms of how the young identify with the world around them, their outlook, and in some areas, their values. In many cases, these generational cleavages cut across country income levels, gender, and other factors—though we find evidence of the greatest divide within high-income countries, and a smaller divide in most low- and middle-income countries.

08 Cameron, D., and R. Johnson, ‘[How Gay Rights Have Spread Around the World Over the Last 224 Years](#)’, The Washington Post, 26 June 2015.

09 Our World in Data, ‘[Gender Ratios for Mean Years of Schooling, 1870-2010](#)’, based on data drawn from Lee and Lee, ‘[Human Capital in the Long Run](#)’, Journal of Development Economics, May 2016.

10 Inter-Parliamentary Union, ‘[Women in Politics: 2021](#)’, 10 March 2021.

The results reveal that where one stands on the generational continuum has a profound role in shaping one's perspectives of childhood and the world. Rapid change in our world is unquestionably shaping the experiences and worldviews of children today.

Overall, the UNICEF-Gallup survey shows that young people embody the spirit of the 21st century more readily than their older counterparts. Young people are more active and savvy users of digital technology than members of their parents' generation. They are quicker to see its benefits and more at ease with its risks, even as they too voice serious concerns. Brought up in a globalized world, they identify less as members of their local communities and more as global citizens. And they are not just accepting of changed norms; they also demand greater tolerance and pluralism, including in the realm of LGBTQ+ rights. The survey results reflect the reality that members of this group have only ever known a highly digitized, interconnected, and more pluralistic world.

The UNICEF-Gallup survey describes a young generation that not only embraces many aspects of modernity but also relishes the pace of change in key areas. Looking back, the young are more likely to recognize the progress that has been made in different dimensions of life, as living standards across the globe have risen and access to services has expanded. Looking forward, the young are more confident that the world is becoming a better place. These results may seem surprising because, while there has been progress, children will inherit a world facing significant headwinds. From the climate crisis to rising inequality and the devastation wrought by COVID-19, one might think the rising generation would despair, or at least have a dimmer outlook than their older counterparts.

But acknowledging improved living standards and markers of social progress does not mean youth are carefree or complacent. While there is widespread optimism that the young generation will be better off than their parents for example, that does not hold true for young people in rich countries where growth in living standards has stalled.

**While there is widespread optimism that the young generation will be better off than their parents for example, that does not hold true for young people in rich countries.**

Further, enthusiasm for digital technologies is not as strong among young women, who are more circumspect about its benefits and quicker to see its risks, our survey found. Nor does young people's general embrace of digital technology reflect blind trust in online content; the young are more discerning than their parents when it comes to consuming it. Young people feel a growing pressure to succeed in childhood and experience worse mental health, the survey reveals. And more young people are dissatisfied with progress in tackling discrimination.

Yet despite clear generational gaps across a range of issues, we see little evidence of a divide in critical areas where we most expected to find them. Climate change is one such realm. Media narratives notwithstanding, young and older generations are aligned in the strength of their responses on questions of whether humans can reverse its worst effects, and whether governments should take bold action to do so. In terms of what factors wholly contribute to an individual's success in life, old and young agree that it is hard work and education rather than factors outside their control, like family wealth and luck, that matter most.

The remainder of the report is organized as follows. Part One examines what it is like growing up today, and how generations' views on contemporary childhood compare. We look at use of digital technology and views about its risks and benefits; progress on various dimensions of childhood; mental health; and issues around children's power and agency. In Part Two, we explore how young people see the world differently from their older counterparts. We examine opinions about the future outlook, economically and more broadly, at a country and global level. We also look at views on global citizenship and cooperation; the climate crisis; trust in institutions; and social equity. Part Three describes the key takeaways about the generation divide. In a final section we ask what the survey's findings mean for childhood in the 21st century, and how best to improve the lives of all children today and into the future.

**Yet despite clear generational gaps across a range of issues, we see little evidence of a divide in critical areas where we most expected to find them. Climate change is one such realm.**

PART ONE

# What's it like growing up today? Perspectives on childhood



## What is it like growing up today? Perspectives on childhood

**Young people mostly inhabit a digital world. Older generations, less so.**

More than any other issue the survey covers, the deepest divide between young and old relates to digital technology. A generational gap exists not only in the use of digital technologies, but also in perspectives about its benefits for, and risks to, children.

In terms of usage, the generational gap is yawning, and young people are far more likely than those over 40 years old to be online every day.

Across 21 countries surveyed, a median of 77 per cent of young people say they use the internet daily versus just 52 per cent of older people.

In almost all countries surveyed, young people are substantially more likely than older people to use the internet this often

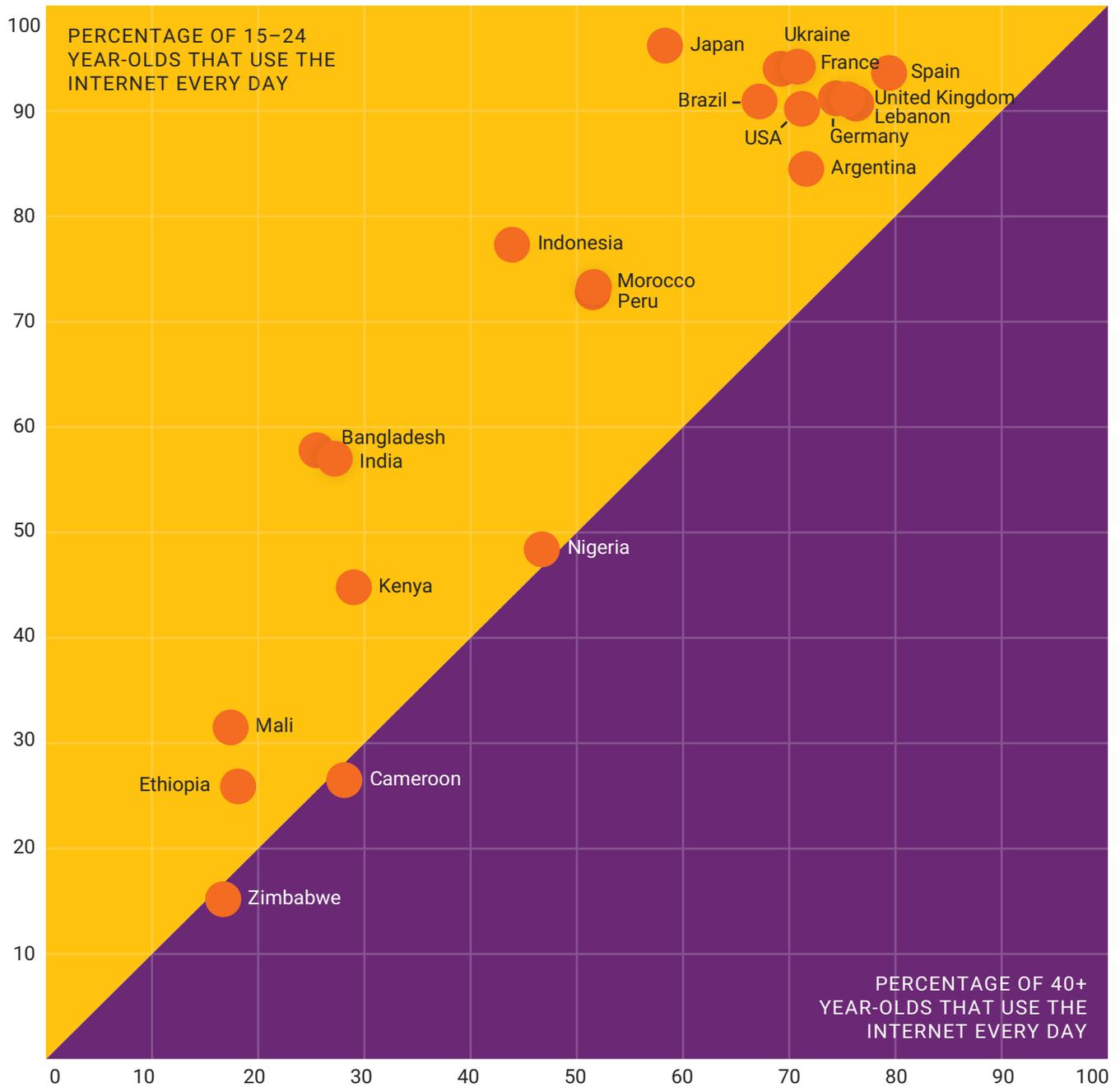
This is not the digital divide we hear about the most. Most commentary about the digital divide focuses on the difference between digital access and use between rich and poor, whether within countries or across countries. We see these divides too, among young people. Compared to young people in low- and middle-income countries, those in high-income countries are twice as likely to use the internet every day, our survey found. Fewer than one in two young people in low- and lower-middle-income countries are regularly online. Furthermore, an average of 90 per cent of young people who say they are living comfortably report having been online in the past month, versus just 55 per cent of young people on average who find it difficult or very difficult to get by financially – a 35 percentage-point gap.

**More than any other issue the survey covers, the deepest divide between young and old relates to digital technology.**

## FIGURE 2: CONNECTED YOUTH

Percentage who use the internet every day

- COUNTRY
- 15-24 YEAR-OLDS
- 40+ YEAR-OLDS



Across 21 countries surveyed, a median of 77 per cent of young people say they **use the internet daily** versus just 52 per cent of older people.

In an interview following the survey, Mark, 24, of Kenya expresses enthusiasm about the upsides of connectivity but points to unequal access for those in more remote areas. Digital technology has brought “good progress because ... you can receive news in a short time ... you can find any news about anything online,” he says. “It is better now compared to the past, but people who live in towns benefit the most compared to those in the country. Those in the countryside do not have gadgets.”

**Young people most often turn to online sources – primarily social media – to stay informed. Older people tune in elsewhere.**

The survey reveals another vast gap in usage of digital technologies: young people rely far more on online platforms than on traditional sources for news and information. Today’s 15-to-24-year-olds most often turn to online sources – primarily social media – to stay informed about current events.<sup>11</sup> In every country, young people are at least 10 percentage points more likely than older people to use online sources for information, and in most countries, the difference is 30 percentage points or more.

Compared with any other single survey item, reliance on social media marks the greatest divide between generations. A 28 percentage-point gap separates the cohorts on this question, with young people accessing those platforms to stay informed far more often (45 per cent on average) than older people (17 per cent).

By contrast, people aged 40 and older are more likely to turn to television to stay up to date on current events. They are also more likely than young people to rely on other traditional media such as radio and newspapers.

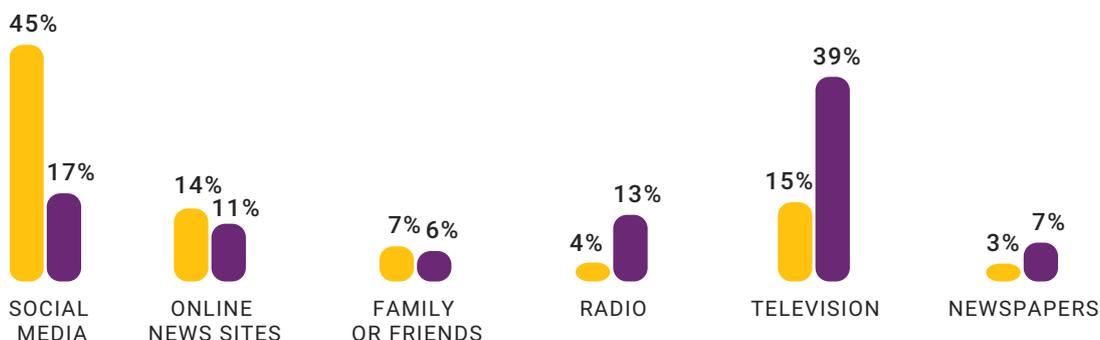
**Today’s 15-to-24-year-olds most often turn to online sources – primarily social media – to stay informed about current events.**

<sup>11</sup> The only exception on a country level is Zimbabwe, where internet penetration is still relatively low and radio remains the main source of information for the country. Younger Zimbabweans most often turn to the radio to stay up to date.

### FIGURE 3: INFORMATION SOURCES: LOG ON OR TUNE IN?

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS

Go-to information sources, 21-country medians



#### Young people are more convinced of the benefits of life online

As heavier users of digital technology, young people are more comfortable with its role in children's lives as well as in their own. Long before the pandemic, children and young people were spending a growing share of time online. As COVID-19 spread, the internet became a constant companion for many young people, leading to a further rise in screen time. The internet turned into a lifeline to the outside world that kept many young people connected to work, school, and one another.

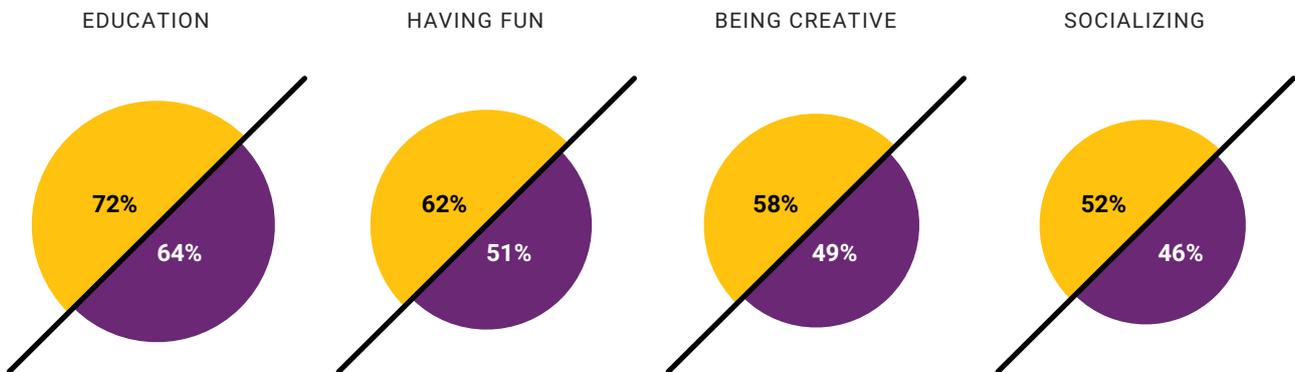
Overall, young people see greater benefits, and fewer risks, from children's online lives compared with older generations.

Both generations see education as the biggest upside of children's online engagement, followed by having fun, being creative, and socializing. However, in each of these categories, young people are more certain of these benefits than older people. "It's a positive thing that people from far away villages are getting news about what is happening [elsewhere] in our country just [by] sitting at home," says Shamim, 17, who lives in a rural area of Bangladesh.

### FIGURE 4: DIGITAL DIVIDENDS

Percentage who believe digital technology helps children a lot in various spheres, 21-country medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



Other young respondents acknowledge the many upsides of digital technology while asking what might be lost with all the increased stimulation and engagement. “The internet has changed what it’s like to be a child today because we don’t really, I guess, just sit around and be bored,” says Kiara, 15, of the United States. “I mean, if we’re bored we just go on our phones and that’s probably not good for the real young kids, or even older kids.”

“The internet has changed what it’s like to be a child today because we don’t really, I guess, just sit around and be bored.”

— Kiara, age 15, United States

#### Young people see serious risks, but older people are more concerned

Whether they are savvier about how to protect their information, as some research suggests, or they simply have different privacy concerns because of their age, young internet users express less concern about privacy online than older internet users. On average, 25 per cent of young internet users say they are very concerned that their personal information could be collected and shared when they are online, compared with 36 per cent of older internet users.

This generational divide is particularly true in high-income countries with older populations such as Germany, Japan, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the United States, for example, a 32-point gap separates the two generations, with the older group far more worried about privacy online.

Young internet users express less concern about privacy online than older internet users.

Young and older internet users in low- and lower-income countries, where internet access is less widespread and online consumer and data privacy laws are still lacking, are most likely to be very concerned about their information being collected and shared. In Nigeria, for example, 72 per cent of young internet users and 67 per cent of older ones say they are very concerned about these risks.

When it comes to views on the safety of children being online, the majority of young people see serious risks – but overall, their level of concern does not reach that of older people.

For example, large majorities of both young and older generations see each of these scenarios as very risky for children: talking to someone online whom they have not met in person; meeting someone in person for the first time after meeting them online; and sending personal information to a person they have never met in person. But members of older generations express greater worry, by six to eight percentage points on average in each scenario.

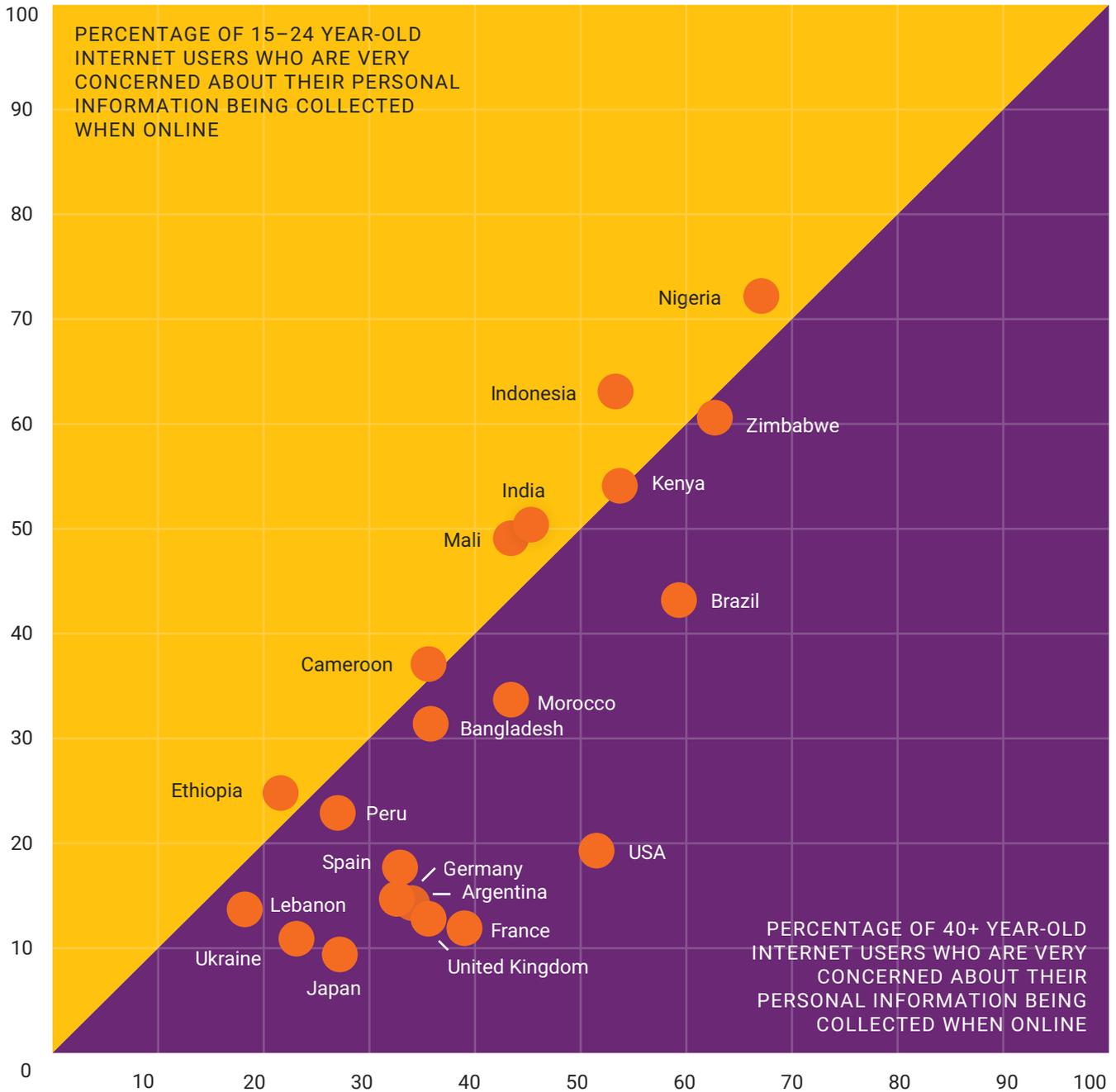
Similar differentials emerge between young and older generations around concerns about children getting false information online (73 per cent of young people on average think parents should be “very concerned” about this, versus 79 per cent of older people), and children seeing violent or sexually explicit content online (78 per cent of young people on average think parents should be “very concerned,” versus 88 per cent of older people). The two cohorts are more aligned on whether parents should be “very concerned” about online bullying and sexual harassment.

**When it comes to views on the safety of children being online, the majority of young people see serious risks but overall, their level of concern does not reach that of older people.**

### FIGURE 5: CYBER CONCERNS

Percentage of internet users who are very concerned about their personal information being collected when online

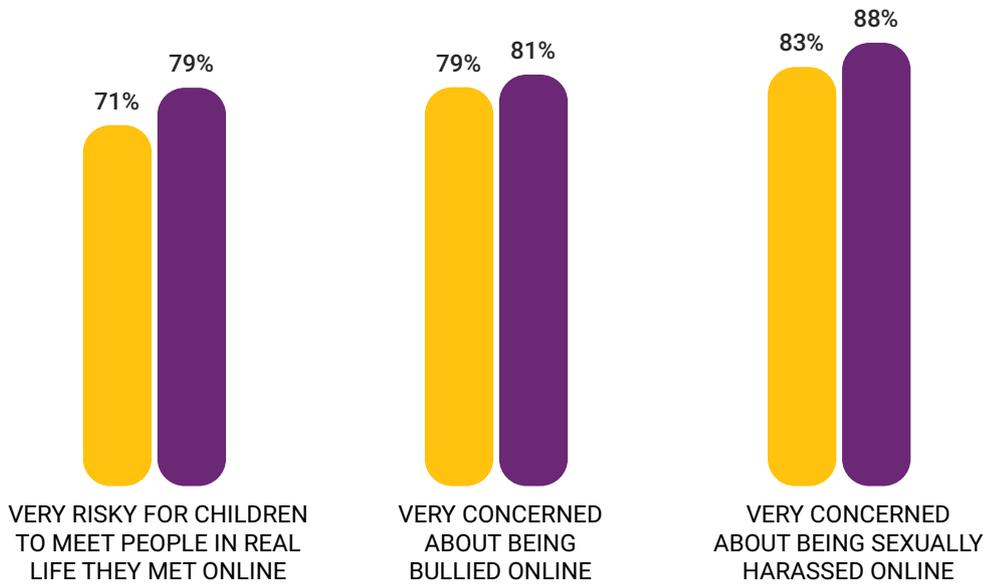
- COUNTRY
- 15-24 YEAR-OLDS
- 40+ YEAR-OLDS



### FIGURE 6: TECH TREPIDATION

Percentage who express great concern about various risks of digital technology for children, 21-country medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



“With the internet, there’s a lot more exposure for young kids,” says John, 22, of the United Kingdom. “They’re only ever one click away from the next swear word or the next porn thing. Kids almost have to grow up earlier than they should. The ‘innocent child’ stage goes by quite quickly due to the internet.”

Across both generations, women are significantly more wary than men about risks associated with children being online. Young women are more concerned than young men about children meeting someone in person after encountering them online, seeing violent or sexually explicit content, or being sexually harassed online. In each case, young women are on average at least 8 percentage points more likely to express serious concern than young men.

“With the internet, there’s a lot more exposure for young kids. They’re only ever one click away from the next swear word or the next porn thing. Kids almost have to grow up earlier than they should. The ‘innocent child’ stage goes by quite quickly due to the internet.”

– John, age 22, United Kingdom

**Young people see greater progress for children in many key areas**

Beyond digital technology, young people are more likely than older generations to recognize other important markers of progress in children’s lives.

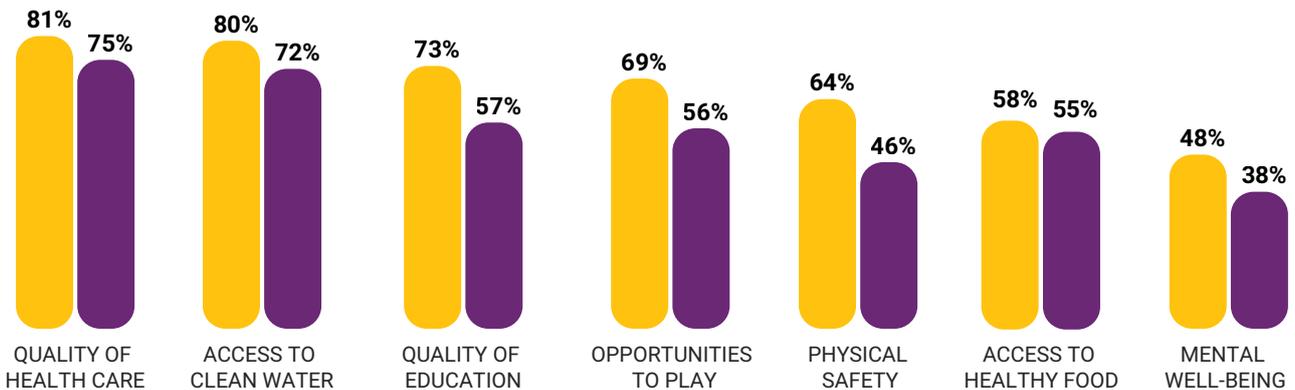
Large majorities believe that childhood has improved in multiple ways. Young people in at least 15 of 21 countries are more likely than older people to say conditions have improved in terms of physical safety, quality of education and health care, opportunities to play, access to clean water, and healthy food. Overall, the young and old generations are most divided when it comes to the quality of children’s education, their physical safety, and having opportunities to play.

Overall, the young and old generations are most divided when it comes to the quality of children’s education, their physical safety, and having opportunities to play.

**FIGURE 7: BETTER BEGINNINGS**

Percentage who believe childhood has improved over the past generation in the following dimensions, 21-country medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



Young people’s perspective reflects reality, as recent years have seen dramatic gains in children’s health and well-being. Progress is reflected in all areas for which data exists, including health, nutrition, and education. A child born today has a far better chance of surviving than one born only a few decades ago.

More children everywhere are living past their fifth birthdays, largely thanks to improvements in the quality of children's nutrition and health services and access to clean and safe drinking water. More children today are in school, including more girls, both at the primary and lower-secondary levels.

Shamim of Bangladesh notes the progress in gender equity compared to when his parents were growing up. "Women are getting education these days," he says. "Back then, they didn't like so much education for women. They thought, 'Why do girls have to study? They will be married and do household work. They don't need to be educated'."

One aspect of children's physical safety is the harm their parents or teachers may subject them to. While a majority of young (64 per cent on average) and 46 per cent of older people say physical safety is better for children today, a considerable number of people still deem corporal punishment acceptable.<sup>12</sup> Overall, an average of 27 per cent of young people and 29 per cent of older people say it is acceptable for a parent to physically punish a child. There is a generational gap in terms of those who say it is acceptable for a teacher to do so: an average of 22 per cent of older people condone such actions across all countries surveyed, while just 8 per cent of young people agree. In Japan, Mali, and the United States, the generational gap on this question is vast – at least 16 percentage points, with older people deeming physical punishment by a teacher acceptable.

Views on corporal punishment have shifted in the past quarter century. "I remember my parents used to tell me that they were beaten," says 21-year-old Juan of Argentina. "They couldn't confront their parents because it was disrespectful, and everything followed a sort of doctrine. But now, in my childhood, my parents [have] made an effort to ensure my well-being and cover all my needs."

**"Women are getting education these days. Back then [when my parents were growing up], they didn't like so much education for women. They thought, 'Why do girls have to study? They will be married and do household work. They don't need to be educated'."**

*– Shamim, age 17, Bangladesh*

**Overall, an average of 27 per cent of young people and 29 per cent of older people say it is acceptable for a parent to physically punish a child.**

<sup>12</sup> Worldwide, 135 countries now prohibit corporal punishment in schools, while 62 prohibit it in the home.

While young people point to improvements in most aspects of childhood, enthusiasm is muted in one area: mental well-being. Less than half (48 per cent on average) of young people say mental well-being is better for children now than it was for their parents growing up. These results are largely driven by sentiment in high-income countries, where both young and older people see mental well-being as worse for children today. In these countries, an average of 33 per cent of young people say children's mental well-being is better today, along with 31 per cent of older people.

It is not just higher country income that is associated with more pessimism about children's mental well-being; greater material comfort on an individual level correlates with a darker view as well. Young people who say they are living comfortably on present income are far more likely to say that mental well-being is worse for today's children than those finding it difficult or very difficult to get by. They are separated by a 22 percentage-point gap on average on this question.

### Young people are more likely to report feeling anxious or depressed

Other findings from the survey echo these concerns among young people about mental well-being. Compared to older generations, young people are more likely to say they feel the stresses and psychological burdens of modern life, according to several measures. These results reflect the reality that while modern life means progress in many areas, it can also be marked by unease and disruption. Results may also reflect a greater openness to identify and acknowledge struggles with mental health among the younger generations.

**It is not just higher country income that is associated with more pessimism about children's mental well-being; greater material comfort on an individual level correlates with a darker view as well.**

### FIGURE 8: BACKWARD SLIDE

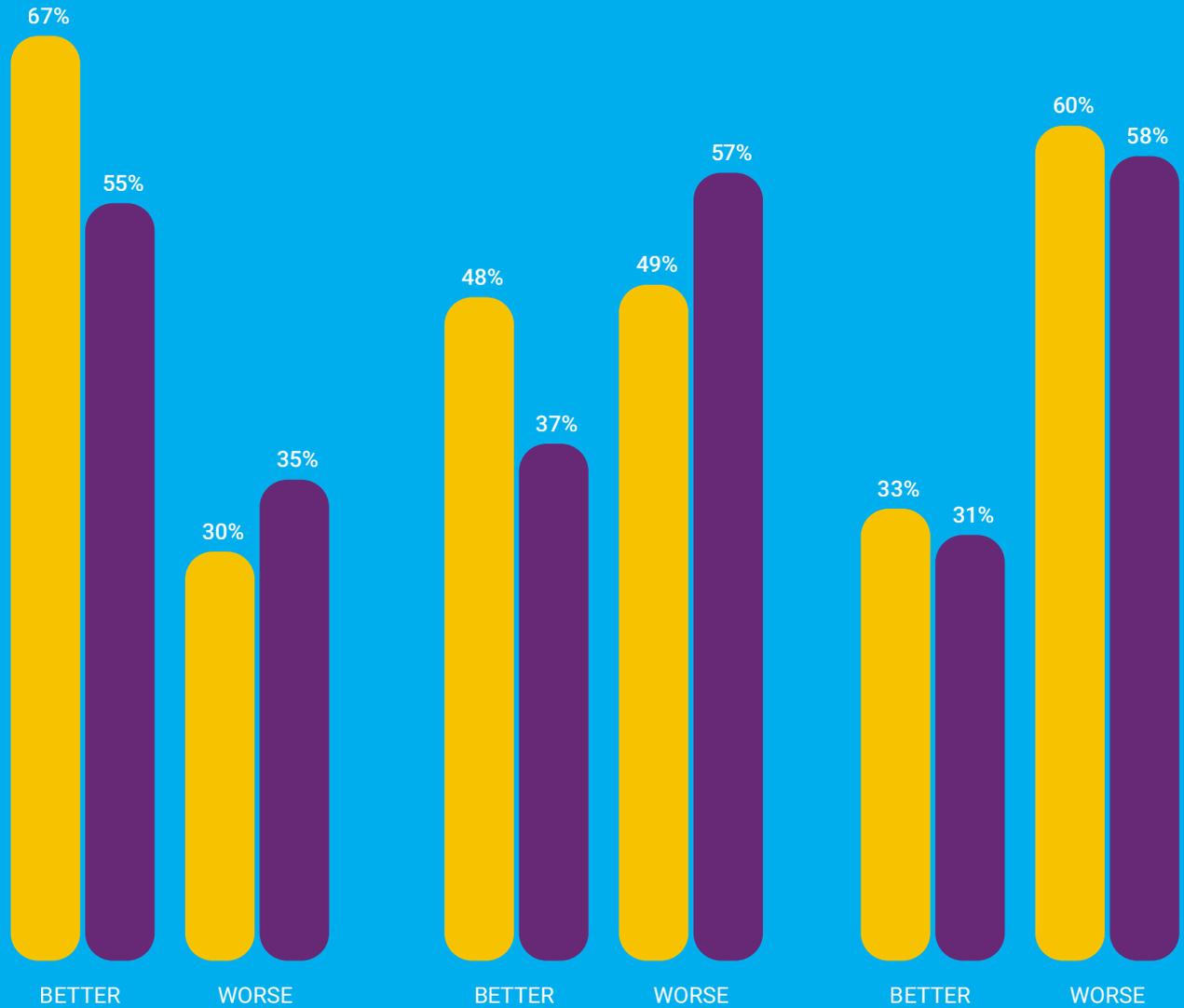
Percentage who believe childhood mental health has improved or worsened over the past generation, country income group medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS

LOW- / LOWER-MIDDLE-INCOME

UPPER-MIDDLE-INCOME

HIGH-INCOME



While the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about mental distress, the true burden of mental health disorders among adolescents and young people worldwide remains unknown because of the lack of empirical data. Now more than ever, more data on mental health among young people – particularly those in low- and middle-income countries – are urgently needed to better identify their needs and tailor interventions.

Occasionally feeling anxious or sad is a normal part of life. But when these feelings happen often, become overwhelming, and interfere with people's ability to carry out everyday tasks, they can be signs of more serious mental health conditions. Young people worldwide are particularly at risk of experiencing these mental health conditions as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

Today's 15- to 24-year-olds are more likely to self-report often feeling anxious or depressed compared with adults in the 40 and older age group. More than one in three (36 per cent on average) young people across the 21 countries say they often feel anxious, worried, or nervous compared with an average of 30 per cent of older people. One in five young people (19 per cent on average) say they often feel depressed or have little interest in doing things, versus 15 per cent of older people.

The largest generational gaps in anxiety and depression are found in the United States, France, and Germany. Young people in these countries are about three times as likely as older people to say they often feel depressed or have little interest in doing things.<sup>13</sup> The generation gap is even wider in terms of those reporting often feeling nervous, worried, or anxious, with at least 21 percentage points separating older people and the young.

Compared to older generations, young people are more likely to say they feel the stresses and psychological burdens of modern life, according to several measures.

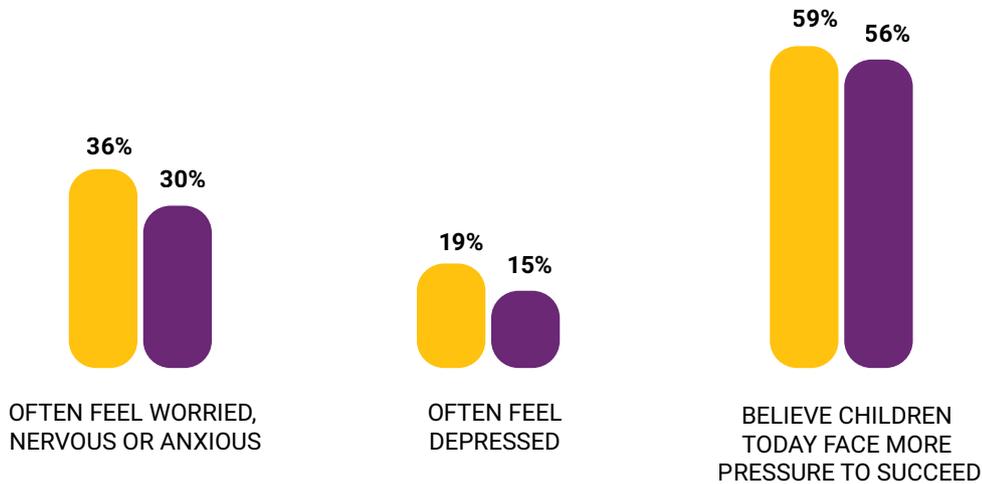
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13 On the other side of the ledger, older people in Lebanon are substantially more likely to feel depressed, with 35 per cent of older people saying they often feel this way, compared with 21 per cent of young people. Older people in Lebanon, Ukraine, and Bangladesh also report feeling anxious, worried, or nervous more often than young people in those countries.

**FIGURE 9: HARD TIMES**

Experience with and attitudes about mental health,  
21-country medians

● 15–24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



These data provide a snapshot of people’s anxiety levels one year into the pandemic in 2021, and do not offer information about how people felt before it. However, Gallup World Poll data collected in these same countries since 2005 on people’s daily experiences of stress suggest many generational divides – in both directions – existed before the pandemic. In countries like the United States, where anxiety age gaps are the largest, young people have consistently been more likely than older people to say that they experienced stress during a lot of the previous day while in Lebanon, the reverse has been true.

Household income, age, education level, and gender are significant factors in explaining the prevalence of anxiety among young people. People who are least financially comfortable are more likely to say they feel anxious often. Within the young cohort, those aged 15–19 are less likely than those aged 20–24 to say they feel anxious a lot. Young people with a tertiary education are least likely to say they experience anxious feelings often and are 50 per cent less likely to give this response than those with a primary education only. Finally, young men – compared with older men – are more likely to report feeling anxious or depressed often.

**People who are least financially comfortable are more likely to say they feel anxious often.**

Mary, 15, who lives in a rural area in Kenya, says that mental burdens arise from material struggles. “Currently people are only talking about sadness; it is not the same as when our parents were growing up,” she says. “Life has become tough ... and about going through stress. People think about where their next meal will come from, where to get school fees, so life has just become hard. At times I go without food to eat.”

Some young survey respondents say young people are more willing to acknowledge and talk about mental health conditions. “There’s less of a stigma about mental illness than when our parents were kids,” says Brian, 22, of the United States. “I think people are more willing to open up because it’s not as negative a thing. We’re more open about discussing mental health, and I think our parents’ generation wasn’t as open. They didn’t have all these diagnoses for mental problems that we only just discovered in the last 20 to 30 years of research.”

### Young and old say seeking support is the best way to address mental health struggles

There is one striking area of intergenerational convergence when it comes to mental health. Instead of considering mental health a personal matter that people can best work through on their own, both young and older people see sharing experiences with other people and seeking support as the better way to address mental health issues. A median of 83 per cent of young people across 21 countries choose the latter option, as do 82 per cent of older people.

This intergenerational consensus is reflected at the country level as well, with majorities of young and older people in nearly every country saying that “sharing” is preferable to going it alone when dealing with mental health issues. The sole exception is India, where young and older people are about evenly split over the best course of action. It is also worth noting that majorities of older people choose the “sharing” approach in Germany, Ukraine, and Japan, but to a considerably lesser degree than young people.

Both young and older people see sharing experiences with other people and seeking support as the better way to address mental health issues.

There is another important area of intergenerational convergence when it comes to mental health. Both young and old agree that today's children are under more pressure from adults to succeed in life. In all countries surveyed, both young (59 per cent on average) and older people (56 per cent) agree that children today face greater pressure to succeed than their parents did when they were growing up. Women are more likely to say children today feel more pressure.

### Young and old say they support empowering children

Another area of generational convergence in the survey is around children's agency. Both young and older generations agree that children deserve to have their voices heard, and that the minimum legal age for marriage should be higher. There is also support from both age cohorts in some countries to lower the legal voting age, and a desire from young and old in developing countries to raise the minimum working age for children.

When children have agency – the personal capacity to act and make free and informed choices to pursue a specific goal – it empowers them to actively participate in and engage with the world around them.<sup>14</sup> Having a voice and being heard, which is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is critical to increasing agency among all children, but particularly among the most vulnerable and marginalized. There are new examples every day of children speaking out on the issues that affect their lives, from climate change to gender equality, and from racial justice to human rights.<sup>15</sup> But social, cultural and political barriers can stifle children's voices and limit their participation in both public and private settings, even where they comprise the majority of the population.

There is also support from both age cohorts in some countries to lower the legal voting age, and a desire from young and old in developing countries to raise the minimum working age for children.

Social, cultural and political barriers can stifle children's voices and limit their participation in both public and private settings, even where they comprise the majority of the population.

14 United Nations Children's Fund, '[Technical Note: Adolescent empowerment](#)', ADAP, Education and Gender teams, UNICEF, New York.

15 McNulty, J., '[Youth Activism is On The Rise Around the Globe, and Adults Should Pay Attention, Says Author](#)', University of Santa Cruz, California, 17 September 2019.

**Young people with a tertiary education are least likely to say they experience anxious feelings often.**

## Strong majorities of young and older people believe children's voices should be heard

Few people worldwide see a reason for children to be silent. Majorities of young and older people in the 21 countries surveyed believe that it is very important for political leaders in their countries to listen to children's voices when making decisions. On average, 58 per cent of 15- to 24-year-olds believe it is very important for political leaders to listen to children, and 53 per cent of those aged 40 and older share this view.

Young people and older people in developing countries are particularly likely to believe it is very important for politicians to listen to children, while those in high-income countries are more divided. However, in each country income group, strong majorities believe it is at least somewhat important.

Majorities of young and older people in the 21 countries surveyed believe that it is very important for political leaders in their countries to listen to children's voices when making decisions.

## Ideal minimum age for work skews older in developing countries, younger in high-income countries

Age thresholds for paid work protect children from being exploited and from performing work that interferes with their education during childhood. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 138 sets the general minimum age at which a child can work full-time at 15 and makes allowances for 14-year-olds to work in countries where economic and educational systems may be less developed.

The survey's findings reveal a desire for children in developing countries to hold off on work for longer. The reported ideal age that a person should be able to start paid work skews older than the ILO Convention's minimum age, with the bulk of young and older people seeing the ideal as at least 17 or older.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Wealthier respondents are more comfortable with starting work at a younger age than those struggling financially. Across countries of all income levels, there is a 27 percentage point gap between those who are living comfortably (48 per cent on average) and those struggling to get by (12 per cent on average) believing that the ideal minimum age for work is 16 years old or younger.

This is important because in the least developed countries, more than one in five children between the ages of 5 and 17 are involved in labour that harms their health and development.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, for young and older people in high-income countries – and particularly young people – the ILO Convention’s minimum working age is close to their ideal. Most young people in high-income countries (67 per cent on average) say people should start working paid jobs at age 16 or younger, and about half of older people (49 per cent) agree.

**In most countries, young and old say the minimum marriage age should be older than the legal minimum**

While fewer girls today are married before age 18 than a decade ago, the practice of child marriage is still widespread. Before the pandemic, more than 100 million girls over the next decade were expected to marry before they turned 18, and because of the pandemic, up to 10 million more could be at risk.<sup>18</sup> Although child marriage among boys is just one-sixth of that among girls, boys worldwide are also at risk of having their childhoods cut short.

In most developing countries surveyed<sup>19</sup> – and in several developed ones – generations agree that the legal marriage age for both males and females should be older than the current one. The only surveyed country where respondents recommend an age younger than the existing legal age is Japan.

In all countries where the minimum legal age for girls is younger than 18 – in other words, where child marriage is legal – young and older people both believe much older ages are appropriate. In Mali and Cameroon, for example, the minimum legal age for marriage is 15 for girls. Yet young and older people in Mali recommend a minimum age of 17 or 18 for girls, while those in Cameroon see 22 or older as the ideal minimum age for girls.

The reported ideal age that a person should be able to start paid work skews older than the ILO’s minimum age, with the bulk of young and older people seeing the ideal as at least 17 or older.

17 United Nations Children’s Fund, [‘Child Labour’](#), UNICEF, New York, August 2021.

18 United Nations Children’s Fund, [‘Child Marriage’](#), UNICEF, New York.

19 Refers to countries with an established legal minimum marriage age.

Survey results reveal a similar intergenerational consensus for raising the minimum age in both Ukraine and Indonesia.<sup>20</sup>

One factor that contributes to this result is household income. People who are struggling financially are far more likely to propose an older minimum marriage age. Gender is also significant, with women about 1.6 times more likely to say that the legal marriage age for females should be older than it currently is.

One factor that contributes to this result is household income. People who are struggling are far more likely to propose an older minimum marriage age.

**In select countries, many people – especially the young – want to see a lower voting age**

While most people think it is important for political leaders to listen to children, most children around the world cannot vote before the age of 18.

In certain countries, a significant proportion of both young and older people propose a minimum voting age below the current legal age in their country. This preference is especially evident in high-income countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom. In 2020, three of Germany's main political parties campaigned on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, which polls suggest resonates with many Germans.<sup>21</sup> Sixteen- and 17-year-olds can already vote in some German states.

The desire to lower the voting age is also common in other countries where the existing legal age is high, including Cameroon, where the voting age is 20 and Lebanon, where the voting age is 21. In Cameroon, 54 per cent of young people would like the voting age to be lower – the second-highest proportion of young people behind Germany – as do 51 per cent of young people in Lebanon.

20 Girls can legally marry at age 17 in Ukraine and 16 in Indonesia.

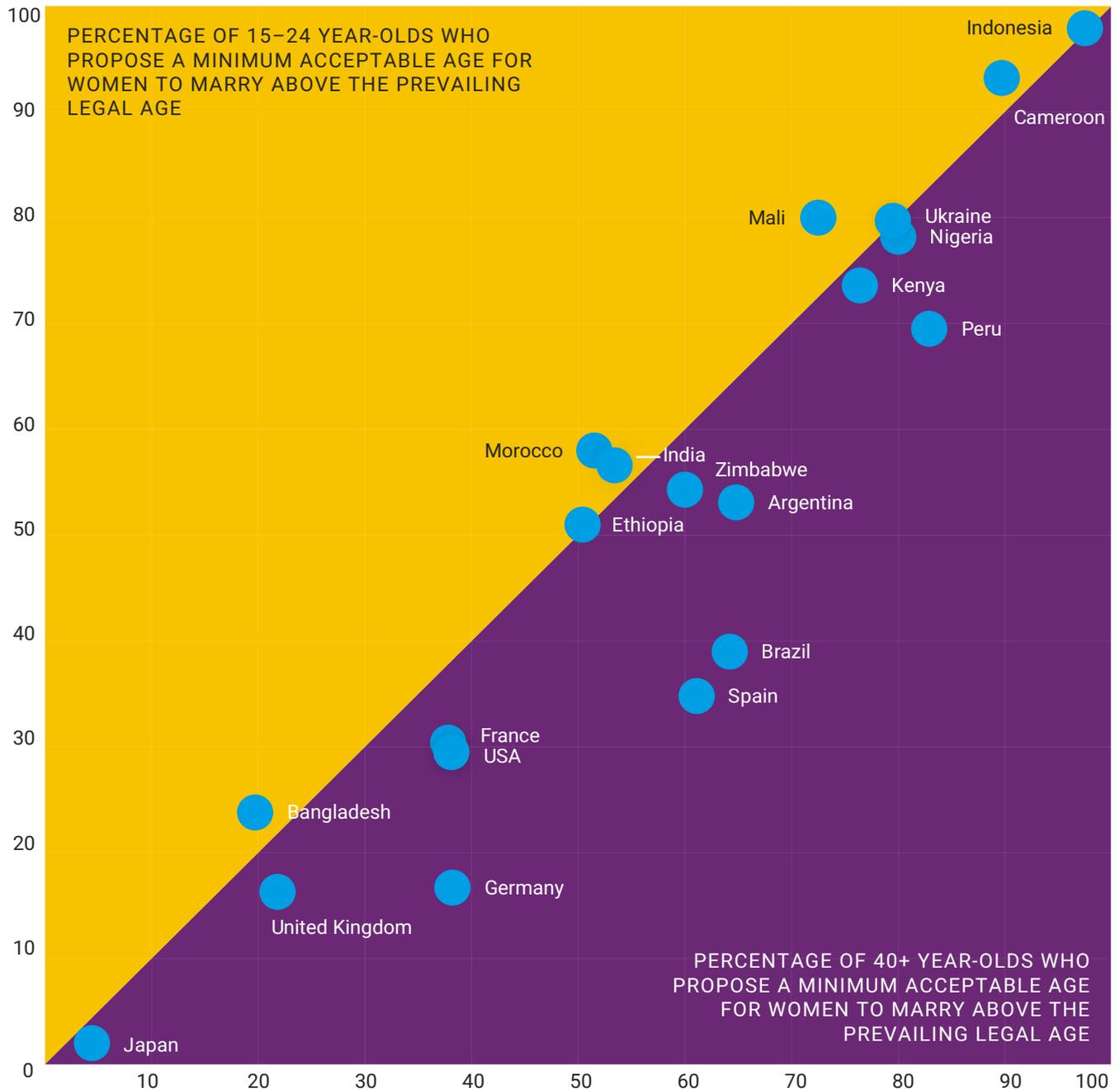
21 Deutsche Welle online, ['Germany: Left-of-center parties call for lowering voting age to 16'](#), 30 July 2020.

Both young and older generations agree that children deserve to have their voices heard, and that the minimum **legal age for marriage should be higher.**

### FIGURE 10: GIVE IT TIME

Percentage who propose a minimum acceptable age for women to marry above the prevailing legal age

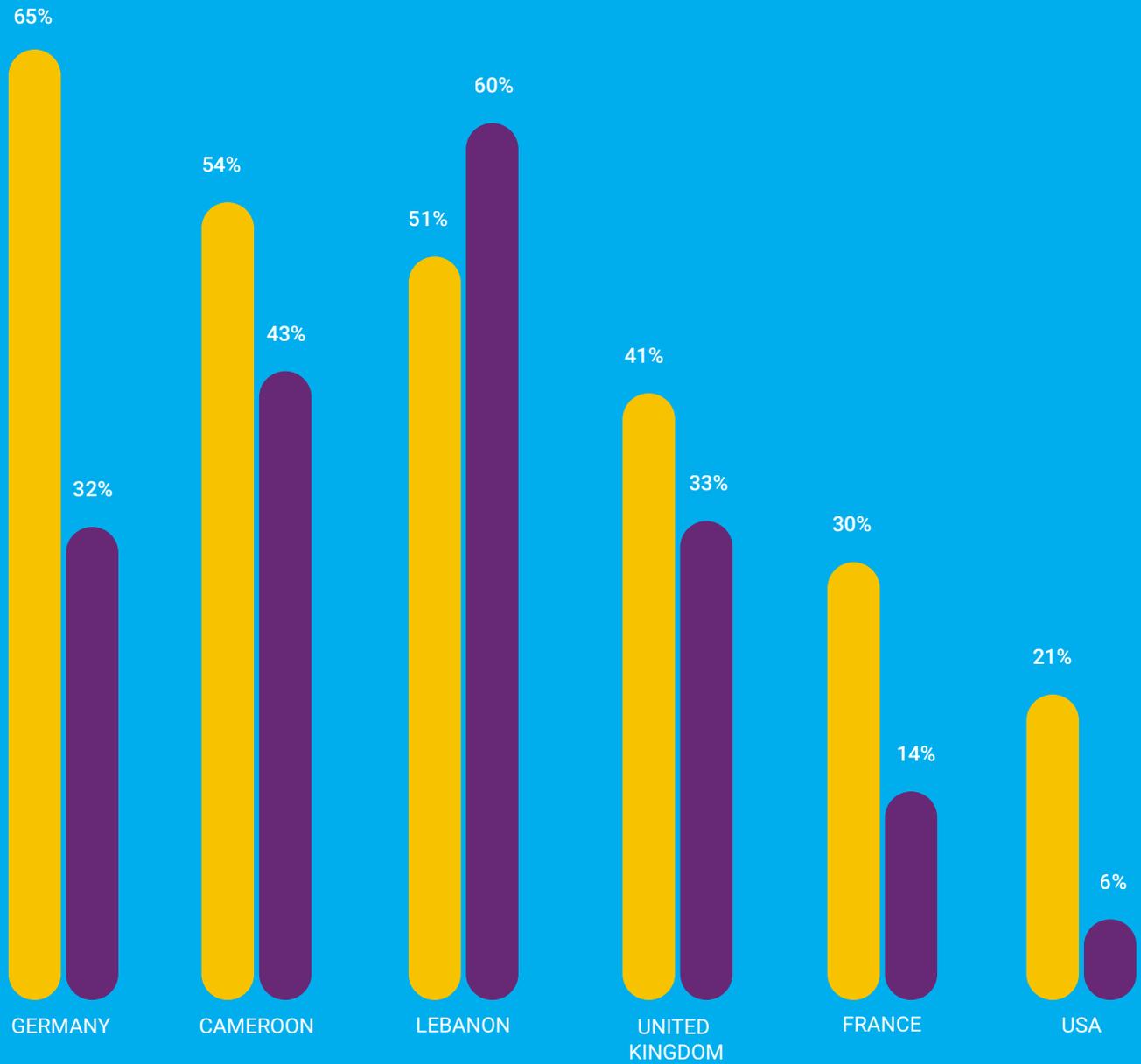
- COUNTRY
- 15-24 YEAR-OLDS
- 40+ YEAR-OLDS



### FIGURE 11: YOUNG VOICES, YOUNG VOTES

Percentage who propose a minimum voting age below the current legal age

15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
40+ YEAR-OLDS



PART TWO

# How do young people see the world differently? Perspectives on the world



## How do young people see the world differently? Perspectives on the world

### Young people see the world getting better with each generation

In the face of unfolding crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, and despite rising inequality and struggles with mental health, young people are more optimistic about the future of the world.

Across all 21 countries surveyed, a median of 57 per cent of young people say the world is becoming a better place with each new generation, versus 39 per cent of older people. On average, a one-year increase in age is associated with a 1 percentage point lower likelihood of believing that the world is becoming a better place.

John of the United Kingdom says he feels confident about the future of the world. “I prefer to look at things like that,” he says. “I think there are a lot of problems that are going to get worse, but I like to think that our generation is going to find solutions to the problems, so I’m hopeful.” He cites growing awareness of climate change and discrimination – and emerging efforts to combat both – as reasons to feel upbeat.

Older people living in low and lower-middle-income countries, which have younger populations, tend to share the younger generations’ optimism, while those in upper-middle and high-income countries are more pessimistic and think the world is becoming a worse place.

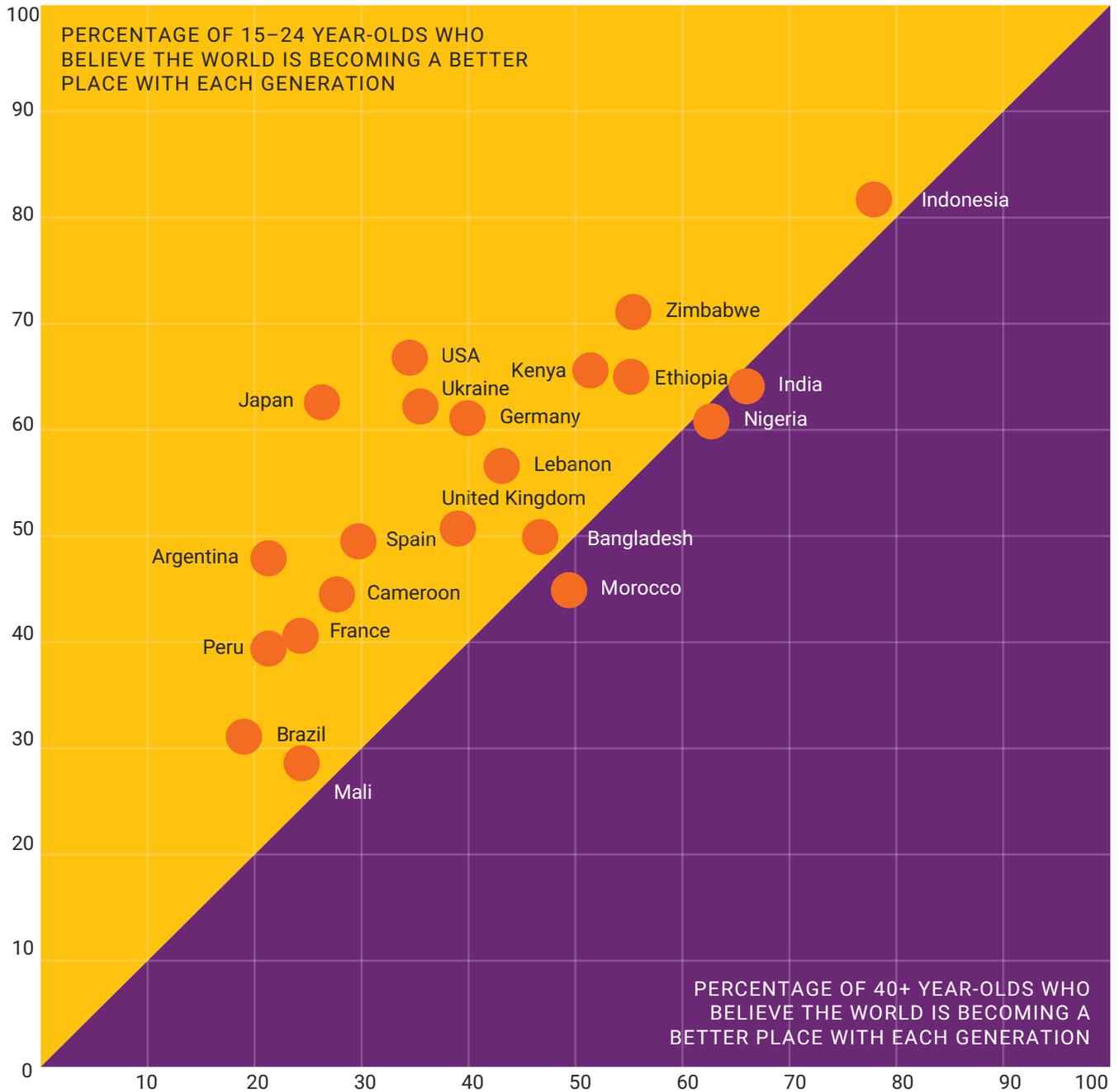
Nonetheless, in almost every country young people are at least marginally more likely than the older generation to say that the world is becoming a better place with each generation. The largest gaps between generations are in countries such as Japan, Argentina, the United States, Ukraine, Germany, and Spain, where at least 19 points separate them. In less than a handful of countries, including India, Bangladesh, Morocco, and Nigeria, young and older people see the world in much the same way.

Across all 21 countries surveyed, a median of 57 per cent of young people say the world is becoming a better place with each new generation, versus 39 per cent of older people.

### FIGURE 12: THE BEST IS YET TO COME

Percentage who believe the world is becoming a better place with each generation

- COUNTRY
- 15-24 YEAR-OLDS
- 40+ YEAR-OLDS



### Economic pessimism weighs heavily in high-income countries

Today's 15- to 24-year-olds on the whole think that when children in their countries grow up, they will be better off economically than their parents are now. A median of 54 per cent of young people across all countries surveyed say today's children will be better off, versus 45 per cent of older people.

"Our parents grew up in poverty and faced challenges that we do not face," says Shamim of Bangladesh. "In my parents' time, there weren't so many opportunities for a job. Nowadays in the garment industry or other sectors, jobs are more available. Whoever is educated a little [is] getting a job." Shamim says that despite having left school and being unable to work due to a COVID-19 lockdown, he remains optimistic about the future.

Juan of Argentina says he is confident about his prospects. "I am very optimistic about my life," he says. "I have always accomplished what I set my heart on doing, and obviously sometimes [it] was hard, [but] the idea is always to start all over again if you encounter obstacles."

But in high-income countries, there is little faith in economic progress. Young people there are twice as likely to think children will be worse off than their parents (59 per cent on average) as they are to think they will be better off (31 per cent). Their views reflect the economic reality that real wages over the past two decades have almost tripled in emerging and developing G20 countries,<sup>22</sup> while barely budging in advanced economies. Older people in high-income countries are even more pessimistic than the young on this point.

**Young people in high-income countries are twice as likely to think children will be worse off than their parents (59 per cent on average) as they are to think they will be better off (31 per cent).**

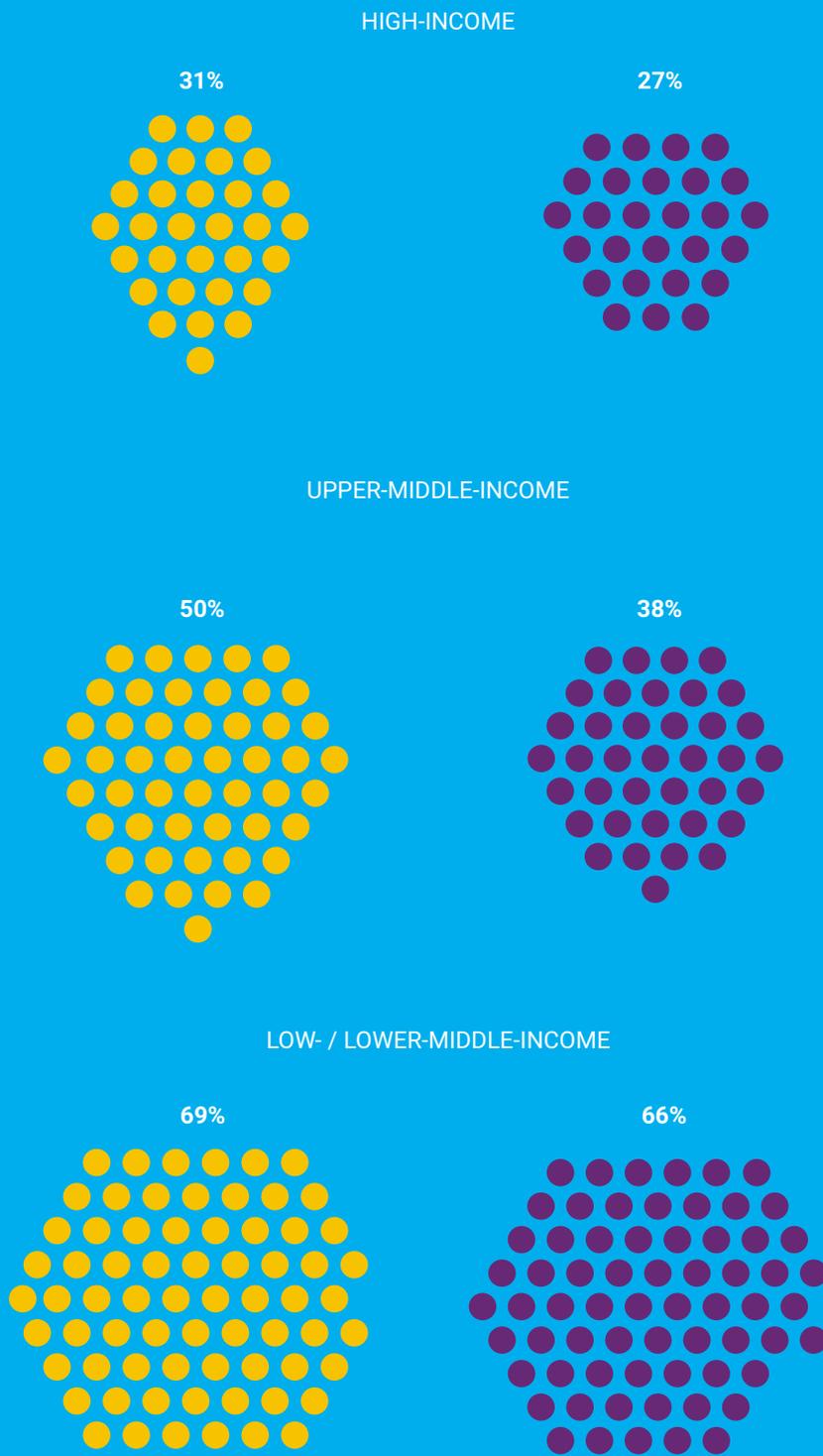
22 G20 (or Group of Twenty) is an intergovernmental forum composed of the world's largest economies, both developed and developing. Its members account for more than 80 per cent of world GDP.

**Across all 21 countries surveyed, people are about 1% less likely to identify as a global citizen with each additional year of age.**

### FIGURE 13: MOVING ON UP?

Percentage who believe that children in their country will grow up to be economically better off than their parents, country income group medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



## Young people are more likely than older people to embrace global citizenship

Born into a highly connected and digitized world, young people are far more likely to see themselves as citizens of the world than members of older generations. Young people are almost twice as likely as older people to say they identify most with being part of the world, as opposed to feeling primarily part of their local community or country. In fact, a one-year increase in age is associated, on average, with about 1 per cent lower likelihood of identifying as a global citizen, as opposed to identifying with one's country or local area.

This is true across countries at every income level. The exceptions are Bangladesh and Japan, where young and older people largely see themselves the same way – as being part of their countries.

By contrast, older people in most countries are more likely to identify most with their country, and if not their country, with the city or area where they live. On average, 45 per cent of older people across the 21 countries say they identify most with their country, while 30 per cent identify with their local community. Slightly more than one in five (22 per cent on average) identify most with the world.

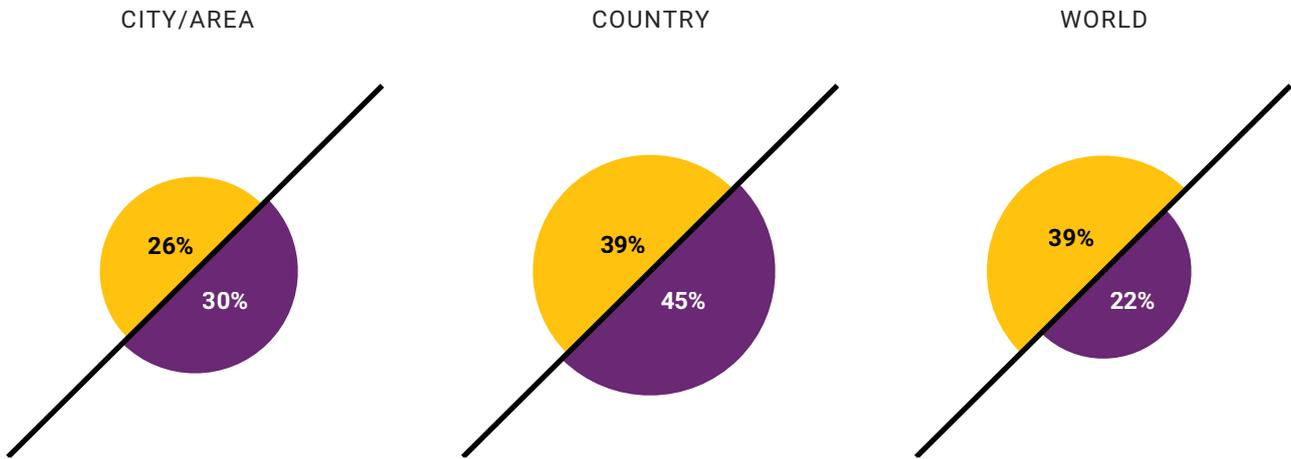
Spain and Germany are the two countries where young people identify most as global citizens. A sense of global citizenship is less common in poorer countries. Still, the generation gap there is striking. There is a 12 percentage-point gap separating young and older people in low and lower-income countries on average, with young people far more likely than their older counterparts to identify most with being part of the world.

**A sense of global citizenship is less common in poorer countries. Still, the generation gap there is striking.**

### FIGURE 14: FINDING HOME

Percentage who identify most with the world, their country, or their city/area, 21-country medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



Several factors – how heavily you use the internet, your age, and whether you live in a city or rural area – relate to feelings about global citizenship. Those who use the internet every day are substantially more likely to identify most with being part of the world than those who do not use it daily.<sup>23</sup> And yet, regardless of the frequency of internet use, young people in general are still more likely than older people to identify themselves with the world.

Where young people live also plays a factor. Young people living in a large city or suburb of a large city, where they may be more likely to come into contact with other cultures, are more likely to see themselves as global citizens than those living in rural areas.

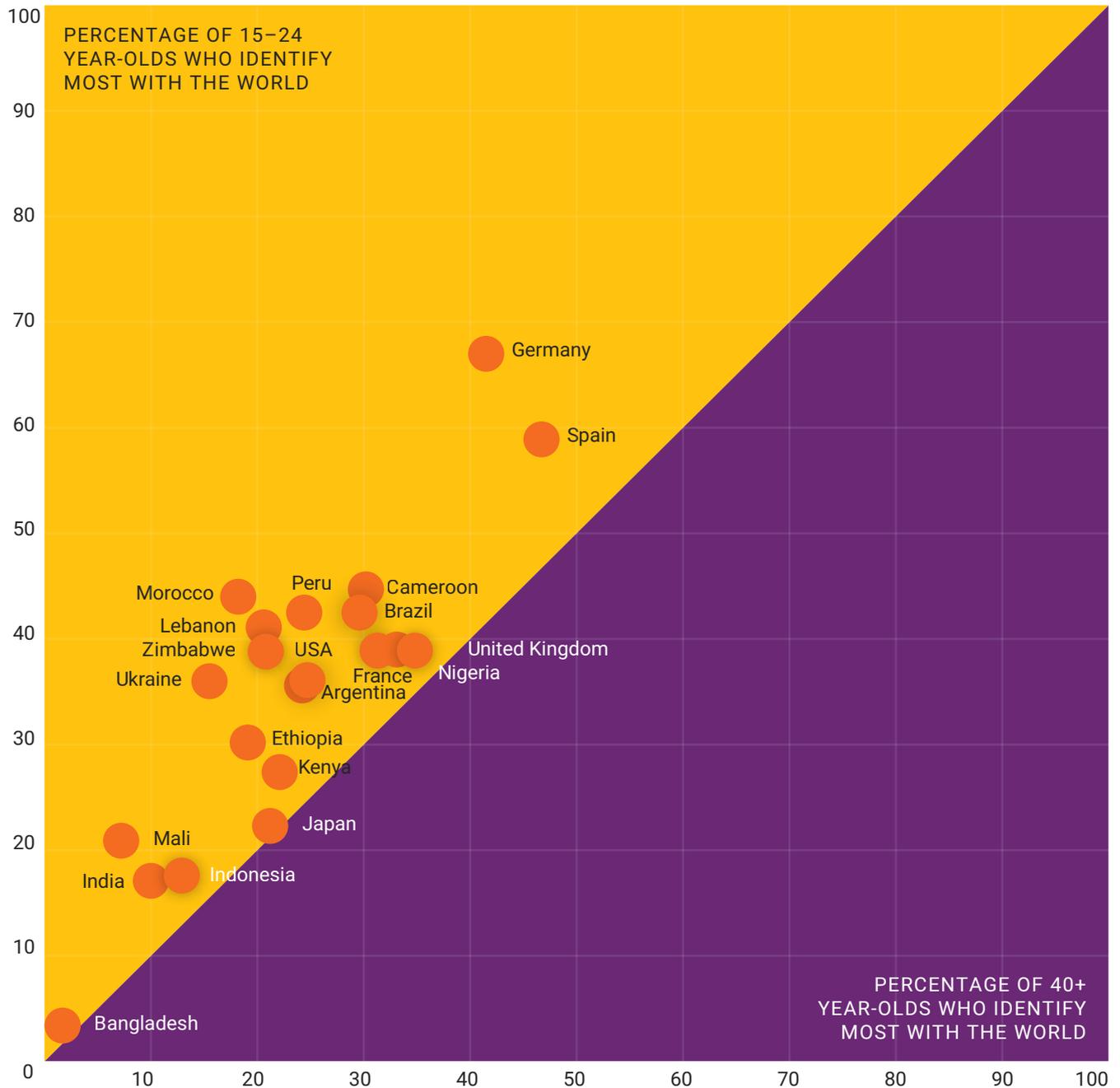
Those who use the internet every day are substantially more likely to identify most with being part of the world than those who do not use it daily

23 Among younger people, the median share who identify with the world rises from 33 per cent to 40 per cent if they use the internet daily; among older people, the median rises from 19 per cent to 28 per cent.

### FIGURE 15: CITIZENS OF THE WORLD

Percentage who identify most with the world

- COUNTRY
- 15-24 YEAR-OLDS
- 40+ YEAR-OLDS



## Young and older people are open to global cooperation, but young people are the most receptive

Most young and older people in nearly every country agree that their respective countries would be safer from threats like COVID-19 if their governments worked in coordination with other countries rather than on their own.

However, young people in most of the 21 countries surveyed are more likely than older people to support their country working with others. One notable exception to this pattern is France, where 83 per cent of older people and 72 per cent of young people choose this option.

Education and country income level both factor into young and older people's support for cooperation between their government and others. Support for global cooperation is lower among those with less education and among those living in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

## Young and older people lack awareness, understanding of climate change

The climate crisis poses an unprecedented test for humanity, one that demands both cooperation and action. As its burdens will fall disproportionately on the young generation, it is important to examine how well young people understand the problem.

Climate change awareness among young people globally is far from complete, our survey reveals. On average, only 80 per cent of young people say they have heard of climate change. When young people who have heard of climate change were asked to identify its correct definition – a rise in average world temperatures and more extreme weather resulting from human activities – only 56 per cent on average could do so. The remainder chose the alternative: that climate change refers to seasonal changes in temperature.

The likelihood that a young person correctly defines climate change increases with country income level.

The climate crisis poses an unprecedented test for humanity, one that demands both cooperation and action. Its burdens will fall disproportionately on the young generation.

Overall, an average of 23 per cent of those in low- to lower-middle-income countries say they have heard of climate change and are able to define it correctly, followed by 56 per cent of those in upper-middle income countries, and 77 per cent of those in high-income countries.

A lack of understanding about climate change is not a problem unique to the young. On average, older people fare no better on these questions. Only 75 per cent on average say they have heard of climate change, and just 53 per cent were able to select the correct definition of climate change between the two options. A failure to comprehend the climate crisis means an inability to respond to it – a major constraint to effective global action.

### **Calls for government action in fighting the climate crisis**

Amid rising youth activism around climate change, including the high-profile work of Greta Thunberg and the global youth climate strike of 2019, a narrative has emerged that the climate crisis is the issue of the young generation. Thunberg regularly admonishes world leaders and older people for taking insufficient action in the face of this global emergency, bolstering a media narrative of a battle between a militant young generation and a more “wait and see” older one.

The UNICEF-Gallup survey finds little evidence to support the idea that young and old are at odds over the climate crisis.<sup>24</sup> In fact, among those who have an awareness and understanding of climate change, overwhelming majorities of young and older people – 86 per cent of each cohort on average<sup>25</sup> – express the belief that humans can still reduce most of its effects.

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24 All results that follow, and in the next section, are drawn from the sub-sample of survey respondents who say they have heard of climate change and answered correctly when asked to choose between two definitions of climate change. The two definitional options for climate change the survey offers are: a) seasonal changes in temperature and weather, or b) changes in the world's weather resulting in more extreme weather events and a rise in average world temperatures.

25 This percentage is drawn from the subset of survey respondents who say they have heard of climate change and chose the correct definition of it between the two options the survey offers.

Majorities of young and older people in all countries, at all income levels, believe this is possible. Young and older generations also converge on the need for their governments to take bold action to address the climate crisis. On average, approximately three-quarters of those in both age groups agree<sup>26</sup> that their country's government should take significant action to address it.

"The government should take charge," says Mary of Kenya. "And also, us people should take measures to avoid doing things that negatively affect our environment and climate."

John of the United Kingdom puts the onus more pointedly on the state. "The government needs to help," he says. "The house-level sort of thing – saying 'turn your lights off' – it needs more than that. It needs worldwide help from all governments to work together to fix it."

The intergenerational consensus is highest in poorer countries, where resources and leverage to tackle the climate crisis are most limited despite suffering disproportionately from its effects. On average, those in low- and lower-middle-income countries (83 per cent) are more likely to demand action of their governments compared to their upper-middle-income (66 per cent) and high-income country (70 per cent) counterparts.

Support for significant action is highest among young people in low- and lower-middle-income countries. More than 90 per cent of young people with an awareness and understanding of climate change in Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe want significant climate action. All three have witnessed deadly flooding within the past two years.

**"The government should take charge. And also, us people should take measures to avoid doing things that negatively affect our environment and climate."**

*– Mary, age 15, Kenya*

**Support for significant action is highest among young people in low- and lower-middle-income countries.**

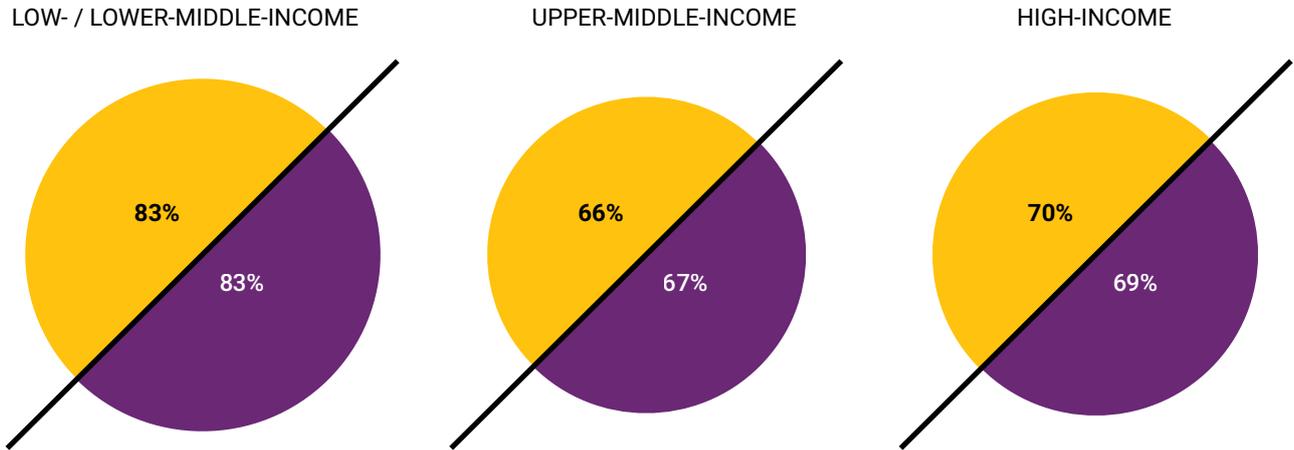
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26 This percentage is again drawn from the subset of survey respondents who say they have heard of climate change and chose the correct definition of it between the two options the survey offers.

**FIGURE 16: CLIMATE ACTION-ORIENTED**

Percentage who believe the government should take significant action against climate change, country income group medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



**Young and old agree – and disagree – on who is to blame for the climate crisis**

Both young and older people largely say governments that allow companies to sell goods and services that damage the environment are more to blame for climate change than the companies themselves or people who use their goods and services.

Nonetheless, divergence exists between young and older people about who is to blame:

- In developing countries, young people are less likely than older people to blame governments.
- In all income groups, young people place more blame on companies than older people do. Young people in India, Spain, Cameroon, France, and Brazil are substantially more likely to blame companies.
- Young people in most countries are more likely to blame their parents’ generation than older people. In France, Lebanon, Spain, Ukraine, and Cameroon, the generation gap is at least 19 percentage points.

Kiara of the United States thinks both corporations and governments are responsible for the climate crisis. “[Corporations], a lot of times, pollute the environment”, she says. “And the way they get the materials to make whatever they need is often in a way that’s harmful to the environment. The average person can do everything that they could possibly do to help, but if the big corporations are still polluting ... not much will change.”

### The young are more trusting of institutions, but they are not naïve

“Never trust anyone over 30,” said American activist Jack Weinberg in 1964 during an interview in Berkeley, California. Young people in many countries have a reputation for greater scepticism of established institutions. Our survey finds, however, that today’s young people are generally more trusting of institutions as sources of information – with some notable exceptions.

Young people are more trusting than older people of international news media in most countries,<sup>27</sup> with the largest gaps emerging in Ethiopia, Japan, and Indonesia.

They are more trusting of national government,<sup>28</sup> with the largest divides in the United Kingdom and Germany. They are more trusting of doctors and other healthcare workers, not just compared to older people but compared to all other sources of information. And they are more trusting of scientists,<sup>29</sup> with the largest generational divides recorded in Ukraine, Germany, Spain, and the United States.

“The average person can do everything that they could possibly do to help, but if the big corporations are still polluting ... not much will change.”

— Kiara, age 15,  
United States

27 On average, 36 per cent of young people trust international news media “a lot”, compared with 30 per cent of older people.

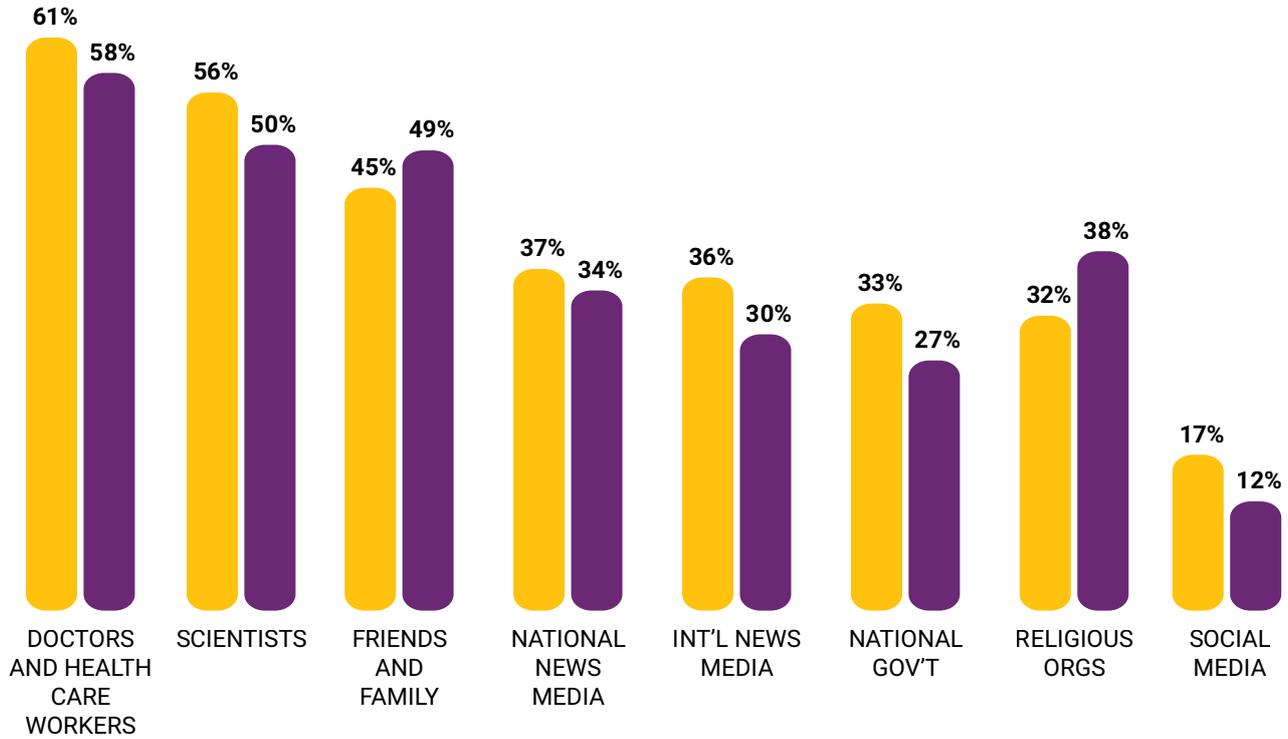
28 Young people’s higher trust in the national government may sound surprising, but it is fully in line with what Gallup has observed in its 15-year trend in people’s confidence in their national governments.

29 On average, 56 per cent of young people say they trust information they receive from scientists “a lot”, compared with an average of 50 per cent of older people.

### FIGURE 17: RELIABLE SOURCES

Percentage who express a lot of trust in various institutions and professions to provide accurate information, 21-country medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



However, young people are less trusting of religious organizations, with an average of 32 per cent saying they trust the information they share “a lot” compared with 39 per cent of older people. The sharpest generational divides on this question are evident in Brazil, the United States, and Argentina, where young people are less trusting than older people, and Ethiopia, where young people express greater trust.

On the whole, neither young nor older people have great confidence in the accuracy of information on social media platforms. Although young people rely on social media to keep them informed about current events, they are least likely to trust social media platforms a lot to provide them with accurate information compared with all other categories included in the poll.

On average, 17 per cent of young people say they trust social media platforms a lot, with a slightly smaller percentage of older people overall saying the same (12 per cent). Young people are twice as likely to place a lot of trust in the accuracy of national (37 per cent on average) and international media (36 per cent) as they are social media platforms.

Notably however, young people who are heavy internet users cast a more critical eye on content than their older counterparts. Among those who rely predominantly on social media to stay informed, 17 per cent of young people on average report high levels of trust in these platforms compared to 24 per cent of older people.<sup>30</sup>

**Notably however, young people who are heavy internet users cast a more critical eye on content than their older counterparts.**

Indeed, in the current era of misinformation and disinformation, it is getting increasingly difficult for people to separate fact from fiction in what they see and read online. But perhaps young people are more equipped to do so compared to members of older generations.

Mary of Kenya says it is harder today to ascertain what information is reliable, compared to when her parents were children. “Currently it’s harder compared to the past,” she says. “One example is the contradicting information we are given about COVID-19. The internet is full of false information.”

A number of young respondents echoed Mary’s sentiments. “Social media is usually a lot less reliable,” says Kiara of the United States. “There are a lot of people who are just posting things so they can get likes and not because it’s true. False information can become a bigger problem because anyone can go on Twitter and say something that isn’t true, and it can blow up and everyone will believe it. When my parents were growing up, the average person couldn’t just make something up and have it gain a lot of traction overnight.” Kiara says she is careful to check her sources when online, and only believes about 50 per cent of what she comes across on the internet.

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<sup>30</sup> Countries in which the sample size fell below 100 for either group were excluded from the median/average calculations.

In addition to sources of information, the survey also asked about respondents' perspective toward another institution: police. Young people overall are significantly less likely to say they trust police to protect them in upper-middle and high-income countries. The biggest generational divides on this question are found in France, the United States, Morocco, and Spain. The findings in France and the United States are notable against the backdrop of ongoing discussions about police reform after protests against violence and racism on the part of the police in 2020.

Young people overall are significantly less likely to say they trust police to protect them in upper-middle and high-income countries.

### Generations align on matters of equity, but the young are more supportive of LGBTQ+ rights

Reflecting on social progress achieved in the last half-century, young and older generations agree about the importance of treating women and members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities equally. On average, at least 9 in 10 say it is somewhat or very important that members of these groups are treated this way.

In almost every country, young and older people also believe – almost universally – that it is equally important for girls and boys to learn skills like understanding personal finances, reading, using digital technology, and speaking up for oneself.

There are some importance nuances to this intergenerational agreement on matters of equity, however. Overall, young women express greater concern for equality than young men. For example, young women are more likely than young men to say that it is “very important” that females be treated equally, by an average margin of eight percentage points.

In addition, in high-income countries, the young are significantly more supportive than the older generation of equal treatment for various minority groups. Young people in these countries are more likely to say it is very important to treat racial and ethnic minorities and women equally, with an average gap of six percentage points between the two age cohorts. The young are more likely to say it is very important to treat religious minorities equally by a margin of eight percentage points.

“I think that now, a lot of the younger generation actually want to do something about [discrimination],” says Natasha, 21, of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. “And so there is less silence, whereas in my parents’ generation, you kind of just had to get on with things. That was the way it was and you couldn’t really change it, or they would notice something was wrong and wouldn’t know how to address it. But now a lot more people are wanting to stand up for things.”

Further, there is no intergenerational consensus when it comes to views on advancing the rights of LGBTQ+ people. Young people are far more likely to say that it is very important that members of this community be treated equally. On average, 71 per cent of young people say it is somewhat or very important to treat LGBTQ+ people equally, versus 57 per cent of older people.

Juan of Argentina says that when he was younger, he would try to brush off anti-gay slurs he was subjected to in the street. Now he feels more empowered to confront the perpetrator. “Now I’m not so tolerant,” says Juan. “Before I would just let it go; I would think, ‘he called me this, so what’, but now I feel it’s not right. I am now in a role of wanting to educate and teach people.”

Young women are especially concerned about LGBTQ+ rights. In the majority of countries surveyed, young women are more likely than young men to believe it is very important that LGBTQ+ people are treated equally. Of all items in the poll, this question reveals largest gap between young women and young men. On average, we see a median gender gap of about 10 percentage points on this issue, with Ukraine, Bangladesh, and Lebanon exhibiting the biggest differences between the sexes. “Nowadays there is a lot of discrimination against gay people, and there is this bullying in schools sometimes,” says Luciana, 15, of a small town in Argentina. “It’s hard for people to accept something different; people who are not the same as everybody else.”

**On average, 71 per cent of young people say it is somewhat or very important to treat LGBTQ+ people equally, versus 57 per cent of older people.**

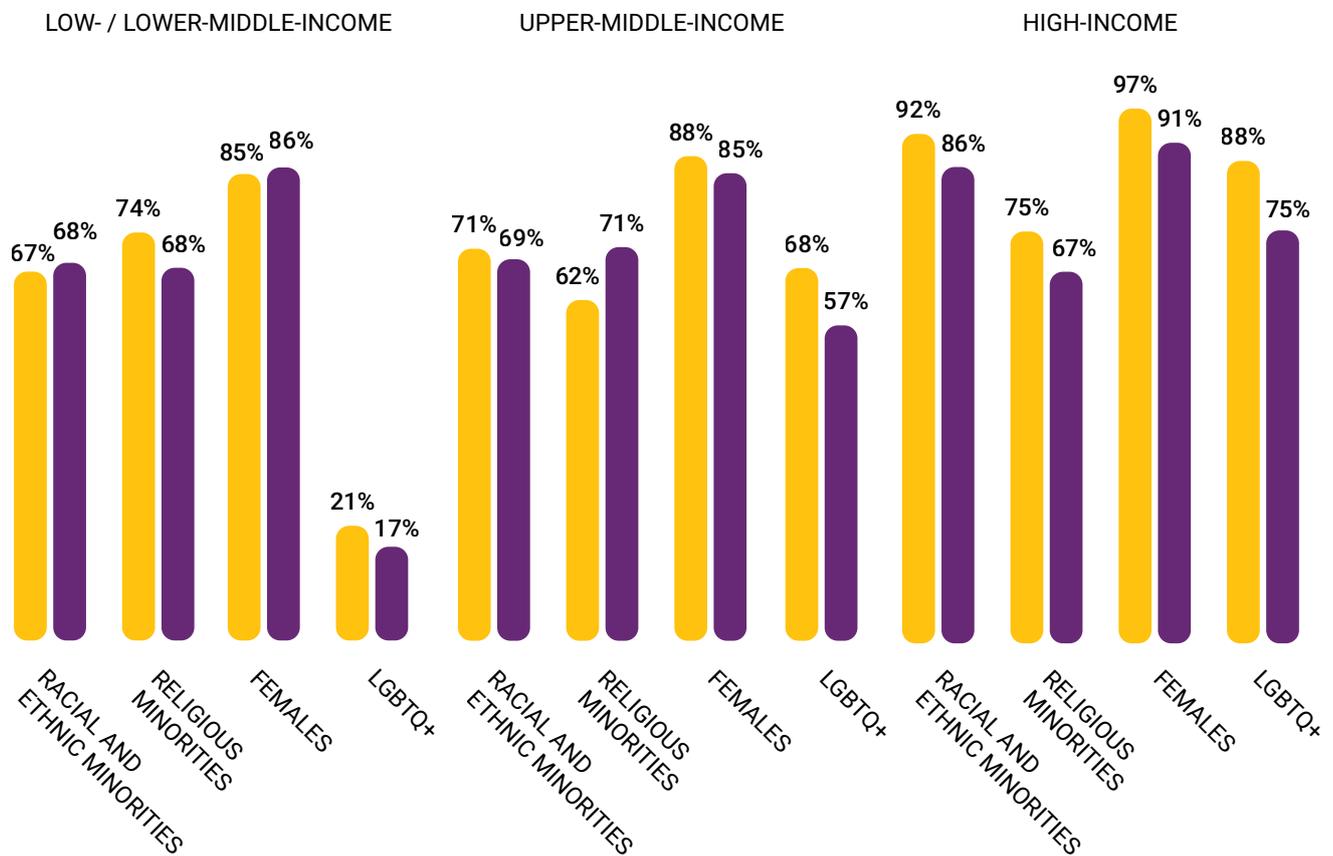
**In the majority of countries surveyed, young women are more likely than young men to believe it is very important that LGBTQ+ people are treated equally.**

People in developing countries are substantially less likely than those in high-income countries to say that treating LGBTQ+ people equally is very important. But even in countries in which same-sex sexual relations are illegal – including Nigeria, Kenya, Morocco, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Bangladesh, and Lebanon – young people tend to be more likely than older people to say it is important to treat LGBTQ+ people equally. Kenya, along with Japan and Spain, has one of the largest generational gaps on this question, with 45 per cent of young people saying that treating LGBTQ+ equally is very important versus 26 per cent of older people.

### FIGURE 18: EQUITY MATTERS

Percentage who report that it is very important to treat various minority groups equally, country income group medians

● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



PART THREE

# Key takeaways on the generational divide



## Key takeaways on the generational divide

Born into a more digital, interconnected and diverse reality, young people see both childhood and the world very differently compared to members of older generations. More so than their older counterparts, they see a world that is largely a better place for children than the one their parents grew up in – a safer and more abundant world that offers children better education, opportunities, and hope for the future.

At the same time, young people are unsettled in many realms of life. They report greater struggles with mental health. Amid a sea of mis- and disinformation, they report low levels of trust in the information sources they use most. In their eyes, the world needs significant action on climate change and equality for LGBTQ+ people. And decision-makers need to listen to children's voices.

The issues where we record the greatest overall generational difference are in the digital divide (including the sources people use most to stay informed and their use of the internet); optimism; views on improvements in different aspects of childhood; the importance of treating LGBTQ+ people equally; the ethics of corporal punishment; the potential for intergenerational economic mobility; and the prevalence of mental health struggles.

The issues where we record a high degree of generational convergence include the need for government action on climate change; support for children's agency; recognition of greater pressure on children today; education and hard work as drivers of success; online risks to children; the role of global cooperation; and the importance of boys or girls learning key skills.

Within this overall picture, two notable patterns emerge:

- The generational divide – measured here by the median absolute difference in responses between the age cohorts across survey questions<sup>31</sup> – is generally stronger in wealthier countries with older populations than in developing countries with younger ones. Of the countries with the biggest overall generational divides, five of the top six are high-income countries: United States, Spain, Japan, France, and Germany. The country with the largest generational divide in our survey is Ukraine. The five countries with the smallest overall generation divide are low- or lower-middle-income countries: Mali, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Bangladesh, and India.
- Young women and men are more aligned with each other than males and females within the older age group. Across survey questions,<sup>32</sup> there is a median absolute gap between the genders within the 40+ cohort of seven percentage points, but only a three-percentage point gap within the 15- to 24-year-old cohort. For the older group, questions about climate change, information sources, mental health, and the role of women in society see sharper differences. A convergence of views between genders in the younger cohort could reflect the ongoing erosion of traditional gender roles in many areas.

The generational divide is generally stronger in wealthier countries with older populations than in developing countries with younger ones.

Young women and men are more aligned with each other than males and females within the older age group.

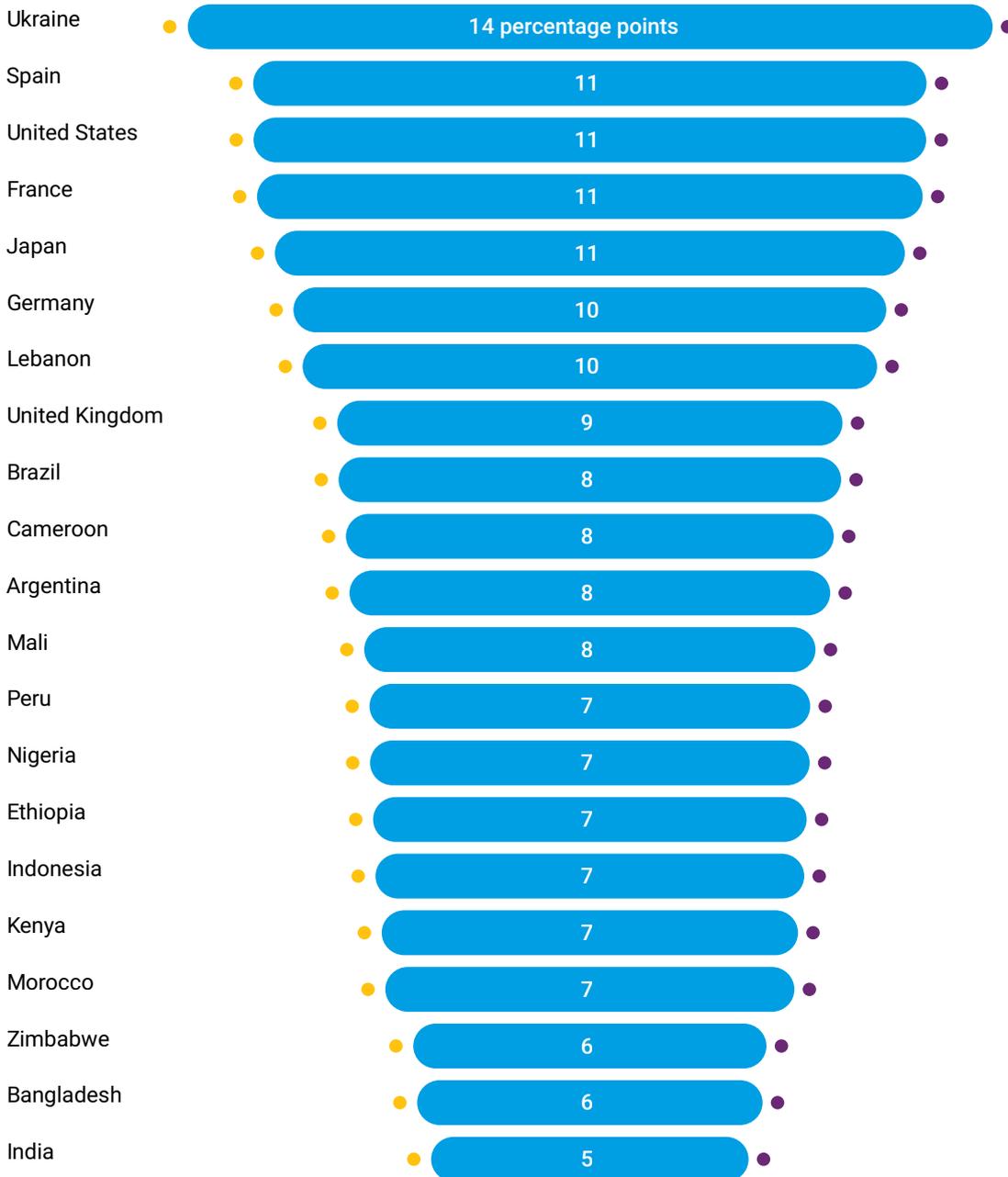
31 The generation gap analysis was conducted across all major poll questions. It does not include demographic items included in the survey (e.g., education level or urbanicity), or background attitudinal items (e.g., those related to respondents' standard of living).

32 The gender gap analysis was conducted across all major poll questions. It does not include demographic items included in the survey (e.g., education level or urbanicity), or background attitudinal items (e.g., those related to respondents' standard of living).

### FIGURE 19: GENERATION GAP OR CHASM?

Median absolute generational gap across survey questions

● COUNTRY  
 ● 15-24 YEAR-OLDS  
 ● 40+ YEAR-OLDS



**Our results show that clichés about young people being entitled, demanding, or naïve are not backed up by data.**

## To improve childhood, centre children

Listening to children and young people is essential to ensuring they all have safe, fulfilling lives. The UNICEF-Gallup survey is one tool for doing so, and one we hope will open the door to greater efforts to lift up children's voices and understand their needs, ideas, and aspirations.

Our results show that clichés about young people being entitled, demanding, or naïve are not backed up by data. Even against the longest odds and some of the toughest problems in a century or more – the climate crisis and the ongoing pandemic – children and young people are not giving up. They are aware of the world's problems, they are cognizant of the misinformation that takes up so much virtual space, and many are wrestling with anxiety or depressed moods. And yet, they are looking to a better future.

**Even against the longest odds and some of the toughest problems in a century or more – the climate crisis and the ongoing pandemic – children and young people are not giving up.**

These results present a challenge to adults and people in decision-making positions. The challenge is to listen to these young people, and to take their views and ideas into account when shaping visions, plans, and policies. The challenge is to take on some of their positivity, some of their optimism, to boldly tackle the problems we face, not hide from them. The challenge to national politicians is to listen to young people who are not looking inward – but rather, outward across the globe, eager for interaction and cooperation. These results present a challenge to UNICEF to incorporate the findings into our programming, advocacy, and outreach.

From increasingly frequent and intense cyclones and heatwaves to changes in global rainfall that lead to droughts jeopardizing their food security, climate change directly threatens children's ability to survive, grow, and thrive.<sup>33</sup> Arguably, today's young generation may be the last to be able to take the actions needed to ensure this fate is not inevitable.

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33 Haspel, E. , '[Climate Change is Forcing United States Indoors – and Childhood May Never Be the Same](#)', Washington Post, 23 July 2021.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 is robbing many children around the world of their childhoods. An estimated 1.5 million children worldwide are 'COVID orphans', having lost a parent, grandparent, or caregiver during the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> COVID has wrought the largest disruption to schooling in history, affecting between half and two-thirds of the world's student population since March 2020.<sup>35</sup> Schoolchildren around the world have lost an estimated 1.8 trillion hours of in-person learning since the start of the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Reversing a previous downward trend, child labour grew to 160 million by 2020, and the pandemic has put an additional nine million children at risk.<sup>37</sup> A failure to contain COVID, including a failure to vaccinate the world, is threatening to reverse decades of progress on child and maternal health, education, and child labour.

Findings from the Changing Childhood Project provoke challenging questions: What impact is increased pressure having on children today? How can we boost young people's economic prospects in an uncertain future? What can be done to improve the mental health of young people around the world? How can we ensure progress in more areas of childhood continues into the next generation? What does it mean to be a global citizen, and will this spirit continue to rise with each generation? What can be done to improve awareness about climate change around the world? Why are young people more positive in their overall outlook compared to older people? How can we encourage decision-makers to pay more attention to young people's voices?

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34 Pidd, H., '[Covid Has Caused "Hidden Pandemic of Orphanhood", Says Global Study](#)', The Guardian, 20 July 2021.

35 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, '[Education: From disruption to recovery](#)', UNESCO, Paris

36 United Nations Children's Fund, '[Education Disrupted](#)', UNICEF, New York, September 2021.

37 United Nations Children's Fund and International Labour Organization, '[Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends, and the road forward](#)', UNICEF, New York, and Geneva, Switzerland, June 2021.

As we seek to answer these emerging questions, young people are facing up to the world's challenges. Affording them not just responsibility but also the voice, freedom, and agency to shape the future will benefit the world for years to come.

“There's a lot more hope in the younger generation, even though it might not look like it to the older generation,” says Natasha of Northern Ireland. “Parents ... might be a little more pessimistic about younger people now, saying, ‘Well, they are walking so far away from the values we grew up with and that is really dangerous’. At the same time, there is hope that [the young] will come up with wonderful ideas or ways of living and creating a better world to the extent we can with the time we have left.”

# What is it like to be a child today? How do young people see the world differently?

In 2021, UNICEF and Gallup surveyed people around the world – both young people aged 15–24 and people over 40, seeking to answer these questions.

We found that young people are optimistic about the future and recognize the progress that has been made, including in key areas of children’s lives. Yet they are not complacent. Young people recognize both the benefits from, and the risks associated with, their increasingly digital lives. They are judicious about whom they trust and they seek action on a range of fronts, from climate change to discrimination.

The challenge now is to listen to these views on childhood and the world – and meet young people’s clear-eyed optimism with action.

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