

Proportion of older women; proportion living alone



Key points

- The survival advantage of females over males results in a higher share of women than men among older persons. Globally, at least three out of every five persons (62%) aged 80 and over are women and just over a half (54%) of those aged 65 and over are women.
- The share of women among older persons aged 80 and over is the highest in Europe and Northern America (64%) and the lowest in Central and Southern Asia (55%).
- Three out of four older persons over the age of 80 in Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Ukraine are women.
- Analysis of living arrangements for older persons is important as an indication of the level of support that is available to them.
- Women over age 65 are generally about twice as likely as older men to live alone in developed countries and three times as likely to live alone in developing ones.
- More than 30% of older women (around 18% of men) in Australia and New Zealand and in Europe and Northern America live alone, compared to 13% of older women (4% of men) in Central and Southern Asia and 19% of older women (6% of men) in Northern Africa and Western Asia.

Background

The proportion of women among the total population of older persons gives an indication of the relative mortality rates of women and men until advanced ages. An analysis of the living arrangements of older persons provides information about who they live with, whether alone or with others, and is important as an indication of the level of support that is available to them. In the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, the living arrangements of older people were identified as a topic requiring more attention and research.¹

Women comprise more than a half of the total older population worldwide

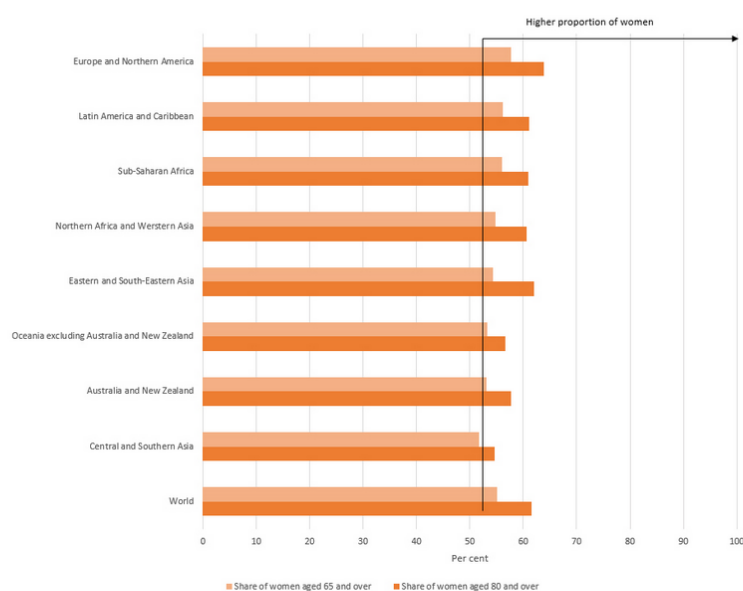
Women comprise more than a half of all older people throughout the world (see figure I). Globally, the share of women among the population aged 65 and older is 54%, and at the regional level, the share ranges from 51% in Central and Southern Asia to 56% in Europe and Northern America. The proportion of women among the population aged 80 and older is even higher both at the global level (62%), and at the regional level (ranging from 55% in Central and Southern Asia to 64% in Europe and Northern America). This high proportion of women among the older population is due to their survival advantage over men.²

Increasing life expectancy at older ages has implications for the living arrangements as well as the health and well-being of older people.³ In particular, data show that older women are more likely than older men to live alone due to: (a) their higher **life expectancy**; (b) higher prevalence of widowhood among women; and (c) higher prevalence of remarriage among men after **widowhood or divorce**.

As the length of life and thus the proportion of older people in the population increase in many countries, it is important to examine whether this is accompanied by sustained health, decent quality of life and sufficient social and economic resources. Research shows that both the prevalence and severity of disability increase with age. In Australia, data show that older women are more likely than older men to have a profound or severe disability: 66.4% of women aged 90 years and over, compared with 48.9% of men aged 90 years and over.⁴ This points to the fact that as more women live to advanced ages, they require greater care and assistance in activities related to daily living, and long-term care always has costs, even when such care is provided by family members on an **unpaid basis**.

Since all regions are experiencing growth in the proportion of older people at advanced ages, the need for long-term care will be critical, including in countries where crucial preconditions for care and healthy ageing, such as universal access to water, sanitation and electricity, as well as robust primary health-care systems, are often lacking.⁵ In addition, as people live longer, and women in particular, they are at higher risk of living in poverty. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, households headed by older women are more likely to be poor than households headed by older men; and in more developed countries, older women in one-person households are more likely than older men to be living in poverty.⁶

Figure I: Share of women among people aged 65 and older and 80 and older, by region: 2019 (Percentage)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>).

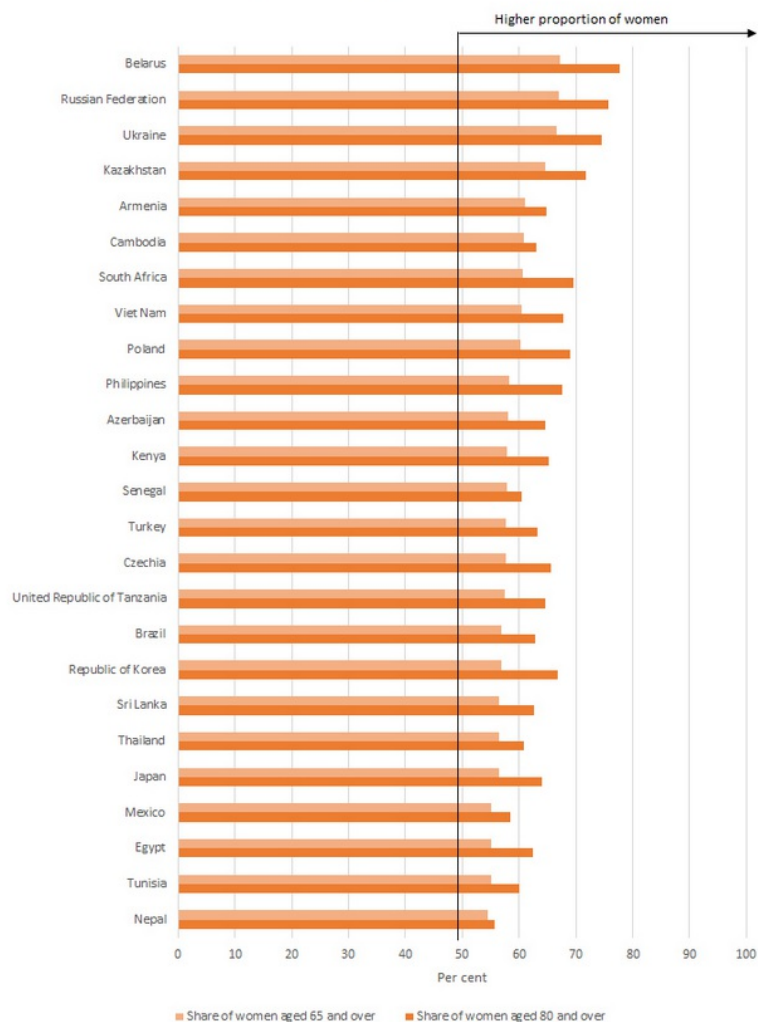
Note: The vertical line (-) indicates the same number of women and men.

National differences in the proportion of women among older people

Certain countries have higher shares of women in their population of older people (see figure II). Among the 25 countries with a proportion of women aged 65 years and older that is higher than the global average of 54%, the following have at least 60%: Armenia, Belarus, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Poland, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Ukraine and Viet Nam. In five of those countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, South Africa and Ukraine), the share of women among those aged 80 and over is at least 70%, pointing to a much higher

female than male survival rate among older people in those countries.

Figure II: Share of women among people aged 65 and older and 80 and older in selected countries: 2019 (Percentage)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>).

Note: The vertical line (-) indicates the same number of women and men.

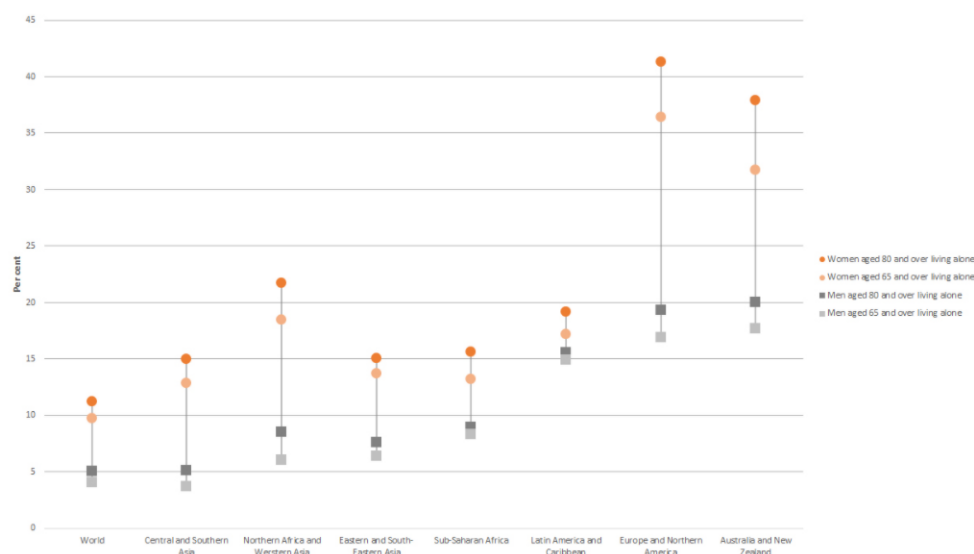
Older women are twice as likely as older men to live alone

Globally, a significant proportion of the population aged 65 and older live alone (see figure III), in particular women. Worldwide, 24% of women and 12% of men aged 65 and older, and 27% of women and 14% of men aged 80 and over live alone. In addition to the differential in the mortality rate between older women and men, it appears that marital status is a major determinant of the differences in living arrangements between the two groups.⁷

The proportion of people living alone among people aged 65 and older varies widely among regions, ranging

between 13% in sub-Saharan Africa to 36% in Europe and Northern America, with developed regions generally having higher proportions of people aged 65 and older living alone than developing ones. Nonetheless, in all the regions, a higher proportion of older women than older men live alone. While less than 9% of men aged 65 and older live alone in four regions (Central and Southern Asia, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Northern and Western Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa), the proportions of women aged 65 and older living alone in these regions range from 13% to 19%. However, the proportion of older women living alone is much higher in Australia and New Zealand (32% of women versus 18% of men) and in Europe and Northern America (36% of women versus 19% of men), about twice that of older men. The gender gap is very small, however, in countries in Latin America and Caribbean, with 17% of women and 15% of men aged 65 and older living alone.

Figure III: Proportion of the population aged 65 and older and 80 and older living alone by sex and by region: 2019 (Percentage)



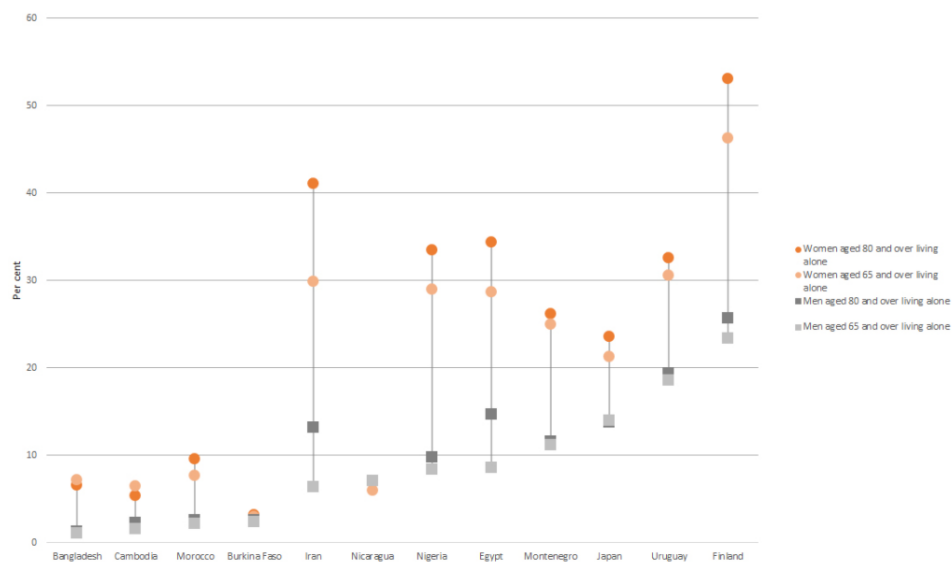
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). Database on the Households and Living Arrangements of Older Persons 2019.

Note: Unweighted averages.

National differences in the living arrangements of older people

There are wide variations in the percentage of people aged 65 and older living alone, even within geographical regions (see figure IV). For example, while 30% of older women and 6% of older men in the Islamic Republic of Iran live alone, in Bangladesh 7% of women and 1% of men in the same age range live by themselves. In Uruguay, 31% of women and 19% of men aged 65 years and over live alone, compared to 6% of older women and 7% of older men in the same age range in Nicaragua. Similarly, the proportion of people aged 80 and older in one-person households in Finland (53% women and 26% men) is significantly higher than in Montenegro (26% women and 12% men).

Figure IV: Proportion of people aged over 65 and over and 80 and over living alone by sex, by selected countries: 2019 (Percentage)



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). Database on the Households and Living Arrangements of Older Persons 2019.

About the data

Definitions

- **Share of women aged 65 and over and aged 80 and over as a percentage of all older persons in the same age groups:** Provides information on the relative proportion of older women to older men
- **Share of women aged 65 and over and aged 80 and over living alone as a percentage of all older persons living alone:** Provides information on the living arrangements of older persons.

Coverage

Population aged 65 and over and aged 80 and over worldwide and by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals indicators framework.⁸

Footnotes

1. Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid, 8–12 April 2002.
2. Ritchie, H. and Roser, M., "Gender Ratio", Our World in Data, June 2019 (online).
3. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, "Living arrangements of older persons around the world", Population Facts, No. 2019/2, April 2019.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Summary of findings, 2018.
5. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Long-term care for older people: A new global gender priority", Policy Brief No. 9, 2017.
6. UNDESA, Programme on Ageing, "Income Poverty in Old Age: An Emerging Development Priority", Briefings Series.
7. Population Division, "Living arrangements of older persons around the world", Population Facts, No. 2019/2, April 2019.
8. Regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals.