



# Child Marriage in the Sahel

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3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA  
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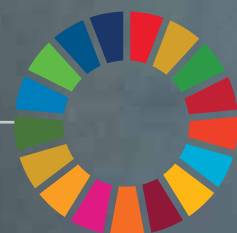


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## Child marriage in the global development agenda

Child marriage is a violation of human rights. Every child has the right to be protected from this harmful practice, which has devastating consequences for individuals and for society. Child marriage is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, which aims to eliminate the practice by 2030. Although indicator 5.3.1 measures child marriage among girls, the practice occurs among boys as well. Regardless of gender, marriage before adulthood is a breach of children's rights.



**SDG 5**

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

### TARGET 5.3

Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

### INDICATOR 5.3.1

Proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18



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## KEY FACTS

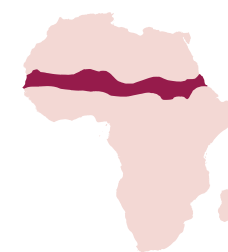
### on child marriage in the Sahel



The Sahel is home to over **20 million** child brides, including currently married girls along with women who were first married in childhood



Over half of young women in the Sahel married in childhood; levels are highest in central Sahel, where **7 in 10** young women were child brides



In countries spanning the **Sahel**, women living in states or provinces inside the region marry nearly **two years earlier** than those living outside the Sahel



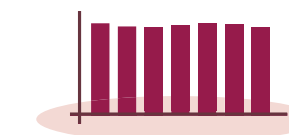
Vast disparities exist across population groups: Young women with **no education** are **10 times more likely** to have married in childhood than their peers with more than a secondary education



Six in ten child brides in the Sahel gave birth before age 18, and nearly **9 in 10** gave birth before age 20



**95 per cent** of married adolescent girls in the Sahel are **not attending school**



Child marriage remains **just as common** in the Sahel today as it was 25 years ago; without a **change in course**, the Sahel will fall further behind other regions of the world in their progress towards eliminating child marriage

# A LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

The Sahel, meaning ‘shore’ in Arabic, is a broad swath of land across the northern portion of sub-Saharan Africa. It has always been an amalgam of civilizations, combining Arabic, Islamic and nomadic cultures from the north, and indigenous and traditional cultures from the south. With months of intense sunshine, heat and desiccating winds giving way to torrential rainstorms that wash away topsoil, its climate is among the most difficult on Earth. For millennia, nomadic

herders and subsistence farmers have eked out a living from the land, but food shortages and famines have become all too common. Tensions over limited natural resources have contributed to the region’s instability. And terrorism, coupled with weak governance, have kept the Sahel in a fragile state, limiting economic growth and development and contributing to massive displacement and migration across the region.



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## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAHEL



### A surging population

The Sahel is one of the fastest growing areas of the world.<sup>1</sup> By some estimates, two thirds of the region’s population are children and young people,<sup>2</sup> and the number of people under age 20 is expected to double by 2050.<sup>3</sup>



### An unpredictable and changing climate

Climate change is having a more severe effect in the Sahel than in most other regions, with temperatures rising at 1.5 times the global rate. The increasing frequency of extreme weather is affecting livelihoods throughout the region and bringing with it the threat of severe water and food shortages.<sup>4</sup>



### Lagging human development

The Human Development Index is a measure to assess progress in three basic dimensions: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and education, and a decent standard of living. According to the *2019 Human Development Report*, countries in the Sahel have some of the world’s lowest rankings. Out of 189 countries and territories, those with the worst outcomes include Niger (189), Chad (187), Mali (184), Burkina Faso and Eritrea (tied at 182), Sudan (168), Senegal (166), Mauritania (161) and Nigeria (158).<sup>5</sup> Multidimensional poverty affects over 80 per cent of the populations of Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger, and over 50 per cent of the populations of Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.<sup>6</sup>



### Violence, conflict and fragility

Several Sahelian countries are suffering from the impacts of acute and prolonged conflicts. According to the World Bank Group’s List of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations for 2020, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan are classified as experiencing medium-intensity conflict, based on the number of conflict-related deaths relative to the population. Chad and Eritrea are plagued by high institutional and social fragility, according to indicators that include deep institutional crises, poor transparency and low government accountability.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, six countries<sup>8</sup> in the Sahel have a “low” or “very low” state of peace, based on quantitative and qualitative indicators that measure societal safety and security, ongoing domestic and international conflict, and militarization, according to the 2020 Global Peace Index.

Compounded crises affect the well-being of children and adolescents in the Sahel, both directly and indirectly. In this climate of uncertainty, in a region firmly rooted in cultural traditions, it is common for marriage to be considered a safe haven for girls with few opportunities. Not surprisingly, the Sahel has the highest levels of child marriage in the world.

The analysis on the following pages explores levels of child marriage in the region, identifies populations most at risk, describes the lives of child brides through key measures of their well-being, and evaluates whether the region has recorded any progress in reducing the practice across generations.

# DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SAHEL

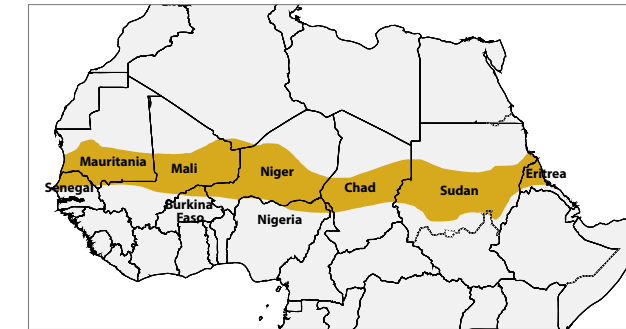
The Sahel stretches from northern Senegal on Africa's Atlantic coast to northern Eritrea on the Red Sea. The region is defined by its climate – a semi-arid zone bordered on the north by the Sahara Desert and on the south by tropical savannas. Maps vary as to the Sahel's precise size, since the region does not neatly align with physical or geopolitical boundaries.

For development purposes, the Sahel is often defined as a selection of countries in the area that face a common set of risks. For example, the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel encompasses 10 countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.<sup>9</sup> The Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program of the World Bank focuses on six countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal, whereas the Norwegian Refugee Council includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan, describing the Sahel as the world's "most neglected and conflict-ridden region."<sup>10</sup>

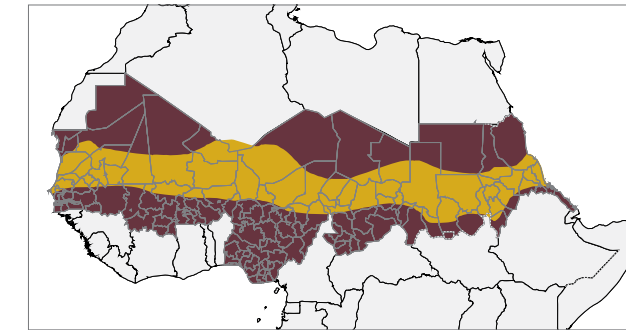
When defined more strictly as a climate zone, geographic definitions of the Sahel, moving from west to east, generally include northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, southern Algeria, south-western Niger, northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, central Chad, central Sudan and northern Eritrea.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of portions of Algeria and Cameroon, these were the areas selected for analysis in this report,<sup>12</sup> using representative data available at the state or provincial level for the remaining nine countries.

Outlines of the area were drawn on the following basis: Subregions of countries were included if they were fully or partially in the Sahel climate zone. To encompass as much of the region as possible, an inclusive approach was taken to this selection, with subregions included in the operational definition of the Sahel if at least 10 per cent of their land mass was in the Sahel climate zone (see opposite page). The portions of the Sahel that extend into Algeria and Cameroon did not meet the inclusion criteria; thus these two countries were not represented in the analysis.

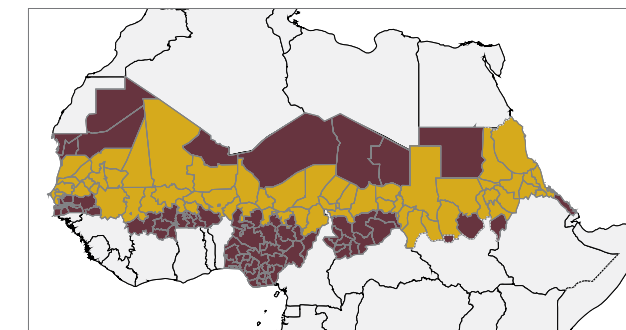
## The Sahel:



## National and subnational borders in the region:



## Operational definition of the Sahel:

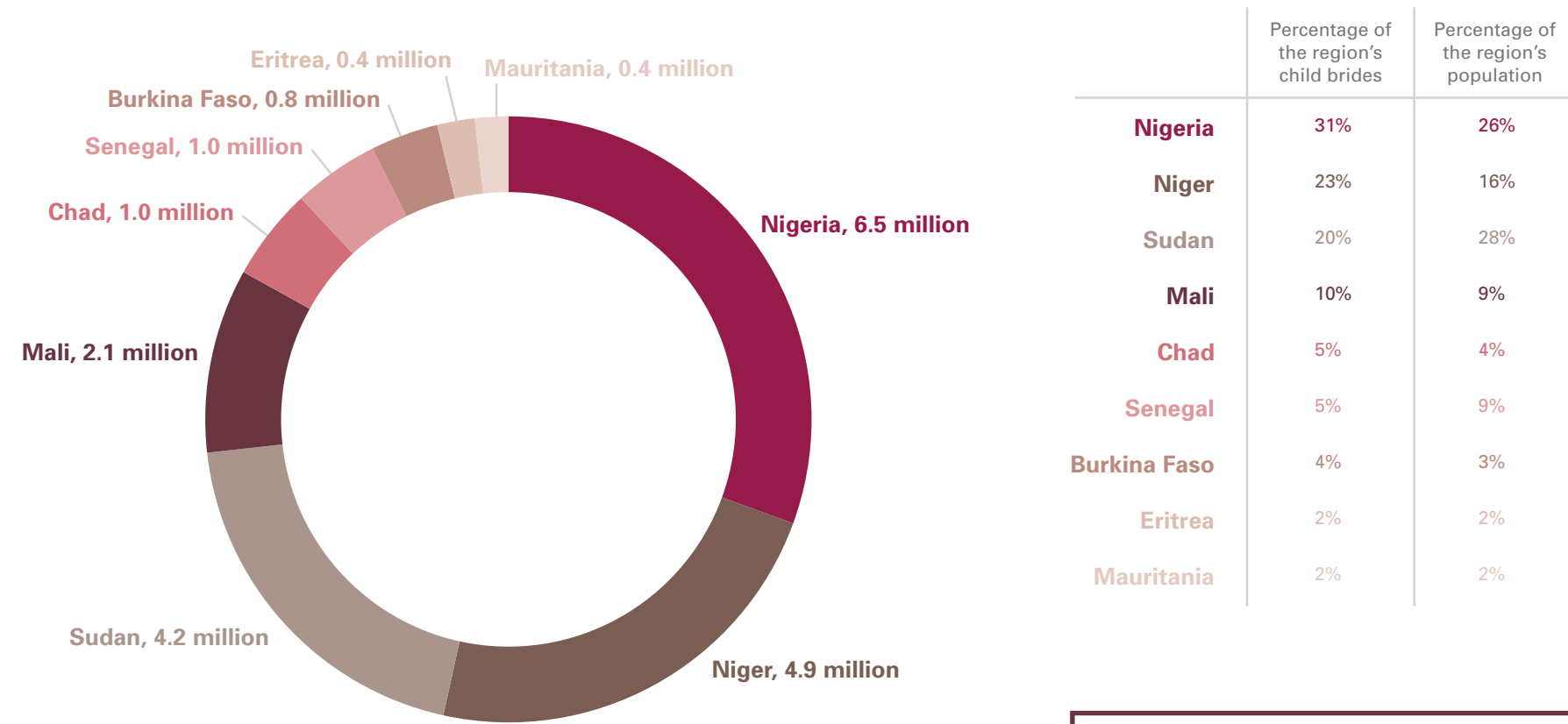


Note: These maps do not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

# CURRENT LEVELS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

## The Sahel is home to over 20 million child brides

FIG. 1 Number of girls and women of all ages who were first married or in union before age 18



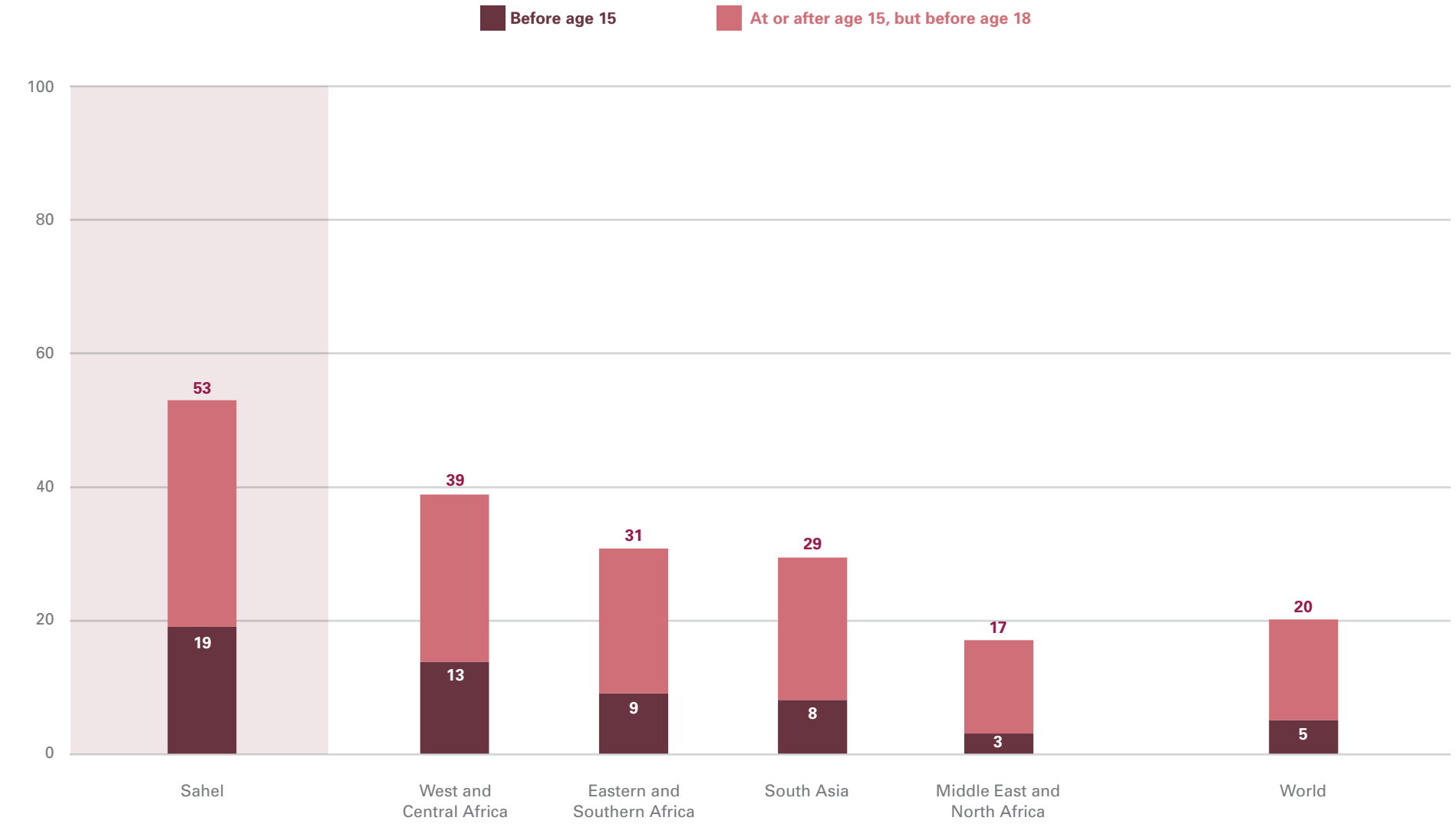
	Percentage of the region's child brides	Percentage of the region's population
<b>Nigeria</b>	31%	26%
<b>Niger</b>	23%	16%
<b>Sudan</b>	20%	28%
<b>Mali</b>	10%	9%
<b>Chad</b>	5%	4%
<b>Senegal</b>	5%	9%
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	4%	3%
<b>Eritrea</b>	2%	2%
<b>Mauritania</b>	2%	2%

**How to read the data**  
 The Sahelian regions of Niger are home to 4.9 million child brides. This represents 23% of the Sahel's child brides, though Niger accounts for only 16% of the Sahel's population.

Note: Values do not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

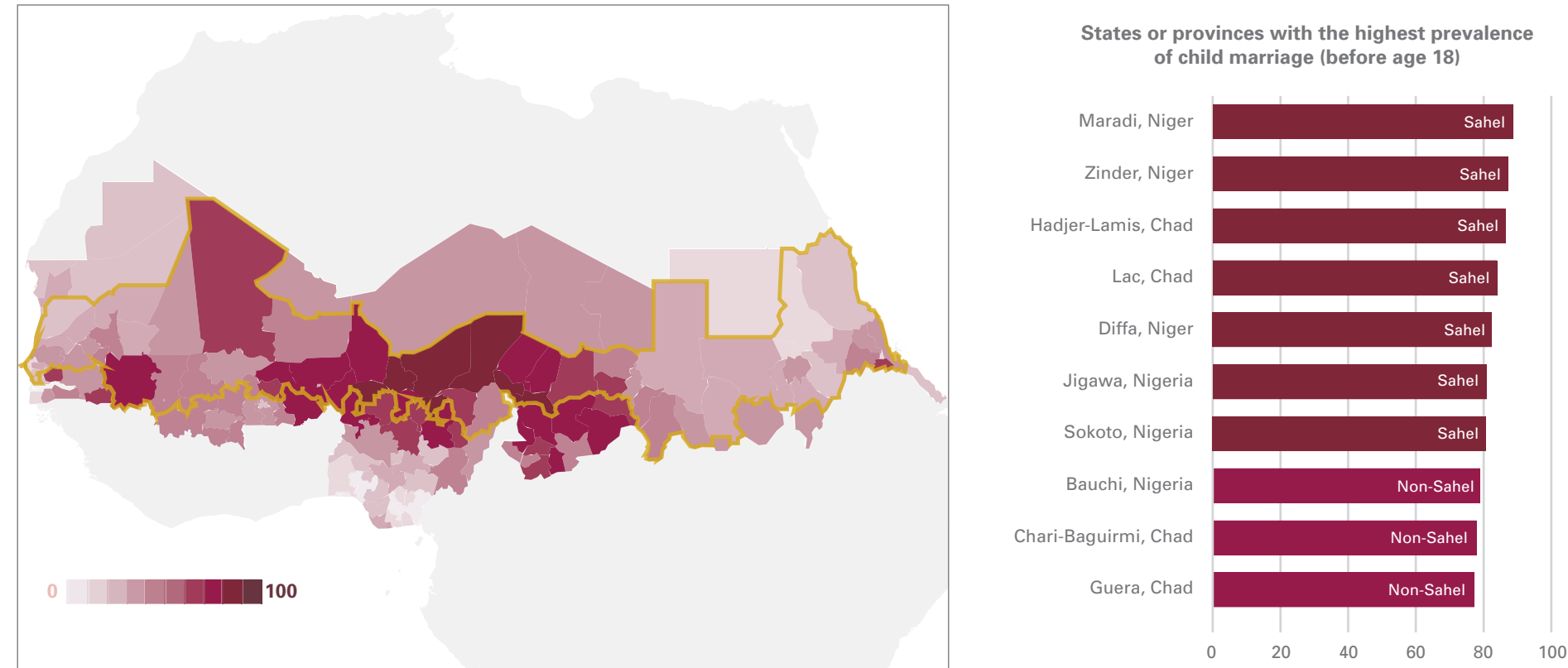
## Over half of young women in the Sahel married in childhood

FIG. 2 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18



## Some of the highest levels of child marriage in the world are found in the Sahel

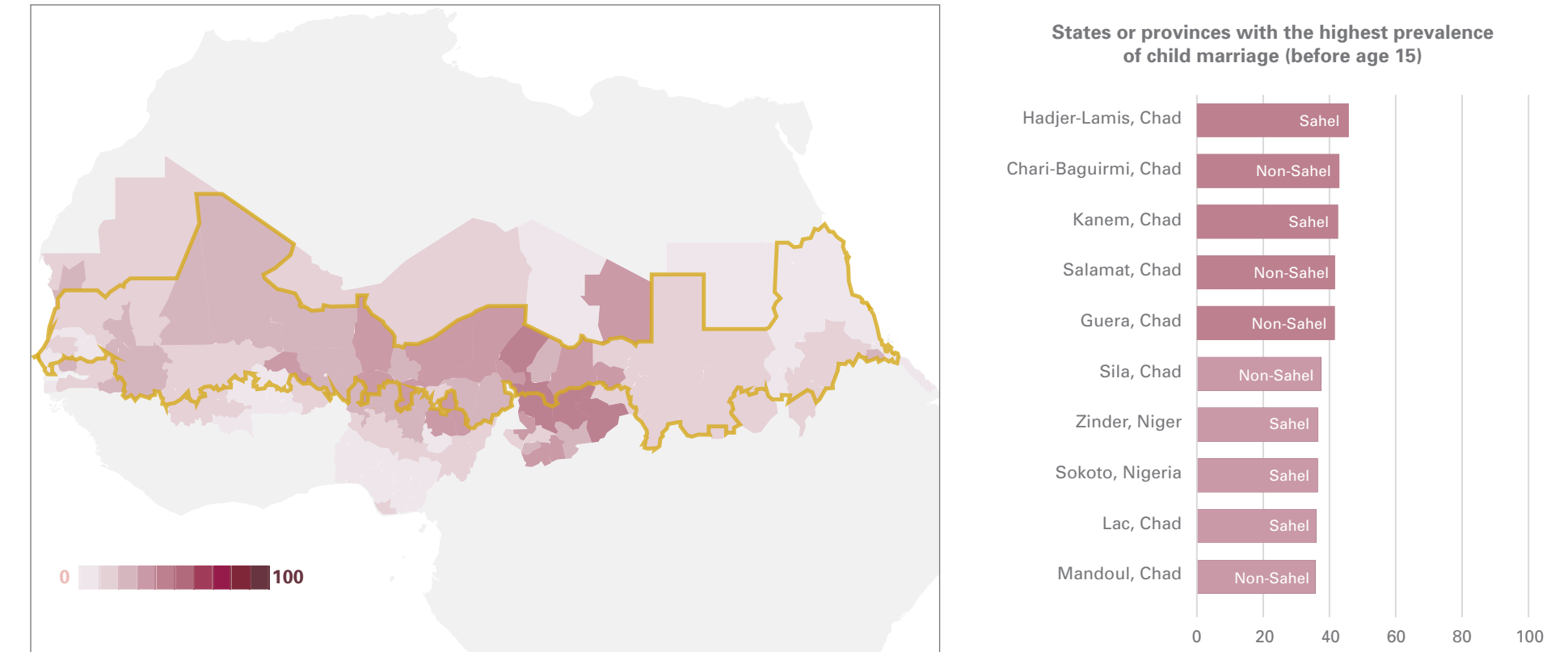
FIG. 3 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18



Notes: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers. The yellow border encloses the states and provinces included in the operational definition of the Sahel (see pages 8-9).

## Marriage occurs very early in the Sahel: In some areas, up to 40 per cent of young women were married before age 15

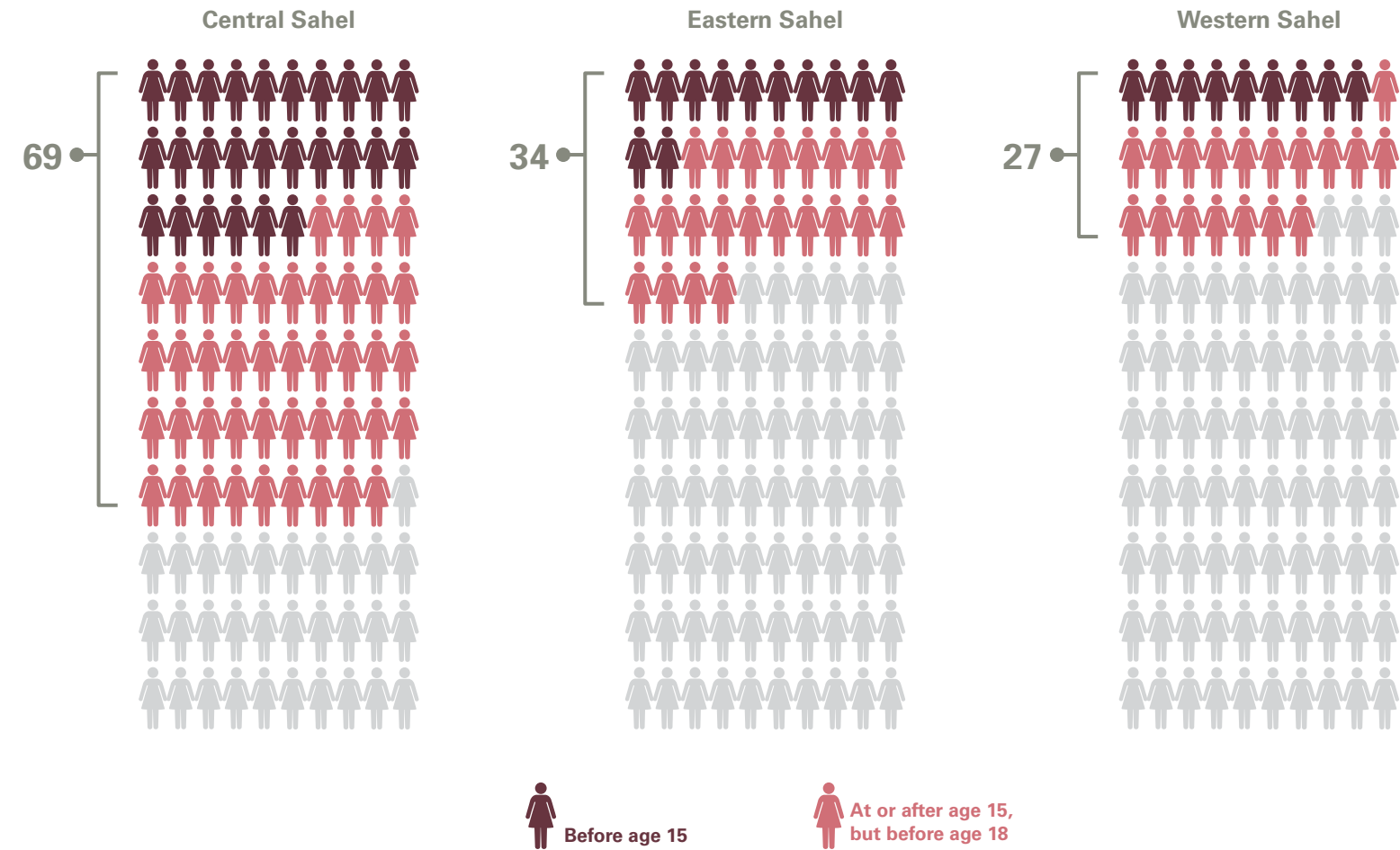
FIG. 4 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 15



Notes: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers. The yellow border encloses the states and provinces included in the operational definition of the Sahel (see pages 8-9).

## The highest levels of child marriage are concentrated in the central Sahel

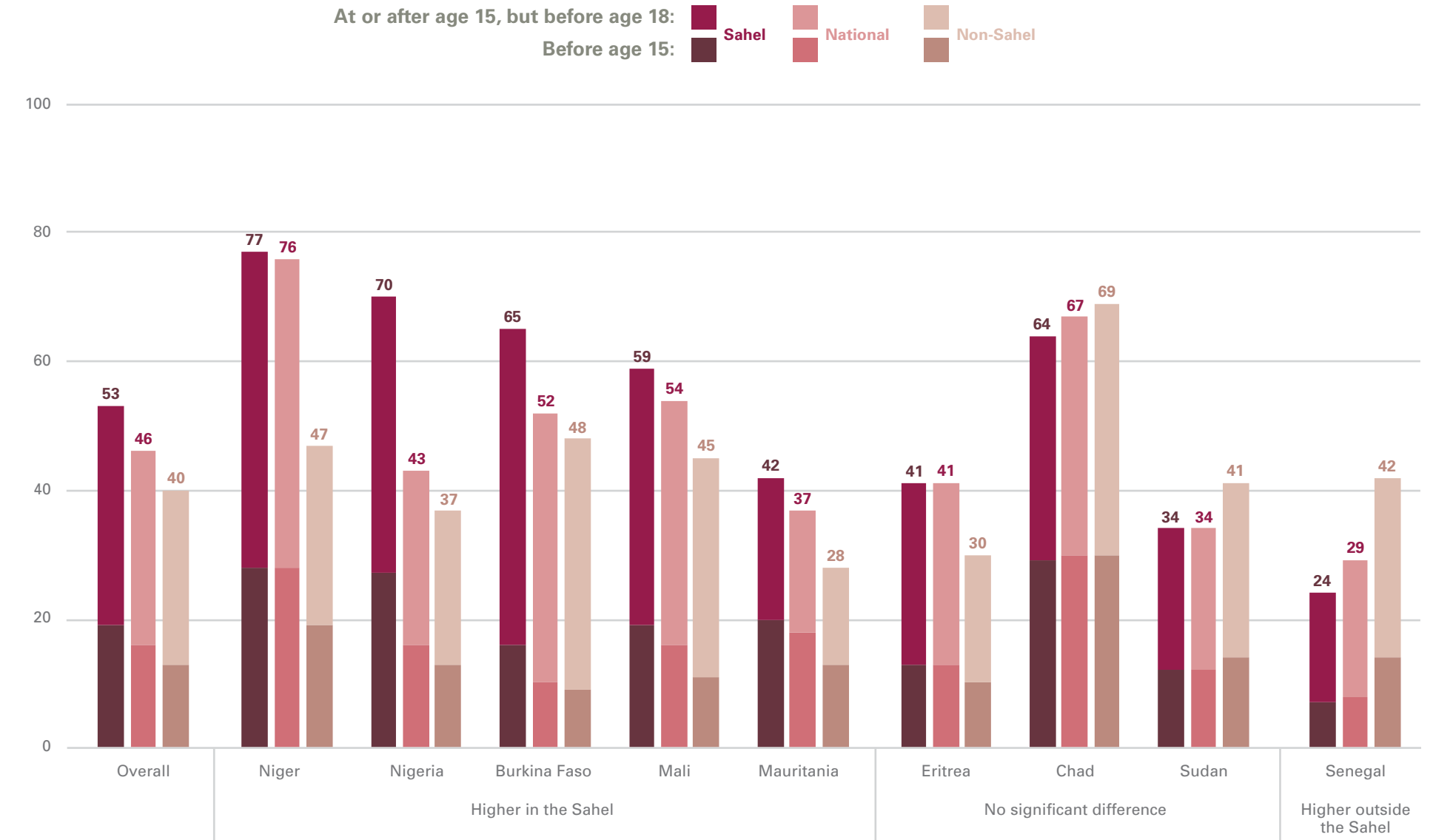
FIG. 5 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18



Note: For the purpose of this analysis, the central Sahel is defined as the Sahelian subregions in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria; the eastern Sahel includes the Sahelian subregions of Eritrea and Sudan; and the western Sahel includes the Sahelian subregions of Mauritania and Senegal.

## In five of the nine countries spanning the Sahel, levels of child marriage are higher in states or provinces inside the region compared to those outside the Sahel

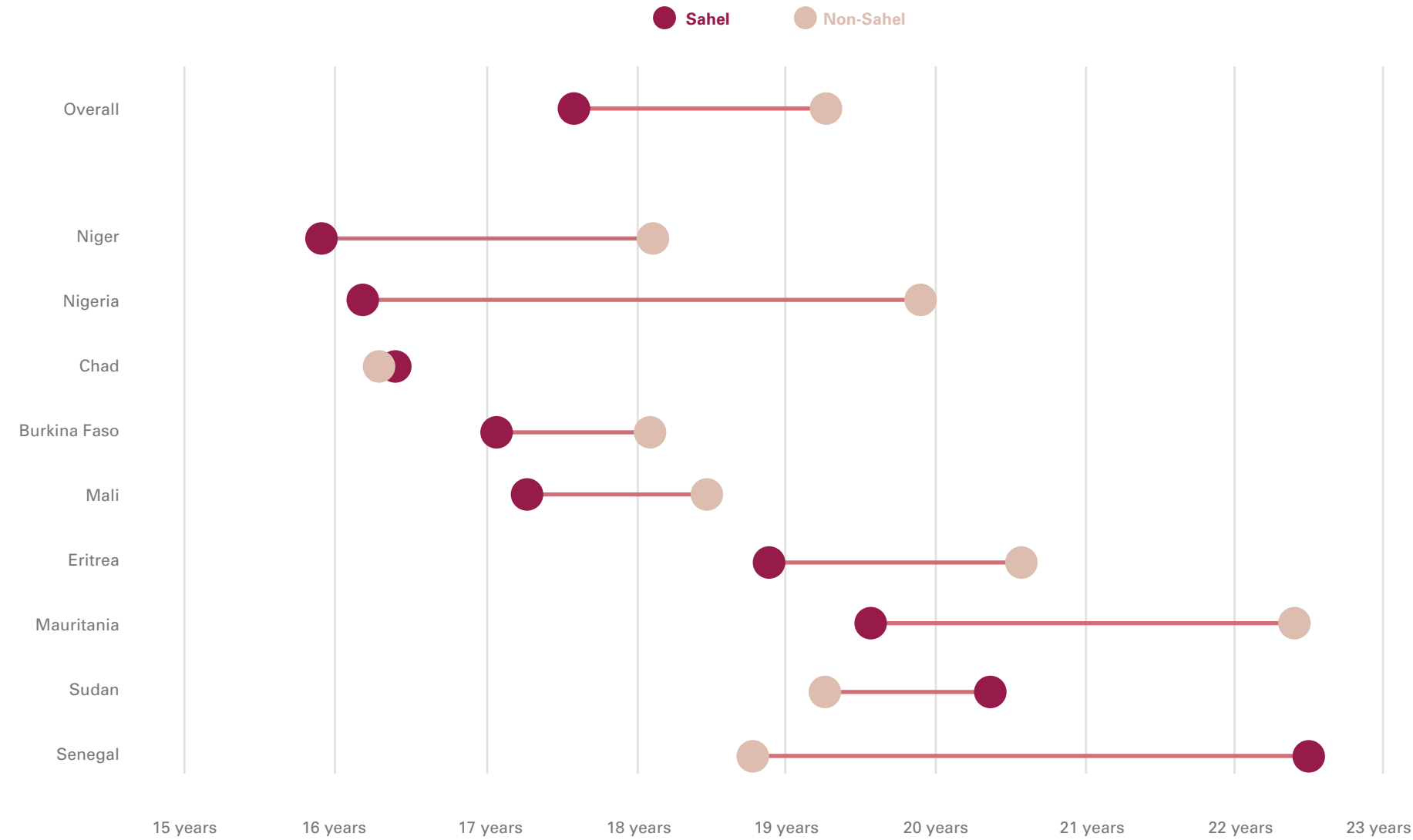
FIG. 6 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18





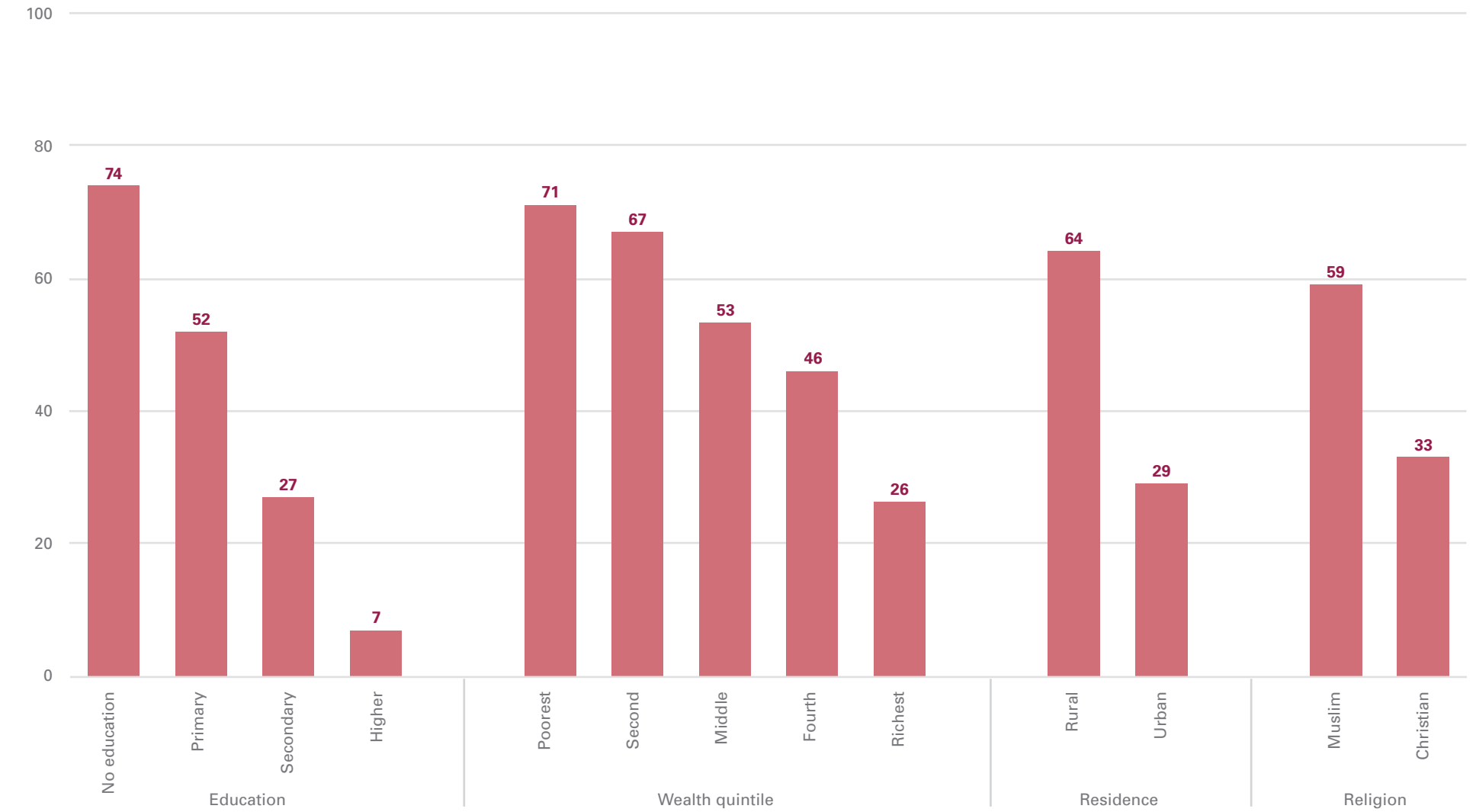
## In these nine countries, women in the Sahel region marry nearly two years earlier than those outside the region

FIG. 7 Median age at first marriage or union among women aged 20 to 24 years



## Young women with no education are 10 times more likely to have married in childhood than their peers with more than a secondary education

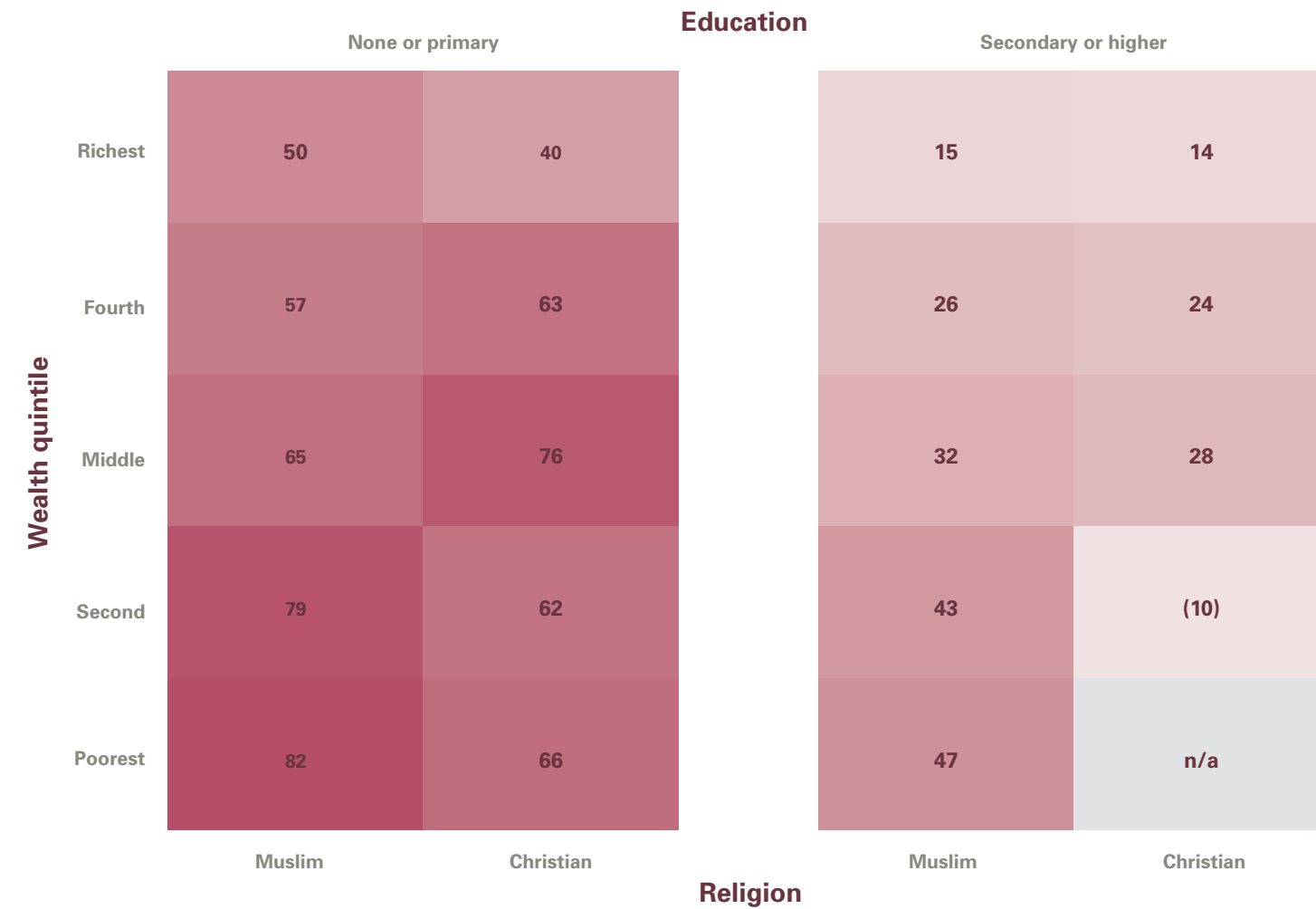
FIG. 8 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18



Note: Analysis by religion excludes Mauritania, Niger and Sudan, for which data were not available by this background characteristic.

## Regardless of wealth or religion, women with more education were less likely to have married in childhood

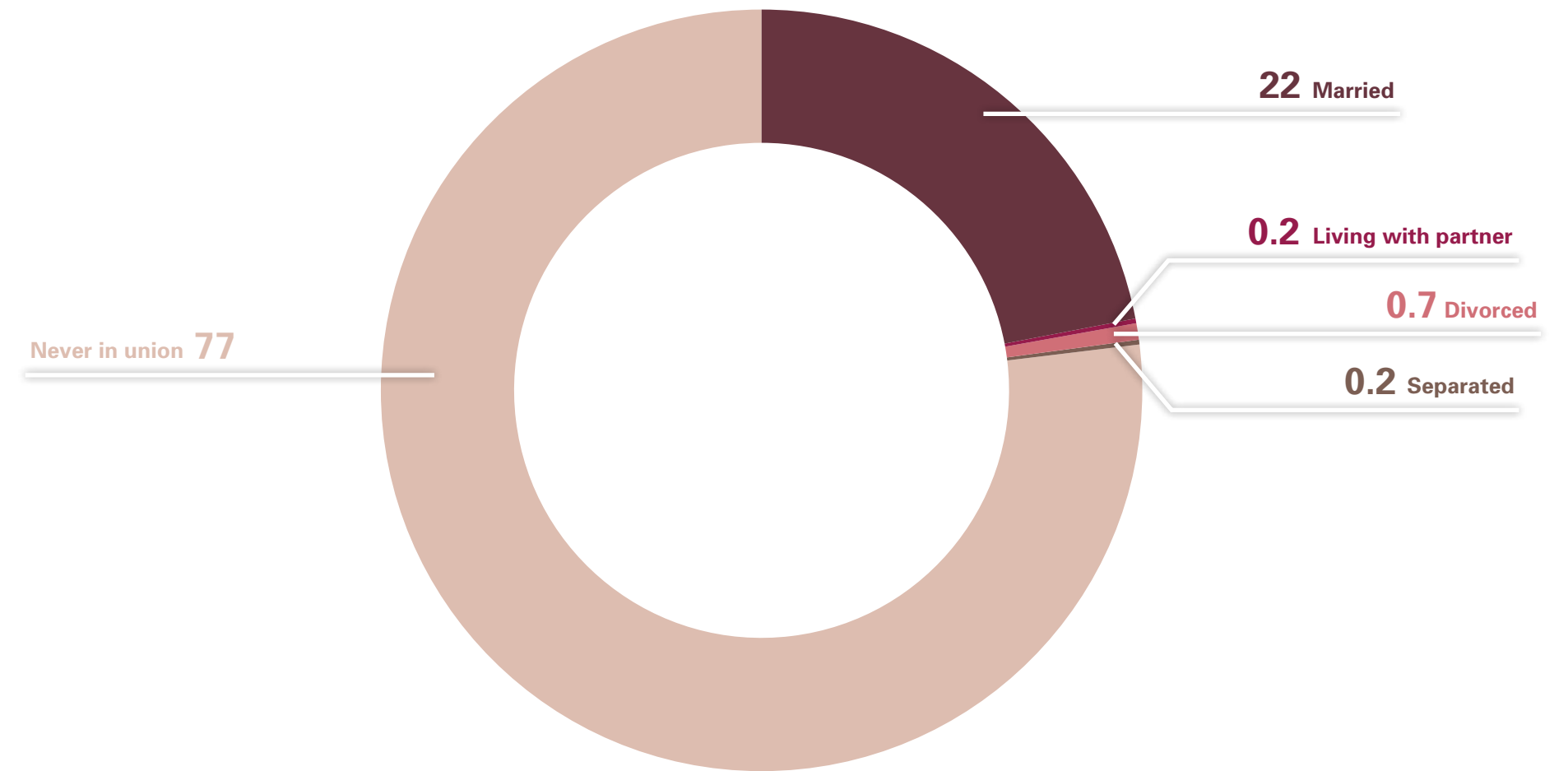
FIG. 9 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before age 18



Notes: Values presented here are based on at least 25 unweighted cases. Those based on 25 to 49 unweighted cases are shown in parentheses. This figure excludes Mauritania, Niger and Sudan, for which data were not available by religion.

## Among adolescent girls in the region, more than one in five are already married; informal unions are rare

FIG. 10 Percentage distribution of adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years by current marital status

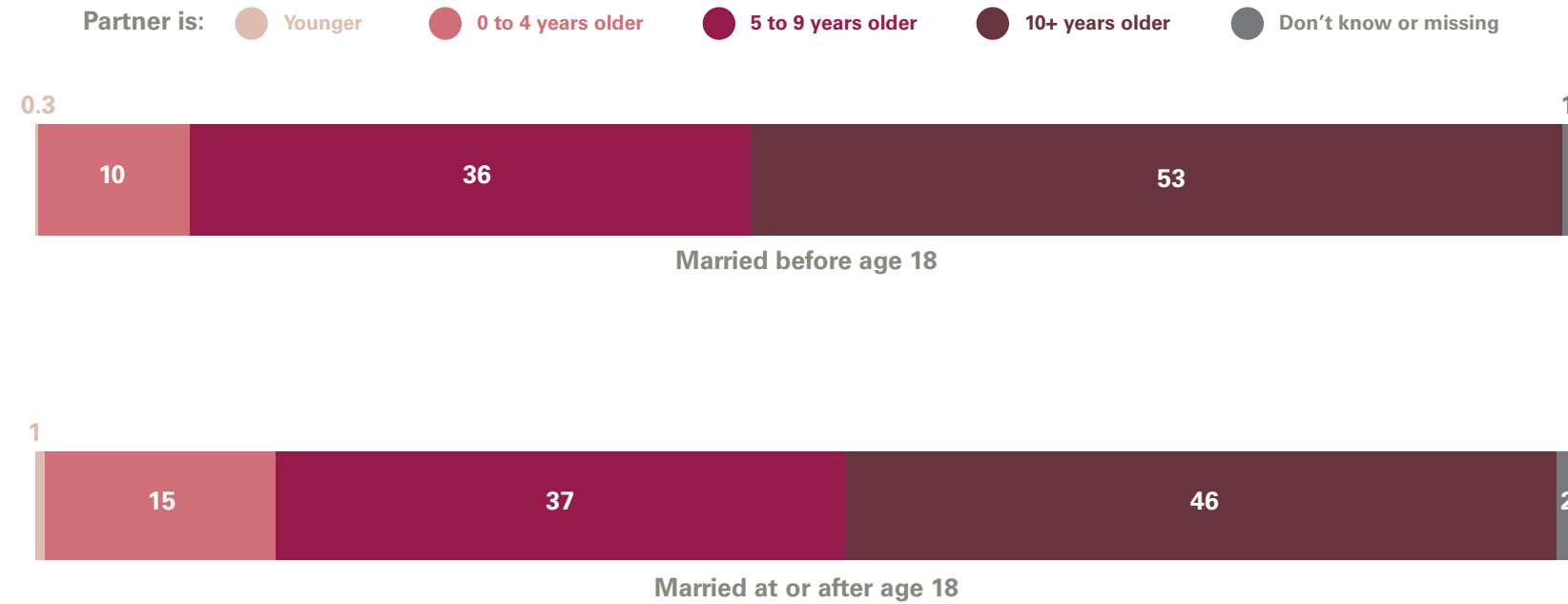


# LIVES OF CHILD BRIDES

## Spousal age gap

Over half of child brides have a spouse who is at least 10 years older

FIG. 11 Percentage distribution of currently married women aged 20 to 24 years by age gap between the women and their partners

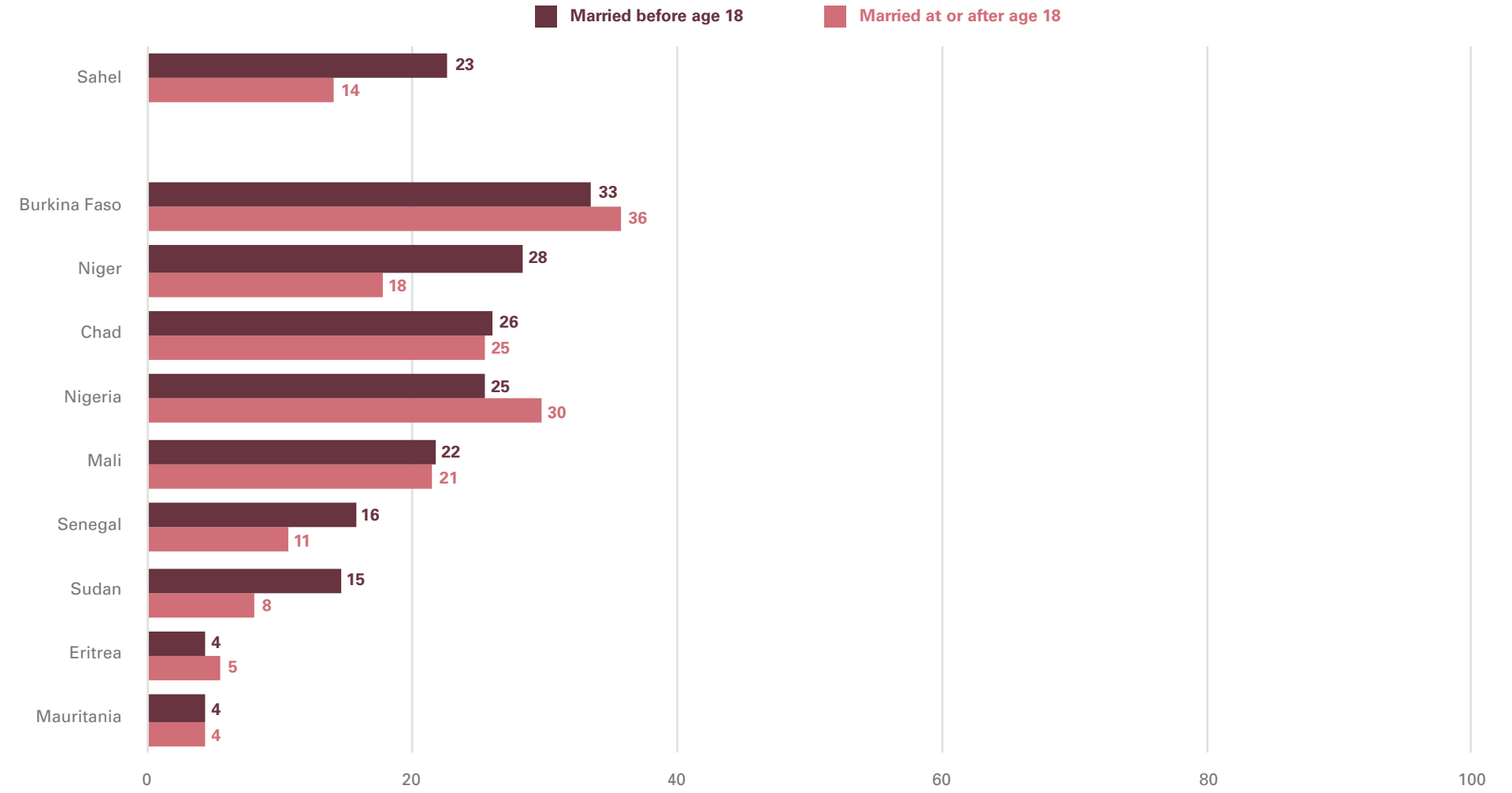


Note: Some values do not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

## Polygyny

Nearly one in four child brides in the Sahel are in a polygynous union; in Niger, levels of polygyny are significantly higher among child brides than in those who married in adulthood

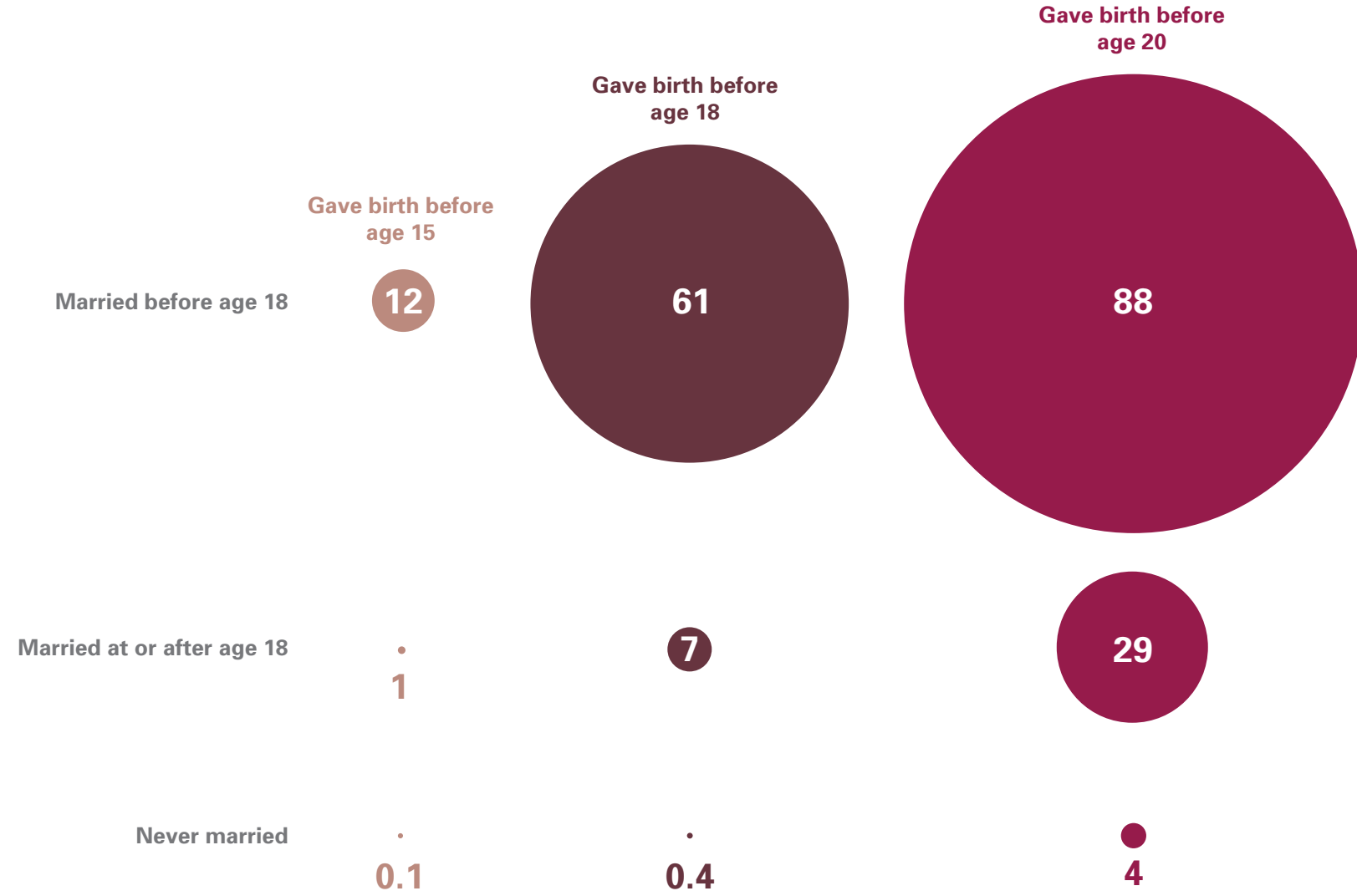
FIG. 12 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years in a polygynous union



## Early childbearing

Six in ten child brides in the Sahel gave birth before age 18, and nearly 9 in 10 gave birth before age 20

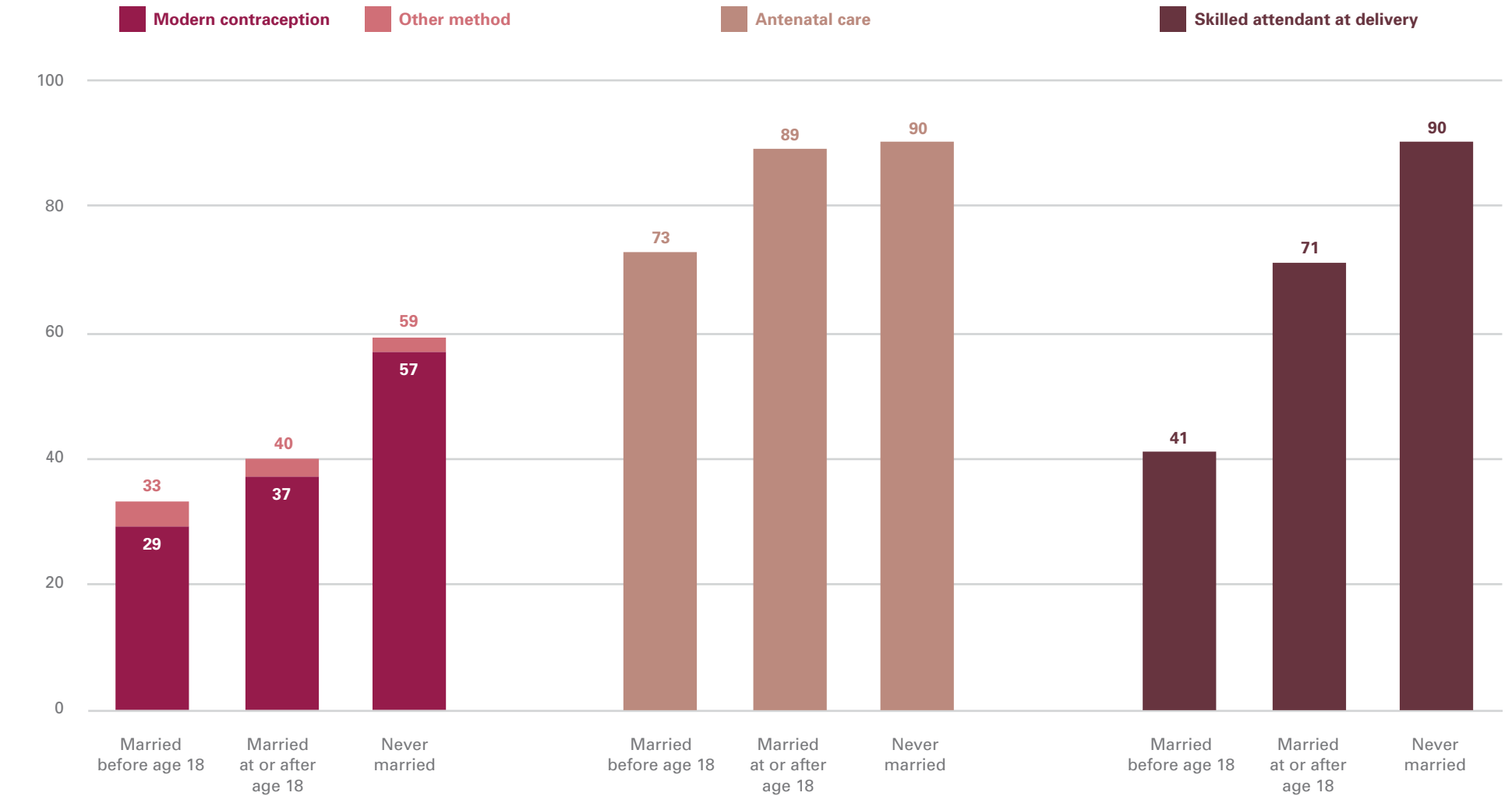
FIG. 13 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before ages 15, 18 and 20



## Reproductive health

Child brides are less likely than their peers who are unmarried or marry later to have their reproductive health needs met

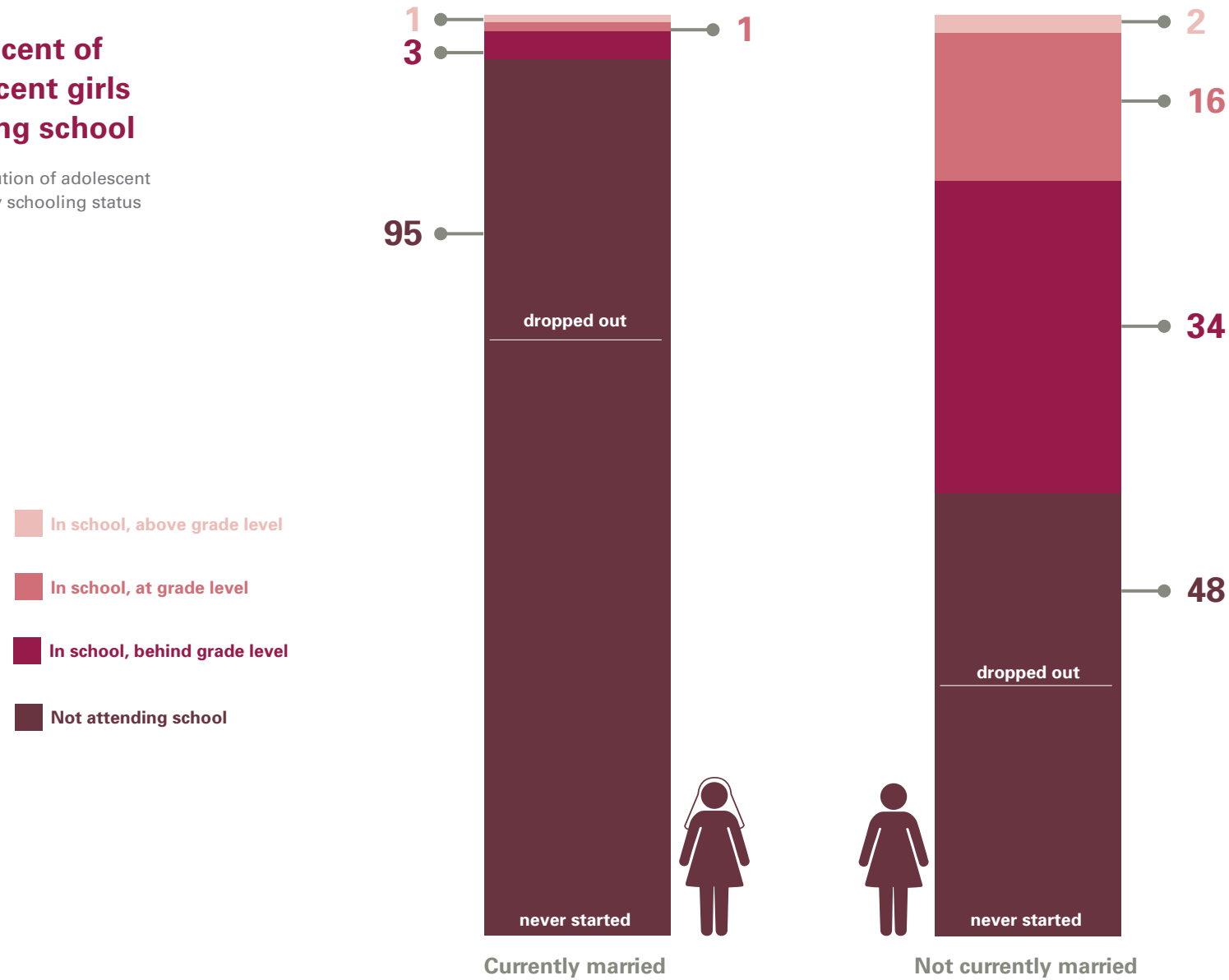
FIG. 14 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years whose demand for family planning is satisfied by a modern method or any method of contraception, who had at least one antenatal care visit with a skilled provider during their last pregnancy, and who had a skilled provider during their last live birth



## Education

**Ninety-five per cent of married adolescent girls are not attending school**

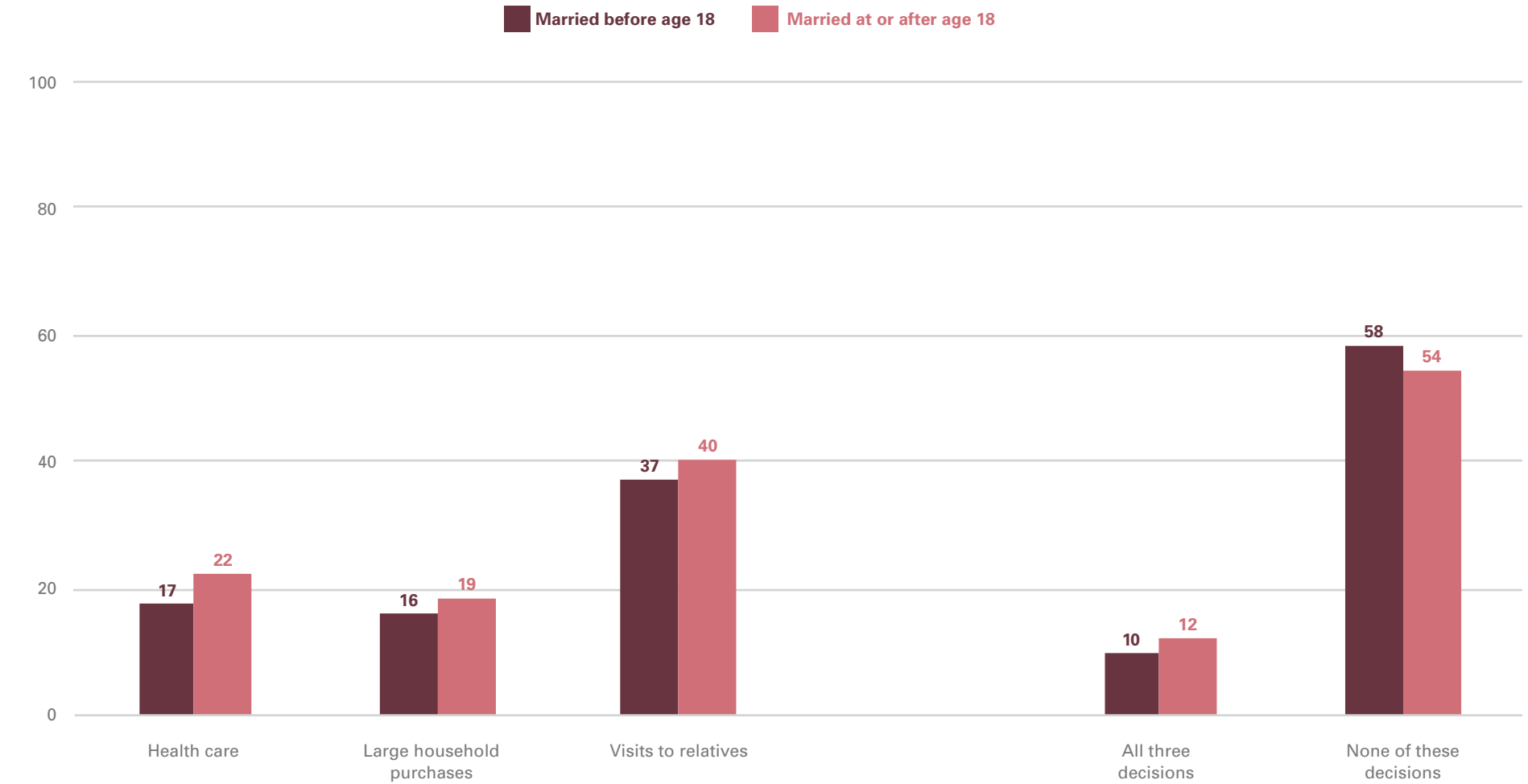
FIG. 15 Percentage distribution of adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years by schooling status



## Empowerment

**The majority of young women, including most child brides, do not have a say in major decisions in their households**

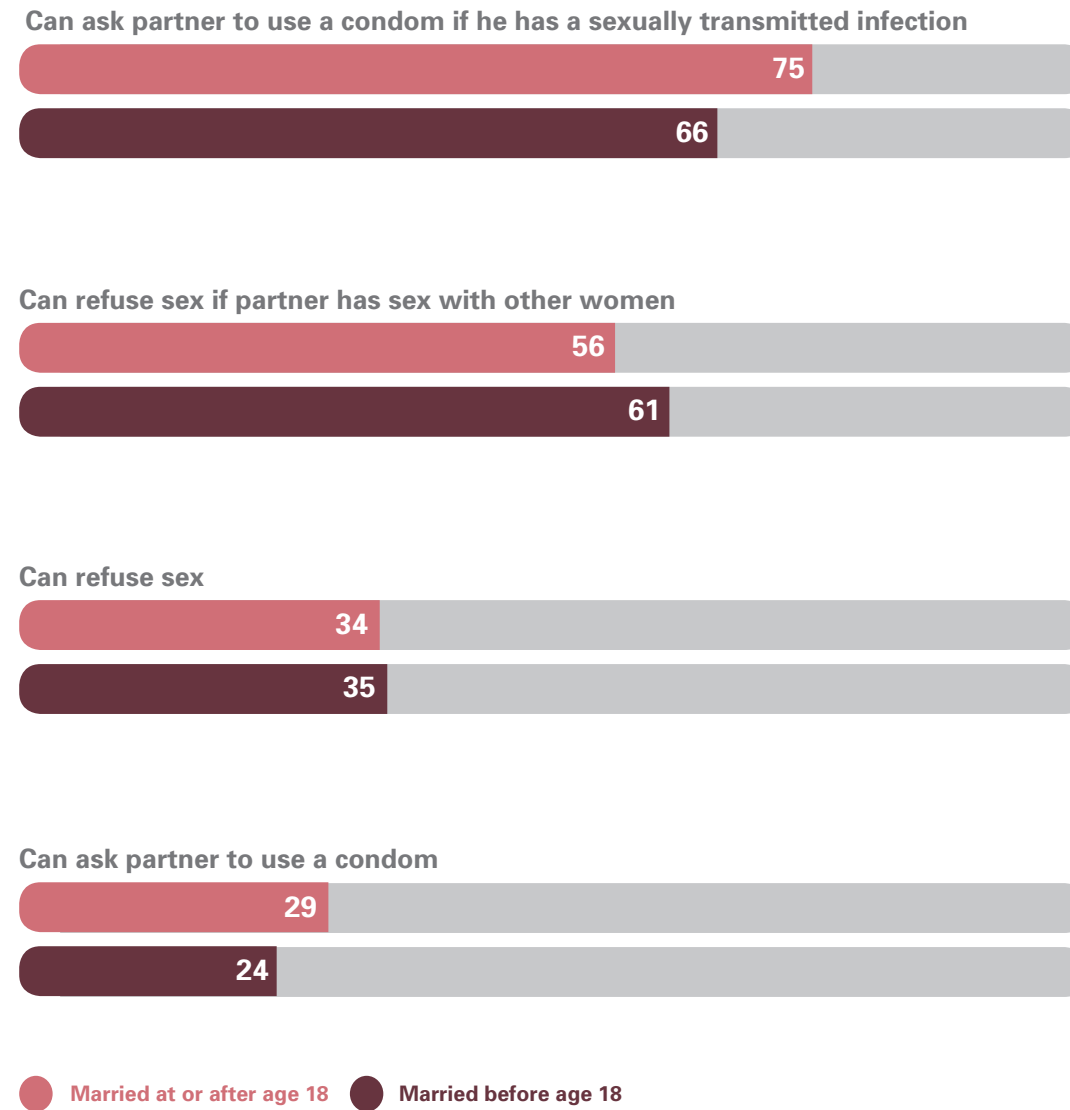
FIG. 16 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who decide, alone or together with their partner, on their health care, large household purchases, and visits to relatives



Note: This figure excludes Mauritania and Sudan, for which data on household decision-making were not available.

## Most young women say they cannot refuse sex with their partner or ask him to use a condom, except under certain circumstances

FIG. 17 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who can ask their partner to use a condom (for any reason, including if he has a sexually transmitted infection) and who can refuse sex with their partner (for any reason, including knowing he has sex with other women)

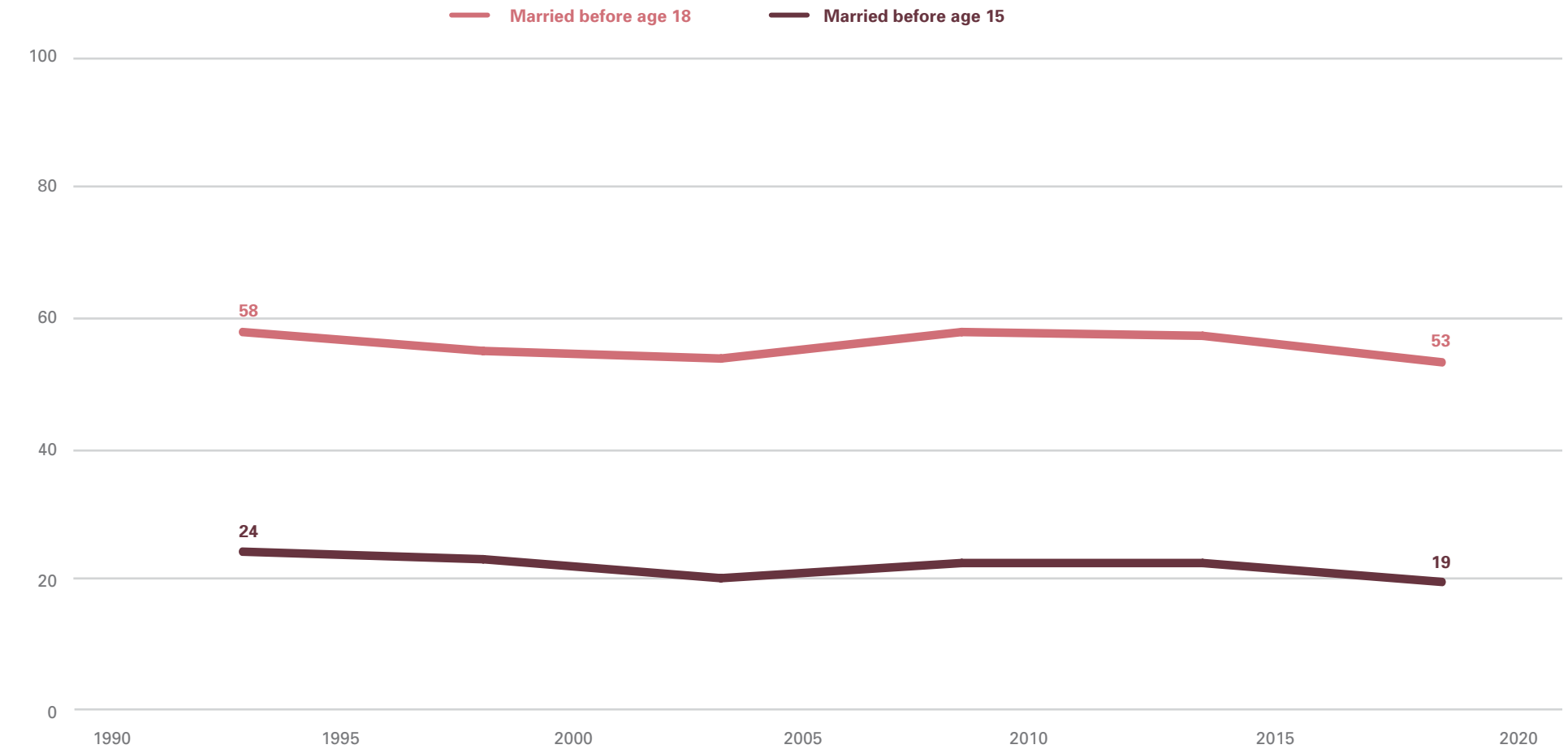


Note: This figure excludes Mauritania and Sudan, for which data on negotiation with sexual partners were not collected.

## GENERATIONAL TRENDS

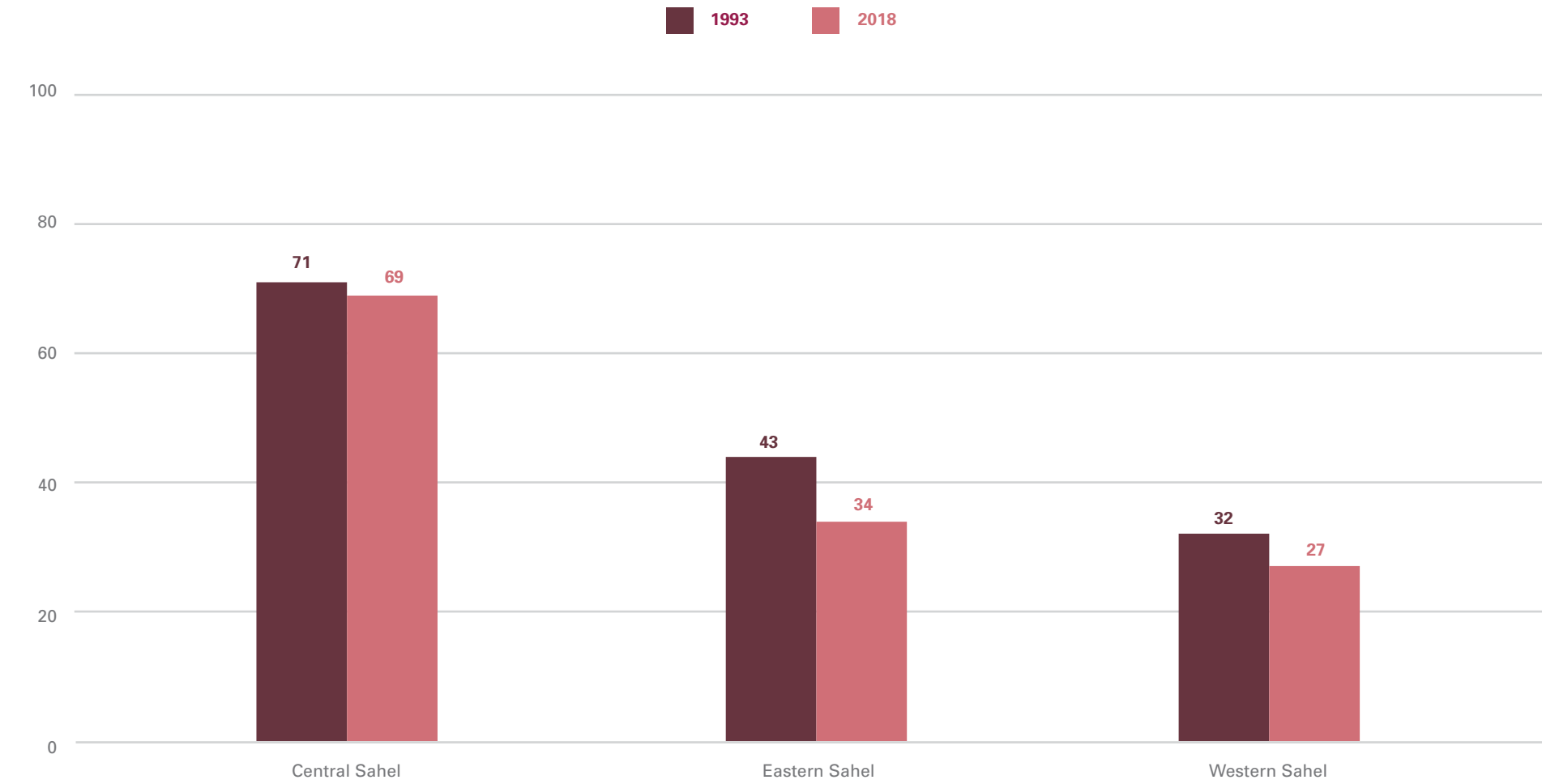
### Child marriage remains just as common in the Sahel today as it was 25 years ago

FIG. 18 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18



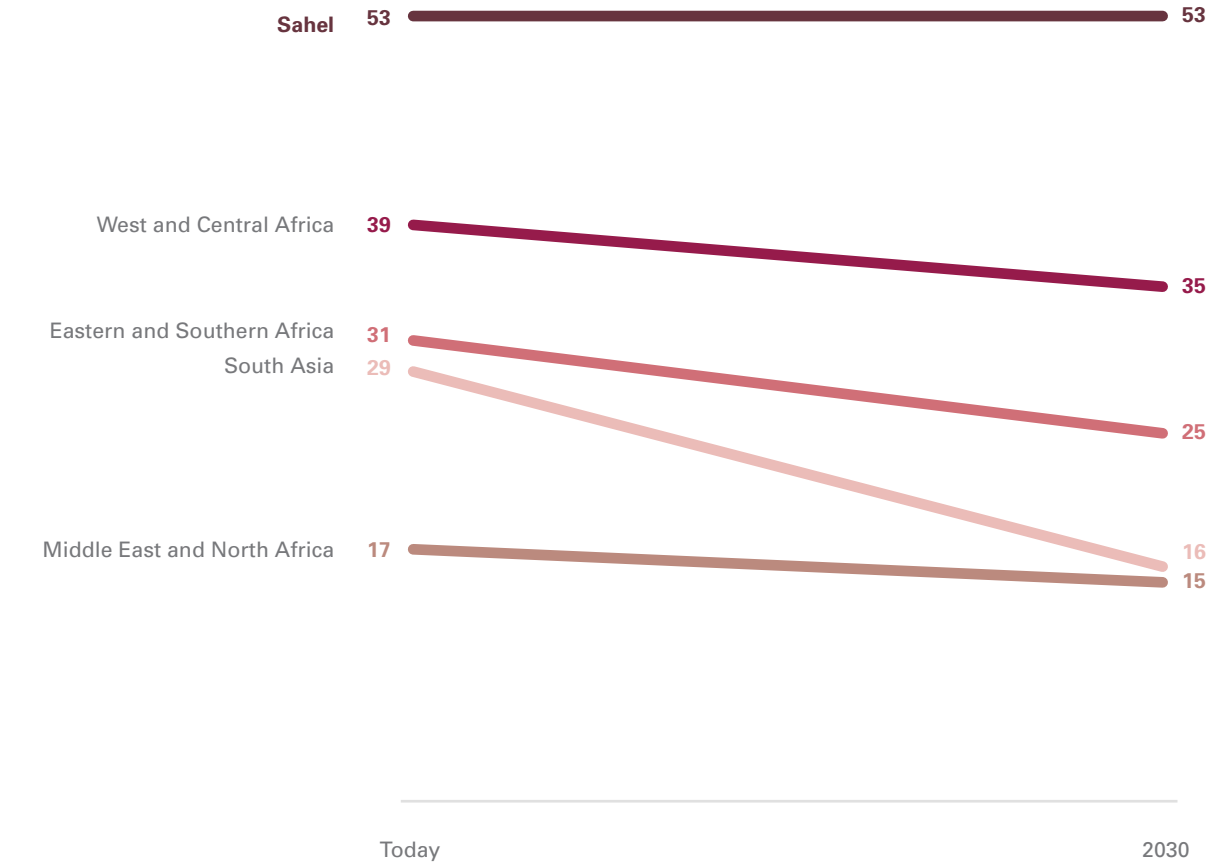
## The eastern Sahel has recorded progress in reducing child marriage, while the central and western areas have not seen a significant change

FIG. 19 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18



## Without a change in course, the Sahel will fall further behind other regions of the world in their progress towards eliminating child marriage

FIG. 20 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, projected





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## Technical notes

The purpose of this publication is to offer a descriptive analysis of the practice of child marriage in the Sahel, covering: the proportion and number of girls and women affected; disparities in risk across different populations; a selection of key outcome measures for women who married in childhood; an evaluation of historical trends in prevalence; and projections through 2030. It relies on nationally representative survey data, namely from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), which provide comparable data on the practice over time, along with data on respondents' background characteristics and key measures of well-being that facilitate this analysis. Additional research questions, including on families' decision-making about marriage, the impact of programmes and drivers of change fall outside the scope of this analysis.

To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18. The number of child brides is defined as the number of girls under 18 who have already married plus the number of adult women who were married before age 18. This is calculated using the estimated prevalence of child marriage among each age cohort, applied to the female population in the respective cohort. This method relies on both household survey data for prevalence and demographic data for the size of the population (See section on 'Data sources').

The percentage of currently married adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years should not be interpreted as indicative of the risk of being married in childhood. Any prevalence measure among girls under age 18 will be an underestimate of the full extent of the practice, since girls who are unmarried at the time of data collection may still marry before their 18th birthday.

Global estimates are based on a subset of 91 countries with comparable data from 2013–2019, covering 77 per cent of the global female population. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. In Figures 2 and 20, data coverage was insufficient to present regional values for East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. Confidence intervals are not shown in this publication. Caution is therefore warranted in interpreting the results since apparent differences among groups may not be significant. Key messages were developed taking confidence intervals into account; in cases where the title indicates a difference among various population groups or countries, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

Trends in the prevalence of child marriage relied on an age-cohort analysis using data from the latest available survey for each country. From each data source, data on age at marriage were used not only for the cohort aged 20 to 24 years, but for all respondents through age 49 years, which allowed for a calculation of the prevalence of child marriage up to 25 years prior to the time of data collection.

'Childhood' refers to the period from birth until the 18th birthday. 'Adulthood' refers to the period starting at age 18.

## Data sources

Data are drawn from UNICEF global databases, 2020, based on MICS, DHS and other nationally representative surveys, 2006–2019. For detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>. Demographic data are from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019*, Online edition.

## Endnotes

1. It is worth noting that demographic estimates and projections vary according to which geographic definition is used. See pages 8-9 for further detail on the definition of the region.
2. 'The Sahel: Land of opportunities', Africa Renewal, <www.un.org/africarenewal/sahel>, accessed 19 June 2020.
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8. Namely, Chad, Eritrea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan. Source: Institute for Economics & Peace, 'Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring peace in a complex world', Sydney, June 2020.
9. 'Sahel – A Region of Opportunities', United Nations Development Programme, <https://feature.undp.org/sahel/index.html>, accessed 15 June 2020.
10. 'Sahel – The World's Most Neglected and Conflict-ridden Region', Norwegian Refugee Council, <www.nrc.no/shorthand/fr/sahel--the-worlds-most-neglected-and-conflict-ridden-region/index.html>, accessed 16 June 2020.
11. 'Sahel Map', Office of the Special Envoy for the Sahel, <https://oses.unmissions.org/map>, accessed 3 August 2020.
12. It is worth noting that, in some of the literature, the Sahel is described as also including the extreme southern part of Algeria as well as northern parts of Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia and Guinea.



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UNICEF  
Data and Analytics Section  
Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring  
3 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017, USA

Email: [data@unicef.org](mailto:data@unicef.org)  
Website: [data.unicef.org](http://data.unicef.org)