West African Regional

Policy Brief

November, 2019

Closing inequality gaps: Prioritizing nutrition among women and adolescents in West Africa

The Challenge

The West Africa in region is home to 348 million people, including 29 million children under the age of five, and 80 million women of reproductive ages 15-49 years. Despite current efforts and progress, the population faces enormous challenges in fully realizing the optimal nutritional status required to develop and thrive.

In the region, 18.5 million of children under the age of five are stunted, more than 18 million women have anemia, and 6 million are obese. The situation is particularly difficult for children and women living in conditions of vulnerability and disadvantage, and even those relatively well-off face increasing health threats in obesity. The aspiration for food security, eradication of hunger, improvement of nutritional status and promotion of sustainable agriculture that all West African countries signed for under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be achieved by 2030 unless stronger and accelerated actions are taken in prioritizing nutrition and addressing significant inequalities among children, adolescents, and women in each country and the region as a whole.

Malnutrition is a severe public health problem that is linked to a substantial increase in the risk of mortality and morbidity. According to data from the United Nations (UN) Population Division, 2015, 23% of the total population in the West African region comprises of women of reproductive age (15 and 49 years). The health and nutrition of adolescent girls and women are, therefore, critical and a priority since it has been linked with child health and survival. Positive outcomes among adolescent girls and adult women lead to the improved nutritional health status of children.

Measuring inequalities in nutrition

As a part of the Countdown to 2030 for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health, government nutritional analysts from the 15 ECOWAS countries in collaboration with the West African Health Organization (WAHO), the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and other Countdown 2030 experts, conducted nutrition equity analyses using existing nationally representative data from the West Africa region.

This was done by taking a closer look at sub-regional variations in coverage and the equity of cost-effective nutrition interventions as well as nutritional status among children, adolescents, and women of reproductive age.

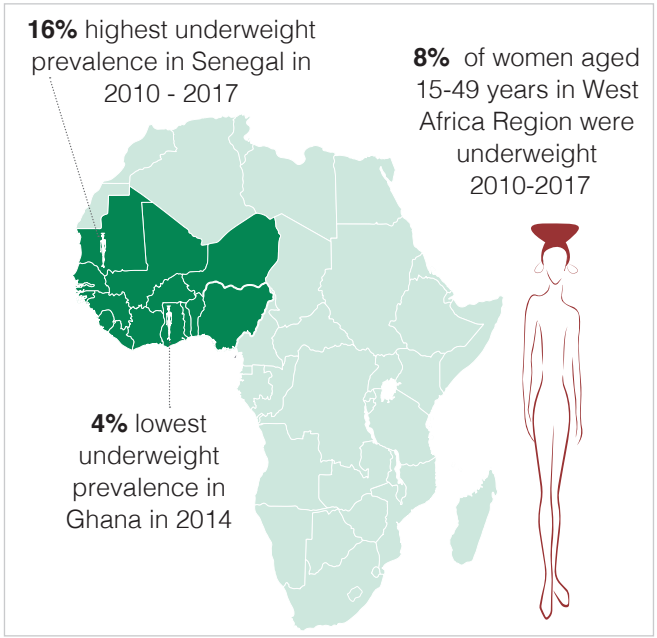
This brief describes the findings and actions that may accelerate progress towards eradicating hunger and ensuring optimal nutritional status and food security among adolescent girls and adult women in the region, regardless of their age and where they live. The findings provide policy-makers a reliable source of information and updated knowledge about the status of malnutrition and disparities that exist among women.

Health and nutrition among adolescent girls and women in West Africa

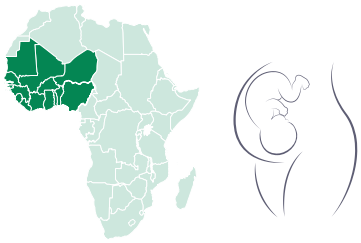
A. Underweight

An underweight person is someone whose body weight is considered too low to be healthy.

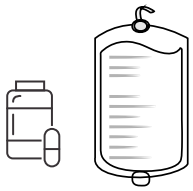
1. Overall situation in West Africa



60% of pregnant women in West Africa have anemia



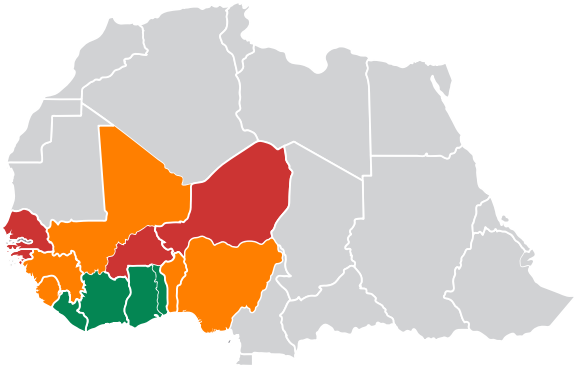
Iron and folic acid supplementation is received by **36%** of women on average during their last pregnancy



More than 18 million women aged 15-49 have anemia

2. Underweight prevalence among women aged 15-49 in West Africa

Underweight prevalence is 8.4%, with evidence showing persistent disparities between countries.



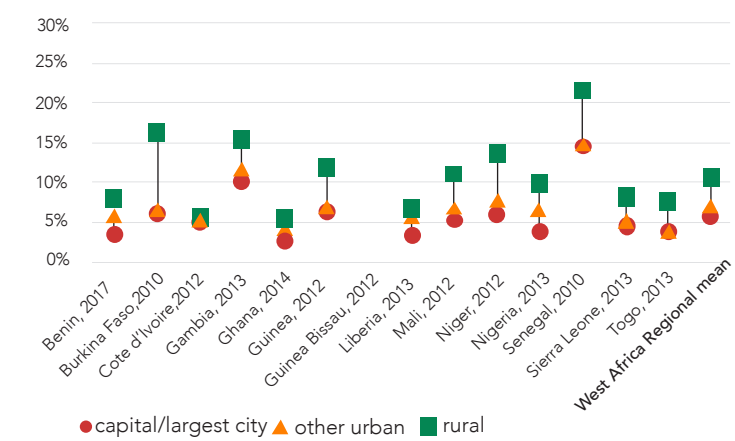
There are significant inequalities across countries in the prevalence of underweight women. Countries with the lowest underweight prevalence are clustered together.

Legend:

- < 5%
- 5 -10%
- >10%

3. Urban vs. Rural Inequalities

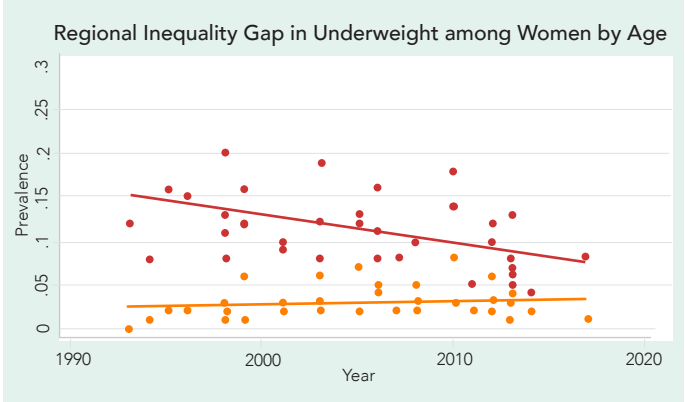
There are marked disparities in the prevalence of underweight between women living in the capital or largest cities, other urban, and rural areas, with the rural areas being disadvantaged by 5.4 percentage points on average. However, there is no disparity between the capital cities and other urban areas.



4. Inequalities among women by age

There has been a gradual reduction in regional inequalities from 12 percentage points to 4 percentage points between 1993 and 2017. This is attributed to a steady decrease in underweight among adult women, whereas a slight increase in underweight is observed among adolescent girls.

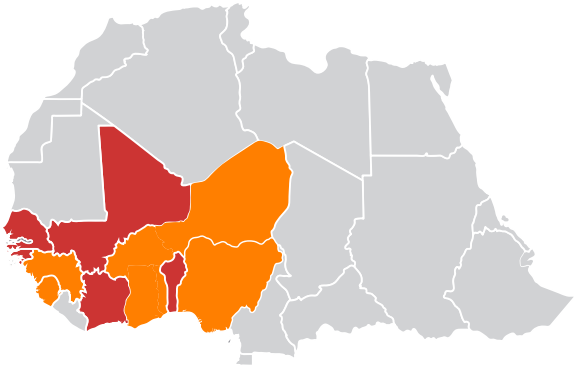
Key:
- Country Estimate Adolescent
- Country Estimate Adult
- Regional Multilevel Prediction Adolescent
- Regional Multilevel Prediction Adult



B. Anemia

Anemia is a condition in which a person lacks enough healthy red blood cells to carry adequate oxygen to the body's tissues. Having anemia can make you feel tired and weak'

1. Anemia among women in West Africa



More than half of the population of women in West Africa has anemia, with disparities observed between countries in the 2010- 2017 period.

42.4% in Ghana in 2014

60.3% in the Gambia in 2013

Legend:

40 - 50%

> 50%

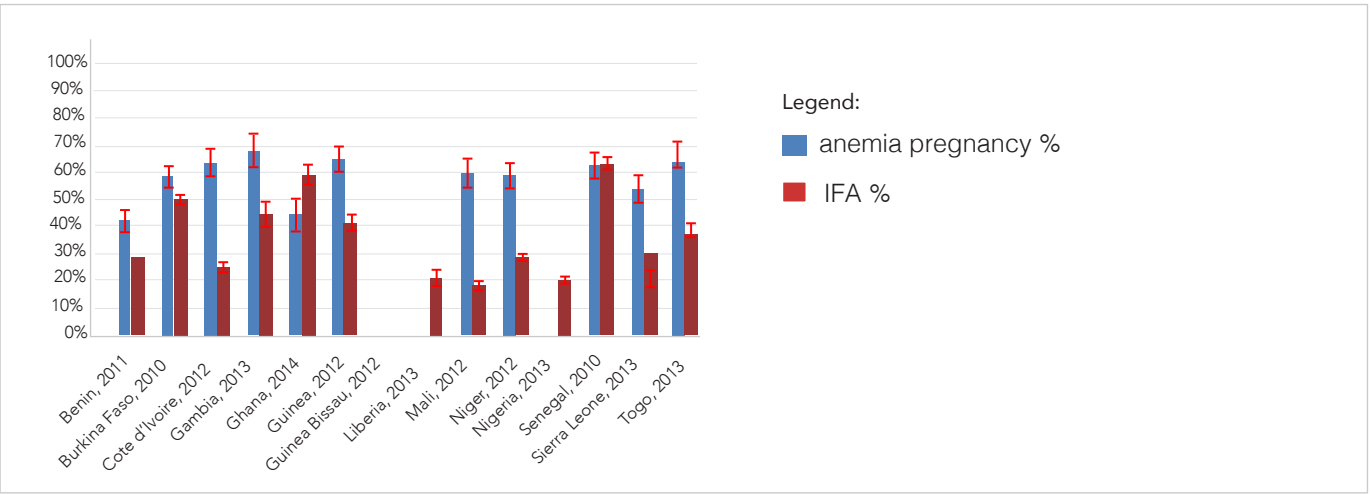
2. Trends in regional inequality of anemia among women by wealth

Prevalence of anemia gradually decrease between 2001 and 2017 among both poor and rich people. Additionally, inequalities remained constant (8 percentage points) over the period, with no significant differences between the two groups.

Legend:

Country Estimate Q1(poorest)
Country Estimate Adult Q5 (richest)
Regional Multilevel Prediction Q1
Regional Multilevel Prediction Q5

3. Prevalence of anemia during pregnancy and coverage of IFA supplementation



Anemia during pregnancy is highly prevalent at 58.2% on average in the region, while the coverage of iron/folic acid supplementation remains very low at 36.1%. Sierra Leone depicts a desirable scenario where the need for IFA supplementation coverage is being met. There are some significant data gaps, with countries such as Nigeria and Liberia lacking recent data on anemia and iron/folic acid supplementation.

Conclusion

Malnutrition among adolescent girls and adult women in West Africa is still rife even though multiple programs have been established to improve nutritional outcomes. There is an urgent need to address malnutrition in all its forms – undernutrition and obesity. Furthermore, accelerated efforts are required to close the evident inequality gaps to ensure that nobody is left behind.

Governments must renew their commitments and development partners should develop broader programs and interventions for adolescent girls and women if the region is to meet its nutrition targets by 2030.

Recommendations

- There is an urgent need to focus investment particularly in the poorest performing countries. Increased investment should not, however, mean shifting resources from better-performing countries. This recommendation is in alignment with WAHO's multisectoral nutrition plan.
- Governments should develop guidelines for the screening and management of malnutrition in adolescent girls and adult women. Furthermore, countries need to make adolescent and women's nutrition a top national priority to reduce incidences of malnutrition.
- Countries should empower women at the household level to ensure proper nutrition, and adequate care for the family is a top priority.
- Countries should increase efforts to make available recent data, especially from household surveys, to allow measurement and monitoring of nutrition intervention coverage and nutrition status indicators among adolescents and adult women .
- Stakeholders should support further analyses of the causes of anemia.

About the Countdown 2030 Initiative

The Countdown 2030 Initiative for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health is a global strategy, led by several institutions. It aims to improve the measurement and monitoring of coverage, equity and drivers of coverage, and to strengthen regional and national capacities in the production and use of scientific data. In collaboration with the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and the West African Health Organization (WAHO), the Initiative supported the establishment of a regional network of research and public health institutions and government agencies from 22 West and Central African countries to help them better monitor and analyze data and communicate research results on maternal, newborn, child and youth health and nutrition. The Initiative calls for the accountability of governments and development partners, identifies knowledge gaps and proposes new actions for universal coverage of women's, children's and adolescents' health. It is expected that government authorities will use the research results to improve planning and increase resources for achieving national and global goals end preventable maternal, newborn, and child deaths. For more information, visit http://countdown2030.org.

Acknowledgements

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Countdown to 2030
Women's, Children's & Adolescents' Health

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