One in three deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth could be avoided if all women had access to contraceptive services. That means some 175,000 women each year could be saved, and many more could avoid severe or long-lasting injuries (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Population Issues: Contraception). As many as 50% of pregnancies are unplanned, and 25% are unwanted. The unwanted pregnancies are disproportionately among young, unmarried girls who often lack access to contraception. Figures 1a to 1f below provide data from 34 countries on the use of ‘modern contraceptives’ by young women, which has generally increased rapidly over the past 30 years. However, progress has stalled in many low-income countries and notably in sub-Saharan Africa.

Figures 1a. to 1c. show the rates for sub-Saharan Africa, where in only 5 out of 20 countries, unmarried, sexually active 15–24 year-old women report a contraceptive use rate greater than 45%, while for 15–19 year old unmarried, sexually active women, this is the case for four countries. Furthermore, in 7 out of the 20 countries, 15–19 year old unmarried, sexually active women report a contraceptive use rate of less than 25%.
Among these countries with a low prevalence, for Benin, Chad (Figure 1a) and Mali (Figure 1b), young women also report low use of condoms for last higher-risk sex, according to DHS data (less than 20% for 15–24 year-old women, Indicator 2). In addition, in Mali, knowledge of a formal source of condoms is also low among young women, ranging from 23–26% (Indicator 5). Data is not available however for Benin and Chad for Indicator 5, so it is not clear if (lack of) knowledge of a formal source of condoms is one of the barriers for their use (i.e. accessibility) or not.
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The data currently available from DHS for Latin American countries shows consistently higher prevalence rates than for sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1d below).

Current use of modern contraceptives by young women aged 15–24 years

Latin America and the Caribbean, 2001–2005

(Source: Macro International Inc., STATcompiler)

Note that for Figures 1e & f for the regions shown below, DHS data was not disaggregated by marital status.

Figure 1d shows that the contraceptive prevalence rate in North Africa is relatively low, regardless of marital status. Figure 1f, for South and South-East Asia, shows low prevalence for Nepal and the Philippines. Unfortunately, for the countries represented in each of these examples, condom use data is not available (Indicator 2), as a comparison.

Current use of modern contraceptives by sexually active young women aged 15–24 years

North Africa/West Asia/Europe, 2002–2005

(Source: Macro International Inc., STATcompiler)
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