



# SITUATION ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENTS IN MALAYSIA: An infographic booklet

Published by the United Nations Children's Fund, Malaysia.  
© UNICEF Malaysia 2021.  
All rights reserved.  
First published in November 2021.

The copyright for this report is held by the United Nations Children's Fund. Permission is required to reprint, reproduce, photocopy or in any other way to cite or quote from this report in written form. UNICEF has a formal permission policy that requires a written request to be submitted. For non-commercial uses, the permission will normally be granted free of charge. Please write to UNICEF Malaysia at the address below to initiate a permission request.

For further information, please contact:  
United Nations Children's Fund  
Malaysia Country Office  
Level 10, Menara PJH,  
No. 2, Jalan Tun Abdul Razak,  
62100 Putrajaya, Malaysia.  
[kualalumpur@unicef.org](mailto:kualalumpur@unicef.org)  
[www.unicef.org/malaysia](http://www.unicef.org/malaysia)

Design and layout by Salt Media Group,  
advised by UNICEF Malaysia Communications.

# CONTENTS

WHAT, WHY, WHO, HOW?	2
1. EDUCATION, SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT	4
2. ENABLING AND PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT	6
3. HEALTH	8
4. PARTICIPATION	10
5. CHALLENGES	12

---

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the 119 young people that participated in the consultations that contributed to the Adolescent Situation Analysis report on which this infographic booklet is based. The development of this booklet was led by Jessica Sercombe, Adolescent Development and Participation (ADAP) Officer, and supported by Siddarth Jeyakuhan and Wani Nur Immanina, ADAP/Communication for Development (C4D) interns, with close guidance from Hyung Joon Kim, C4D Specialist.

The team would like to extend our gratitude to Dr Rashed Mustafa Sarwar, UNICEF Representative in Malaysia, Radoslaw Rzehak, Deputy Representative, Marc Vergara, Chief of Communications, and to all UNICEF Malaysia Programme staff for their support and guidance throughout the development process.



This booklet is a snapshot of the report, [Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia](#) commissioned by UNICEF Malaysia. The study aimed to:

- improve understanding of the situation of adolescents in Malaysia,
- identify advocacy priorities,
- help inform programmes for young people.

Adolescence is a defining stage in a person's life. It's a period when individuals are experiencing physical growth, developing emotionally, and forming personal identities. Ensuring that adolescents are supported during this time will have significant impacts on their future. Their experiences with, and access to, quality health services, education, employment opportunities and participation in community and civic affairs are important foundations for adolescents to reach their full potential as they transition into adulthood.

### Population of adolescents in Malaysia in 2019\*

# 4,797,200

10-14 year olds

## 2,527,200

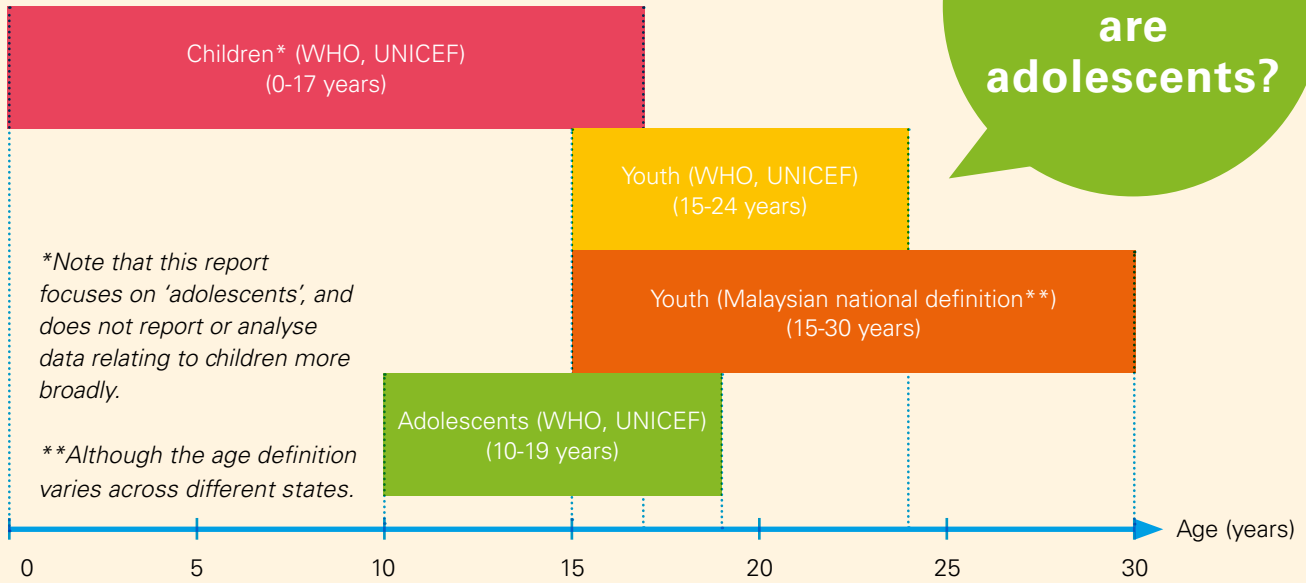
15-18 year olds

## 2,270,000

\*Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)

# WHO are adolescents?

Children, adolescents and youth's ages are defined as follows:



# HOW was the study conducted?

**PHASE 1** Researchers studied key published data, including national surveys and administrative data from Government agencies and UNICEF's strategy documents. They also conducted literature reviews of smaller-scale studies and research reports.



**PHASE 2** Researchers held three consultations with 119 adolescents living in Selangor, Sabah and Sarawak in November 2019, where participants helped identify and analyse priority issues affecting adolescents in Malaysia.

# 1

## EDUCATION, SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

Over the years, Malaysia has improved its access to education and opportunities for adolescents. However, there are disadvantaged groups that are still at risk of being denied education or dropping out of school. These include:



**Adolescents from indigenous communities** often drop out of school as the system does not take into account their cultural background, making them feel disconnected. Their parents also don't always understand the importance of education.



**Adolescents with disabilities** find it hard to get an education that is truly inclusive as there are not enough trained teachers, resources and personnel to support their learning needs. Some parents are also reluctant to enrol their children because they fear the stigma that their children will face.



**Undocumented or stateless adolescents** cannot register themselves at government schools. Some adolescents may get to attend schools run by private charitable organisations. Refugees also face the same problems as they are not granted a 'refugee status' and are therefore considered illegal immigrants.



**Adolescents in conflict with the law** are those who are suspected or accused of committing an offence by law. When they are detained at centres or institutions—which can be overcrowded and substandard—they have limited access to education.



**Pregnant adolescents** tend to avoid going to school because of the stigma they face from peers and adults. When this happens, they find it hard to catch up with lessons even after the baby is born. Many choose to fully drop out.



### A ACCESS TO EDUCATION

#### Risk of dropping out of school

Adolescents are more likely to drop out from secondary school than younger children because secondary education is not compulsory in Malaysia.



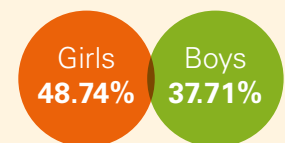
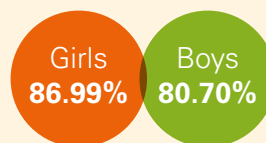
In 2019<sup>1</sup>, the percentages of adolescents enrolled in secondary and higher education were:



Secondary school



Tertiary education



1 World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.MA?locations=MY>

## B SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

What does the employment landscape for youth in Malaysia look like?



### A mismatch of skills

Formal education does not always provide the skills that industries and employers need. As a result, many graduates have difficulty finding jobs.

### Lower-skilled jobs

Young people are more likely to be employed in **lower skilled jobs at lower wages**. In 2019 the estimated average median monthly wages of youth employees<sup>2</sup> was:



### Youth unemployment

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that youths are facing more challenges in transitioning from school to work.

In February 2021, **13.9% of young individuals faced unemployment<sup>3</sup>** (compared to the national unemployment rate of 4.8%).



15-19 years: <b>RM1,450</b> (males: RM1,476, females: RM1,318)	20-24 years: <b>RM1,577</b> (males: RM1,672, females: RM1,473)
25-29 years: <b>RM2,206</b> (males: RM2,186, females: RM2,261)	30-34 years: <b>RM2,672</b> (males: RM2,646, females: RM2,732)

More than **20% of young people** aged 15-24 worked in services<sup>4</sup> and sales. Of these, 52.8% were female adolescents aged 15-19.

### Not in education, employment or training (NEET)<sup>5</sup>

Between 2010-2017, an estimated **14%-16% of youths aged 15-24 were not enrolled in education, or had any jobs or training.**



**18%-21%**  
of female youths  
were NEET



**10%-11%**  
of male youths  
were NEET

<sup>2</sup> Department of Statistics, Malaysia (DOSM), *Salaries & Wages Survey Report 2019*, Sept 2020, pp. 23, 25, 27.

<sup>3</sup> DOSM, Labour Force, Malaysia February 2021, April 2021, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> A "service" is a business that provides goods or services to a customer but does not itself manufacture goods.

<sup>5</sup> Tey, Nai P. 'The State of the Youth in Malaysia', *Population Statistics Malaysia 2018*, Population Studies Unit (PSU), 2019, p. 139.



# 2

## ENABLING AND PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT

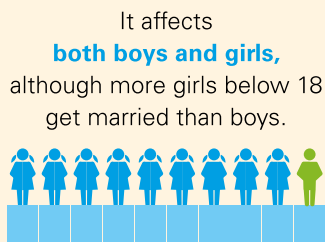
For children entering adolescence, new experiences bring new risks. Adolescents face different forms of violence: physical, sexual and emotional abuse that may happen at home, in the community or over the internet, with different risks for girls and boys. In Malaysia, some of the key issues adolescents face include child marriage, abuse at home and in school, bullying and cyberbullying and the risk of being in conflict with the law.

### A CHILD MARRIAGE

In Malaysia, thousands of children under 18 years old have been married in the past decade.



At least **1,500 children**<sup>6</sup> marry every year (as of 2018).



In 2018 **90%** were girls.<sup>7</sup>

It occurs **across all states** and **communities**.

In 2018, **1,856** children married.<sup>8</sup>



**Pahang** had the highest number of non-Muslim children married (**102**).

**Sabah** had the highest number of Muslim children married (**334**).

### Why child marriage occurs



**Social acceptance** that enables children to get married (social norms)



**Poverty** and low household income



**Laws** that allow marriage under age 18



**Unable to access education** or poor school attendance



**Lack of parental guidance** and access to **sexual and reproductive health support** and services



Lack of legal status, rights and services to protect a child who is **undocumented, stateless, a refugee or asylum-seeking**

### Child marriage and the law

There is no standardized minimum age of marriage in Malaysia.

**Muslims fall under Islamic Law**

Minimum age (in most states<sup>9</sup>)

Boys **18**  
Girls **16**

Muslims can marry **under the minimum age** with approval of the Syariah Court. All females require a guardian's (wali) consent.

**Non-Muslims fall under Civil law**

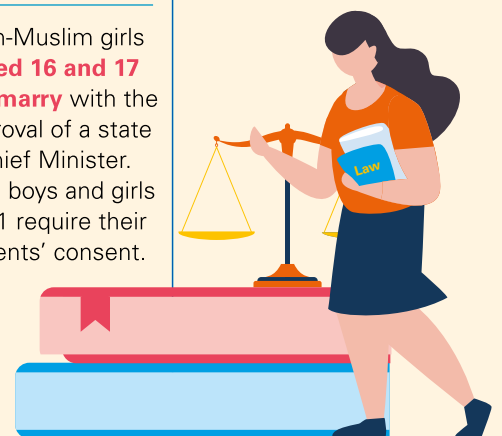
Minimum age

Boys **18**  
Girls **18**

Non-Muslim girls **aged 16 and 17 can marry** with the approval of a state Chief Minister. Both boys and girls < 21 require their parents' consent.

**Non-Muslim indigenous people follow customary laws**

Minimum age **not stated**



6 Based on 2007-2017 statistics from Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFC), Malaysia.

7 DOSM as cited by MWFC.

8 Ibid.

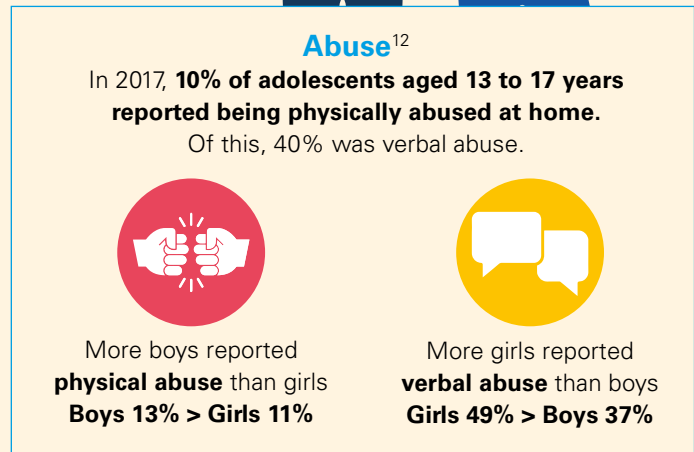
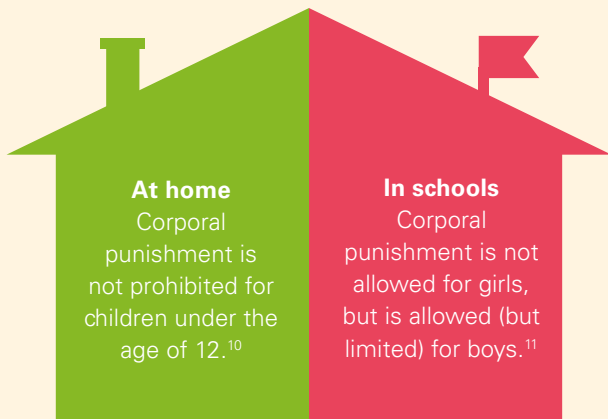
9 As of January 2020, the minimum age in Selangor is 18 for both boys and girls.



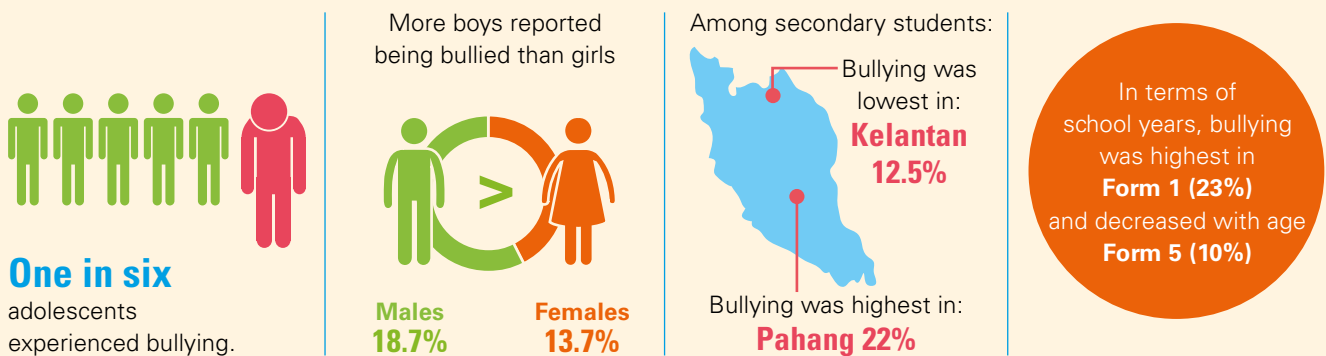
## B VIOLENCE AT HOME AND IN SCHOOLS

### Corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is any kind of punishment where physical force is used to cause pain or discomfort – even light discomfort. Most corporal punishment involves hitting children – including smacking, slapping and spanking – with the hand or with an implement such as a cane, ruler, stick, belt or shoe.



### Bullying (as reported in 2018)<sup>13</sup>

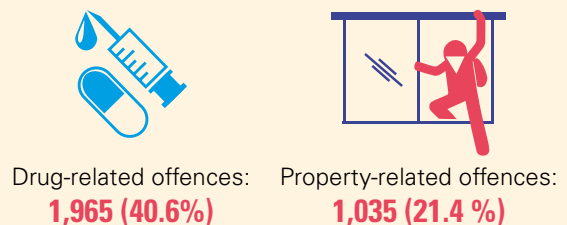


## C CONFLICT WITH THE LAW

In Malaysia, a child of 10 years can be held legally responsible for a crime.<sup>14</sup> However, as stated in the CRC general comment<sup>15</sup> parties are encouraged to increase their minimum age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age. Children in Malaysia can also be punished for 'status offences' (such as skipping school) which are not offences if they are committed by adults.<sup>16</sup>



In **2019**, there were **4,833 offences** committed by Malaysian adolescents (aged 10-18).<sup>17</sup>  
The most common offences were:



10 Section 89 of the Penal Code 1936.

11 Education (School Disciplines) Regulations 1959, r.5(1)(a) and (b).

12 Institute for Public Health, Ministry of Health, *National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2017: Key Findings from the Adolescent Health and Nutrition Survey – Infographic booklet*, April 2018, p. 12.

13 Ibid., p. 3.

14 Article 82, Penal Code.

15 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 24 on children's rights in the child justice system (2019), CRC/C/GC/24, para 22.

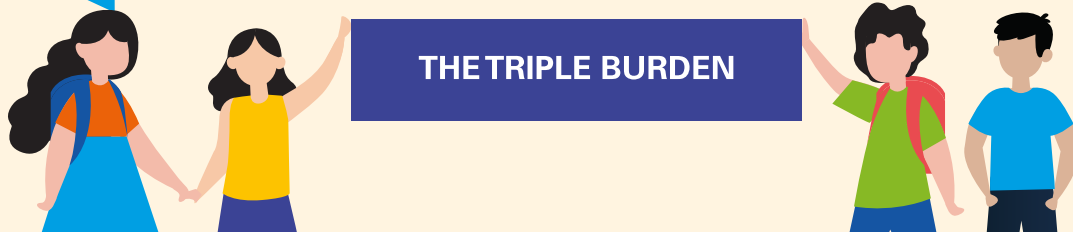
16 Ibid., para 12.

17 Department of Social Welfare as cited in the DOSM report.

# 3

## HEALTH

Malaysia has what's called a "triple burden" in healthcare: stunting, obesity and anaemia.<sup>18</sup> This triple burden is made worse by food insecurity (that is, disruption to meals because of lack of money or other resources), and a low awareness of nutrition.



### STUNTING

happens when a child doesn't physically grow enough because of not enough nutrition, repeated infection and not enough chances to play and learn.

### OBESITY

is when there is too much fat in the human body. This is often caused by eating too much food that is high in fat and sugars, as well as by too much physical inactivity.

### ANAEMIA

is a medical condition when there are not enough red blood cells in the human body. Common causes include poor nutrition (particularly the lack of iron, folate, and vitamins) and infections.

## A NUTRITION

In 2017, **14.8%** of children and adolescents aged 10-17 years were **obese**.<sup>19</sup>

**8.2%** of those aged 10-17 years were reported as **stunted** in 2017.<sup>20</sup>

### Sugar consumption & carbonated drinks

**36%** of Malaysian students drink at least one carbonated soft drink each day.<sup>22</sup> This high consumption of sugar, combined with low physical activity, contribute to the high rates of obesity.



## Eating habits in 2018<sup>21</sup>



**70%** skip breakfast regularly

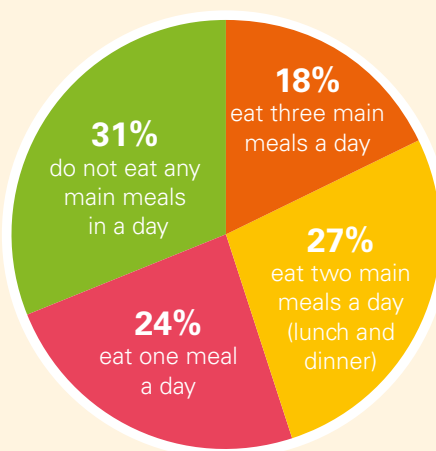


**50%** skip lunch regularly



**50%** skip dinner regularly

Some of the reasons for poor eating habits and low nutritional intake among adolescents include limited awareness and the high cost of fresh, nutritious food.



**92%** don't eat enough vegetables

**75%** don't eat enough milk and dairy products

**67%** don't eat enough fruit

**25%** eat too much poultry, meat and eggs daily

<sup>18</sup> Global Nutrition Report 2018, Nutrition Country Profile: Malaysia.

<sup>19</sup> Institute of Public Health, NHMS 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Institute of Public Health, NHMS 2017, Infographic booklet. p. 14 & 20.


<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

## B SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH (SRH)


In 2017,  
**7.3%**  
of adolescents  
aged **13-17**  
had engaged in **sexual  
intercourse**.<sup>23</sup>

In 2015,  
**20.4%**  
of **HIV-infected  
persons**<sup>24</sup>  
were under the  
age of 25.


### What adolescents knew about SRH in 2014<sup>25</sup>



**< 60%** of adolescents  
had **basic knowledge of  
reproductive organs**.



**33.7%** of adolescents  
knew **a girl could become  
pregnant the first time she  
had sexual intercourse**.



**33.3%** of adolescents  
knew that **condoms  
could prevent sexually  
transmitted infections**.

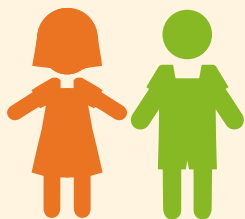
### A lack of SRH information and services can lead to:

Higher risk of unsafe  
sexual activity

Risk of sexually  
transmitted infections

Teen pregnancy,  
which can contribute  
to child marriage

## C MENTAL HEALTH



In 2019,  
**424,000**  
children  
in Malaysia  
had mental health  
problems.<sup>26</sup>

**9.5%** were teenagers between  
10-15 years.

**42.9%** said that peer problems  
contributed to mental  
health problems.


In 2017,  
**9.3%**

of secondary school children<sup>28</sup>  
felt **lonely 'most of the time  
or always'**.

### In 2017, among Malaysian adolescents aged 13-17<sup>27</sup>:




**1 in 5**  
depressed



**17.7%** **18.9%**




**2 in 5**  
anxious



**42.3%** **37.1%**



**1 in 10**  
stressed



**10.3%** **8.9%**

### The main causes of depression were:

- loneliness
- difficulty making friends
- stress from homework and exams
- bullying, including cyber-bullying

Suicide  
is a crime  
under Malaysian law<sup>30</sup>,  
which can create stigma  
around mental health and  
getting support. In October  
2021, the Home Ministry and  
Attorney General's Chambers  
announced this law would  
be abolished (with more  
details to come).<sup>31</sup>

In 2017<sup>29</sup>, Form 1 students (aged 12-13  
years) had the highest rates of

- suicide ideation: **11.2%**
- suicide planning: **9%**
- suicide attempts: **10.1%**

23 Institute of Public Health, NHMS 2017, Infographic booklet, p. 6.

24 Tey, 'The State of Youth', pp. 130-131.

25 MWFC and National Population and Family Development Board, *Report on key findings: fifth Malaysian population and family survey (2014)*, p. 49.

26 Institute for Public Health, *National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019: Non-communicable diseases, healthcare demand, and health literacy—Key Findings*, 2020, p. 15.

27 Institute of Public Health, NHMS 2017, Infographic booklet, p. 22.

28 Institute for Public Health, NHMS 2017, Adolescent Health Survey 2017, Malaysia, pp. 103 and 106.

29 Institute of Public Health, NHMS 2017, Infographic booklet, p. 8.

30 Section 309, Penal Code.

31 Teh Athira Yusof & Arfa Yunus, "Home Ministry, AGC agree to decriminalise attempt to commit suicide", *The New Straits Times*, 7 October 2021. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/10/734399/home-ministry-agc-agree-decriminalise-attempt-commit-suicide> (accessed 13 October 2021).



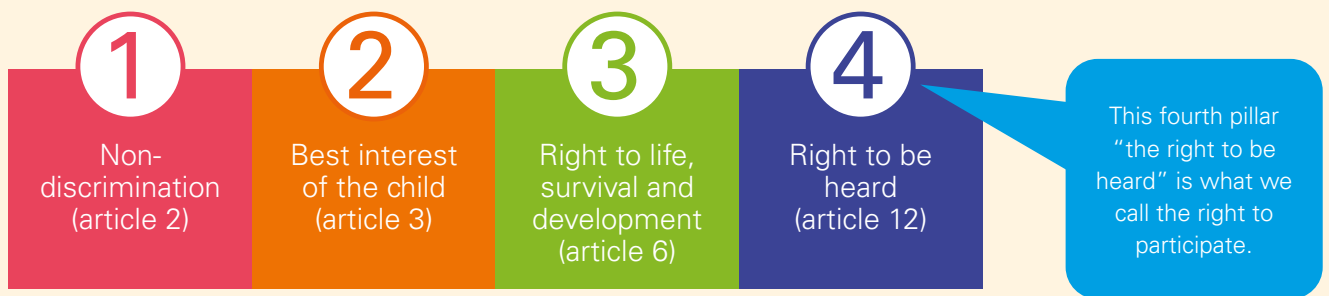
# 4

## PARTICIPATION

Adolescents have the right to participate in decisions that affect them. They have the right to space, encouragement, platforms and mechanisms to express their views, gain information and influence decisions on issues, both locally (including family, school and community) and globally.<sup>32</sup>



There are four key pillars of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that are known as the “General Principles” for all children. They are:



### A LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

Adolescents’ lives are affected by many people at different levels of participation. This includes: family, peers, school and the local community as well as local and national government all the way to the international sphere and the global environment. Adolescents have a right to participate and be heard at all these levels, influencing the decisions that affect their lives.



32 CRC Committee, General Comment No.20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child During Adolescence, CRC/C/GC/20, 2016.

## B ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIA



Laws that protect the rights of children and youth	Ministries responsible
Child Act 2001	The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD)
National Youth Development Policy of Malaysia	The Ministry of Youth and Sports (MoYS)

## C PLATFORMS THAT ENABLE PARTICIPATION

<p><b>National Council for Children</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operates under the MWFCD.</li> <li>Two council members are children from the Children's Representative Council.</li> </ul> <p><b>Objective:</b> to involve children in national decisions that affect them.</p>	<p><b>The Children's Representative Council (Majlis Perwakilan Kanak-Kanak)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operates under the MWFCD.</li> <li>Composed of 30 adolescents aged 13-17 from each state in Malaysia.</li> </ul> <p><b>Objective:</b> to reach out to children in need of help and identify problems and solutions in order to create a better environment for all children in Malaysia.</p>	<p><b>The Malaysian Youth Council (Majlis Belia Malaysia)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A non-government council</li> </ul> <p><b>Objective:</b> monitors the implementation of youth policy through the National Youth Consultative Council. It also coordinates youth and student organisations throughout Malaysia.</p>
<p><b>The Youth Parliament</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simulates parliamentary proceedings.</li> <li>Comprises 13 members aged 18-25, elected online by youth throughout Malaysia. It meets for three sessions, lasting three days, each year.</li> </ul> <p><b>Objective:</b> to help young people gain knowledge about the workings of Parliament and government generally.</p>	<p><b>National Youth Consultative Council</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operates under MoYS. It is the main body responsible for youth policy in Malaysia.</li> <li>Includes members of the Malaysian Youth Council, State Youth Consultative Councils, representatives from key Government Ministries, and other experts.</li> </ul> <p><b>Objective:</b> monitors the implementation of the National Youth Policy and advises MoYS on youth development issues and a range of other issues.</p>	<p>Besides these platforms, social media is also a powerful tool for children and adolescents to participate and to engage with the world through freedom of expression as well as the potential to access information.</p>



# 5

## CHALLENGES

Several challenges exist that affect the situation of children and adolescents in Malaysia.

It is very important that data is collected on adolescents as a **specific group**, and not under a wider definition such as “youth”. In **Malaysia**, the definition of “youth” can include people aged **up to 30** and above.



### A GAPS IN DATA

For now, much of the data is represented in totals. Researchers need **disaggregated data**, that is, data that is broken down according to categories such as age and sex.

This is important because it helps to:

- better understand the situation across age and sex.
- identify adolescents’ needs better and to plan better interventions.

The Government and other service providers also need disaggregated data to identify the needs of adolescents and effectively address adolescent issues.



### B LAW AND POLICY GAPS

There are limited policies, programmes and interventions that cater specifically for adolescents, as most only relate to children in general terms.

#### Specific gaps in law and policy

#### Child marriage:

The age children can marry is different for different sections of the population. There are also differences according to religion and laws particular to each community. Also, girls can marry at a lower age than boys.



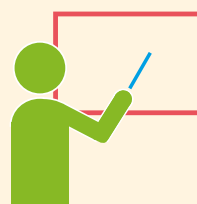
#### Corporal punishment:

No law prevents corporal punishment at home or in school.



#### SRH information and services:

No law gives adolescents the right to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services.



#### Voting age:

A recent positive step has been the reduction of the voting age from 21 to 18, subject to the implementation of automatic voter registration for this age group.



### C SOCIOCULTURAL NORMS

Social and cultural values and norms that emphasise obedience still exist and continue to play a role in Malaysian society. For example, children are expected to respect and listen to their elders without question.

However, because of stigma, these norms can also affect how young people:

- **access information and services** on mental health or sexual reproductive health
- **seek help or support** from their families or peers
- **make decisions** around important life choices, or whether to engage in high-risk behaviour.





For more information and the full report, download the Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia report.

<https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/reports/situation-analysis-adolescents-malaysia>

# For every child

Whoever she is.

Wherever he lives.

Every child deserves a childhood.

A future.

A fair chance.

That's why UNICEF is here.

For each and every child.

Working day in and day out.

In 190 countries and territories.

Reaching the hardest to reach.

The furthest from help.

The most excluded.

It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.

## **United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia Country Office**

United Nations Offices,  
Menara PJH, Level 10,  
No. 2, Jalan Tun Abdul Razak,  
Precinct 2, 62100 Putrajaya, Malaysia.  
Email: [kualalumpur@unicef.org](mailto:kualalumpur@unicef.org)  
URL: [www.unicef.org/malaysia](http://www.unicef.org/malaysia)

