

MARCH 2025

# FACT SHEET



## ADULT ILLITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA



### BACKGROUND

Adult illiteracy remains a critical challenge in South Africa, one deeply rooted in the country's historical, socio-economic and systemic inequities. Apartheid-era policies significantly restricted access to quality education and training for many communities, leaving generations of adults without basic literacy skills. This situation has been exacerbated by factors such as under-resourced schools, poverty and social inequalities, which continue to limit education and training opportunities. Illiteracy among adults directly impacts their ability to access meaningful employment, navigate the health-care system, and actively participate in civic and economic life, all of which perpetuates cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

To address this challenge, Community Education and Training (CET) colleges have taken on a vital role by providing Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes. These initiatives align with the goals outlined in the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013), which emphasises the importance of creating inclusive education and training opportunities for adults and young people who were unable to complete their formal schooling.

Literacy and numeracy are foundational skills that empower individuals to achieve personal growth, contribute to their communities, and participate fully in society. Within the broader framework of lifelong learning, addressing adult illiteracy is essential for advancing South Africa's development objectives and fostering a more equitable society.



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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to assess the magnitude and distribution of adult illiteracy in South Africa—providing insights into the scale of the challenge and the potential demand for programmes that address adult illiteracy in the country. Specifically, the Fact Sheet aims to explore the adult illiteracy rate, examine its patterns across gender, age groups, provinces, and population groups, and analyse the implications for South Africa’s Post-School Education and Training system.

This Fact Sheet serves as a resource for policymakers and stakeholders to guide the development and refinement of targeted strategies that confront adult illiteracy. By presenting data-driven insights, the Fact Sheet aims to support the design of inclusive, context-specific literacy initiatives that prioritise underserved populations and promote lifelong learning.

Ultimately, improving adult literacy will contribute to advancing South Africa’s broader socio-economic and education and training objectives, ensuring that all adults are equipped with the foundational skills necessary to participate in and contribute to society.



## TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

### 3.1. LITERACY

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.<sup>1</sup> Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

### 3.2. FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

A functionally literate person is one who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for the effective functioning of their group and community. Functional literacy also enables people to continue to use reading, writing and calculation to develop themselves and their communities.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.3. ADULT ILLITERACY RATE

The adult illiteracy rate is calculated by dividing the number of persons of a given age range who are not literate by the corresponding age group in the population, then multiplying the result by 100.

In this Fact Sheet, persons who are not literate (illiterate) are deemed to be those who have not completed schooling up to Grade 7 or its equivalent, namely ABET Level 3.

The highest level of education attainment for an individual is used as a proxy measure for (il)literacy since it is very expensive and resource-intensive to assess literacy among adults on a sustainable basis.

Internationally, the achievement of Grade 5 is often accepted as the benchmark for literacy; however, the DHET has adopted Grade 7 to align with how Statistics South Africa measures functional literacy in its General Household Survey.

### 3.4. ADULT

The term ‘adult’ refers to persons in the South African population aged 20 years and older.

1 <https://uis.unesco.org/node/3079547>

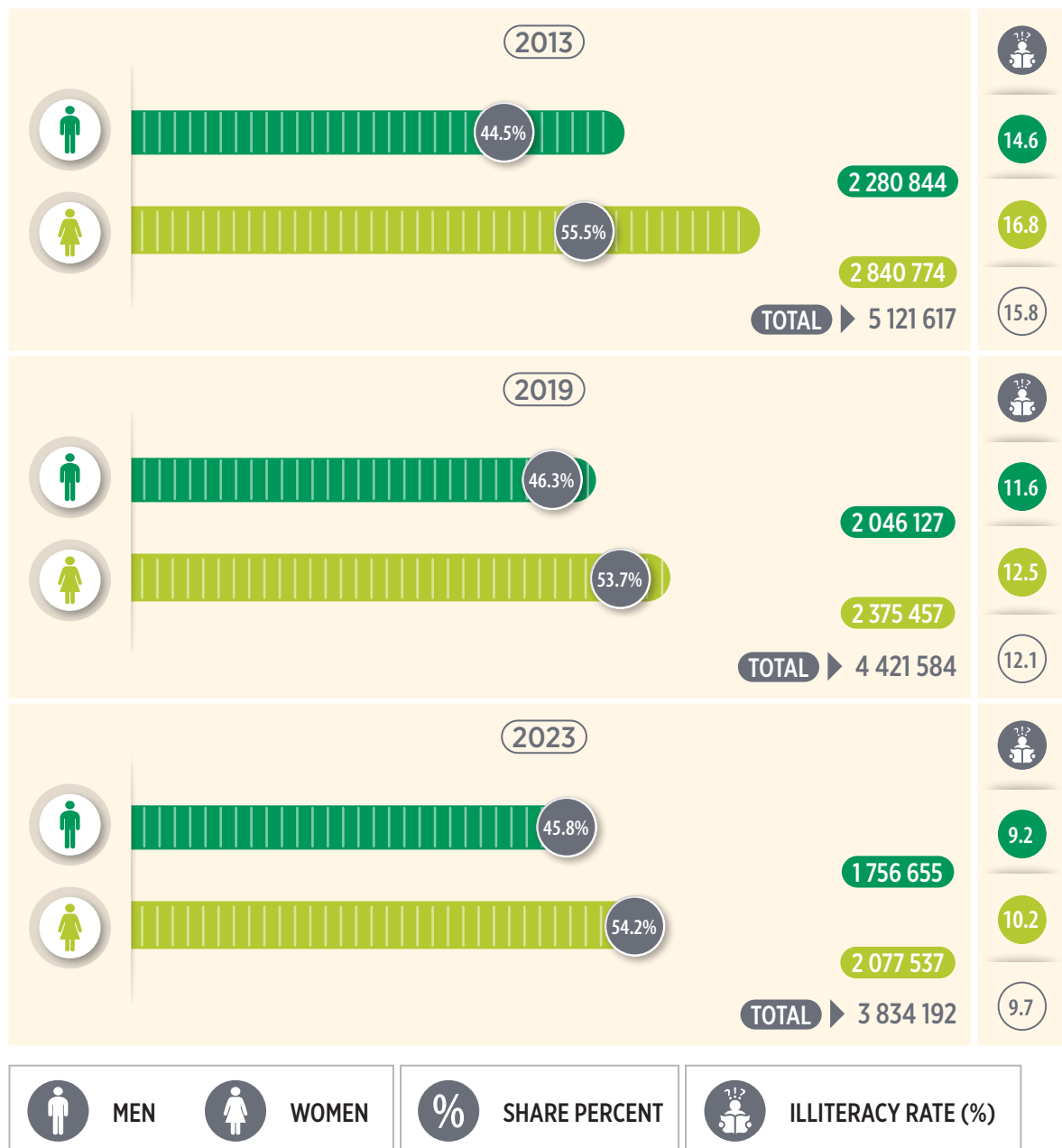
2 <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/gaml4-functional-literacy-numeracy.pdf>



## FACTS AND FIGURES

Figure 1 demonstrates a consistent decline in South Africa’s adult illiteracy rate over the past decade, from 15.8% in 2013 to 9.7% in 2023. While progress is evident, approximately 3.8 million adults remain illiterate, indicating the scale of the challenge. The data highlights persistent gender disparities. In 2023, the illiteracy rate for women was 10.2%, compared to 9.2% for men. The data further reveals that older generations have greater rates of female illiteracy than younger generations, which contributes to the higher rates of female illiteracy relative to male illiteracy (Figure 5). Efforts to address illiteracy must include gender-sensitive interventions, such as flexible learning options in CET colleges to encourage participation by older women.

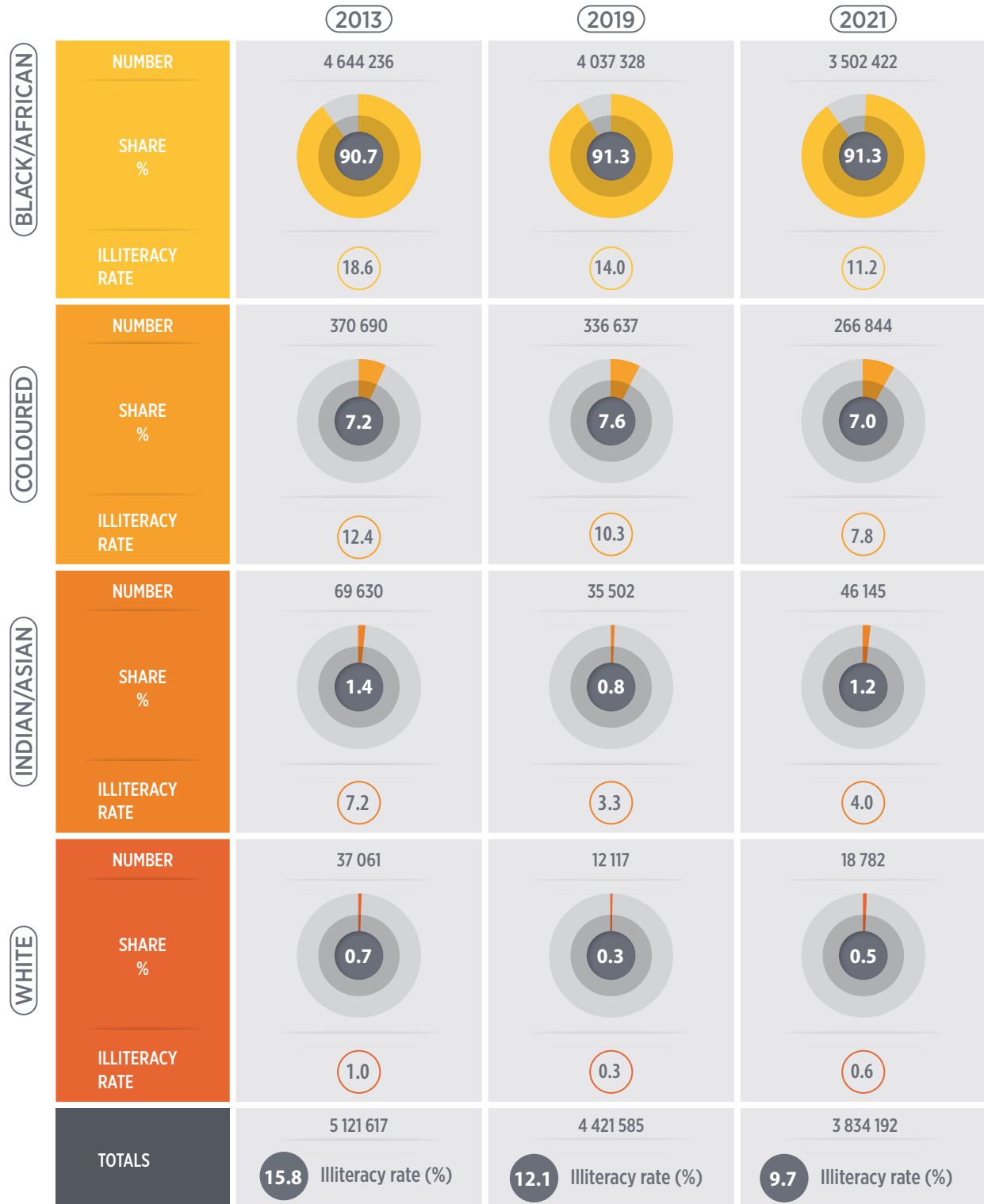
**FIGURE 1:** Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and older who have not completed Grade 7 and above by gender, 2013, 2019 and 2023



Source: General Household Survey, Statistics South Africa (2013, 2019, 2023)

Figure 2 highlights noteworthy racial disparities in adult illiteracy. In 2023, Black Africans had the highest illiteracy rate at 11.2%, followed by Coloured persons at 7.8% and Indian/Asian persons at 4.0%. Meanwhile, the White population had the lowest rate at 0.6%. Although all the racial groups experienced declines over the past decade, the persistent gap between historically disadvantaged groups and others underscores the enduring legacy of apartheid-era education policies. Targeted interventions are critical for addressing these inequalities, particularly among Black African and Coloured populations, to ensure inclusive progress. The figures emphasise the need for localised efforts in underserved communities to further reduce illiteracy rates.

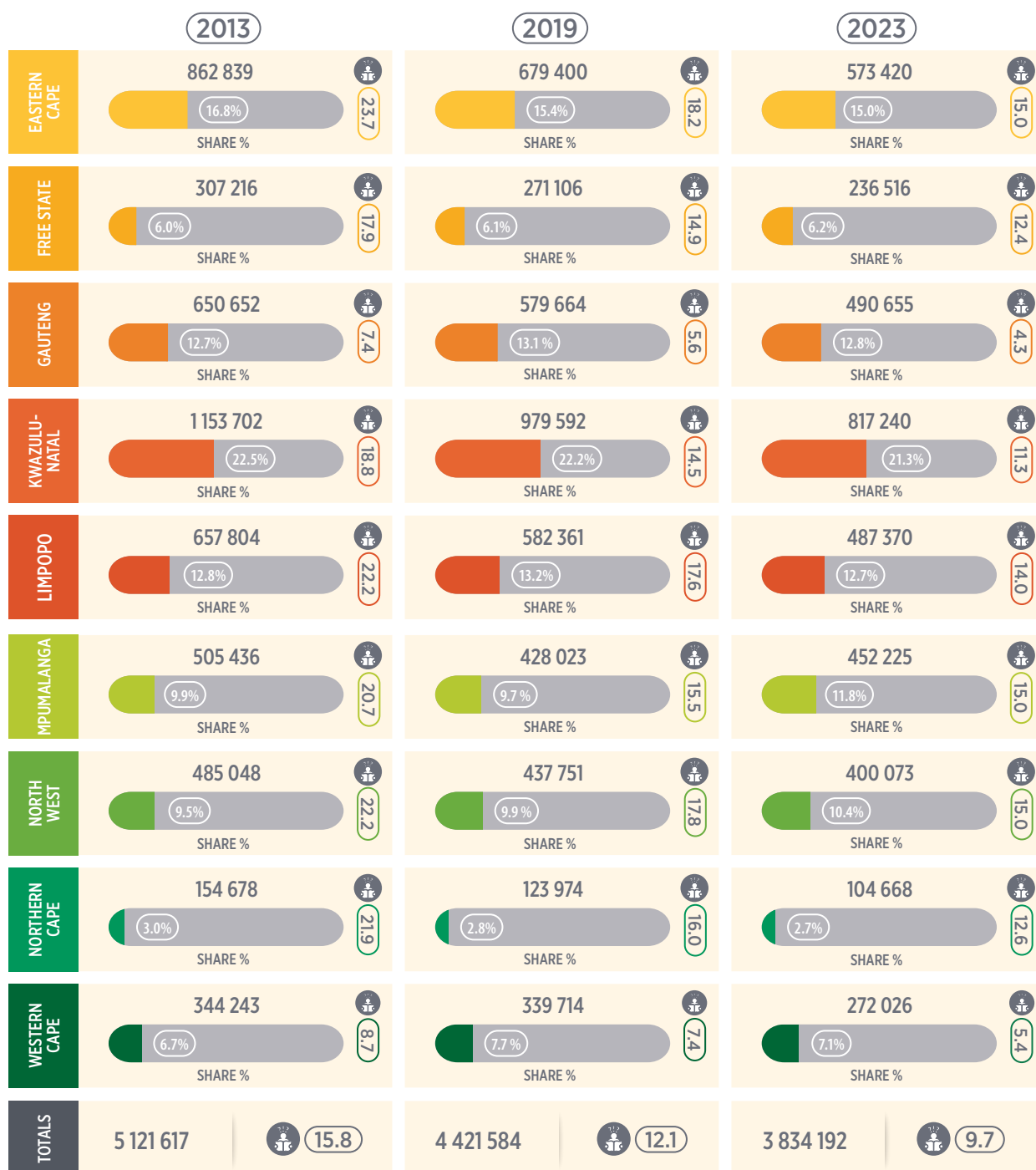
**FIGURE 2:** Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed Grade 7 and above by population group, 2013, 2019 and 2023



Source: General Household Survey, Statistics South Africa (2013, 2019, 2023)

Figure 3 reveals regional disparities in illiteracy rates across South Africa. In 2023, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape recorded the highest numbers of illiterate adults in their provinces (817 240 and 573 420 persons, respectively). Gauteng and the Western Cape had the lowest illiteracy rates (4.3% and 5.4%, respectively). Conversely, the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, and North West reported the highest illiteracy rates at 15.0% across all three regions, reflecting the challenges in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. This data highlights the importance of province-specific strategies that focus on expanding education and training infrastructure and improving access to literacy programmes in high-need areas.

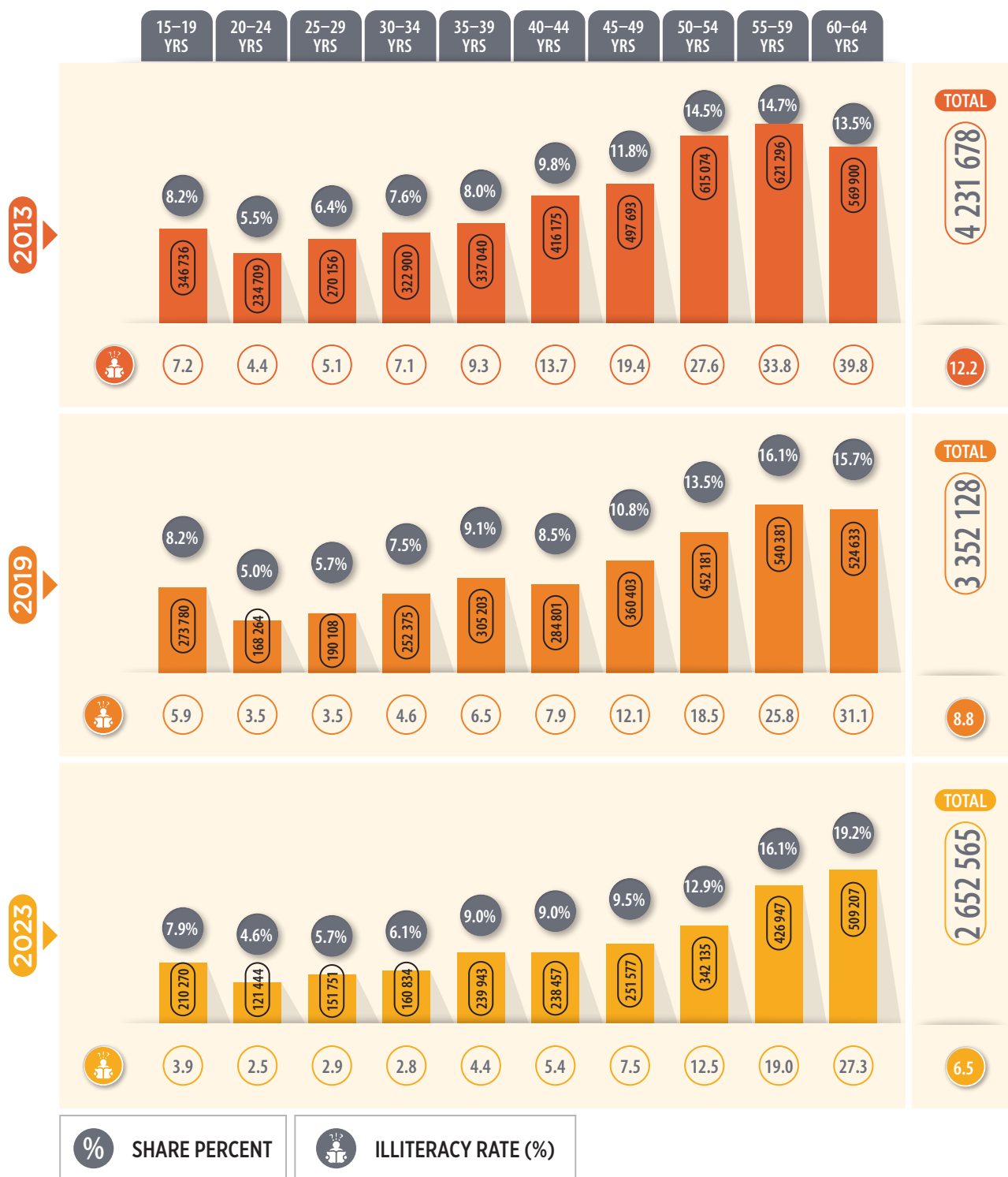
**FIGURE 3:** Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed Grade 7 and above by province, 2013, 2019 and 2023



Source: General Household Survey, Statistics South Africa (2013, 2019, 2023)

Figure 4 demonstrates a generational divide in literacy rates. In 2023, the highest illiteracy rates were observed in older age groups, particularly individuals aged 60–64 (27.3%) and 55–59 (19.0%). It is concerning that these two age groups were 50–54 and 45–49 years old in 2013 and that their adult illiteracy rates remained virtually unchanged 10 years later (27.6% and 19.4%, respectively). Younger age groups, such as those aged 20–24, had significantly lower rates (2.5%) in 2023, reflecting the positive impact of improved access to education and training over recent decades. This generational disparity underscores the importance of lifelong learning programmes targeting older adults, many of whom missed formal education opportunities under apartheid. Expanding adult education initiatives tailored to older populations is essential to ensuring equitable progress.

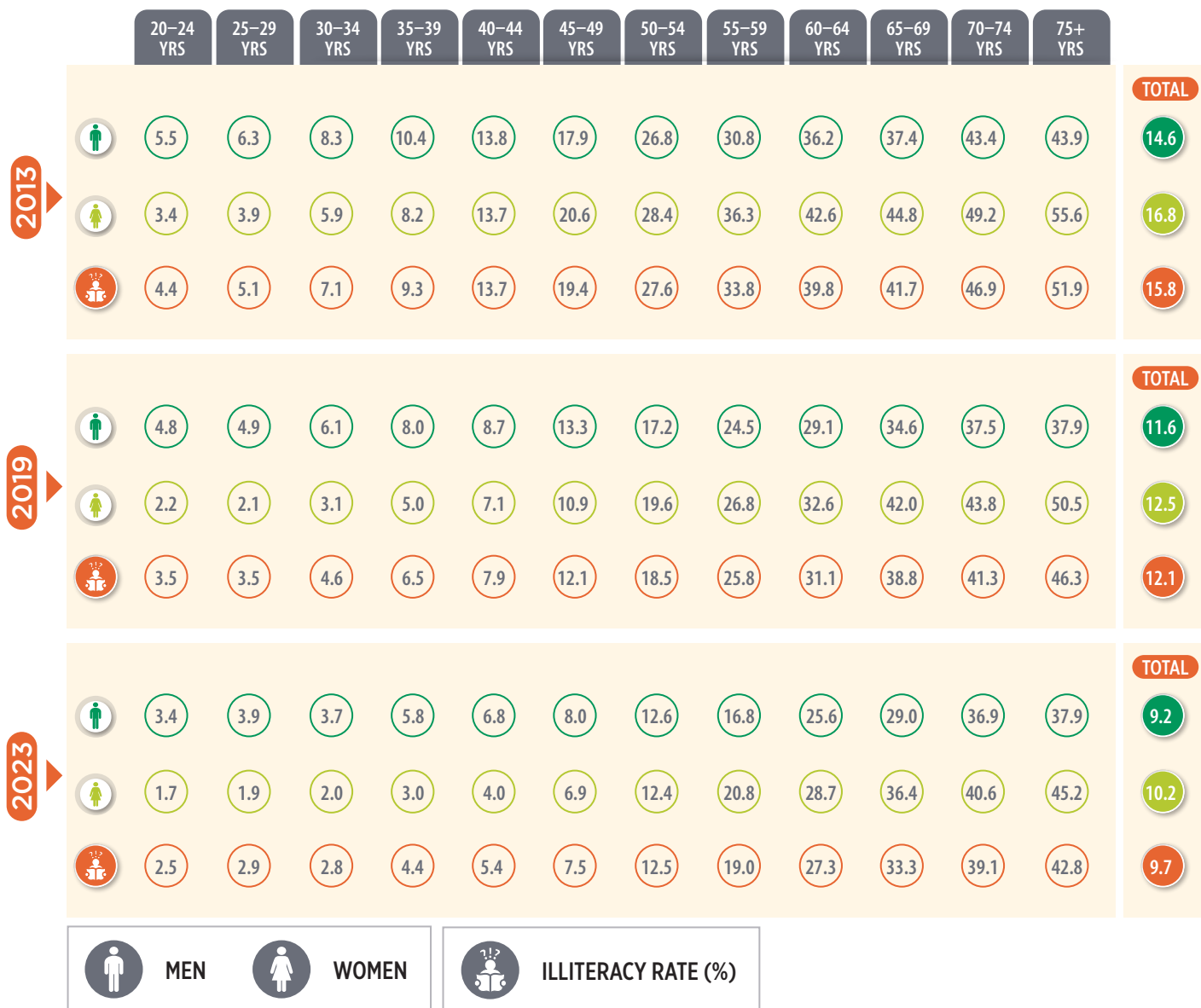
**FIGURE 4:** Number and percentage of persons in the population who have not completed Grade 7 and above by age group, 2013, 2019 and 2023



Source: General Household Survey, Statistics South Africa (2013, 2019, 2023)

Figure 5 shows adult illiteracy rates by gender and age group. Across all the years studied, female illiteracy rates are higher than male illiteracy rates in the older generation but lower than male illiteracy rates in the younger generation. They are also much lower than the overall illiteracy rate in the population. For instance, in 2023, the illiteracy rate for females in the 55–59 age group was 20.8%, which is substantially higher than that of males (16.8%). This discrepancy could be attributed to the injustices of the past and to systemic barriers where women were afforded limited access to education and training due to caregiving roles and societal expectations. It is encouraging to see the progress of initiatives aimed at building an inclusive and equitable education system by 2030. This is in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, Target 4.5 of which is to eliminate gender disparities in education. However, greater efforts must be directed towards supporting older women.

**FIGURE 5: Percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed Grade 7 and above by age group and gender, 2013, 2019 and 2023**



Source: General Household Survey, Statistics South Africa (2013, 2019, 2023)

South Africa has made substantial progress in reducing adult illiteracy

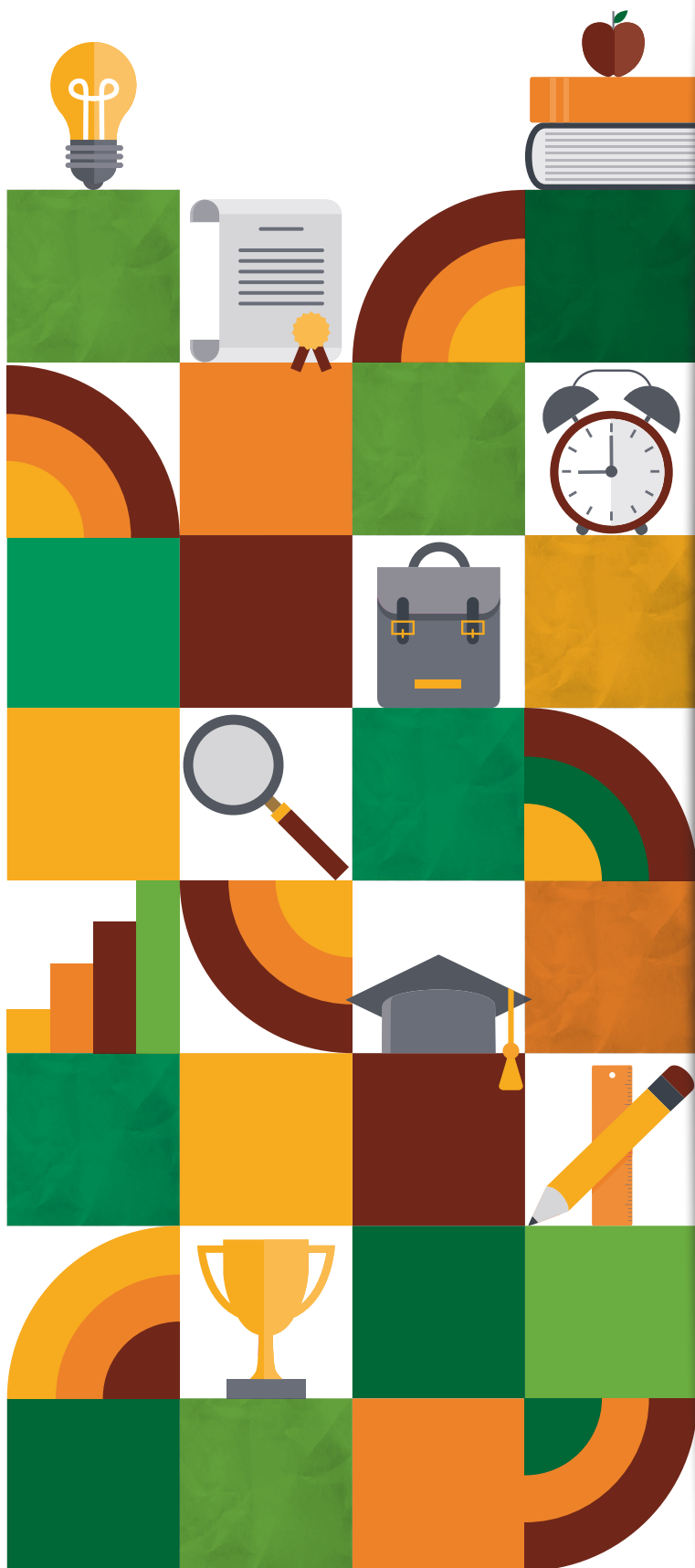


## CONCLUSION

While South Africa has made substantial progress in reducing adult illiteracy from 15.8% in 2013 to 9.7% in 2023, the challenge remains significant, with approximately 3.8 million adults still illiterate. Persistent gender, racial, provincial, and age disparities highlight systemic barriers that must be addressed through targeted and inclusive interventions. Older women, Black Africans, and residents of rural and economically disadvantaged provinces like the Eastern Cape and North West face the greatest challenges, necessitating localised, gender-sensitive, and community-specific strategies.

Generational differences in literacy rates reflect the transformative impact of improved access to education, with younger populations showing much lower illiteracy rates. However, high rates among older adults underscore the need for lifelong learning programmes to support those who missed opportunities for formal education, especially older women, since this Fact Sheet reveals a pronounced prevalence of illiteracy within this demographic.

Expanding ABET programmes, integrating literacy initiatives into broader socio-economic development strategies, and leveraging technology for mobile and digital learning are critical to addressing the remaining gaps. To achieve sustained progress, South Africa's literacy efforts must focus on building equitable access to education, particularly in underserved areas, and dismantling structural inequalities. By prioritising these initiatives, the country can create a foundation for individual empowerment, inclusive growth, and long-term socio-economic development.



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Khuluvhe, M. (2025) *Adult illiteracy in South Africa*. Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

This Fact Sheet is available on the Department of Higher Education and Training's website:



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