The task of achieving global literacy is enormous. Using the standard measure by which people report on their own literacy, there are 771 million illiterate adults globally, or 18% of the world’s adult population, according to the latest estimates.

Although figures vary depending on the region, it has been estimated that on average, two thirds of adults without literacy skills are women. Furthermore, older people, especially those who have never attended school, are generally more likely to lack literacy skills than younger people.

**Literacy Facts**

- **771 million** people aged 15 and above do not have basic literacy skills.
- Worldwide, only 88 adult **women** are considered literate for every 100 men.
- Literacy rates are lowest among linguistic, ethnic, religious and other **minority groups**.
- Illiteracy tends to prevail in low-income, often heavily indebted countries with widespread **household poverty**.

The lowest literacy rates are found in Africa, South and West Asia and the Arab States. In absolute terms, over 75% of all illiterate people live in 12 countries, with 45% of the world’s 771 million illiterate adults living in the two most populous countries, India and China (34% and 11% respectively).

Within countries, there are often enormous rural-urban divides, with most illiterate people residing in rural areas. However, geographical disparities in literacy are complex. The rural-urban divide is sometimes not as significant as the intra-urban differences. For example, there are significant differences in the literacy rates within urban areas in China due to the gap in literacy levels between native and migrant workers in these areas. Intra-rural differences can also be more significant than rural-urban divides. For example, in Egypt some rural areas have significantly higher literacy rates than others.

The rural-urban, intra-urban and intra-rural differences are often related to social and cultural factors; with nomadic populations having lower literacy rates than other rural populations, for example. However, in many cases the gap in literacy rates is a result of certain population groups being excluded from mainstream society. This exclusion often results in reduced access to formal education and literacy programmes for these groups - for example, religious and ethnic minority groups.

In an examination of literacy statistics, one of the strongest correlations is between household poverty and illiteracy. Evidence indicates that people who come from low-income households, and therefore lack adequate nutrition and hygiene, are less likely to acquire and use literacy skills. This implies that when implementing literacy education activities targeting low-income households, it may be necessary to first address the basic nutritional and health needs of the target group.

**Towards Better Measurement**

Due to differing methods for measuring literacy, data on literacy is not always credible and comparable. In addition, conventional assessment methods for measuring literacy rates are indirect and are overly simplistic.

The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) has therefore launched the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Project (LAMP) which aims to define and measure a spectrum of literacy skills in developing countries.

Further information about LAMP can be found at this website: [http://www.unescobkk.org/aims/lamp](http://www.unescobkk.org/aims/lamp)