

**goats and soda**

#15GIRLS

# Where The Girls Are (And Aren't): #15Girls

October 20, 2015 · 2:59 PM ET



JOHN POOLE



Many fewer baby girls are born in India and China than the odds would predict.

*LA Johnson/NPR*

The world's girls are healthier than ever. They live longer and more of them are going to school than at any time in history.

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This story is part of our **#15Girls series**, profiling teens around the world.

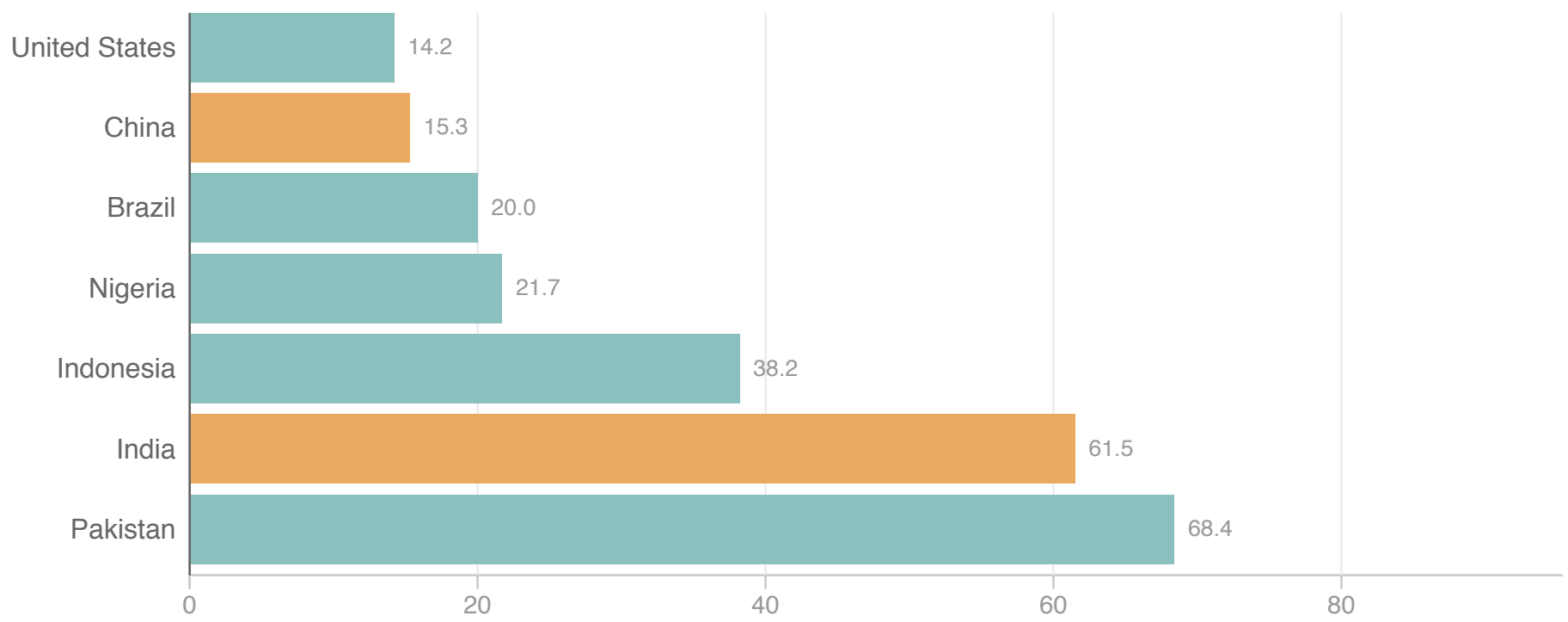
But most of them face discrimination simply because they are girls. The discrimination happens at every point in their lives.

In some cases, it starts even before they're born, when parents decide to abort a pregnancy if the fetus is female.

A good way to get a sense of the progress — and the remaining gaps — in worldwide gender equality is by looking at the data. Numbers can tell a compelling story. The story we're going to tell focuses on girls ages 10 to 19, an age range used by the World Bank and other groups to track populations. Worldwide, about 600 million girls fall into this age range. Nearly half of them live in just seven countries. Those countries are the focus of our story.

# Who's In The Labor Force?

Estimated percentage point difference between labor participation rates for men and women ages 25-54 in the year 2015

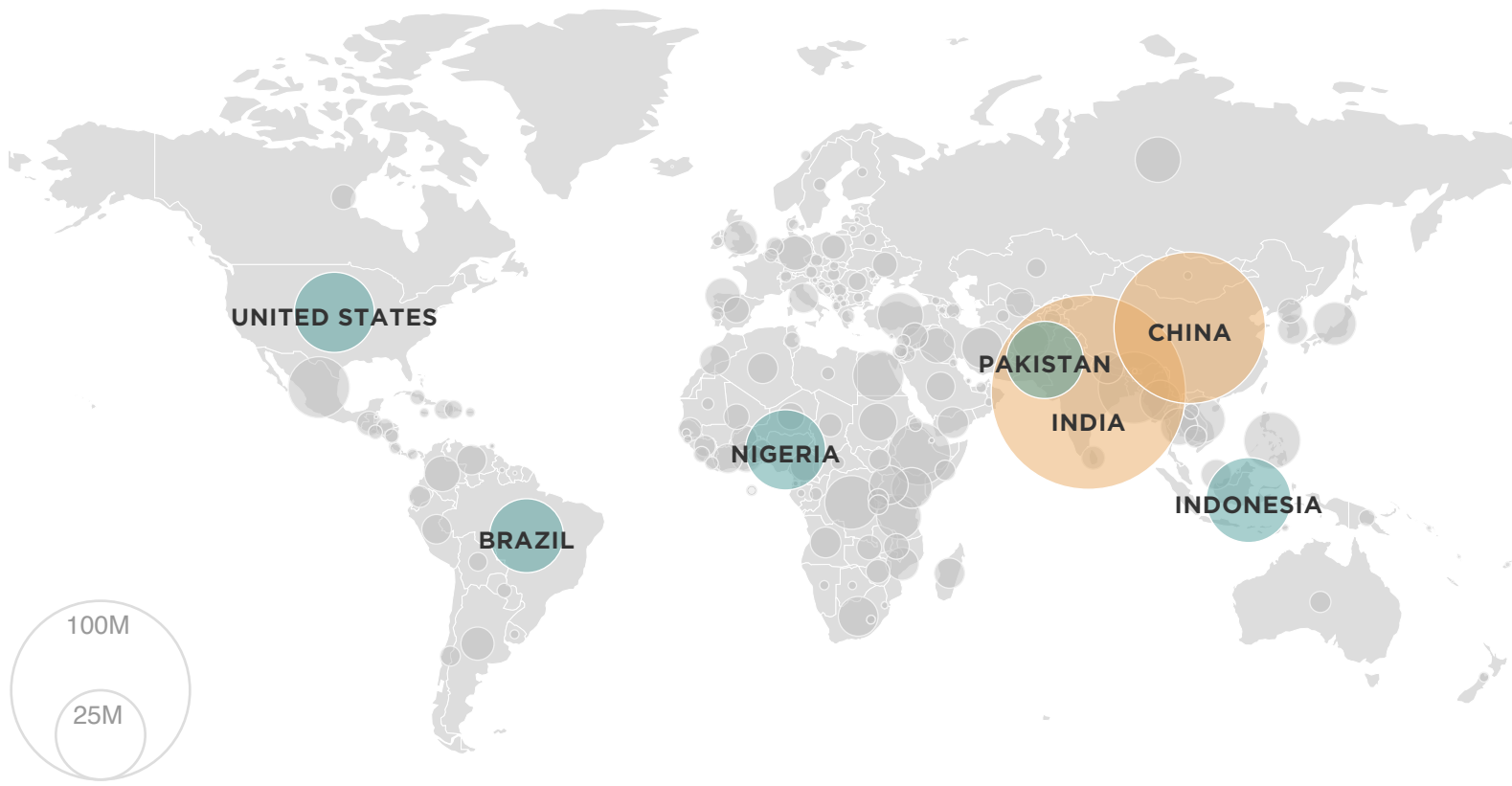


Source: International Labour Organization [ILOSTAT Database](#)

Credit: Christopher Groskopf/NPR

# Half The World's Teens Live in These 7 Countries

- A third of all 10- to 19-year-olds live in **India** and **China**. Throughout this story we'll highlight these two countries in orange.
- The remaining five countries with the highest number of 10- to 19-year-olds — **Indonesia**, **Nigeria**, the **United States**, **Pakistan** and **Brazil** — bring the total population represented up to just over 50 percent of the world's total.



Source: *World Bank Population Estimates for 2015*

Credit: *Christopher Groskopf and Alyson Hurt/NPR*

You might expect that there would be an even number of boys and girls in this age group in these seven countries.

But you'd be wrong.

## The Missing Girls

Consider the girls who were never born.

On average, about 105 boys are born worldwide for every 100 girls. Girls tend to make up for this difference over time because of their greater resilience and resistance to disease.

But if you look at the two biggest countries in the top seven, you'll find a very different picture.

Based on 2010 numbers from the United Nations Population Fund, China is "missing" about 24 million girls between the ages of 0 and 19. That's over 14 percent of the female population in that age range.

Since the late 1970s, China has had a one child per family policy. Many families want that child to be a son. The increasing availability of prenatal ultrasounds and blood tests for gender makes it possible for parents to abort a female fetus if they want. The uneven ratio of boys to girls born in China suggests this is happening. [Editor's note: Since this post was originally published, China has announced that it will halt its one-child policy, allowing couples to have two children.]

A similar dynamic is at play in India, and preliminary data suggest that as access to prenatal gender tests increases there, fewer girls are being born.

India's percentage of girls missing at birth is lower than China's at 5.6 percent of the female population between 0 and 19. But because India's population is so large, India is missing 13 million girls out of its under-20-year-old female population.

Adding up the unborn girls, there are currently about 37 million fewer 0- to 19-year-old girls in India and China than the world average ratio would predict. To put that number in perspective, that's about 2 million more than the entire population of Canada.

China and India aren't the only countries that show this trend. They are just the largest.

## Why Some Parents Prefer Boys

In India and China, the birth of a son is cause for celebration. The family has gained a future asset: a child who can earn money for his parents and support them when they are old.

That's not the case for girls. "It's more expensive for a family to have girls than boys," says Charles Kenny, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development. A boy has greater earning potential in these societies because there is a stigma against women working outside the home. And in India, when a daughter gets married, her family usually makes a generous donation of money and gifts to the groom's family.

So a daughter is seen as a drain on the family's resources. There's an Indian saying: Raising a daughter is like "watering someone else's garden." In other words, the benefits of raising a daughter will be reaped by the family the daughter marries into, not her own family.

In India, a girl is also more likely than a boy to die before she turns 5; that's the only country in the world where that's true. It's mostly to do with neglect. Biologically, girls have an advantage in the first few years of life. But in India, where the majority of people don't earn much more than \$2.40 a day, scarce resources can mean a boy gets extra food and medical attention while his sister doesn't.

A girl who dies from neglect probably wouldn't create much of a stir among people in a small village in India, who understand the preference for boys, says Valerie Hudson, a professor in the Department of International Affairs at Texas A&M University who studies India's gender imbalance. "No one raises it as a public issue within the community, so while it's not secret, it isn't commented upon."

## What Happens At 15?

Turning 15 is an important milestone in many societies. Think of *quinceañera* in Latin American countries — the celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, marking the end of childhood and the beginning of womanhood. In India, 15 is the age where a young bride traditionally goes to live with her husband. (Child marriage is illegal, but still

widely practiced, according to researchers.)

This recognition of the age 15 as a milestone is biologically based. Researchers think that most of the world's girls have had their first periods by age 15 and are able to get pregnant.

But it's difficult to get a good snapshot of what's happening with girls around the age of puberty — not much information has been collected. This is a problem, says Marni Sommer of Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health. "There's this assumption that [the age of menarche] is a nonissue since getting a period isn't a deadly thing, but we've found that many girls have never had conversations about periods, and it is a significant issue. Maybe they keep it a secret or are ashamed. This is a relevant issue for girls' health and well-being, for their confidence."

## Moving Into Adulthood: The Education Gap

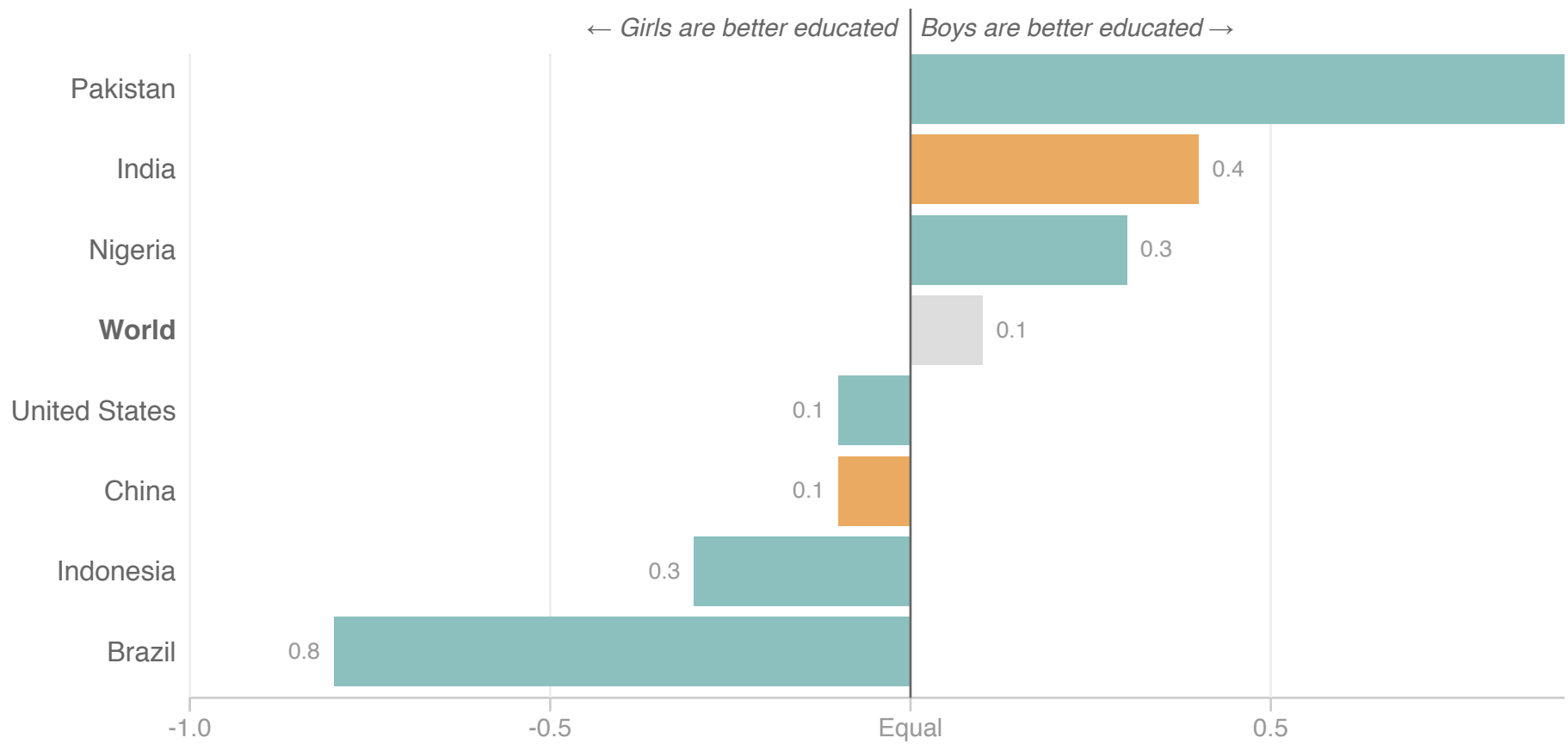
Some good news: The education gap is narrowing. Most school-age girls in our seven countries have attended some form of primary education. And those entering school now are projected to stay in school for more years than past generations, catching up with boys in many places.

Pakistan still has a gap of about a year for the time boys and girls stay in school. But in the past 15 years, it has made the largest jump of these seven countries in closing the literacy gap, according to the World Bank. Almost 65 percent of young women are now literate in Pakistan compared with 43 percent in 2000. In India, 82 percent of young women are literate — that's up 14 percentage points from 2000.

At the other extreme, Indonesia has made little to no progress in terms of girls' literacy in the past 15 years, and Nigeria's young women are now slightly less likely to be literate than they were 15 years ago. During this same 15 years, Nigeria's economy grew by almost 90 percent and Indonesia's by 120 percent, according to the World Bank.

# Who's Better Educated: Girls Or Boys?

Difference in average number of years of schooling children have had for ages 15 to 19 in 2015



## Notes

Data are projected from 2010 educational attainment statistics.

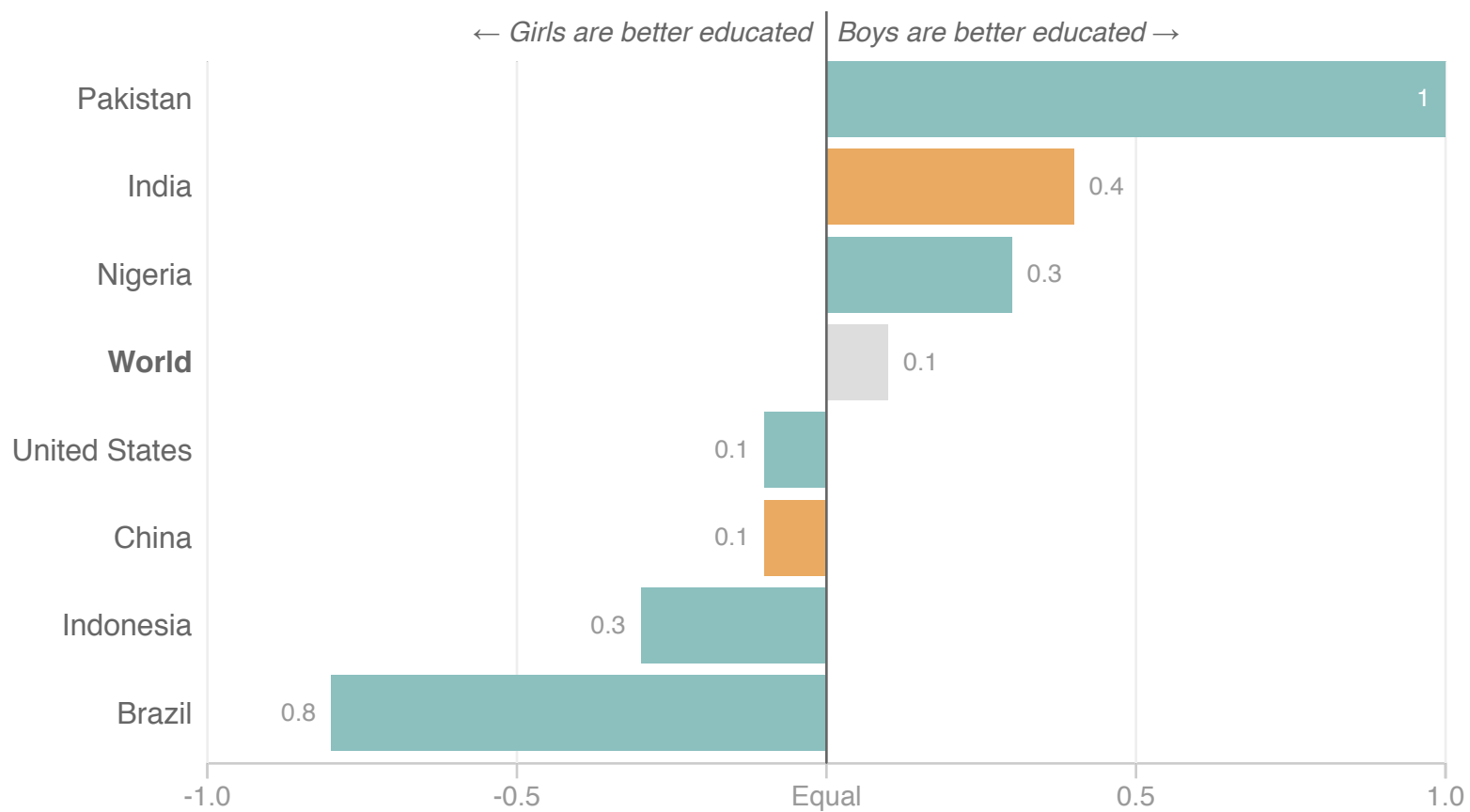
Source: Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (WIC) [Wittgenstein Centre Data Explorer](#). Version 1.2 2015

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## Marriage And Babies

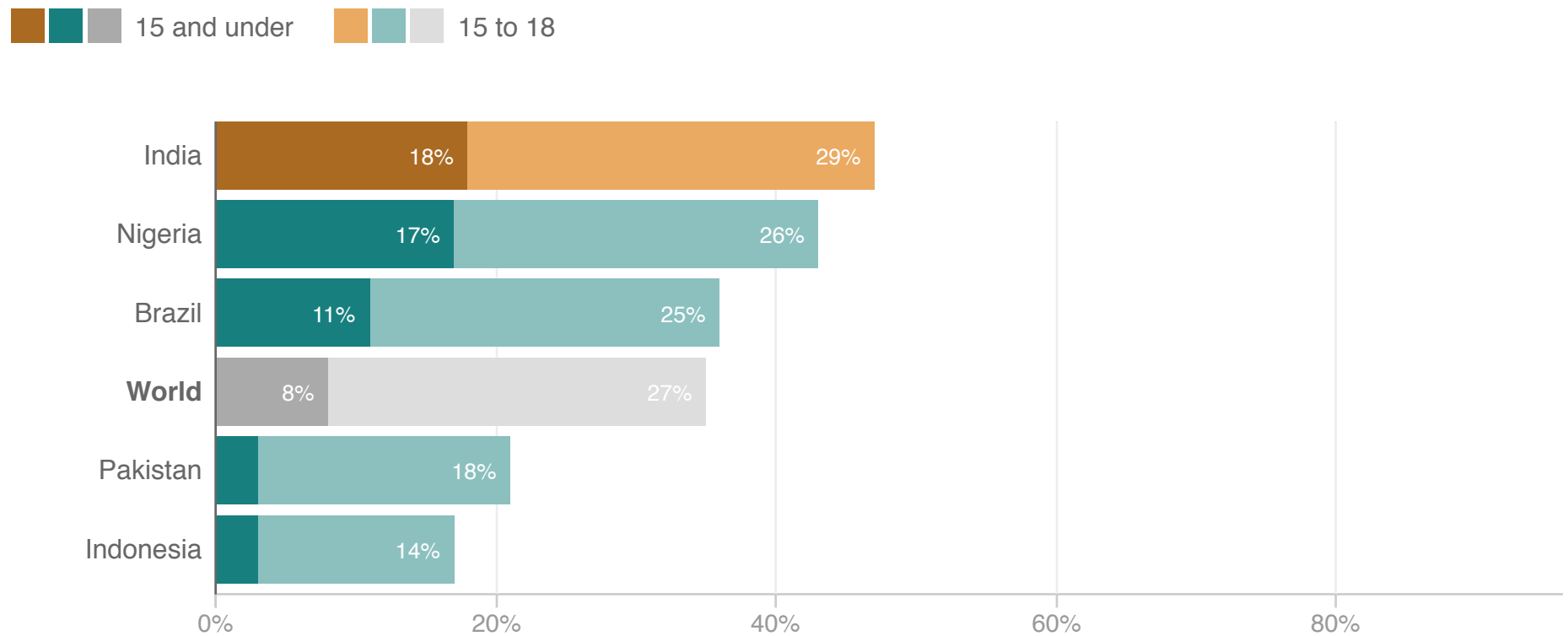
Early marriage (often forced) along with early pregnancies are two of the biggest barriers to girls getting more education. Almost 30 percent of girls in India are married before they turn 19, and marriage often means that the girl leaves school to live with her husband or because she becomes pregnant.

## Working Hard But Not For Much Money

In countries with high rates of early marriage, the lives of girls and women are also held back by underlying social and cultural beliefs. The World Values Survey, compiled by a global network of social scientists, tries to quantify these attitudes. The most recent version was conducted in 60 countries between 2010 and 2014. People don't always act in line with their stated values and beliefs, but with that caveat, the World Values Survey gives a glimpse of the thoughts and attitudes that shape popular opinion — and action — around the world.

## How Many Girls Are Married Before 19

Percentage of girls who are married before age 19, by age at time of first marriage.



### Notes

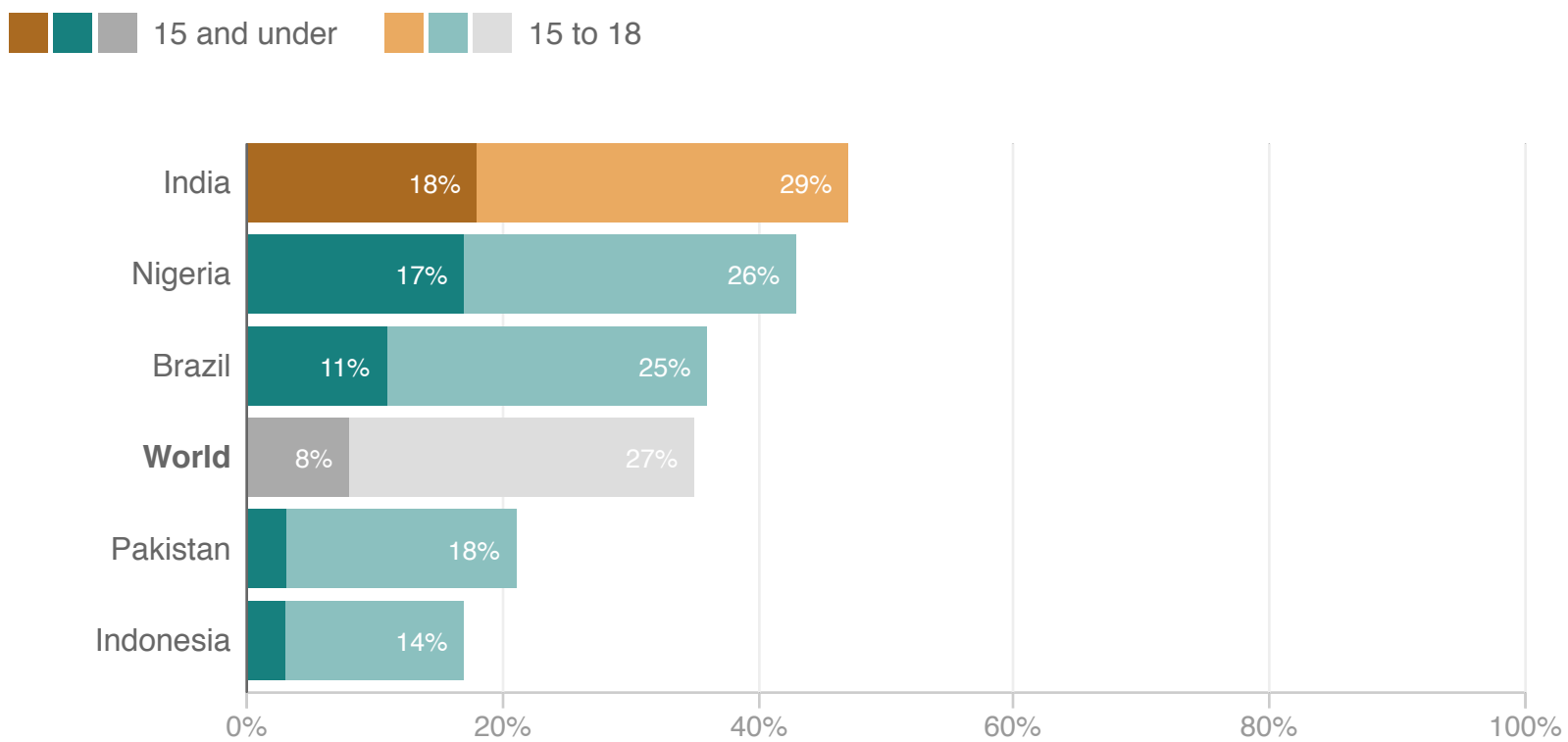
Data are not available for China or the United States. The specific year that data were collected for each country varies from 2005 to 2013.

Source: [UNICEF](#)

Credit: Christopher Groskopf/NPR

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One question in the survey asks people whether they agree with this statement: "A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl." A large proportion of people in our seven countries agreed that higher education is more important for boys.

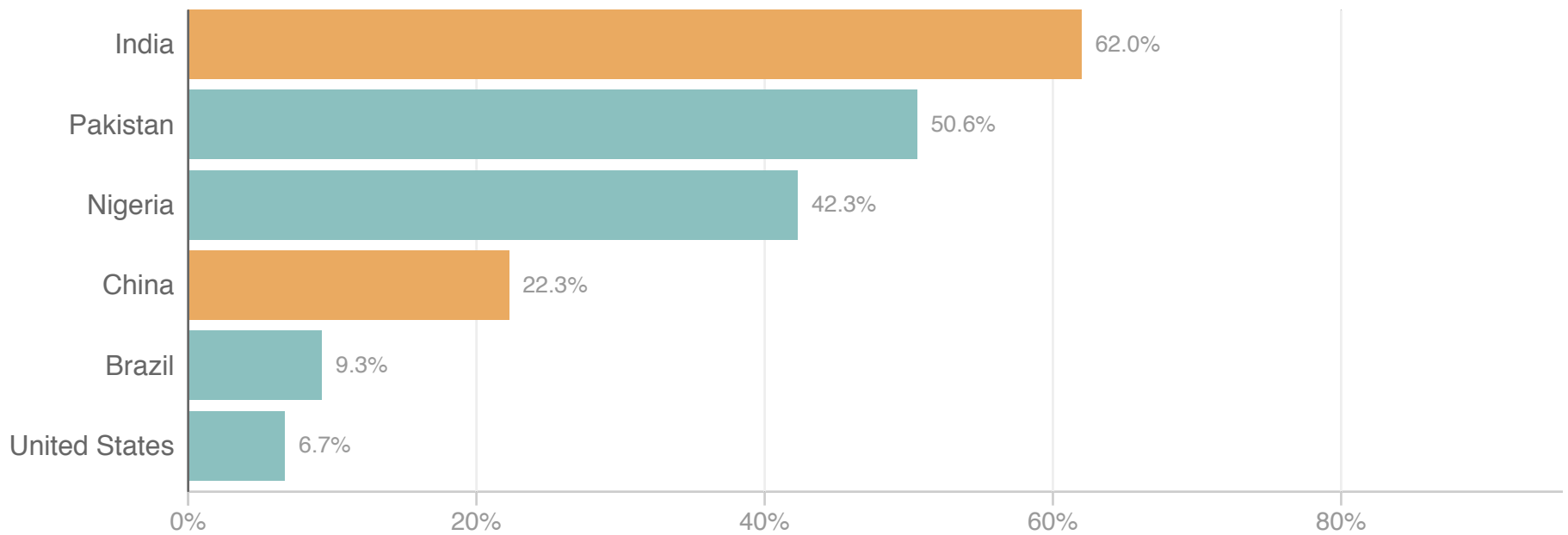
A possible reason for this bias could be that women make up less of the paid labor force in nearly every country in the world. In countries where the bias is strongest, there is an expectation that women do not work outside the home. Washing clothes, cooking, cleaning and taking care of children are hard work but often not paid work.

The World Values Survey then asks participants whether they agree with this

statement: "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women."  
In Pakistan, 73 percent agreed. In India, where one-fifth of the world's adolescent girls live, more than half agreed.

## Percentage Who Think Education Is More Important For Boys

Proportion who agree or strongly agree with this statement: "A university education is more important for a boy than a girl."



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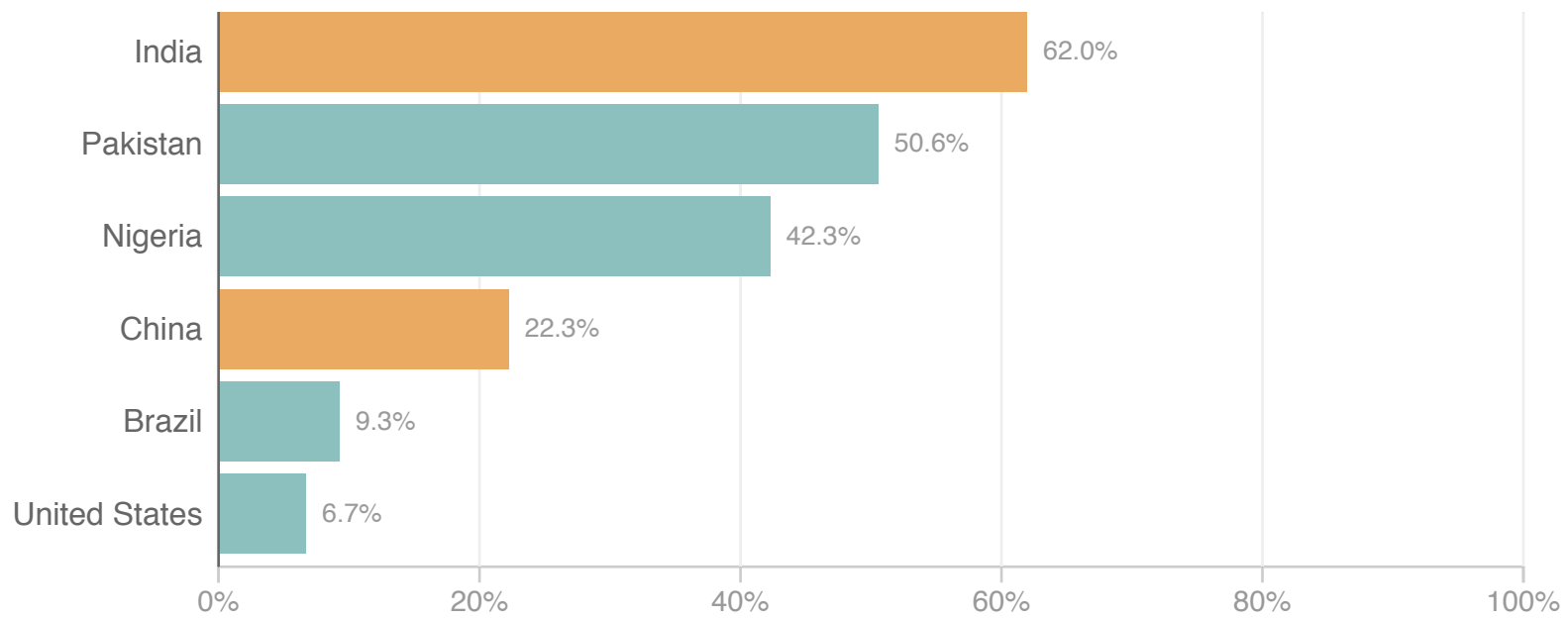
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Source: NPR analysis of [World Values Survey Wave 6 \(2010-2014\)](#) data | [How we processed this data](#)

Credit: David Eads and Christopher Groskopf/NPR

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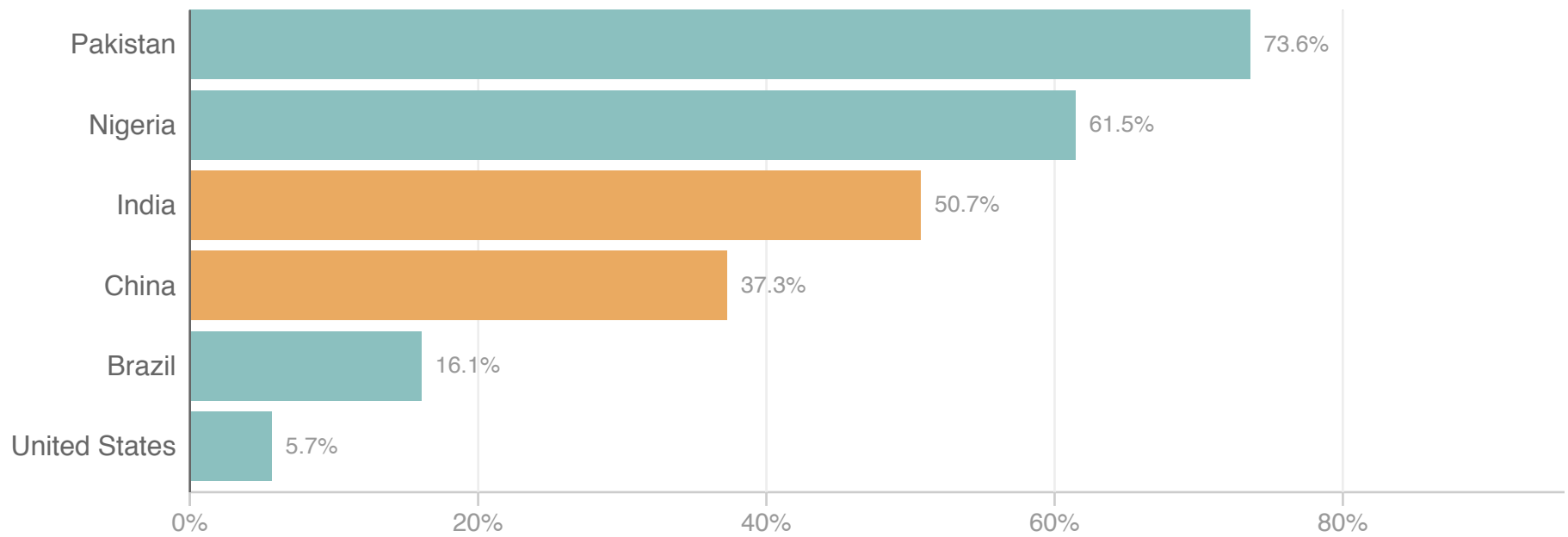
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# Women In Power

# Yes: When Jobs Are Scarce, Men Should Get The Job

Percentage who agree or strongly agree with the statement: "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women."



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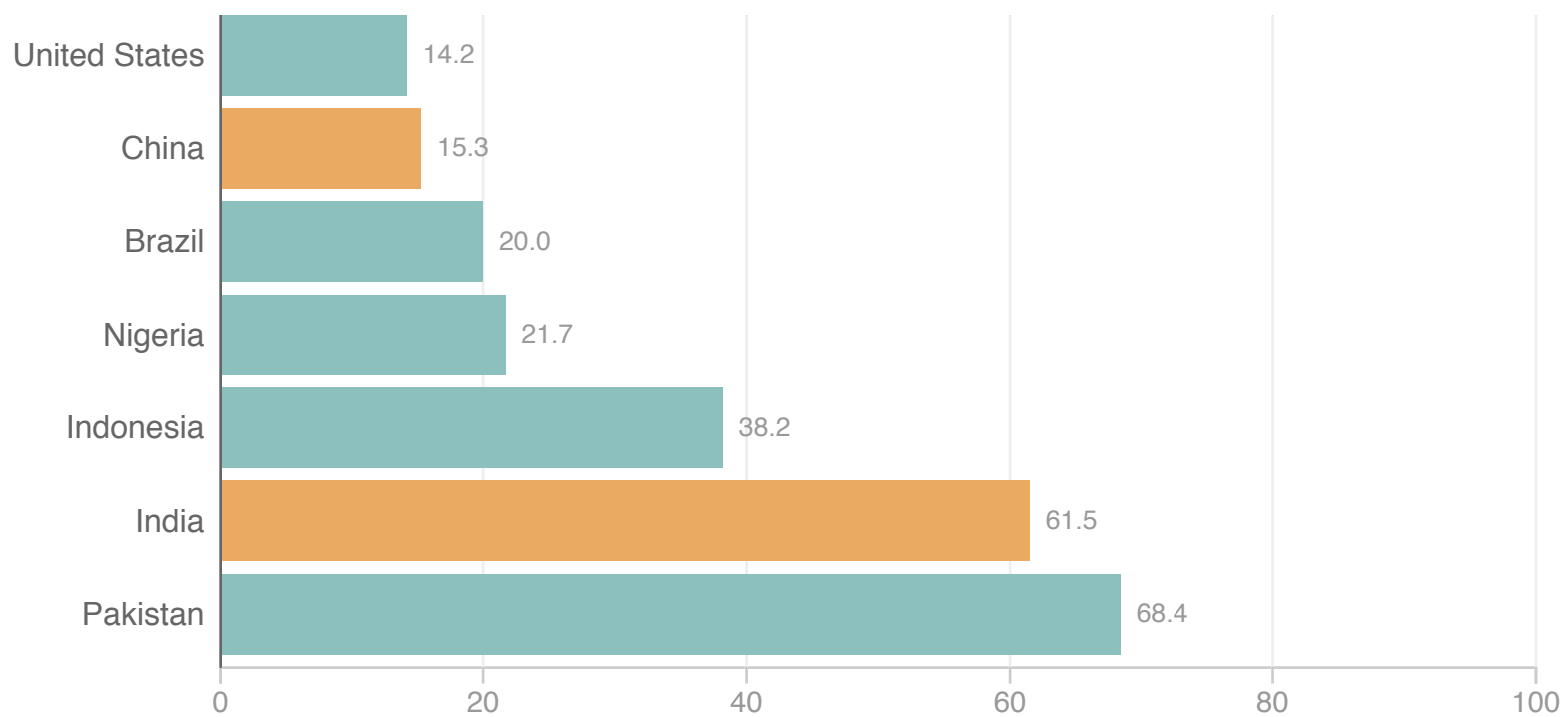
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Credit: David Fede and Christopher Crocker/NPR

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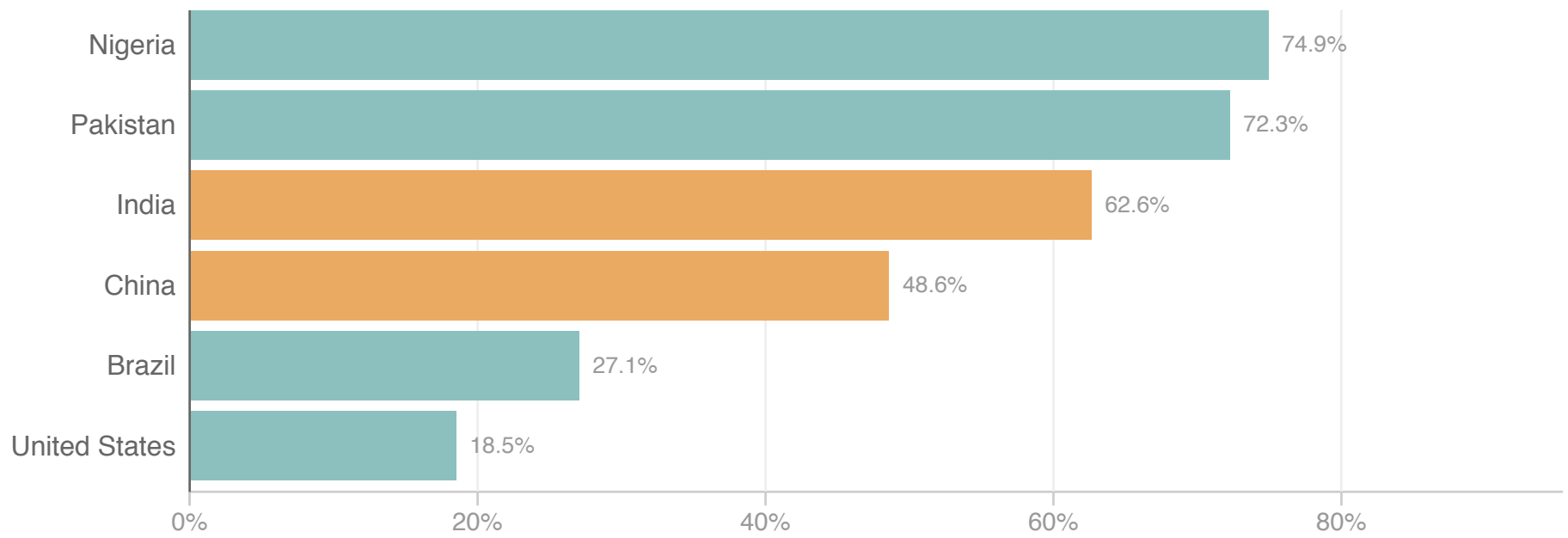
Source: International Labour Organization [ILOSTAT Database](#)

Credit: Christopher Groskopf/NPR

In all seven of the countries we examined, there's an attitude that women don't make good leaders. For instance, when it comes to a man versus a woman holding a political office, the gender bias increases dramatically, even in the United States. The World Values Survey asks respondents if they agree with this statement: "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do." Even in the United States, around 18 percent of people agreed.

# Yes: Men Are Better Political Leaders Than Women

Percentage who agree or strongly agree with the statement: "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do."



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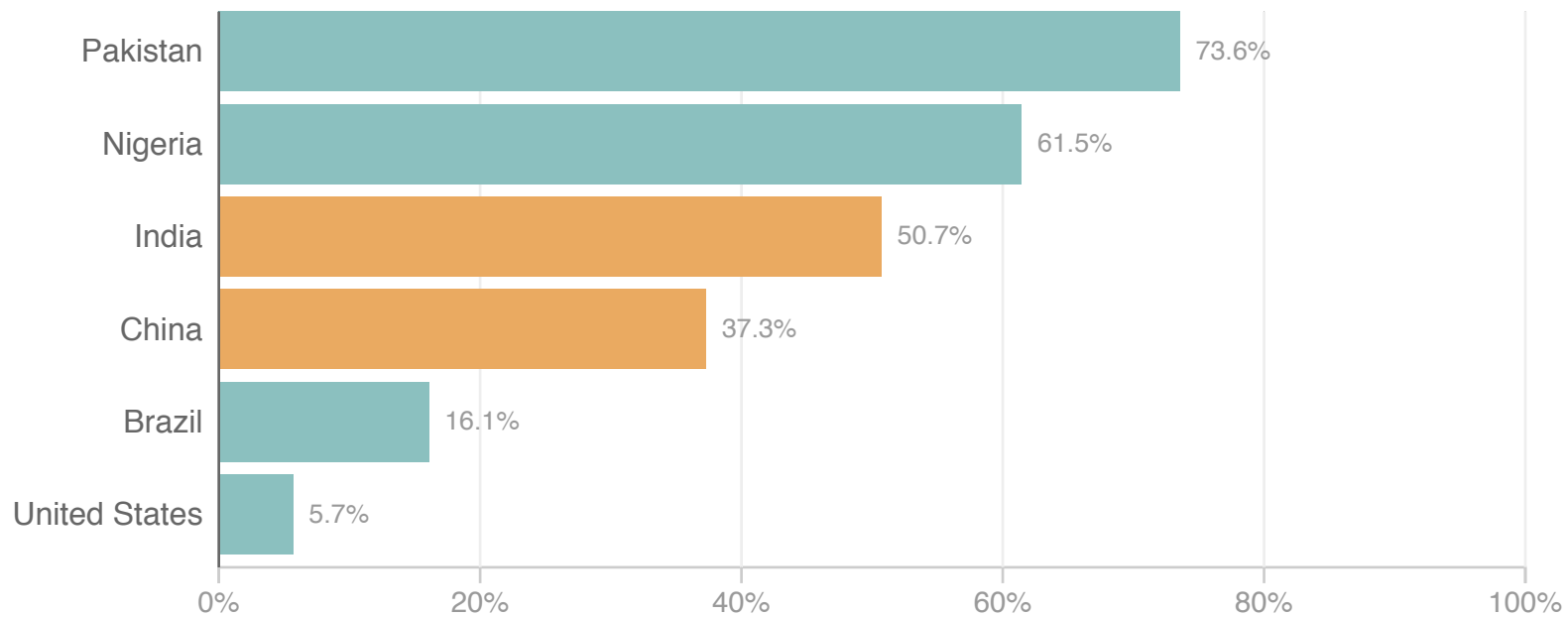
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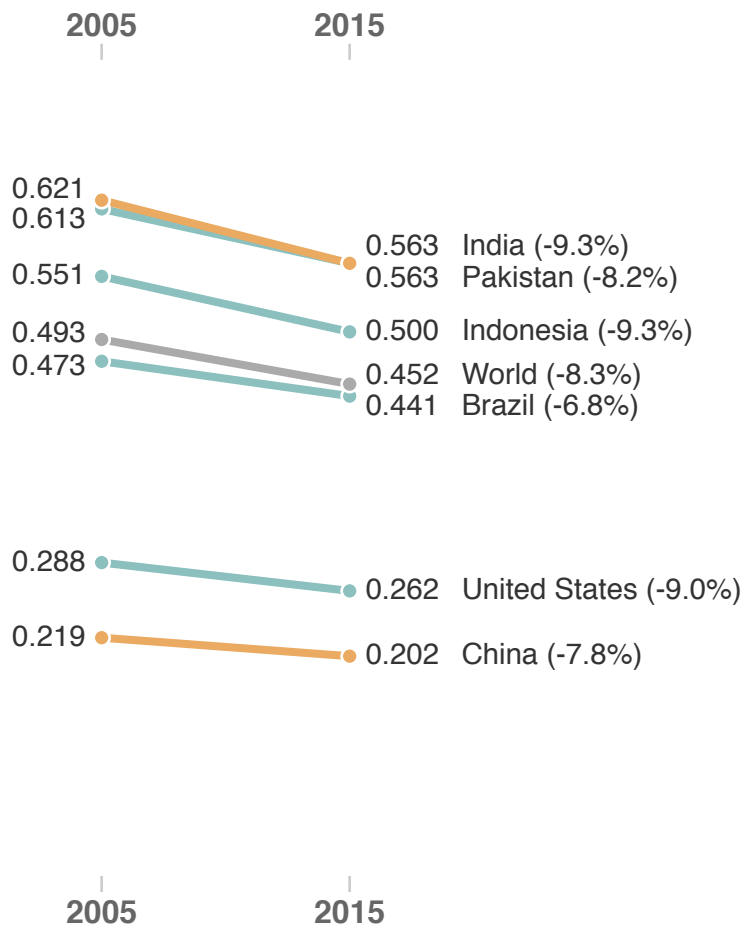
The actual percentages of women serving in a parliament or a congress in these countries reflect this feeling. Not a single one of our seven countries has even come close to gender parity in national political representation. It's interesting that the U.S., in many respects a relatively progressive country when it comes to gender, has a lower percentage of women in Congress than both China and Pakistan do in their national assemblies.

Why do China and Pakistan do so well in this area? Both countries have passed laws that mandate minimum female representation quotas. The relatively high percentage of women in Pakistan's National Assembly is due to a law that requires 17 percent of its seats to be occupied by women. Also notable in Pakistan is that these women are

not directly elected. Their seats are allocated by the winning political parties.

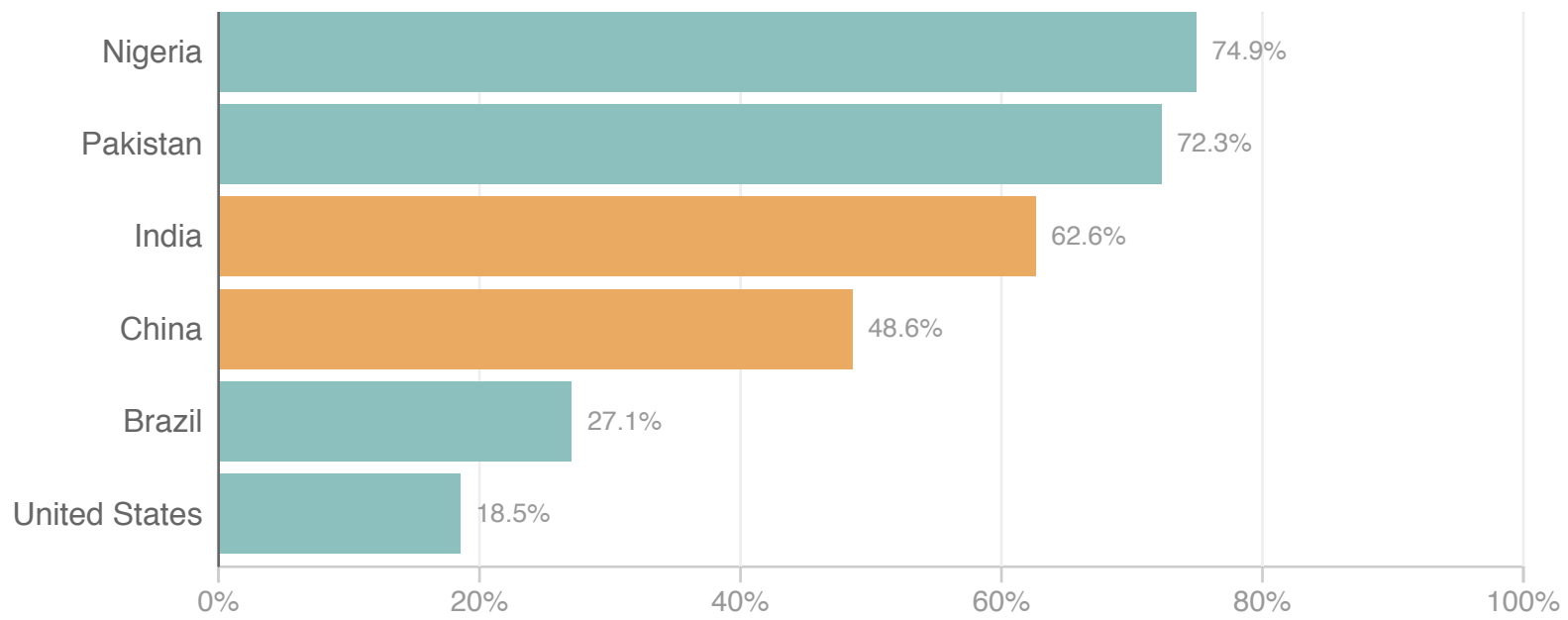
## Improvements In Gender Equality Over The Past 10 Years

The United Nations Gender Inequality Index is a composite measure of inequality that incorporates several of the individual measures referenced above. **Lower numbers are better.**



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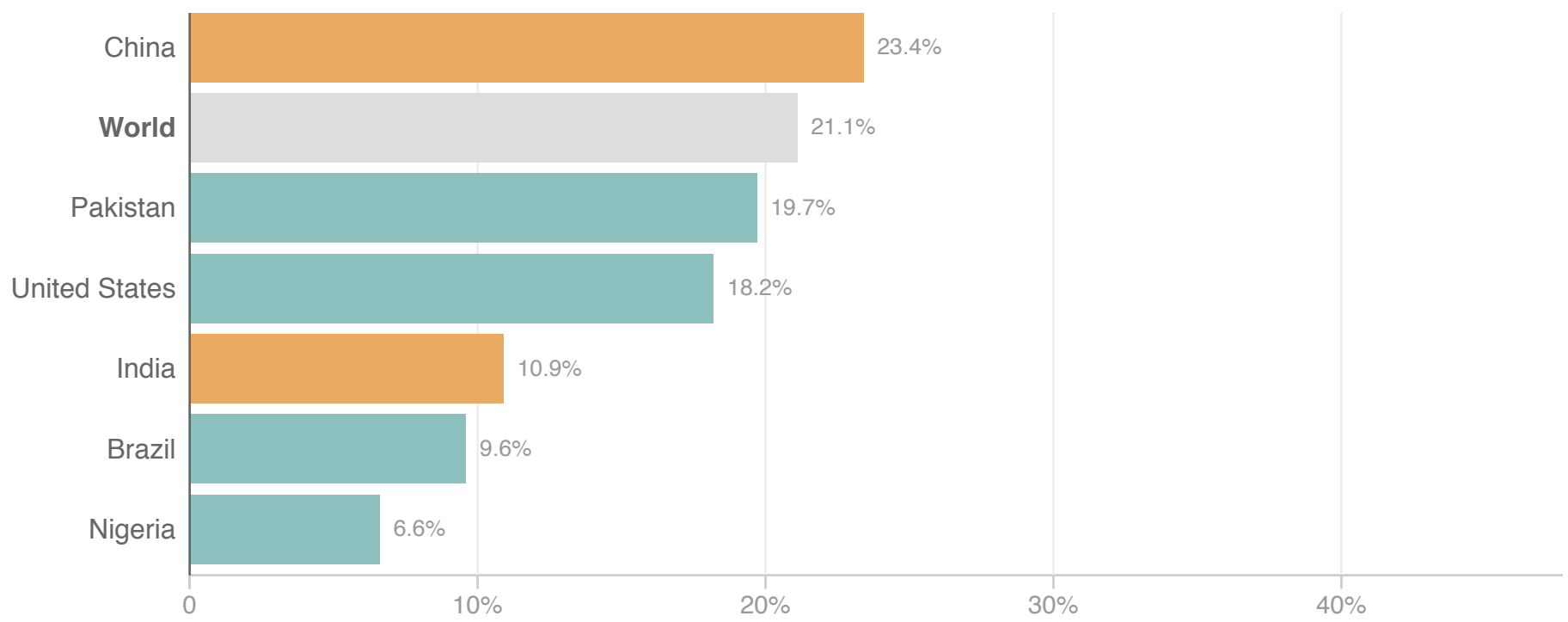
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# Girls And The Big Picture

# Percentage Of Women In High Political Office

Share of parliamentary seats held by women in 2013

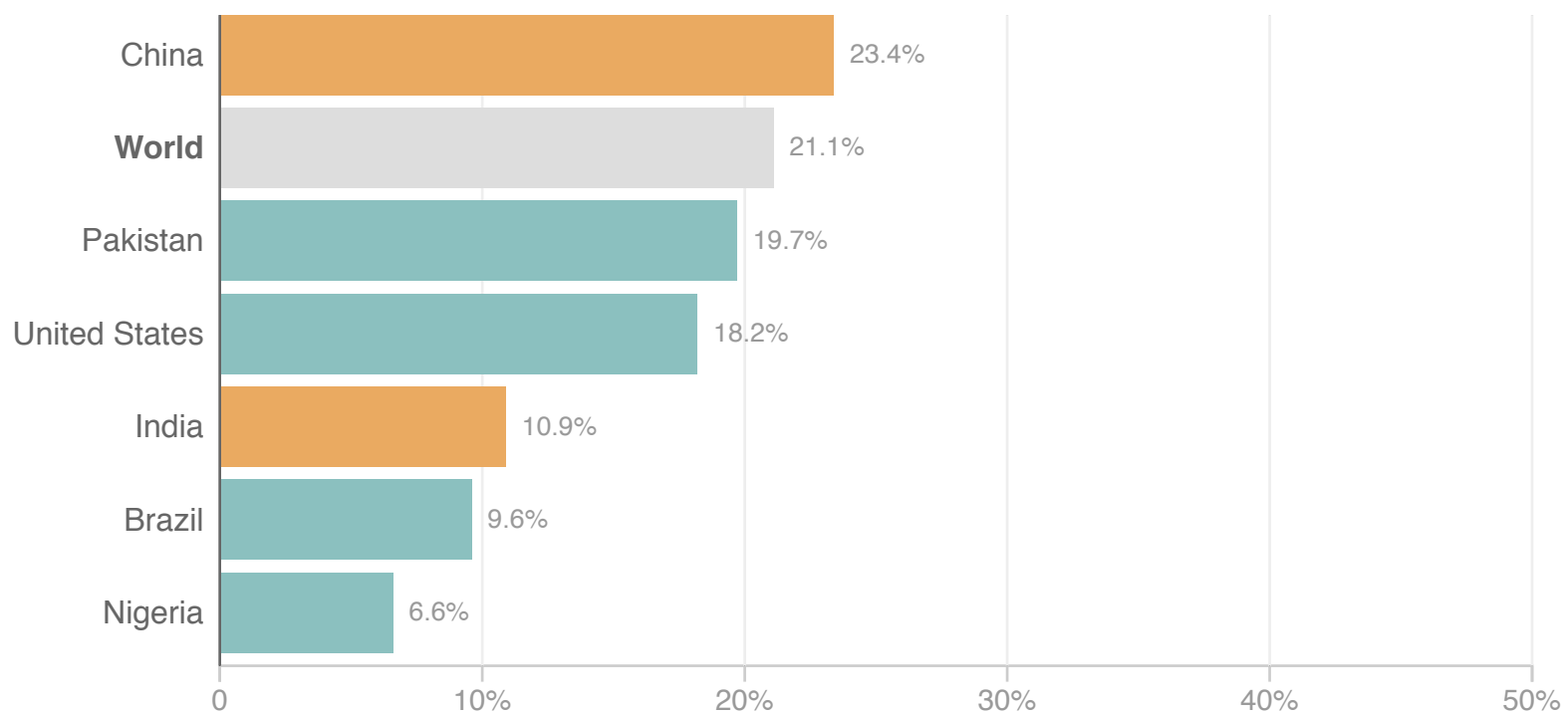


Source: United Nations Development Programme [Gender Inequality Index](#)

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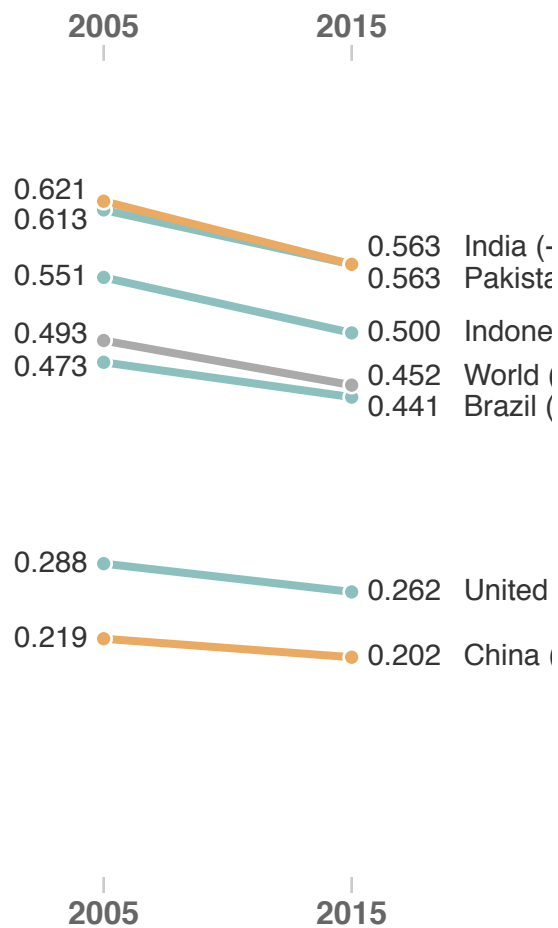
All told, the state of 10- to 19-year-old girls in our survey of seven countries isn't great. They have to overcome the odds at nearly every stage of life just to stay on par with their male peers.

But if we put things in a historical perspective, we can see progress.

Compared with the year 1960, general health as measured by average life expectancy for women has improved in all seven of our countries. India and China's girls have much longer lives to look forward to now. And in all these countries, and actually in nearly every country in the world both then and now, women live longer than men.

## Improvements In Gender Equality Over The Past 10 Years

The United Nations Gender Inequality Index is a composite measure of inequality that incorporates several of the individual measures referenced above. **Lower numbers are better.**



Source: United Nations Development Programme [Gender Inequality Index](#)

Credit: Christopher Groskopf/NPR

The quality of their lives is harder to measure. But looking at the United Nations Gender Inequality Index, a general measure of girls' and women's well-being, the trend over the past 10 years looks promising.

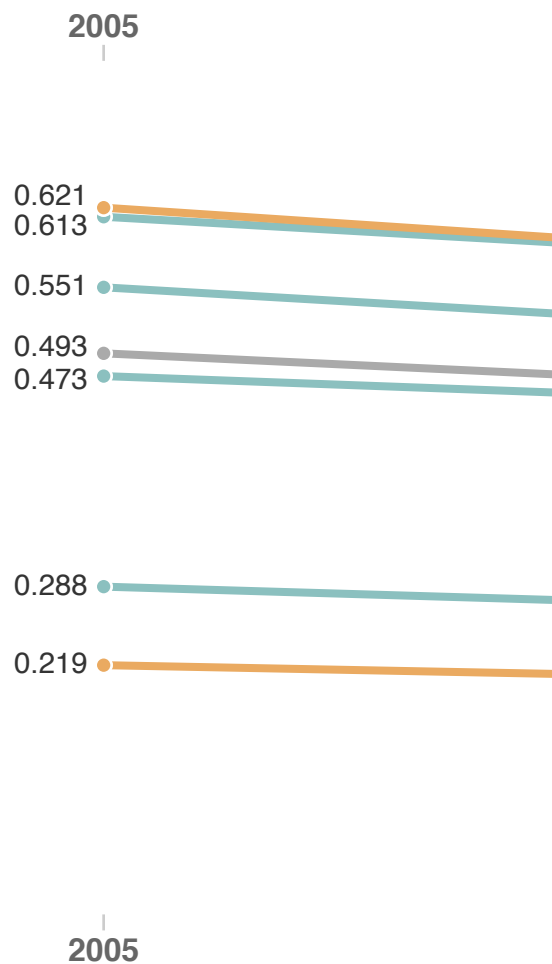
Maybe one day in the not too distant future, the numbers will tell a different story. And if and when they do, it will be due in large part to the efforts of women and girls. As the poet Maya Angelou put it: "I love to see a young girl go out and grab the world by the lapels. Life's a bitch. You've got to go out and kick ass."

## Share Your Story

*Being a 15-year-old girl can be tough no matter where you live. Tell us: **What was the hardest thing about being 15?** Post a photo of yourself as a teen with your answer on Twitter or Instagram, and tag your post with #15Girls and @NPR. More details [here](#).*

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Credit: Christopher Grockopf/NPR

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