

Persisting education disparities threaten to exclude women from the global knowledge economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 32 | Rorisang Lekalake

Summary

Despite growing public support for gender parity, and government initiatives to promote it in some African countries, inequalities in educational attainment remain a significant obstacle to women's empowerment. The United Nations reports notable successes in increasing primary-school enrolment rates, from 52% in 1990 to 78% in 2012 in sub-Saharan Africa and from 80% to 99% in North Africa, but girls continue to be educated at lower rates than boys – particularly at secondary and tertiary levels (United Nations, 2014).

Findings from Afrobarometer surveys in 34 African countries confirm significant gains in educational attainment, with youth reporting higher levels than their elders. But although there is broad support for gender equality in education access, women's attainment levels are lower than men's across all age groups.

This disparity is most notable in post-secondary education, even among young Africans, which threatens to perpetuate existing inequalities in economic and political empowerment. As countries approach universal access to primary education, the development agenda has shifted toward an emphasis on higher education's role in national development (Bloom, Canning, Chan, & Luca, 2014). Modern economies increasingly emphasise human capital (education and knowledge/skills), reflected in government investment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education in developed economies.

The persisting gender gap in higher education therefore threatens to maintain African women's marginalisation in the global knowledge economy.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

Afrobarometer surveys are based on nationally representative samples. The current analysis is based on results for 34 countries surveyed in Round 5 (2011-2013) (see Figure 7 below for a list of countries), representing the views of approximately three-quarters of the continent's population. Depending on sample size, results for each country are reliable within margins of sampling error of +/-3% or +/-2% at a level of 95% confidence.

Key findings

- Support for equal opportunity: Two-thirds of citizens in 34 African countries say that if funds are limited, families should prioritise educating the child with the greatest ability

to learn, regardless of gender. Only 15% indicate an explicit preference for educating boys rather than girls.

- Gains in educational attainment: More than three-fourths (77%) of Africans have at least a primary education, and the proportions of young Africans with secondary and tertiary education are at least double those of their elders above age 50.
- Persistent gaps: **Despite these gains, women are more likely to have lower levels of education than men.** The gender gap in post-secondary educational attainment is prevalent throughout the continent and consistent across all age groups. There are, however, large differences between countries, ranging from no gap in Cape Verde to a 15-percentage-point gap in Egypt.

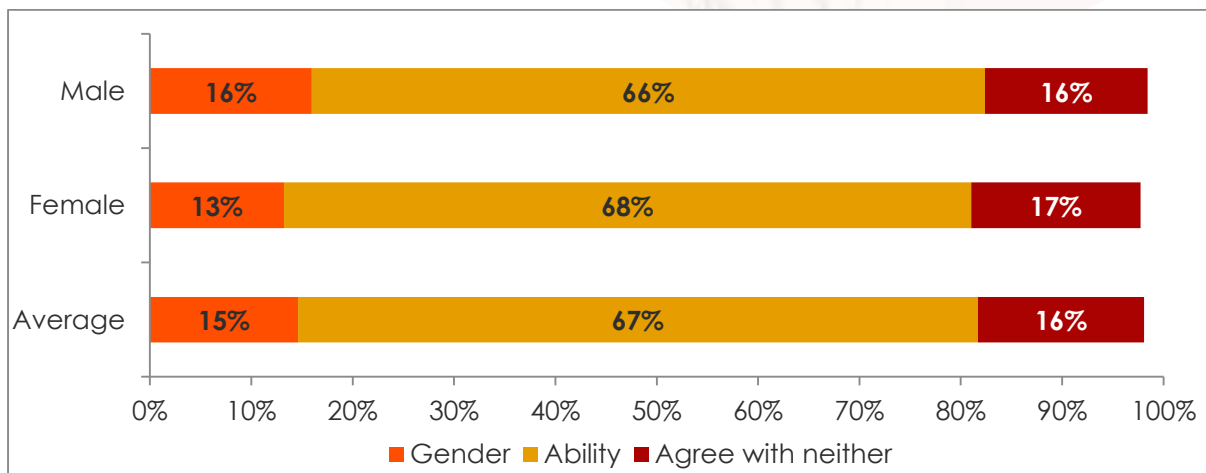
Support for equal educational opportunity

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDG) prioritise achieving universal primary education and the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment by the end of 2015. As this deadline approaches, it has become evident that although progress has been made on both fronts, access to social, economic, and political advancement remains unequal. Previous Afrobarometer analysis demonstrates that gender parity enjoys broad support among both genders throughout the continent, but African women report lower levels of education, employment, and political participation than men (Chingwete, Richmond, & Alpin, 2014).

Public support for equal access to education is widespread throughout the continent, with two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents saying that ability, not gender, should be the primary determinant of who receives schooling if a family's funds are limited. Only 15% of respondents say that a boy's education should take priority over a girl's. These views are shared equally by both genders (Figure 1).

North Africans express the lowest levels of support for prioritising ability (55%), while East Africans are the most supportive of this view (79%). However, less than one in five North African respondents say outright that boys should take preference over girls, which is comparable to levels in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Prioritising access to education | by gender | 34 countries | 2011/2013

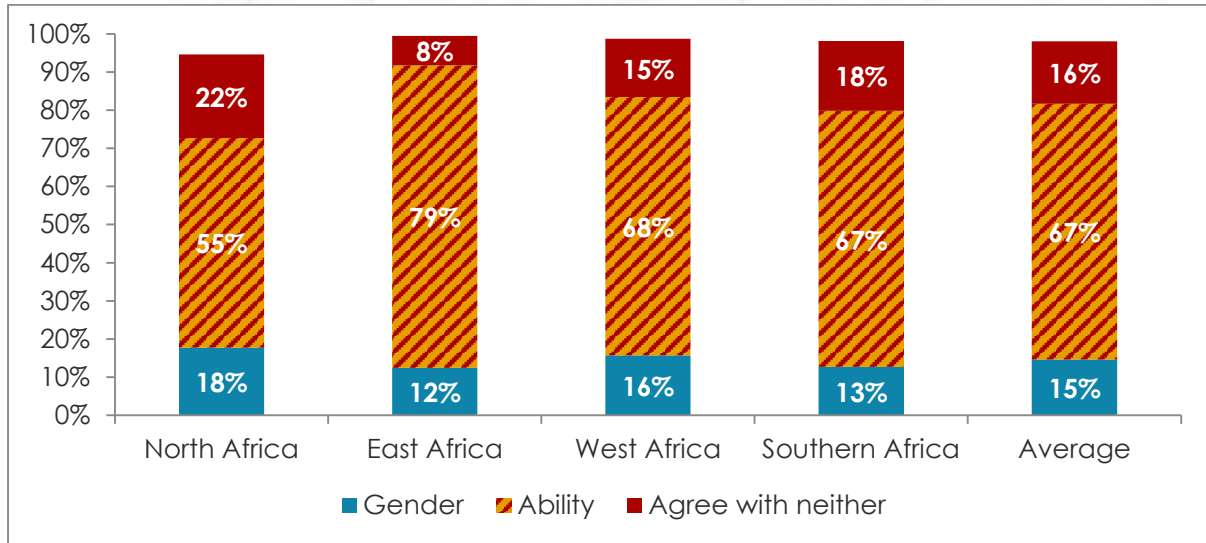


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: If funds for schooling are limited, a boy should always receive an education in school before a girl.

Statement 2: If funds for schooling are limited, a family should send the child with the greatest ability to learn.

Figure 2: Prioritising access to education | by region | 34 countries | 2011/2013

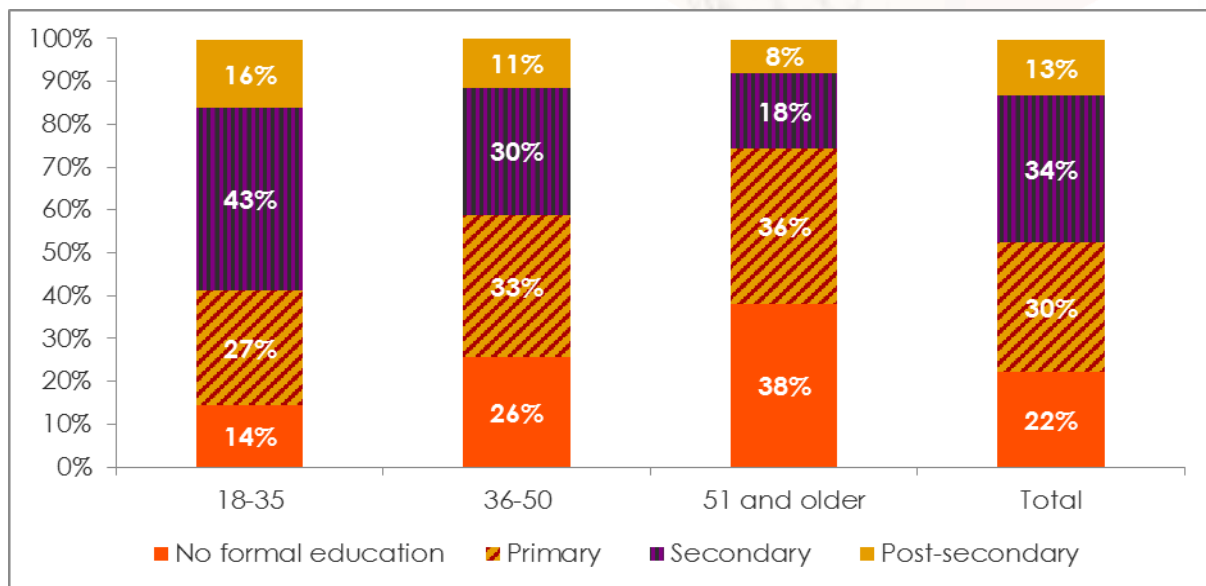


Women lag in educational attainment

After years of national and international investment, the marked generational differences in educational attainment indicate that there have been significant gains in expanding education on the continent. Almost nine in 10 young Africans (aged 18-35 years) have some formal education, compared to only six in 10 in the over-50 age group. The greatest gains have been made in expanding access to secondary education, with a 25-percentage-point difference between 18- to 35-year-olds and those aged over 50 (Figure 3).

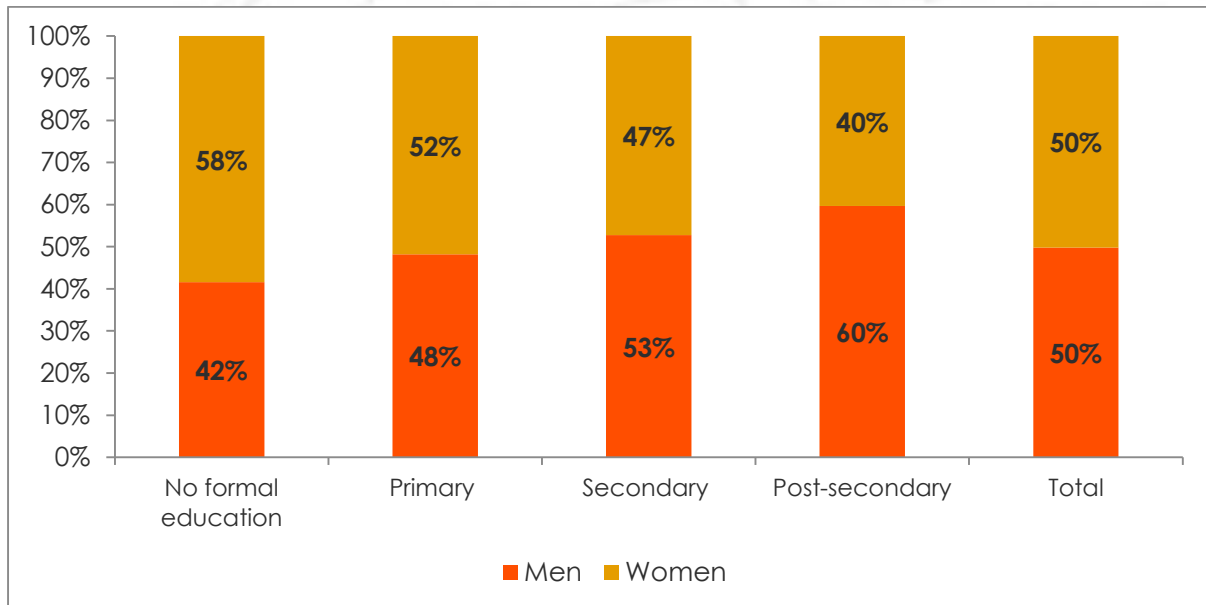
Despite these gains and the widespread support for gender equality in educational opportunities, women are more likely than men to have lower levels of education (i.e. none or primary only). While the sample is split evenly by gender, almost six in 10 respondents with no formal education and only four in 10 respondents with post-secondary education are women (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Educational attainment | by age group | 34 countries | 2011/2013



Respondents were asked: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Figure 4: Educational attainment | by gender | 34 countries | 2011/2013



No progress in closing the gender gap in higher education

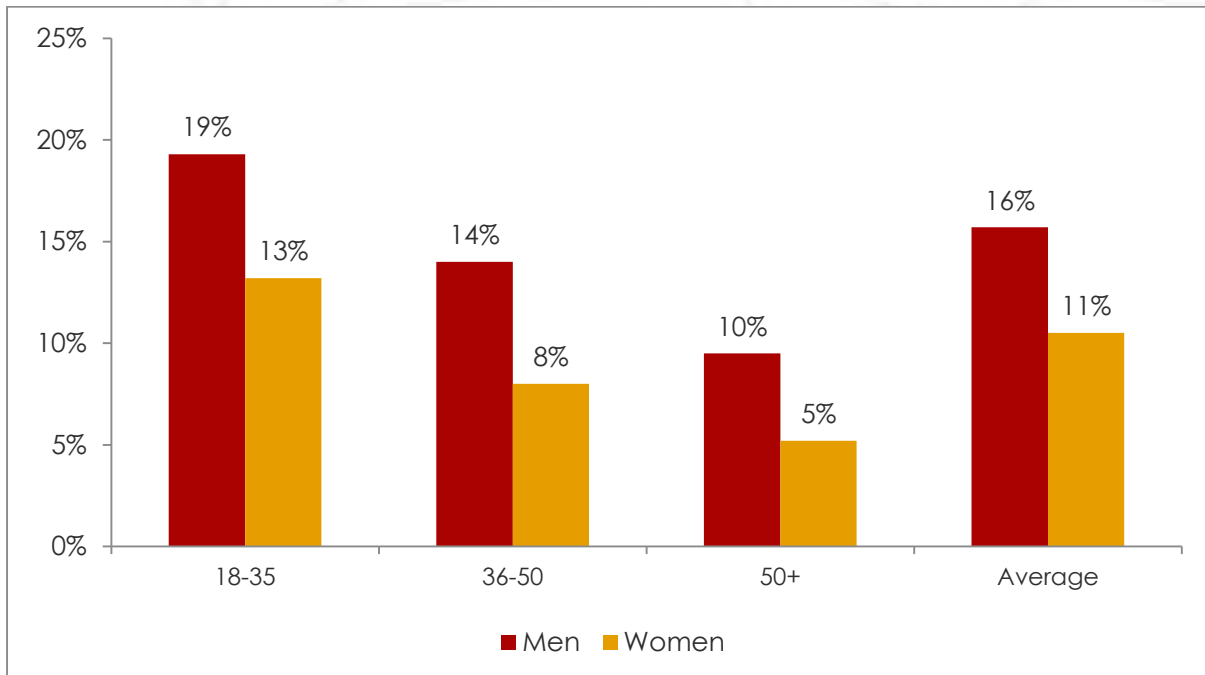
The World Bank identifies education/training as one of the four pillars of the knowledge economy, with a specific focus on secondary and tertiary, rather than primary, education (World Bank, 2012). As shown above, women are underrepresented in both secondary and post-secondary education. This inequality is particularly concerning due to the ever-increasing need for high-level skills in order to participate in the modern knowledge economy.

Despite progress in broadening access to higher education, the gender gap in post-secondary educational attainment is almost identical (5-6 percentage points) across age groups (Figure 5).

The UN reported a marked regional difference in women's access to tertiary education in 2012: While North Africa's female enrolment ratios outpaced those of men, the opposite was true in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations, 2014). Afrobarometer data, however, indicates that women's tertiary education attainment remains lower than men's throughout the continent. While North Africans are most likely to have at least some post-secondary education, the region also has the largest gender gap, at 7 percentage points (Figure 6).

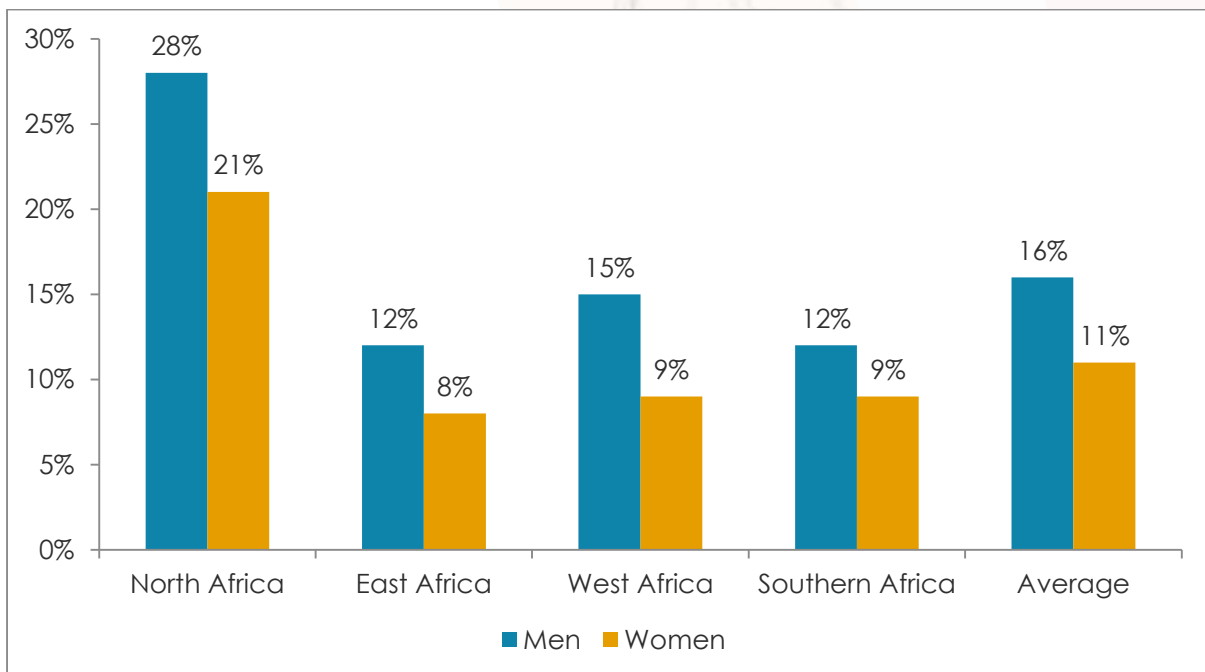
Further analysis shows the wide variation among African countries. Cape Verdean women are as likely to embark on post-secondary studies as their male counterparts, with women in Lesotho and Madagascar not far behind. In Egypt, on the other hand, the gender gap is triple the overall average of 5 percentage points (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Gender differences in post-secondary educational attainment | by age group | 34 countries | 2011/2013



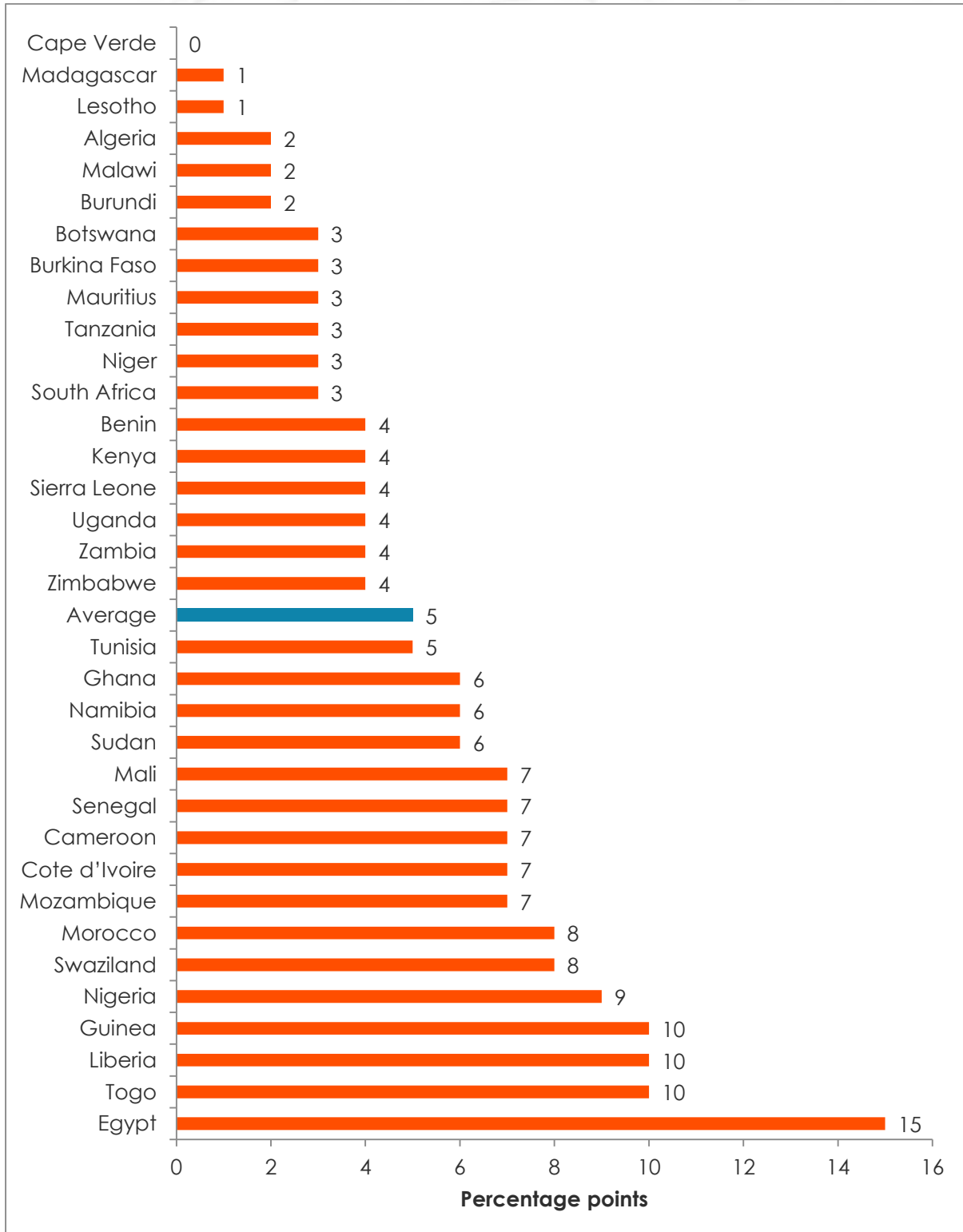
(% reporting post-secondary education)

Figure 6: Gender differences in post-secondary educational attainment | by region | 2011/2013



(% reporting post-secondary education)

Figure 7: Gender gap in post-secondary education | 34 countries | 2011/2013



(Difference between proportions of men and of women reporting post-secondary education)

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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