other indicator of income distribution is the ratio of the proportion of income received by the richest 20% of the population to the proportion received by the poorest 20%. The higher this ratio, the greater the inequality in income distribution. This ratio is 3.6 in Sweden; 5.2–6.5 in Canada, France and Great Britain; and 8.9 in the United States. In the four countries with data on the economic status of women aged 20–24, there are substantial proportions of young women in all three categories of economic status.

The available data on youth unemployment show a mixed picture across countries. The proportions of men and women aged 15–24 who are in the labor force but are not working are extremely high in France (22–30%), moderate in Canada (14–17%) and Sweden (16–18%), and lower in Great Britain (11–14%) and the United States (10–11%). This variation is partly a reflection of overall national differences in unemployment rates (which range from 5% in the United States to 12% in France). In addition, the proportion of youth who are in the labor force and employed varies across countries, depending on the proportion who are enrolled in school, apprenticeships, university or other sources of further education.

The proportion of women aged 20–24 who have a high level of education (some years of university or other postsecondary school) is larger in Canada, Great Britain and the United States (42–54%) than in France (23%). In Sweden, 23% of young women have attended university, but the proportion who have obtained other postsecondary education is unavailable. However, the proportions with low educational attainment are more similar across the five countries, spanning a narrower range (from 10% in Sweden to 26% in France). For a more standard measure of basic educational competency in a country, we also examined the proportion of persons aged 16–65 who are functionally illiterate.

Compared with data for high educational attainment across countries, this measure (available for all countries except France) shows a different pattern: The proportion of the population that is illiterate is smallest in Sweden (8%), much larger in Canada (17%) and even larger in the United States and Great Britain (21–22%).

The proportion of adolescents aged 15–19 who are foreign-born is larger in Canada and the United States (13% and 10%, respectively) than in the other three countries (5–7%). However, there is greater variation across countries in the proportions of their populations who are racial and ethnic minorities. Moreover, classification according to race and ethnicity, and availability of such statistics, varies from country to country. The proportion of young women who are classified as nonwhite, and, in the United States, as black or Hispanic, ranges from 2% in Sweden and 6% in Great Britain to 12% in Canada and 33% in the United States. A substantial proportion of the minority populations in Canada and Great Britain come from South Asia, while the minority population in the United States is primarily black or Hispanic.

The presence of just one of these aspects of disadvantage in an adolescent’s life can be associated with poor reproductive health outcomes. However, it is important to take into account that often in adolescents’ lives, several aspects of disadvantage coincide, compounding the impact of disadvantage and increasing the probability of such outcomes.

**Adolescent Childbearing**

In all five countries, there is a strong negative association between level of educational attainment and having a child before age 20 (Figure 1). In Sweden and France, fewer than 1% of the best-educated 20–24-year-old women had a child before they were 20, compared with almost 20% of those with the least schooling.* In Great Britain and Canada, the proportions are somewhat higher: 2–4% among women with the most education and 36–46% among the least educated. At all levels of educational attainment, U.S. women had the highest levels of adolescent childbearing; seven percent of young women with some college education, 28% of those with a middle level of educational attainment and 66% of those with less than a high school education had a child before age 20.

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*In France, other data show that 2% of adolescent women in academic programs had ever been pregnant, compared with 15% of adolescent women in vocational programs (source: Bajos N and Durand S, 2001, reference 38).