

The World's Women 2020

Trends and Statistics



Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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Social Affairs

Message from the Secretary-General

Twenty-five years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, progress towards equal power and equal rights for women remains elusive. No country has achieved gender equality, and the COVID-19 crisis threatens to erode the limited gains that have been made. The Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals and efforts to recover better from the pandemic offer a chance to transform the lives of women and girls, today and tomorrow.

António Guterres

Message from the Under-Secretary-General

Women are on the front lines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, in health care settings and in-home care, in the family and in the public sphere. While data are still scarce, it is evident that women are essential actors in this unfolding worldwide crisis. I call on all countries to accelerate efforts towards the empowerment of women and girls and towards improving the evidence base to monitor progress: data gaps in the coverage of key gender topics need to be filled, timeliness and comparability of data over time and across countries need to be improved, and data disaggregation and dissemination by age, sex, location and other key variables need to become a priority in order to fully measure and address intersecting inequalities, respond to crises, and ensure gender equality by 2030.

Liu Zhenmin

Acknowledgements

The World's Women 2020: Trends and Statistics online portal, which has been prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), is the result of the collective effort of a wide range of contributors from around the world, under the leadership of Francesca Grum, Chief of the Social and Gender Statistics Section.

Special acknowledgment is owed to the following staff of the Statistics Division: Maria Isabel Cobos Hernandez, Margaret Mbogoni, Andrew Smith, Mehmet Kemal Sökeli, Seiffe Tadesse, Lubov Zeifman and Lin Zhuo for their research, analysis and writing of individual chapters; Thataw Batun, Daniel Eshetie, Luis Gerardo Gonzalez Morales and Paul Narain for the production of the portal; and Tomoyo Ebisawa, Lingyan Hu and Zahia Khalid for their technical support and research.

Special gratitude goes to the following experts for their support and tireless efforts to produce the portal against tight deadlines: the editor, Roberta Brangam; Deepti Kochhar, Chandan Mahapatra and Nicole Talisay from Esri and Ziad Al-Kadri, Narin Gulec and Tanja Herron from the United Nations Graphic Design Unit.

Sincere appreciation goes to the experts from the following national statistical offices and regional and international organizations for providing data, analysis and drafting of individual narratives.

National Statistical Offices

- Barbara Cobo (**Brazil**)
- Karine Leclerc, Melissa Moyser, Martha Patterson, Rachelle Pelletier, Katherine Wall (**Canada**)
- Karen Andrea Garcia-Rojas, Maria Alejandra Lara (**Colombia**)
- Miina Keski-Petäjä, Pontus Lindroos, Laura Lipasti, Marjut Pietiläinen (**Finland**)
- Dieudonnee Ankamah, Sarah Woode (**Ghana**)
- Linda Laura Sabbadini (**Italy**)
- Akira Tsumura (**Japan**)
- Mohammad Khalaf and Manal Sweidan (**Jordan**)
- Ainur Dossanova (**Kazakhstan**)
- Ruta Beinare, Ieva Zabarovska (**Latvia**)
- Raul Figueroa, Pilar García, Eduardo Gracida, Octavio Heredia, Rosa María Licea, Eloína Meneses, Fernando Olguín, Adriana Oropeza, Alejandra Ríos, Norma Sandoval (**Mexico**)
- Nadejda Cojocari, Svetlana Furtuna, Valentina Istrati, Natalia Kleinknecht, Tatiana Sobcovschi, Aurelia Spătaru, Elena Vâtcărău (**Moldova**)
- Katja Branger, Andrea Mosimann (**Switzerland**)
- Tinashe Mwadiwa (**Zimbabwe**)

Regional and international organizations

- Syed Ahmed, Molla Hunegnaw Asmare, Meaza Bekele Gebretsadik, Melat Getachew, Keiso Matashane-Marite, Gonzague Rosalie, Fatouma Sissoko, Gulilat Tesfaye, Ali Yedan (**Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)**)
- Paula Aghon, Amparo Bravo, Francisca Orellana, Iliana Vaca Trigo (**Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)**)
- Yonca Gurbuzer, Martha Osorio (**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**)
- Ulysse Boiteau Montéville, Petra Nahmias, Tanja B. Sejersen, Sharita Serrao (**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)**)
- Christelle Cazabat, Bina Desai (**Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)**)
- Zeina Hilal, Mariana Duarte Mutzenberg, Andy Richardson (**Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**)
- Martin Schaaper (**International Telecommunication Union (ITU)**)
- Molly Gillian (**IUCN-International Union for Conservation of Nature**)
- Jillian Campbell (**Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity**)
- Krishna Pendakur (**Simon Fraser University**)
- Julie Ballington, Ionica Berevoescu, Juncal Plazola Castano, Sarah Crawford, Sneha Kaul, Sara Duerto Valero (**United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)**)
- Henri Luomaranta, Anu Peltola (**United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)**)
- Kristen Mary Jeffers, Andres Vikat, Fiona Willis-Núñez (**Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)**)
- Wilfried Amoussou-Guénou, Friedrich Huebler, Alasdair McWilliam, Rohan Pathirage, Zahia Salmi (**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**)
- Robert Bain, Claudia Cappa, Christie Chatterley, Enrique Delamonica, Jose Espinoza-Delgado, Collen Murray, Lauren Pandolfelli, Tom Slaymaker (**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**)
- Emilie Filmer-Wilson, Mengjia Liang, Rachel Snow (**United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)**)
- Carolina Ferrari, Sebastian Steinmuller (**Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**)
- Valérie Lechene (**University College London**)
- Enrico Bisogno, Michael Jandl, Andrea Oterova, Fatma Ismetova Usheva, Lisa Weijler (**United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**)
- Richard E. Cibulskis (**World Health Organization (WHO)**)
- Theophiline Bose-Duker, Isis Gaddis, Talip Kilic (**World Bank**)

Data providers and reviewers

Trevor Croft and Sunita Kishor (Demographic and Health Surveys Program (DHS)); Elisa M. Benes, David Bescond, Florence Bonnet, Umberto Cattaneo, Michael Frosch, Rosina Gammarano, Steve Kapsos, Marie Claire Sodergren and Kieran Walsh (International Labour Organization (ILO));

experts from DESA, including from the Population Division: Patrick Gerland, Giulia Gonnella, Bela Hovy, Yumiko Kamiya, Vladimira Kantorova, Stephen Kisambira, Mun Sim Lai, Nan Li, Karoline Schmid and Thomas Spoorenberg; Catharina Cuellar, Lilia Jara and Anna Coates (Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO)); Henriette Jansen (UNFPA); Global Health 50/50.

Executive Summary

What is the state of gender equality in the world? What do data tell us about progress towards the commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action, which, 25 years after its adoption, remains the most comprehensive road map for advancing women's rights worldwide. Importantly, in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, Member States reaffirmed, in Sustainable Development Goal 5, that gender equality is central to the achievement of sustainable development for all by 2030. As has been done at five-year intervals since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, The World's Women 2020 takes stock of progress in advancing women's rights, empowering women and girls and ensuring gender equality in the world community.

The **World's Women 2020** is a collection of 100 stories providing up-to-date assessments of progress towards gender equality in the following six critical areas, including, under each area, the impact of COVID-19 on women: (a) population and families; (b) health; (c) education; (d) economic empowerment and asset ownership; (e) power and decision-making; and (f) violence against women and the girl child.

Gender equality in time of crisis: COVID-19 is affecting women and men in different ways

While deaths from communicable diseases are usually higher in developing countries, this situation changed drastically over the course of 2020 due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a highly communicable disease that has affected developing and developed countries alike. As of October 2020, more than 35 million confirmed cases and more than 1 million deaths have been reported worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened underlying inequalities in societies around the world. Gender inequalities in all spheres of life are compounded by other inequalities based on factors including age, ethnicity and wealth. While the pandemic continues to threaten the global community, available data from 38 countries and territories reveal that women above age 20 appear to be more likely to be diagnosed with COVID-19, while men in all age groups under age 80 are more likely to die from it.

It is highly likely that the higher share of diagnosis among women is related to the fact that they comprise over 70% of workers in the health sector. In providing care for those who have fallen ill from the virus, women face a higher risk of infection than men in the workplace. At age 80 and older, when women make up the majority of the population, they significantly outnumber men among those infected: for every single case of COVID-19 among men aged 80 and older there are two cases among women.

Mortality rates among men from COVID-19 are also elevated: men account for a higher proportion of deaths, at least 60%, across all age groups, except among the population aged 80 and older. This may be related to the disruption of health services caused by COVID-19, which has affected the delivery of prevention and treatment services for a number of health-related conditions, including hypertension, cancer and cardiovascular emergencies that are more prevalent among men. For example, the delivery of prevention and treatment services for hypertension has been severely disrupted in 53% of countries surveyed; for diabetes and diabetes-related complications in 49% of countries; for cancer in 42% of countries; and for cardiovascular emergencies in 31% of countries. Emerging research shows that smoking may also be associated with adverse outcomes of COVID-19, which works to the disadvantage of men, who are more likely to smoke than women (4.5 times more likely, globally). Traditional masculine norms which inhibit men from seeking health care could also be related to poor outcomes observed in men.

Given the gender component of the disease spread and related mortality, it is vital that clinical trials include both women and men, older people and those with co-morbidities.

Although less likely to die from COVID-19, women face additional challenges related to the disease compared to men, including: reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services; increased time required to provide care for children (including home-based education), for older persons and for the sick; and higher infection risks than men in the workplace, particularly as women constitute over 70% of the workforce in the health sector. The lockdowns imposed in response to the pandemic have left many people feeling alone, without their usual social connections, in particular, access to support programmes for women and girls, and have exacerbated mental health problems. During lockdowns, many women and girls may have been trapped in unsafe environments and at heightened risk of experiencing intimate partner violence.

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Chapter 1

Population and families

Introduction

Population patterns and changes in family composition affect the lives of women and men throughout the world

As of 2020, there are around 65 million fewer women than men in the world, about 3.8 billion women to 3.9 billion men. The ratio of males to females varies by age, however, and while males outnumber females at birth, with around 107 to 108 male babies for every 100 female births, women outnumber men in older ages due to the inherent biological advantage of women over men.

Worldwide, the age at which women and men first marry or enter into a union has risen over the past two decades (age 23 for women and age 26.5 for men), mainly due to increased education, formal employment opportunities and women's greater economic independence. Marriage before age 18, a violation of children's rights that may also compromise their education and career prospects, lead to social isolation and the risk of early pregnancy, still exists in many regions, especially for girls, although it has slowly declined over the last two decades, from 26% to 20%. In Southern Asia, where child marriage has declined by 23 percentage points since 2004, there is still a 29% prevalence of child marriage, while in sub-Saharan Africa, with a proportion of child marriage of 34.5%, has recorded only a minor 2% decrease. In tandem with the decline in child marriage, motherhood among adolescent girls aged 15–19 has declined globally from 56 to 41 births per 1,000 women in the period 2000–2020, although it remains high in sub-Saharan Africa, at 101 births per 1,000 women. Pregnancies and childbirth among adolescent girls are linked to wide range of negative long-term consequences for both mothers and their babies, including risks to their health, as well as poverty as a result of discontinued schooling and fewer job opportunities.

The increase in women's age of entry into a first marriage or union, as well as increases in the availability and use of contraception, are contributing factors to decisions regarding how many children to have and when to have them. Women are having fewer children in total, 2.5 children on average in 2020 compared to 2.8 children 25 years ago, and they are having them later: the average age at which mothers are giving birth has risen from age 27.5 to age 28.1 over the last 25 years. Along with the increase in the age at which women first get married and have children, there has also been an increase, from 7.6% in 2000 to 9.2% in 2020, in the proportion of women who never have children.

Data since the mid-1990s show that there are more households with lone mothers and children than there are households with lone fathers and children. While the prevalence of lone-father households has remained stable over time, at between 1% to 2%, that of lone-mothers has risen in all regions with available data, reaching 8% to 10% in Northern Africa and Western Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Increases in the prevalence of one-parent households is linked to increases in divorce and separation and in the number of children born outside marriage.

Gender disparities in longevity in favour of women have implications for living arrangements as well as for the health and well-being of older persons, including the family

members who care for them. Among older persons aged 65–69 worldwide, there are currently about four widows for every widower — 29% of women versus 7% of men. Given that women are less likely than men to remarry after a divorce or death of their spouse, women aged 65 and older (24%) are twice as likely as older men (12%) to live alone or to be in the care of other family members, who are, in most cases, other female relatives. Longevity, although an overall positive outcome, therefore, calls for the provision of services that often exist in cultural contexts where the care burden for older persons falls on unpaid female relatives, with financial and other implications for the welfare of all involved.

Women and girls in forced displacement [UNHCR & IDMC]



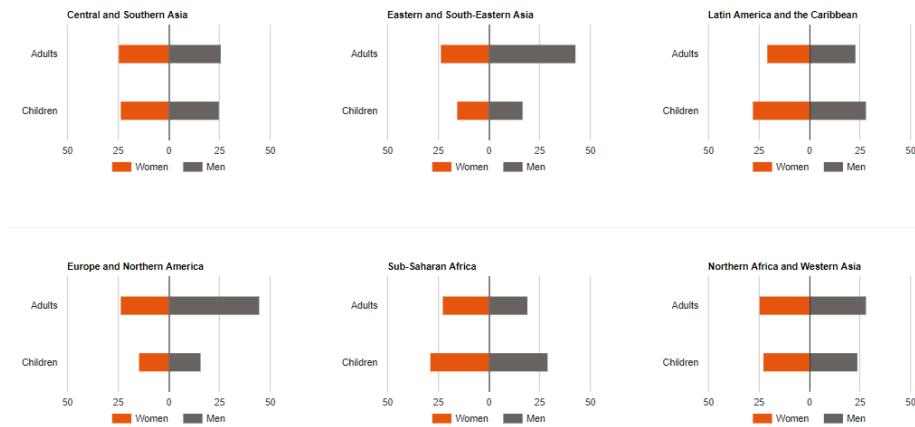
Key points

- By the end of 2019, 79.5 million people (26 million refugees, 45.7 million internally displaced people and 4.2 million asylum-seekers) had been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations, an increase of 8.7 million people over 2018.
- There are approximately equal numbers of women and men among refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons worldwide.
- Among refugees in Northern America and Europe and Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia, women and girls comprise about 40% of the total population, with a pronounced sex imbalance among adults (35% of refugees above the age of 18 are women in these two regions).
- Among internally displaced people, approximately 50% are women and girls: about 13% are girls aged 0–4, 23% are girls aged 5–14 years old, 19% are young women aged 15–24, and 8% are women aged 60 and older.
- Although displacement is a traumatic experience, it may also be a space for redefining and negotiating pre-existing roles, which can lead to an improvement of women's previous circumstances and social status.

Background

By the end of 2019, the world's forcibly displaced population remained at a record high, with a total of 79.5 million individuals having been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations, an increase of 8.7 million people over 2018. This population includes 26 million refugees, 45.7 million internally displaced people and 4.2 million asylum-seekers.¹ Overall, based on available data, there appear to be approximately equal numbers of women and men among refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons reported to UNHCR.

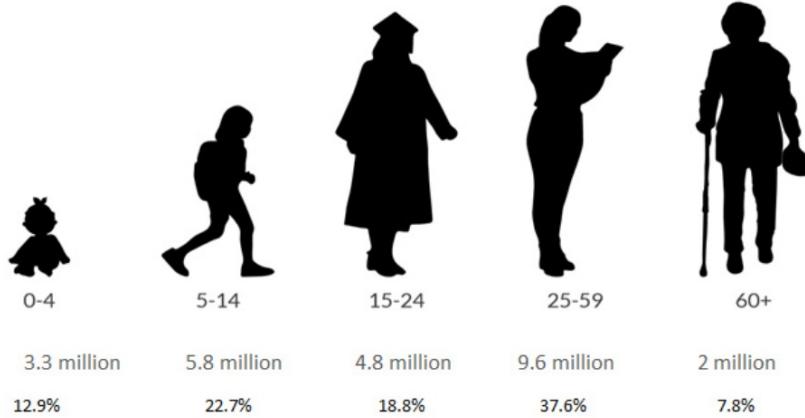
Among the refugee population, in 2019, the lowest proportions of women were among refugees hosted in Northern America and Europe and in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia, where slightly less than 40% were women. This sex imbalance was most pronounced among adults in those two regions, with only around 35% of all refugees above the age of 18 being women, while there were marginally more boys than girls under age 18 (see figure I). In contrast, the highest proportion of girls and women among refugee populations (52%) was in sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately 25% of all refugees hosted in sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia, Central and Southern Asia and Latin-America and the Caribbean were girls under the age of 18.

Figure I: Demographic characteristics of the refugee population: 2019 (Percentage)

Source: UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement 2019, Geneva, 2020 (<https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>).

Note: The refugee population is reported by location according to the regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicator framework (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/regional-groups>). There is no reliable demographically disaggregated data available for refugees hosted in Oceania, including Australia and New Zealand, the respective SDG region is therefore missing from this figure.

By the end of 2019, an estimated 45.7 million people were internally displaced due to armed conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations, as reported by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre for 61 countries and territories.² An additional 5.1 million people were internally displaced as a result of disasters across 95 countries and territories. This is an increase over the total of 41.3 million displaced people reported at the end of 2018.³ In particular, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were 3.3 million internally displaced girls under age 5 at the end of 2019: 5.8 million were aged 5–14; 4.8 million aged 15–24; 9.6 million aged 25–59; as well as 2 million women aged 60 and older (see figure II). Current data suggest that the proportion of women and girls among internally displaced persons is often higher than among the national population. The higher numbers of forcibly displaced women compared to men are often linked to socioeconomic factors and local conflict dynamics. In the case of armed conflict, this may be explained by the fact that men often stay behind to fight, while women tend to flee for safety along with dependent family members.⁴

Figure II: Internally displaced girls and women by age: 2019 (Estimated number and percentage)

Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020, April 2020 (<https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/2020-global-report-on-internal-displacement>).

In such circumstances, women face significantly different challenges than men in terms of livelihood needs and access to economic opportunities, including financial strains and difficulties resulting not only from displacement itself but also from gender norms, which may impose specific **household responsibilities** and/or prevent them from **working**. Internal displacement also has an impact on women's ability to find shelter and security, to access services such as education and health care and to participate in decision-making processes.⁵ A recent study conducted by the Government of Colombia⁶ revealed that conflict and forced displacement exacerbates discrimination and violence against women, leaving forcibly displaced women more exposed to **sexual** and **domestic** violence and labour exploitation. It also showed that forcibly displaced women often face greater obstacles in access to education and **land ownership**, as well as in making their voices heard in public and political spheres.

In situations of forced displacement, women's economic activities are significant and crucial, often contributing to the livelihood of their families and communities and to the strengthening of their economic stability. However, as observed in some studies, women may also be empowered in such scenarios as there may be more space for them to participate in decision-making and in activities outside the home. Although displacement is a traumatic experience, it may also be a space for redefining and negotiating pre-existing roles, which can lead to an improvement of women's previous circumstances and social status. A recent report assessed the impact of displacement on the gender roles and relations of women and girls who were forced to move from a rural area to a peri-urban area in Pakistan. Before displacement, livelihood opportunities had been limited for women, who were mostly able to engage in activities related to household and agricultural work. After moving, women were obliged to look for alternative sources of income, such as sewing, which allowed them to earn money and to manage their earnings independently. In addition, the perception of the importance of girls' education, which was previously regarded as superfluous, was altered owing to displacement. Other life-changing transformations were possible due to greater access to amenities such as running water, cooking gas and electricity, which reduced the amount of time women and girls dedicated to domestic chores.⁷

However, in order to increase and maintain women's livelihood opportunities, further transformation needs to take place within the household, the community and within institutions. This should be accompanied by the long-term and continuous development of non-economic aspects, such as women's access to education, and the implementation of laws and policies supporting women's empowerment. Increased availability of disaggregated data on internal displacement is also crucial to a better understanding and response to the needs of displaced women and girls, as well as to inform improved policymaking. These measures could not only enable women and girls to overcome challenges associated with displacement, but also provide them with ways to benefit from it.

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Definitions

About the data

- **Share of women among refugees:** Women as a percentage of all refugees.
- **Share of children among refugees:** Population aged 0–17 as a percentage of all refugees.
- **Number of women and girls living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence:** The number of internally displaced women in different age groups is estimated using national sex and age distribution data. For each country considered, the percentage of women in each group is applied to the number of people living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence.⁸
- **Children:** Children are defined as all those aged 0–17.
- **Refugee:** According to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees⁹ and the 1967 Protocol thereto,¹⁰ a refugee is someone "who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country". The term also comprises people falling under various regional instruments complementing the international refugee protection standards such as the Organization of African Unity Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa¹¹ and the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees.¹²
- **Asylum seeker:** An asylum seeker is defined as someone "who is claiming or applying for protection as a refugee and who has not yet received a final decision on his or her claim. It may also be someone "who has not yet submitted an application for refugee status recognition (has not yet formalized the administrative requirements in national law) but may nevertheless be in need of international protection".¹³
- **Internally displaced person:** Internally displaced persons are people "who have been forced to leave or abandon their homes, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border".¹⁴

Coverage

Women, men and children in refugee, asylum seeking or displaced person status in countries worldwide, organized by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.¹⁵

Availability

Demographically disaggregated data on refugees and asylum-seekers reported to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2019 varied widely between countries and population groups. In 2019, 123 countries reported sex-disaggregated data for refugees, and 129 for asylum-seekers. For refugees and refugee-like populations, sex-disaggregated data was available for 81% of the population. The coverage of sex-disaggregated data for asylum-seekers was 42%. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported that, in 2018, only 14% of the countries and territories for which data was collected on internally displaced persons published information disaggregated by sex and age. Statistics on forced displacement are often limited in terms of disaggregated data. Case studies are the main source of detailed information on refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons.¹⁶

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12. Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, November 1984 .
13. Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics, International Recommendations on Refugee Statistics, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, March 2018 .
14. United Nations, Statistical Commission, Fifty-first session, International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics, March 2020 .
15. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicator framework .
16. To bridge this gap, the United Nations Statistical Commission, at its forty-seventh session, in 2016, established the Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics to produce international recommendations to improve statistics on these populations.

Jordan: child marriage



Key points

- During the period 1997–2012, marriage of girls before age 18 decreased from 13.5% to 8.4%; marriage of girls before age 15 decreased from around 1% to almost zero over the same period.
- The five-fold increase in the rate of marriage of girls younger than age 15 observed during the period 2012–2017 resulted from a number of factors, including poverty and population growth owing to the influx of foreigners into the country as a result of armed conflicts in neighbouring countries.
- Of the 77,700 marriage contracts issued in 2017, 13.4%, involved girls under age 18. After the adoption of new regulations in 2018, the number of child marriage contracts dropped significantly, by 27% compared to 2017.

Background

Child marriage is a form of violence against girls, which deprives them of their legitimate human rights, including their right to education, to make an informed choice of a life partner and to build positive family relationships. Lack of such rights has a negative effect on the quality of girls' lives, their reproductive health and their ability to find decent work.

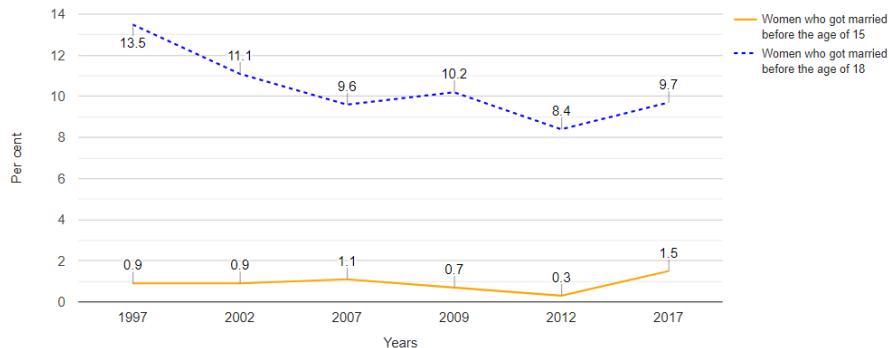
Current situation

After years of significant and steady decrease, child marriage spiked in 2017

Analysis of data from the Population and Family and Health Survey in Jordan shows that there was a significant and steady decrease in the percentage of women married before age 15 and before age 18 during the period 1997–2012 (see figure I):¹ child marriage before age 18 decreased from 13.5% to 8.4% while marriage before age 15 decreased from around 1% to almost zero (0.3%). That decrease was due to amendments made to the Provisional Personal Status Law No. 82 in 2001 to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18.

However, early marriage among women aged 20–24, particularly those who married before age 15, increased significantly in recent years (a five-fold increase between 2012 and 2017), from almost zero to 1.5%. During the same period, the proportion of women aged 20–24 who married before age 18 registered a moderate increase, from 8.4% to 9.7%. The increase in child marriage in Jordan between 2012 and 2017 resulted from a number of factors, including poverty and population growth owing to the influx of foreigners into Jordan as a result of armed conflicts in neighbouring countries.²

Figure I: Proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18: 1997–2017

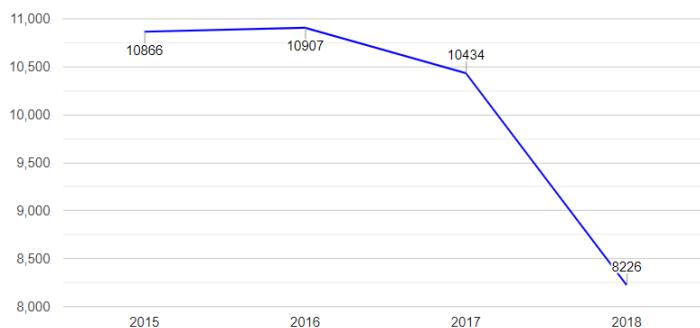


Source: Government of Jordan, Department of Statistics, Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2017-18, DHS Program, Maryland, March 2019, (<https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR346/FR346.pdf>).

Legislative amendments at the national level have resulted in a significant drop in early marriage

Although the legal age of marriage in Jordan is 18 for both women and men, it may be lowered for girls aged 15 and over at the discretion of the chief justice. By 2017 (see figure I), child marriage was on the rise, threatening the core of the institution of marriage and destroying the life and dreams of children. According to the 2017 annual statistical report by the Supreme Judge Department, Jordanian authorities issued 77,700 marriage contracts in 2017, 13.4% of which involved girls under age 18. As a coordinated response, the Government of Jordan, through legislative amendments, has placed a high priority on the elimination of child marriage in the country. The amendments introduced a number of new provisions, including: a maximum 15-year difference in ages between husband and wife; the restriction that the husband must have no other wives; and that marriage must not prevent girls from continuing their education. As a result of the new regulations, child marriage contracts dropped significantly in 2018, by 27% compared to 2017 (see figure II).

Figure II: Number of marriage contracts for girls aged 15–18: 2015–2018



About the data

Definitions

- **Child marriage:** Proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18. It is calculated by dividing the number of women aged 20–24 who were first married or in a union by age 15 or age 18 by the total number of women aged 20–24 in the population.

Coverage

The indicator covers the proportion of women aged 20–24 who were first married or in a union by age 15 and by age 18. Information is presented at the national level.

Footnotes

1. Government of Jordan, Department of Statistics, Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2017-18, DHS Program, Maryland, March 2019.

2. For example, 7.5% of Jordanian women aged 20–24 got married before age 18, compared to 36.6% of women migrants from the Syrian Arab Republic, see Government of Jordan, Department of Statistics, and World Health Organization (WHO), International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), 2019; see also United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), A Qualitative Study on the Underlying Social Norms and Economic Causes that Lead to Child Marriage in Jordan, New York, 2019 and Government of Jordan, Department of Statistics, Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2017-18, DHS Program, Maryland, March 2019.

Composition of population by age and sex



Key points

- As of 2020, there are fewer women than men in the world: 3.8 billion women (49.6%) and 3.9 billion men (51.4%). The ratio of men to women is of significance because it has implications for the demographic and economic situation of societies.
- The ratio of men to women varies widely by geographical region and subregion, with some regions having a surplus and others a deficit, ranging from 93 men per 100 women in Europe to 110 men per 100 women in Western Asia.
- Globally, men outnumber women until around the age of 50, and thereafter there are more women than men (for example, 92 men for every 100 women aged 65–69, and 47 men for every 100 women aged 90–94) as a result of the lower mortality rate for women than for men.
- Over the past 30 years, the sex ratio at birth has remained constant worldwide, ranging between 107 and 108 male births to 100 female births, although it is significantly higher in some countries, including Azerbaijan and China (113:100), Viet Nam (112:100), Armenia (111:100) and India (110:100).
- Since 2000, the share of older persons (aged 65 and older) in the total global population by sex has increased from 8% to 10% for women and from 6% to 8% for men, while the share of children (aged below 15) has declined from 31% to 25% for girls and from 32% to 26% for boys: all of these changes have broad social and economic implications.

Background

Information on the distribution of the population by age and sex is critical for describing any population or group within the population and for taking stock of factors of population change, including fertility, mortality and migration. This information is also used to make projections of the age and sex structure of the population.^{1 2}

One recognized way to determine the relative distribution of the female and male populations is by use of sex ratios. Estimates of the sex ratio of the population provide important information on the relative numbers of men to women in a given population. Sex ratios, which show the surplus or shortage in relative numbers of men compared to women, can be calculated at birth or for selected age segments. In general, the sex ratio at birth tends to be in favour of men but turns in favour of women in later years of life. This is mainly because women tend to live longer than men for a variety of reasons, including the inherent biological advantage of women as well as behavioural differences between the sexes.³

Current situation

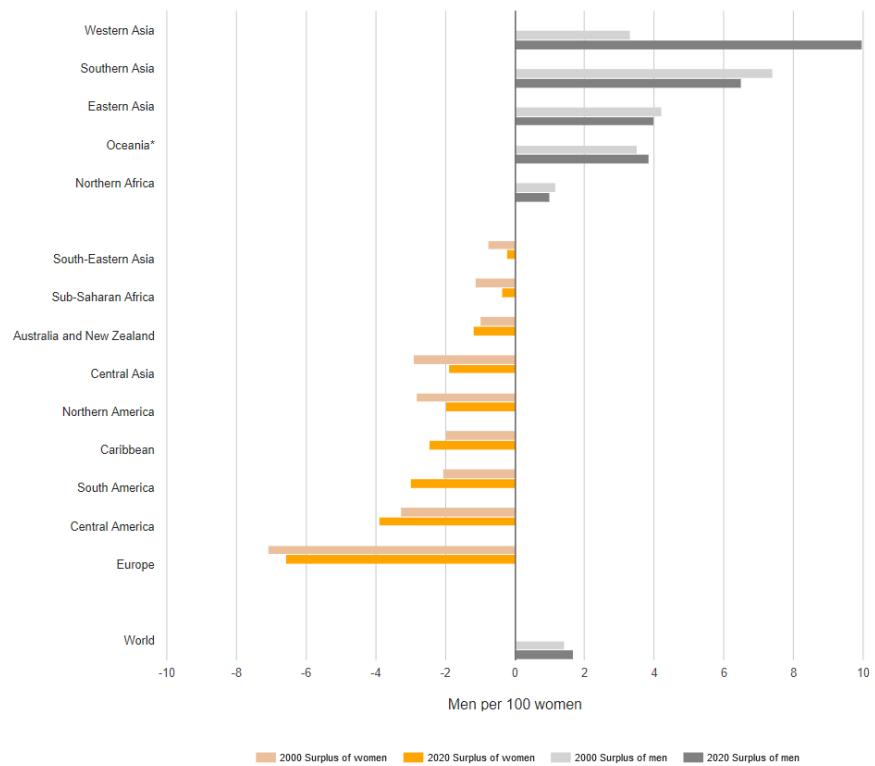
Substantial differences among regions in relative numbers of men and women

In 2020, United Nations population projections estimate that there are 3.8 billion women and 3.9 billion men worldwide, in other words, that women constitute slightly less than half of the global population (49.6%). For the world as a whole, there were more men than women of all ages: 101 men for every 100 women in 2000, and an

estimated 102 men for every 100 women in 2020,⁴ meaning that men outnumber women and that the difference between the two is getting slightly wider. The ratio of men to women is significant because of its impact on societies worldwide, including their future demographic and economic situations.

There are wide variations among regions and subregions in the ratio of men to women: some have a surplus while others a deficit of men in their total population (see figure I). As of 2020, Europe has the largest deficit of men (93 men per 100 women), while the reverse is true in Western Asia (110 men per 100 women). During the period 2000–2020, the relative deficit of men was reduced in: Central Asia (from 97 to 98 men per 100 women); sub-Saharan Africa (from 99 to 100 men per 100 women); and Northern America (from 97 to 98 men per 100 women). In contrast, there was a significant increase in the surplus of men compared to women in Western Asia (from 103 to 110 men per 100 women). Within certain regions there are substantial variations by subregion: for example, there were 101 men per 100 women in Northern Africa compared to 110 men per 100 women in Western Asia.

Figure I: Surplus or deficit of men per 100 women by region: 2000 and 2020



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

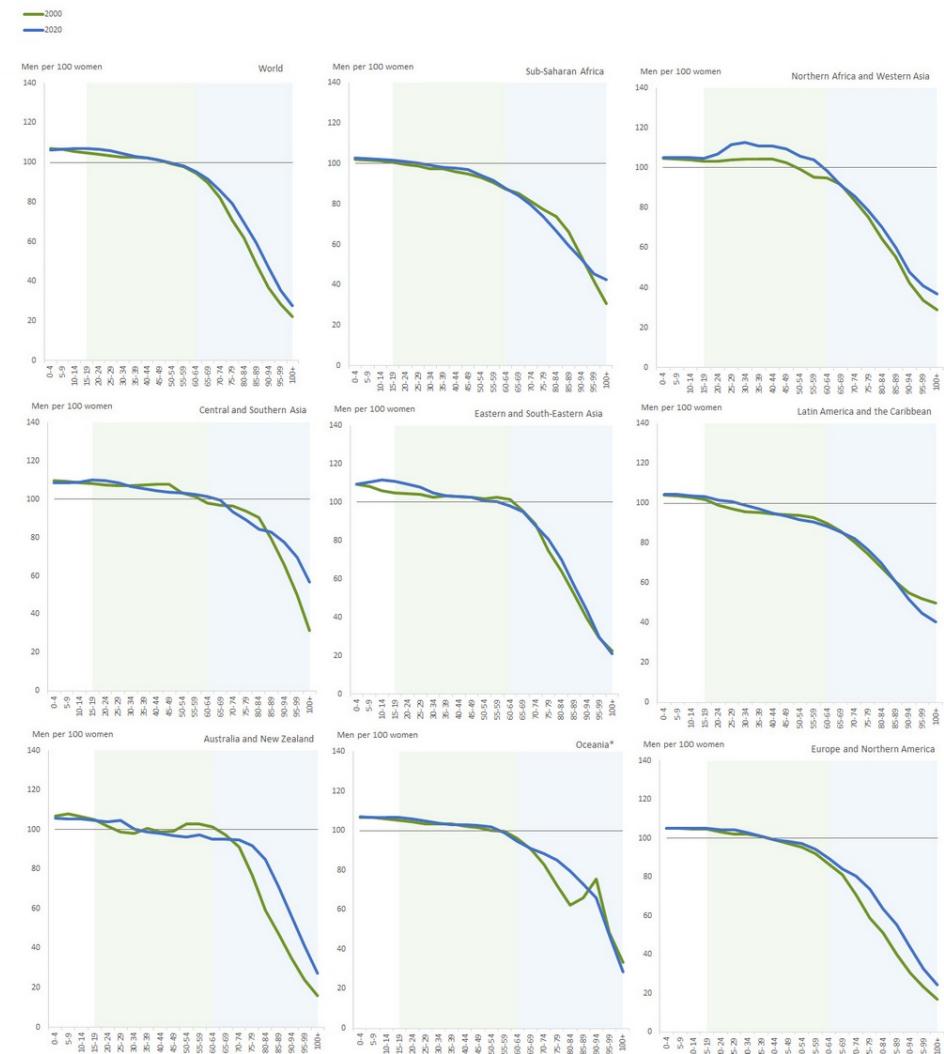
Note: Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).

Globally, men outnumber women until around age 50 (see figure II). After that age, higher **mortality rates** for men compared to women continue to be observed and the share of women increases rapidly. For example, in 2020, at the global level, the sex ratio was: 92 men per 100 women in the 65–69 age group; 70 men per 100 women in the 80–84 age group; and 47 men per 100 women in the 90–94 age group.

During the period 2000–2020, the age at which women outnumber men has increased in most regions, from

ages 15–19 to ages 30–34 in sub-Saharan Africa and from ages 60–64 to ages 65–69 in Central and Southern Asia. There was a decline, however, in the age at which women outnumber men in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (from ages 65–69 to ages 60–64), while the cross-over age remained unchanged for Europe and Northern America (ages 44–45).

In general, the timing of the cross-over from a male surplus to a female surplus is related to multiple factors, including sex differentials by age in levels and patterns of mortality. On average, women live longer than men, and this is true for every country and plays an important role in how the sex ratio changes with age throughout adulthood. Differences in the ratios of men to women are linked to causes of death ([communicable diseases](#), [non-communicable diseases](#) and [external factors](#)), which vary depending on age, sex and geographical region. Possible explanations of the differences across regions in the age of the cross-over to a surplus of women over men include societal biases, which lead to inequalities faced by women at all stages of the life cycle, as well as large-scale migration, particularly labour migration of men compared to women in adult working ages. The latter may explain the demographic profile for Northern Africa and Western Asia, which is characterized by a much higher number of men than women in adult working ages, peaking to unusually high levels in the 30–34 age group.

Figure II: Age-specific sex ratios, worldwide and by region: 2000 and 2020

Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019 (online edition) (<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>).

Note: *Excluding Australia and New Zealand. Horizontal line (-) indicates an equal number of men to women. Shaded areas distinguish children, adults and older persons.

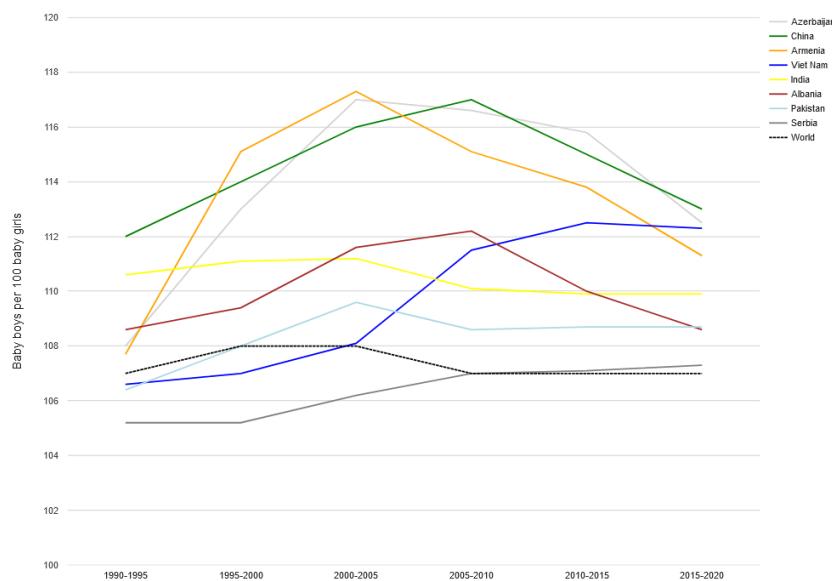
Sex ratios at birth in favour of boys have increased in some countries over the years

Globally, the sex ratio at birth has remained mostly unchanged over the past 30 years, ranging between 107 and 108 male births to 100 female births during the periods 1990–1995 to 2015–2020.⁵ The biological level of the sex ratio at birth tends to be close to 105 boys per 100 girls, with a standard sex ratio at birth reported at between 103 to 107 boys per 100 girls, allowing for regional variations. In some populations, the sex ratio in favour of boys at birth exceeds the standard values. Sex-selective abortion, reflective of long-standing cultural preferences for sons, is a major explanatory factor.⁶

While the sex ratio at birth has remained unchanged and close to the global average for most regions and countries, there are some significant differences. For example, in the Eastern and South-Eastern Asia region, this

ratio increased from 109 boys per 100 girls in 1990–1995 to 112 boys per 100 girls in 2005–2010 and stands at 110 boys per 100 girls for the period 2015–2020. Similarly, in Central and Southern Asia, the sex ratio at birth was 109 male births per 100 female births in 1990–1995, peaking at 110 boys per 100 girls between 1995–2005, and has remained at 109 boys per 100 girls from 2005 –2020. These two regions include countries that currently have the highest ratios of male to female babies during the period 2015–2020 (see figure III): China (113: 100), India (110: 100), Viet Nam (112: 100) and Pakistan (109: 100). Countries in other regions that have shown a substantial change in the sex ratio at birth over this period include Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Serbia, where the ratio is reported at ranges from 107 to 113 male babies per 100 female babies, indicating that more parents are selecting the sex of their offspring in favour of sons.

Figure III: Imbalanced sex ratios at birth in selected countries: 1990–2020

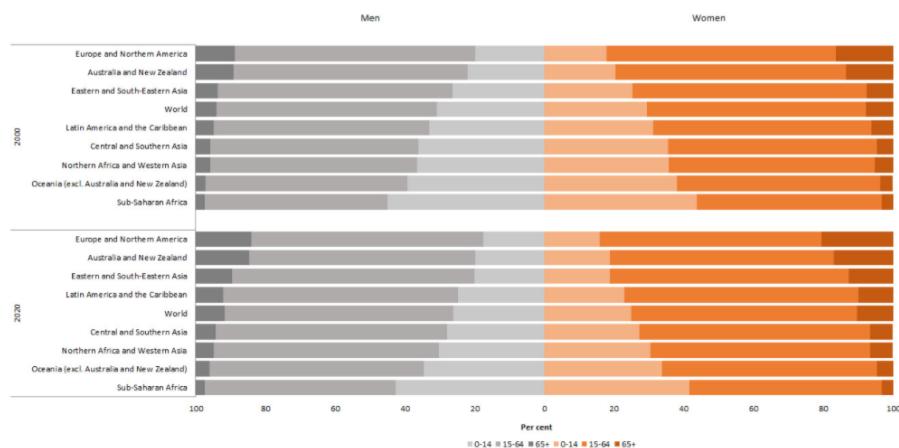


Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019 (online edition) (<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>).

Substantial progression in population ageing by sex over the years

In recent decades, there have been significant shifts in the share of the population in three major age groupings: children (0–14 years); adults (15–64 years); and older persons (ages 65 and over). At the global level and for most regions, the population has transitioned to an older age structure, particularly for the female population (see figure IV). The share of the population, both female and male, aged below 15 declined from 32% to 25% between 1995–2020, although males still outnumber females.⁷ During the same period, women aged 65 and older constituted the fastest growing segment of the population, from 8% to 10% for women compared to 6% to 8% for men. The **older population** is clearly dominated by women in 2020: at the global level, the sex ratio is 92 men per 100 women in the 65–69 age group; 70 men per 100 women in the 80–84 age group; and 47 men per 100 women in the 90–94 age group.

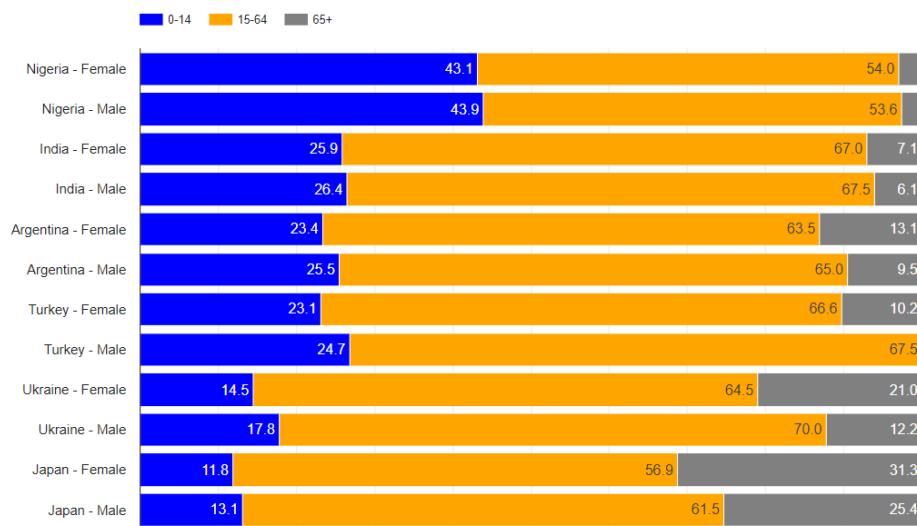
In all regions, except sub-Saharan Africa, populations show evidence of a shift towards an older age structure for both sexes between 2000–2020. The ageing of the world's population and the attendant differences in proportions between females and males have implications for the **living arrangements**, healthcare, **life-long learning**, and the psychological well-being of **older persons**.

Figure IV: Population distribution by broad age groups and sex: 2000 and 2020 (Percentage)

Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019 (online edition)
(<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>)

Differences in selected countries in population distribution by sex and age grouping: 2020

There are noticeable differences in the proportions of women and men by broad age categories in the populations of selected countries in 2020 (see figure V). For example, overall, Japan has the largest share of older women (31%) and older men (25%) (65 years and older) as well as to the smallest share of girls (12%) and boys (13%) below age 15 among its total population. In contrast, the population in Nigeria has the largest proportion of people aged below 15 (43% for girls and 44% for boys), and the smallest proportion of people aged 65 and older (3% for both women and men). In all selected countries, however, the share of women among older persons aged 65 and over is larger than that of men.

Figure V: Population distribution by age groupings and sex: select countries: 2020 (Percentage)

Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019 (online edition)
(<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>).

About the data

Definitions

- **Total population of a country or other defined area:** Estimate of the total count that falls within the scope of a census or survey. In this narrative, estimates correspond to de facto population in a country, area or region as of 1 July of the year indicated
- **Distribution of the population by age and sex:** Proportionate numbers of persons by sex in selected age categories of the population.
- **Sex ratio:** Number of male births per one female birth.⁸

Coverage

The analysis of the total population covers all women and all men divided into three broad categories: children, adults, and older persons. Analysis of the sex ratio covers all women and all men by age.

The information is presented for countries worldwide and by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.⁹

Footnotes

1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, United Nations Demographic Yearbook review: national reporting of age and sex-specific data -implications for international recommendations, April 2004 (ESA/STAT/2004/1).
2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Methodology of the United Nations Population Estimates and Projections. Accessed on 22 September 2020.
3. World Health Organization (WHO), Global Health Observatory, Female life expectancy: Situation and trends . Accessed on 17 July 2020.
4. UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019 (online edition) .
5. UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, (online edition) .
6. Attané, I. and Guilmoto, C. Z. (eds.), "Watering the Neighbours' Garden: The Growing Demographic Deficit in Asia", Committee on International Cooperation in National Research in Demography, Paris, 2007; Bongaarts, J., "The implementation of preferences for male offspring", Population and Development Review, vol. 39 (2), 2013; Guilmoto, C.Z., "The sex ratio transition in Asia", Population and Development Review, vol. 35 (3), 2009.
7. UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019 (online edition) .
8. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Glossary of Demographic Terms . Accessed on 22 September 2020.
9. Regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) .

Life expectancy at 65 and 80 years by sex



Key points

- Over the past two decades, older women have experienced more gains in longevity than older men. Women at age 65 are expected to outlive their male counterparts by about 3 years (women are expected to live an additional 18.3 years and men an additional 15.6 years), and by almost 1.5 years for women at age 80.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southern Asia and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), women's survival advantage over men is lower than one year at age 65; overall, these regions have the lowest life expectancy at older ages.
- Increased longevity coupled with unequal survival rates between older women and men call for gender-sensitive approaches to ensure the provision of social services and protections for them.
- In many cultural contexts, the care burden for older persons falls on unpaid female relatives, which has financial and other implications for their welfare.

Background

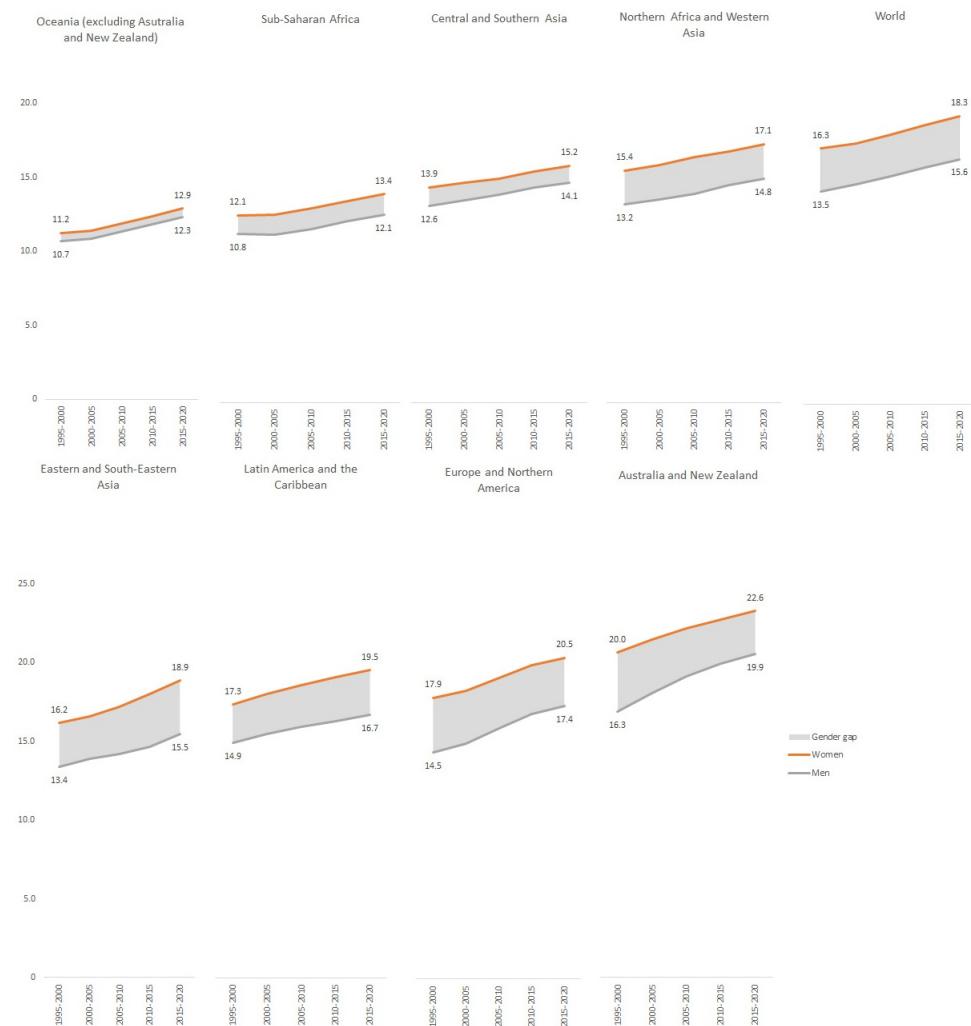
Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal 3 expresses commitment to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages".¹ Over the years, social commitments to improve the lives of populations worldwide have resulted in recognizable gains in reducing mortality and accompanying increases in survival, as well as in life expectancy, in most countries.

Increases in survival and longevity for older persons

Women's survival advantage (gender gap) has recorded a slight increase over the past two decades. Recent United Nations estimates² show that, for the world as a whole, women at age 65 are expected to outlive their male counterparts by about 3 years (women are expected to live an additional 18.3 years and men an additional 15.6 years), and by almost 1.5 years for women at age 80.

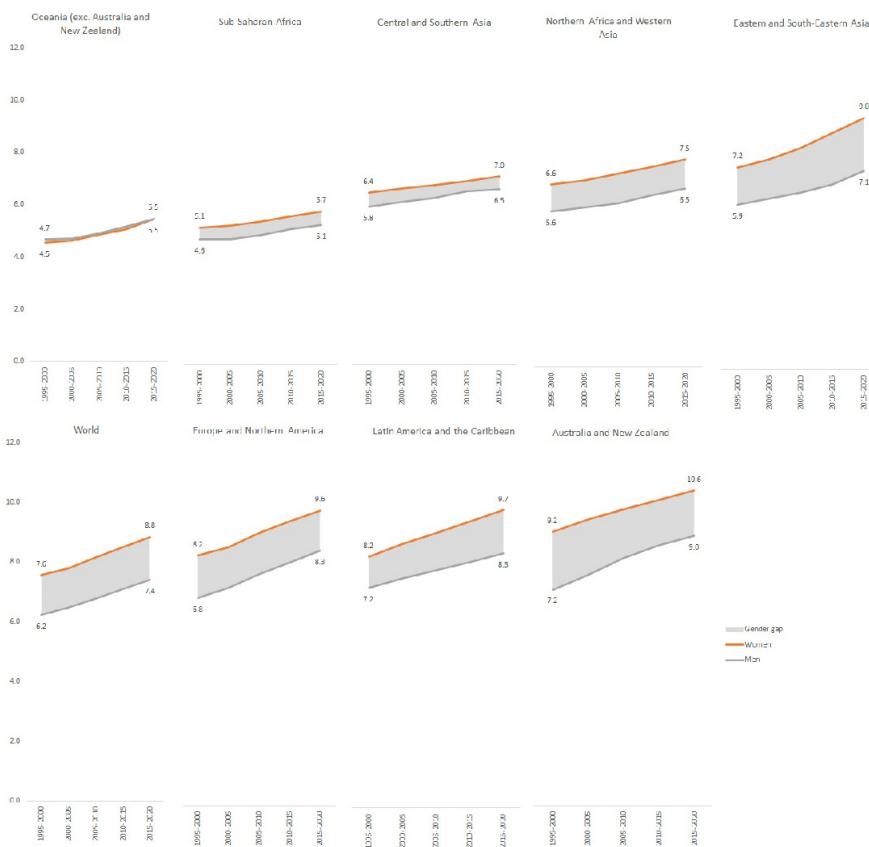
The gender gap in life expectancy at age 65 is estimated at about 3 to 4 years in all geographical regions, except Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) (1 year), Central and Southern Asia (1 year) and sub-Saharan Africa (1 year). These are also the regions where life expectancy at age 65 is the lowest: on average, women in these regions are expected to live an additional 13 years and men an additional 12 years (see figure I).

Figure I: Life expectancy at age 65 by sex and major geographical region:
1995–2020



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Rev. 1, online edition (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>).

The gender gap in life expectancy among the population aged 80 and older is highest in Australia and New Zealand and in the Eastern and South-Eastern Asia region (about 2 years). In addition, Australia and New Zealand, the countries with the highest life expectancy both at age 65 and at age 80 for both women and men, have experienced a decline in the gender gap in favour of males over the last two decades. The reverse has been observed in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia. In Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), men at age 80 have a slightly longer expected number of years to live than women of the same age (see figure II).

Figure II: Life expectancy at age 80 by sex and major geographical region: 1995–2020

Source: UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Rev. 1, online edition (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>).

The observed increases in survival and longevity into advanced ages call attention to the need for adequate policies and programmes to enable older persons to live decent and fulfilled lives. At advanced ages, older persons require greater care and assistance in their daily lives,³ and this is even more so the case for women, who tend to live longer than men, are likely to outlive their spouses or partners and are thus disproportionately represented in the **older population**. Older women are also more likely than older men to have a **disability**⁴ and are more vulnerable to poverty.⁵

Because women tend to outlive their spouses, and oftentimes without economic independence, they tend to become more dependent on the support of others. Research shows that, globally, the bulk of the provision of care for older persons falls on female family members, usually on an unpaid basis, with a consequent socioeconomic stress on the caregivers, including on their mental and physical health.⁶ In the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the pledge to leave no one behind, more needs to be done to ensure economic security for the population later in life, particularly for older women, including those who provide care for them.

About the data

Definitions

Life expectancy at age x is the number of years a person at age x is expected to live if current mortality patterns remain constant in the future. Life expectancy at age 65 or age 80 of a given period is the number of additional years a person at those ages is expected to live if exposed throughout the remainder of life to age-specific mortality rates of that period.

Coverage

The present analysis covers the global population at age 65 and age 80 and above by sex and corresponding life expectancy. Information is presented by regional grouping under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.⁷

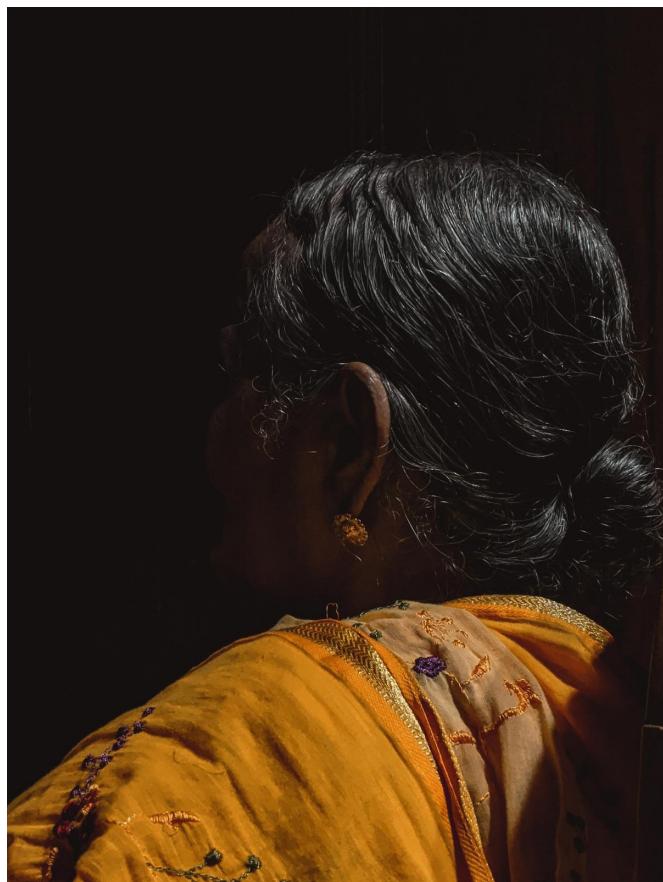
Availability

Data for these indicators have been provided by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.⁸

Footnotes

1. United Nations, Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, General Assembly resolution 70/1, adopted on 25 September 2015 .
2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Population Ageing 2019: Highlights, New York, 2019 .
3. 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.
4. Ibid.
5. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Bringing Older Women to the Forefront of Global Discussions .
6. UN-Women, Long-term care for older people – A new global gender priority, Policy Brief No. 9. .
7. Regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework .
8. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Population Ageing 2019: Highlights, New York, 2019 ; UNDESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Rev. 1, online edition .

Divorced, separated and widowed women and men



Key points

- Women are more likely than men to remain unmarried after a marriage is dissolved through divorce or separation, or through widowhood in older age.
- At the global level, across all regions, the proportion of currently divorced and separated persons aged 45–49 is higher among women than men. This proportion has remained relatively constant worldwide since the 1980s, from 4.5% to 5% for women, and from 3% to 3.2% for men.
- The highest proportion of currently divorced or separated persons live in developed regions (between 8% and 10%).
- Globally, there are about four widows for every widower: 29% of women aged 65–69 are widowed, as compared to 7% of men.
- Since the early 1980s, there has been a steeper decline in proportion of widowed women aged 65–69 years (11 percentage points) compared to men (2 percentage points). Despite this substantial decline, the global widowhood gender gap currently stands at 22 percentage points against women.
- The following regions have a gender gap in widowhood of over 25 percentage points: Northern Africa and Western Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia, which are also the regions with the highest proportion of widowed women (at least 30%).
- In general, countries in Europe and Northern America have a narrow widowhood gender gap (ranging between 3 and 9 percentage points) in comparison to countries in sub-Saharan Africa where the gap ranges between 40 to 49 percentage points.
- The striking differences in rates between women and men and the differences in regional rates are due to a variety of factors, including: gender differentials in age at marriage, since women generally get married at a younger age than men; remarriage rates, since women are less likely than men to remarry following a marital dissolution, including through widowhood; and survival rates, which are in favour of women due to the overall lower female mortality rate.
- There has been a steep decline over the past 40 years in the proportion of widows to widowers, reflecting both improved overall mortality rates and the fact that men are living to older ages compared to the past. Other factors include increased age at marriage, in particular for women, and the decrease, as a result, in the age gap between spouses, which has reduced the chances of wives losing their husbands at younger ages.

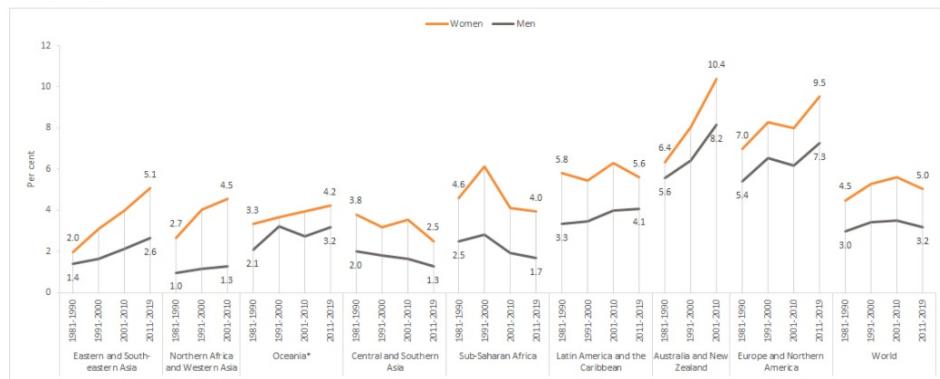
Background

Over the past decades, the increase in divorce rates has been one of the most visible features of change in the family structure.² Marital dissolution, particularly through divorce and separation, can have long-lasting consequences, not just for couples but also for children and other dependent family members. Women are less likely to remarry after divorce, separation or widowhood, and often find themselves in more vulnerable social economic situations. Over recent decades, there have been major differences in the rates of marital dissolution (divorce, separation and widowhood) between women and men, including within geographical regions

Women are more likely than men to be currently divorced, separated or widowed

As reported by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women),² one visible feature of family change is the small but steady increase in the proportion of women and men whose marriages have been terminated as the result of divorce or separation, as well as a decline in marital dissolution through widowhood. In the last 40 years there has been a slightly higher increase in the proportion of currently divorced or separated women than men aged 45–49, both globally and in most geographical regions (see figure I). Worldwide, the proportion of currently divorced and separated persons aged 45–49 has remained relatively constant since the 1980s: from 4.5% to 5% for women, and from 3% to 3.2% for men. There has also been a decline in the proportion of widowed persons (aged 65–69) during the same time period, down from 40.4% to 29.2% for women, and from 9.2% to 7% for men (see figure III). The downward trend in widowhood has been steeper for women than for men, and the gender gap has been reduced from 31.1 to 22.3 percentage points. It is possible that the decline in the rates of widowhood for women is due to the fact that men are living longer owing to better overall health and improved health care.

Figure I: Proportion of divorced or separated persons aged 45–49 by sex and region: 1981–2019 (Percentage)



Source: Census data from UNDESA, Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019.

Note: Unweighted averages

Divorce and separation

Current proportions of divorced and separated persons are highest in Australia and New Zealand (10.4% for women and 8.2% for men) and in Europe and Northern America (9.5% for women and 7.3% for men), and generally low in developing regions, except in Latin America and the Caribbean (5.6% for women and 4.1% for men) (see figure I). In all geographical regions, women aged 45–49 are more likely than men in the same age group to be currently divorced or separated; this gender gap has been sustained and, in some cases, has increased over time during the period from the early 1980s to the late 2010s. Globally, the gender gap has remained constant at 1.5 to 1.9 percentage points during this period. Over the last 40 years, the largest increase in the gender gap in divorce and separation was in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, from 0.6 to 2.4 percentage points, due to a steeper increase in the divorce rate for women than for men.

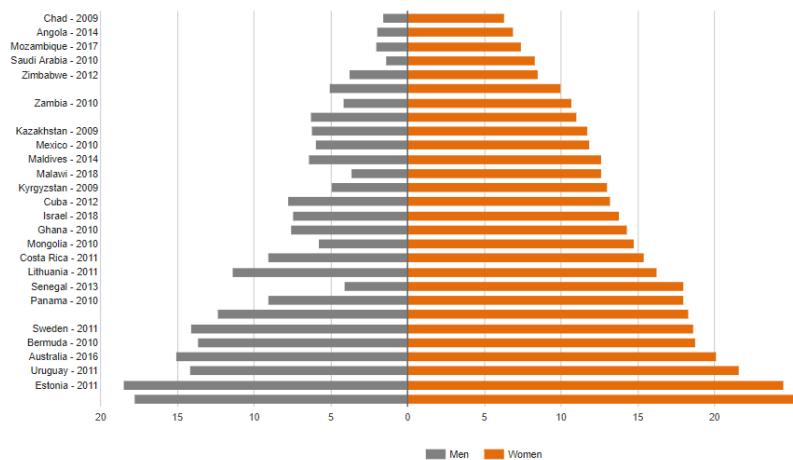
Cultural differences among geographical regions and subregions may account for the observed differences, and

there may be stigma attached both to marital dissolution and remarriage in some contexts. In its report, *Families in a Changing World*, UN-Women attributes the higher rates of women than men who are currently divorced or separated to the fact that men are more likely than women to remarry after divorce.

In some countries, the proportion of women aged 45–49 who are currently divorced or separated is significantly higher than that of men in the same age group, resulting in a large gender gap, ranging from between 5% to 15% (see figure II). This is the case, in particular, for selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Senegal, 13%), Latin America and the Caribbean (Panama, 9%), and, to some extent, in Europe and Northern America (Estonia and the Russian Federation, 6%).

As highlighted in the UN-Women report *Families in a Changing World*, while larger gender gaps in divorce and separation could indicate that women are able to sustain themselves financially through paid work after marital dissolution, there is also a chance they may be left in an economically vulnerable situation.

Figure II: Proportion of divorced or separated persons aged 45 to 49 by sex in selected countries with the widest gender gaps: 2009–2018 (latest available)



Source: Census data from UNDESA, Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019.

Widowhood

While widowhood among older persons is an inevitable fact of life, there are striking differences in rates between women and men, as well as noticeable regional differences resulting from a variety of factors, including gender differentials in [age at marriage](#), remarriage rates, [mortality](#) and [survival rates](#). In general, women get married at a younger age than men, thereby creating a gap in the ages of spouses. In addition, women are less likely than men to remarry following a marital dissolution, including through widowhood. Furthermore, survival rates into advanced ages are in favour of women due to lower female than male mortality rates. As a result of all these factors, there is a higher proportion of widows than widowers.³

In all regions, the proportion of older widows is higher than that of older

widowers

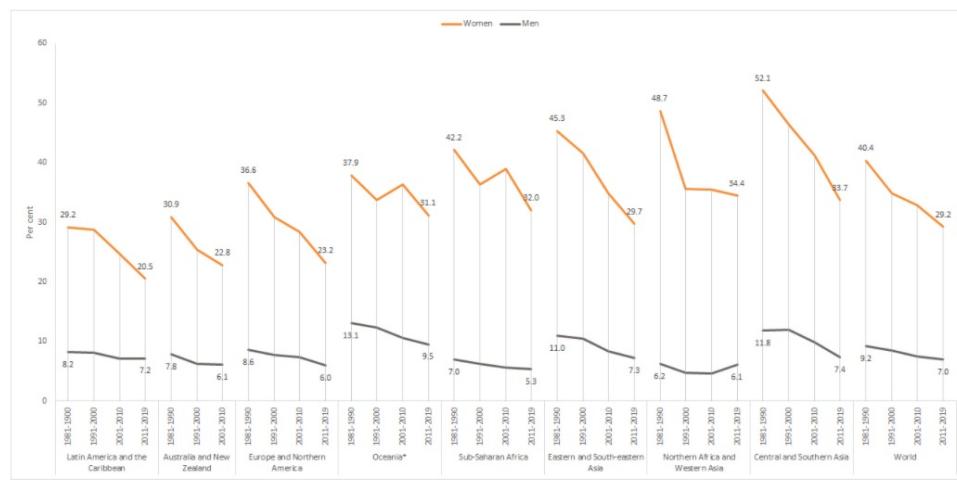
Proportionately, among older persons aged 65–69, there are more widowed women than men (see figure III). Globally, the proportion of widowed women in this age group (29%) is about four times that of men (7%). The decline in these proportions, at the global level, since the early 1980s, has been steeper for women (11 percentage points) than for men (2 percentage points). Nevertheless, there is still a global widowhood gender gap of 22 percentage points.

At the regional level, marked differences are notable. For instance, in countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia there is a gender gap of over 25 percentage points in the proportion of widowed women and men, and these regions also have the highest proportion of widowed women (32% or more). Europe and Northern America and Australia and New Zealand have the lowest rates of widowed women (23%) compared to other regions.

Since the early 1980s, there has been a decline in the rates of widowed persons (aged 65–69), particularly women, in all geographical regions. The largest decline in the proportion of widows aged 65–69, ranging between 10% and 19%, has been recorded in Central and Southern Asia (from 52.1% to 33.7%), Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (from 45.3% to 29.7%), Northern Africa and Western Asia (from 48.7% to 34.4%) and sub-Saharan Africa (from 42.2% to 32%). Trends in female widowhood, particularly in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where there was a decline in the 1990s followed by an increase in the 2000s and a subsequent decline, raise the issue of the likely contribution to this phenomenon of excess male mortality due to HIV/AIDS.⁴

Declines over the years in the rates of widowed persons reflect improved mortality conditions and the likelihood that men will live longer than in the past. Other contributing factors include women marrying men who are not significantly older than themselves, thereby reducing the chances of wives losing their husbands at much younger ages.⁵

Figure III: Proportion of widowed women and men aged 65-69 by regions: 1981–2019



Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019.

Note: Unweighted averages

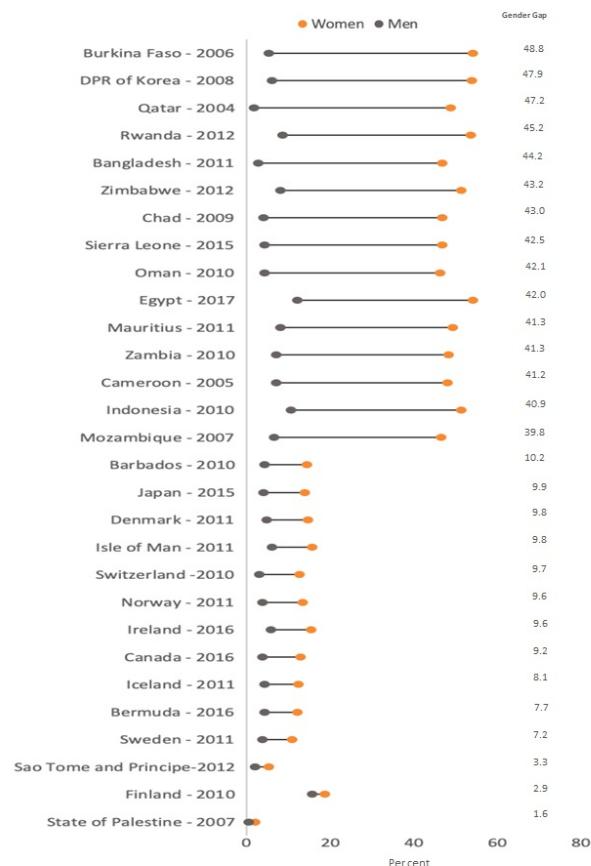
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Countries in focus

The mean age at marriage has increased over the years, more so for women than for men and as a result, the age gap between spouses has decreased. For instance the age gap decreased in Guinea-Bissau from 9.3 to 6.2 years (1991–2014); in Bangladesh from 7.3 to 5.8 years (1981–2011); in the Gambia from 8.8 to 7.8 years (2000–2013); in Ghana from 6.3 to 4 years (1993–2014); and in Mali from 9.2 to 7.1 years (1987–2018).

In spite of reduced levels of widowhood for both women and men over the years in all regions, there are still wide variations in the gender gap among countries. A focus on selected countries with the smallest and largest gaps in widowhood for the population aged 65–69 years (see figure IV) shows that countries in Europe and Northern America have a narrow widowhood gender gap (between 3 and 9 percentage points) in comparison to countries in sub-Saharan Africa (between 40 and 49 percentage points). This could be due to the higher survival rates of women over men, coupled with a generally wider age gap between spouses (especially among older persons), and the lower probability that women will remarry after the death of a spouse.

Figure IV: Proportions of widowed women and men aged 65–69 and related gender gap for selected countries with smallest and largest gaps: 2005–2017 (latest available)



Source: Census data from UNDESA, Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019.

About the data

Definitions

- **Divorce:** Final legal dissolution of a marriage, which confers on the parties the right to remarriage under civil, religious and/or other provisions, according to the laws of each country.
- **Judicial separation:** Disunion of married persons, according to the laws of each country, without conferring on the parties the right to remarry.⁷
- **Separated persons:** For the purposes of the present analysis, separated persons are persons who are legally married (legally or consensually) but not living together.⁸
- **Widowed persons:** Individuals whose marriages have been dissolved through the death of a spouse and who have not remarried.⁹
- **Rates of marital dissolution (divorce, separation and widowhood):** Proportion of women and men who are currently divorced, separated or widowed.

Coverage

Divorced and/or separated women and men aged 45-49 who are currently not remarried; and widowed women and men aged 65-69 who are currently not remarried. The information is presented at the global level and by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicator framework.¹⁰

Footnotes

1. Härkönen, J., "Divorce: Trends, Patterns, Causes, and Consequences", in Treas, J., Scott, J. and Richards, M., (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, London and New York, 2014.
2. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a Changing World*, New York, 2019.
3. Christiane Delbois and Joelle Gaymu, "The Shock of Widowhood on the Eve of Old Age: Male and Female Experiences", *Population*, vol. 57, Issue 6, 2002.
4. UNDESA, Statistics Division, *The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics*, New York, 2015 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.XVII.8).
5. Westoff, C.F., "Trends in marriage and early childbearing in developing countries", *DHS Comparative Reports*, No. 5, July 2003.
6. UNDESA, Population Division, *World Marriage Data 2019* (last accessed on 29 July 2020).
7. United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System: Revision 3*, New York, 2014.
8. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, *World Marriage Data 2019*, New York, 2019 (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2019).
9. United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System: Revision 3*, New York, 2014.
10. *Regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goal indicators*.

One-parent households



Key points

- According to data collected since the mid-1990s, lone-mother parenting is on the rise in all developing regions, increasing from 5% to 8% in Northern Africa and Western Asia; 7% to 10% in sub-Saharan Africa; and 8% to 10% in Latin America and the Caribbean. The proportion of lone-father households has remained stable over the same period, at between 1% to 2%, resulting in a 7% to 9% gender gap in the prevalence of one-parent households in developing regions.
- There are wide variations among countries in the prevalence of one-parent households, even within the same region (for example, 3% of lone-mother households in Senegal compared to 14% in Burundi).
- Over three quarters of one-parent households are headed by mothers and they tend to be more vulnerable to poverty than two-parent and lone-father households.
- Changes in marriage and fertility patterns are having an impact on the living arrangements of children. The increase in the prevalence of one-parent households is linked to increases in divorce and separation and in the number of children born outside marriage.
- The majority of households with children are still households with both parents. In selected countries in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 22% to 40% of households have children living with both parents, 5% to 10% of households have children living with a lone-mother and 1% to 3% of households have children living with a lone-father.
- Households with childless couples are also prevalent in OECD countries, with shares ranging from 15% in Poland and Slovenia to 26% in Canada: in the United States of America childless couples (25%) are more prevalent than couples living with children (24%).
- The general lack of adequate time series data on one-parent households, particularly in developed countries, has hampered the generation of estimates for monitoring the phenomena over time and for informed policy formulation.

Background

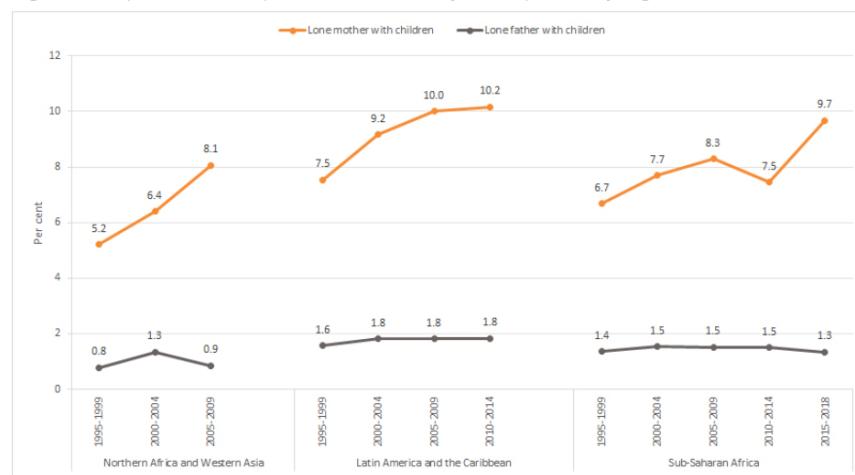
Household composition has important consequences for the well-being of families and individuals, and lone-mother households tend to be more vulnerable to poverty than two-parent and lone-father households. With the increase in [divorce and separation](#) and the number of children born outside marriage, one-parent households are more common than in the past. Understanding patterns of household composition and associated changes over time are thus relevant for efforts to achieve SDG 1, to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, SDG 3, to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, and SDG 5, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.¹

One-parent households are predominantly headed by women

Available data show significant differences by sex in the proportion of one-parent households (see figure I): in the period 2011–2018, at least three quarters of one-parent households with children aged under the age of 18 were headed by lone-mothers.² The higher incidence of one-parent households headed by women compared to those headed by men could be due to fact that, in general, mothers are rewarded custody of children in the

event of divorce and/or separation.³

Figure I: Proportion of one-parent households by sex of parent, by region: 1995–2018 (Percentage)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division, Household Size & Composition 2019 (<https://population.un.org/Household/index.html#/countries/840>) (accessed on 6 July 2020).

Note: Unweighted averages. Data for 10 countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia (1995–2009); 23 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (1995–2014); and 38 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (1995–2018).

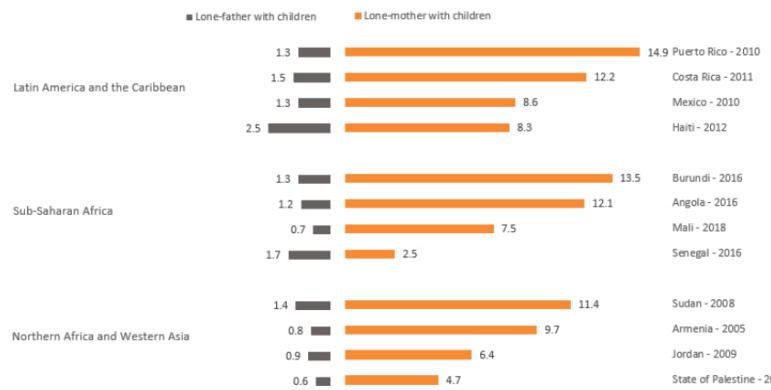
In all developing regions with available data (Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa), the prevalence of one-parent households, especially those headed by a lone-mother, has increased since the mid-1990s: from 8% to 10% in Latin America and the Caribbean; from 7% to 10% in sub-Saharan Africa; and from 5% to 8% in Northern Africa and Western Asia.

In the same regions, data show that the proportion of lone-father households has not changed significantly over time, remaining substantially lower than lone-mother households, at around 2% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1.5% in sub-Saharan Africa and 1% in Northern Africa and Western Asia, resulting in a 7% to 8% gender gap in the prevalence of one-parent households in those regions.

Within regions, there are wide differences in the proportion of lone-mother households among countries (see figure II). For example: in sub-Saharan Africa, Burundi has the highest proportion (14%) and Senegal (3%) the lowest, revealing a significant regional gap of about 11 percentage points; in Northern Africa and Western Asia, the gap between the countries with the highest proportion (Sudan, 11%) and the lowest (State of Palestine, 5%) is 6 percentage points; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Haiti has the lowest proportion (8%) and Puerto Rico the highest (15%), resulting in a gap of 7 percentage points.

Regardless of the level, however, in all of the above countries the proportion of lone-mother households is much higher than lone-father households and the gender gap ranges from 0.8 percentage points in Senegal to a high of 13 percentage points in Puerto Rico.

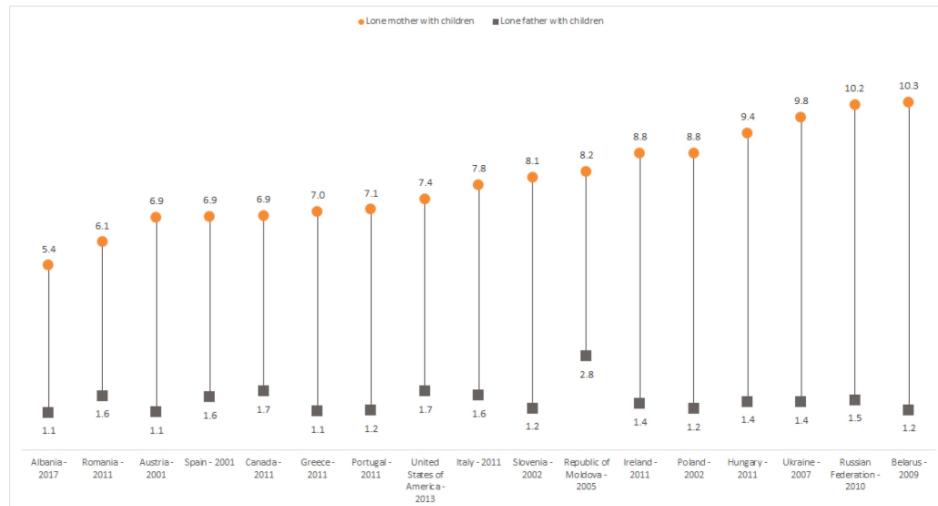
Figure II: Proportion of lone mother households and lone-father households (highest and lowest) by region: 2005–2018 (latest available) (Percentage)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division, Household Size & Composition 2019 (<https://population.un.org/Household/index.html#/countries/840>) (accessed on 6 July 2020).

Based on data from 2001–2017 for countries in Europe and Northern America, wide variations in the proportion of one-parent households are also noticeable, in particular lone-mother households and the resulting gender gaps. The percentage of lone-mother households in the region ranged from a low of 5.4% in Albania to 10% in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The percentage of lone-father households ranged from 1% in the majority of countries to almost 3% in the Republic of Moldova. The gender gap in the proportion of lone-mother and lone-father households was between 4% and 9%, with the highest gap reported in Belarus and the Russian Federation. At 3%, the Republic of Moldova had the highest proportion of single-father households, followed by Canada, Italy, Romania, the Russian Federation, Spain and the United States at 2% (see figure III).

Figure III: Proportion of one-parent households by sex of parent in selected countries in Europe and Northern America: 2001–2017 (latest available) (Percentage)



Source: UNDESA, Household Size & Composition 2019 (<https://population.un.org/Household/index.html#/countries/840>) (accessed on 14 August 2020).

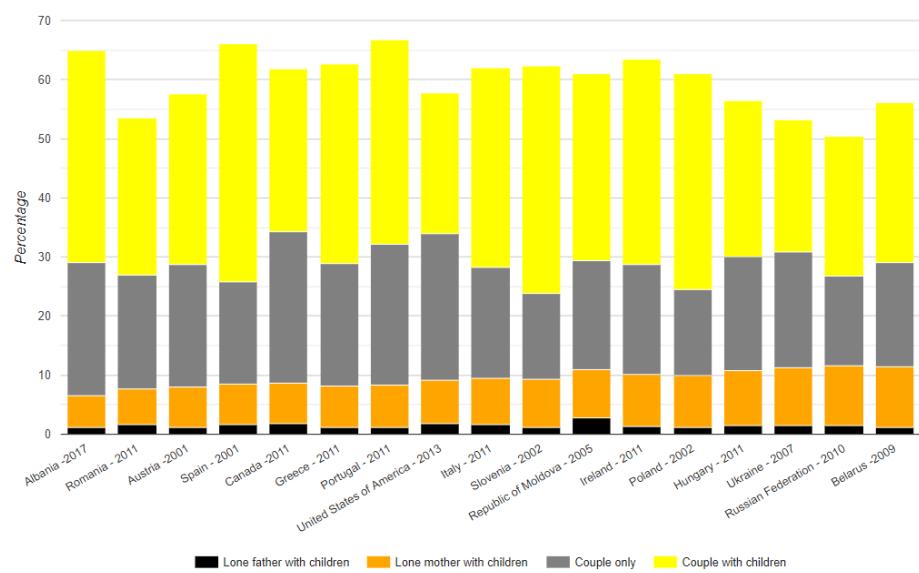
In 17 countries with available data in the Europe and Northern America region, there were more couples-with-

children than one-parent households (ranging from 22% in Ukraine to 40% in Spain), although a significant proportion of households included children that lived with a single parent, in particular with a lone-mother (ranging from 5% in Albania to 10% in Belarus) (see figure IV). Households composed of couples without children were also prevalent in all countries, with share ranges between 15% in Poland and Slovenia to 26% in Canada. In the United States, childless-couple households (25%) were slightly more common than households made up of couples with children (24%) and the percentage of lone-mother households with children (7%) and lone-father households with children (2%) reflected regional trends. The observed distribution of households with or without children, particularly in OECD countries, may be linked to changes in marriage and fertility patterns.⁴ The relatively low levels of couples with children should therefore be interpreted keeping in mind the associated low levels of fertility in those countries.

Information on the incidence of lone parenting should be examined in the context of the welfare of the persons involved, both children and parents. Statistics show that, globally, lone-mothers with at least one child under the age of 6 are more likely to be in the **labour force** (65.8%) than mothers living with a partner and a young child (48.7%), presumably because lone-mothers bear the sole responsibility for providing for the household.

These statistics reveal the extent of the economic pressure of the care burden placed on lone-mothers in providing for themselves and for their children, which may have implications on the welfare of both mothers and children. At present, there are insufficient sampled data to produce reliable labour force estimates on the welfare of lone-father households, possibly owing to the fact that they are less common.⁵

Figure IV: One-parent households and households of couples with and without children in selected countries in Europe and Northern America (latest available) (Percentage)



Source:UNDESA, Population Division (2019), Household Size & Composition 2019 (<https://population.un.org/Household/index.html#/countries/840>) (accessed on 14 August 2020).

About the data

Definitions

- **Proportion of households in which children live with only one parent:** lone-mother households or lone-father households, defined as their percentage among all household types. Household types include: (a) couple households: (i) with children, (ii) without children; (b) one-parent households: (i) lone-mother households, (ii) lone-father households; (c) one-person households; and (d) other types of households.
- **Oceania (excl):** Refers to Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand throughout the publication.

Availability

Data are available for 88 countries for the period 2001–2018.

Footnotes

1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, Patterns and trends in household size and composition: Evidence from a United Nations dataset, New York, 2019 (ST/ESA/SER.A/433); UNDESA, Statistics Division, The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics, New York, 2015 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.XVII.8).
2. UNDESA, Population Division (2019), Household Size & Composition 2019 (accessed on 6 July 2020).
3. UNDESA, Statistics Division, The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics, New York, 2015 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.XVII.8).
4. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Society at a Glance 2019: OECD Social Indicators, Paris, 2019.
5. International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nation Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), Spotlight on Goal 8: The Impact of Marriage and Children on Labour Market Participation, 2020.

Finland: mean age at birth of first child by sex; total fertility rates; living arrangements for children



Key points

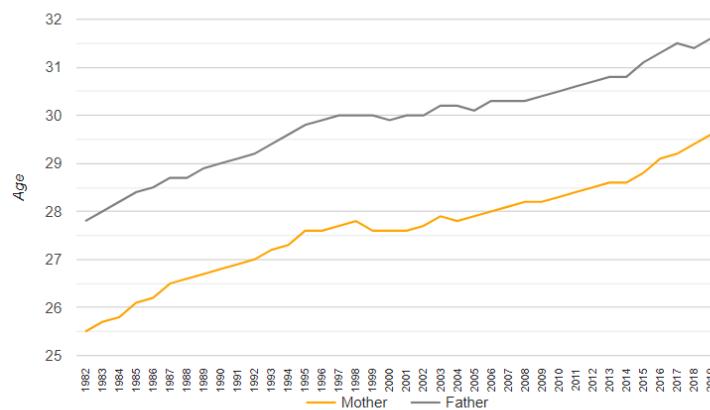
- The total fertility rate in Finland has declined since 2010, from 1.87 children per woman in 2010 to 1.35 children per woman in 2019, the lowest historically recorded rate.
- A growing proportion of Finnish women and men aged 15–49 live alone without a spouse, and this has contributed significantly to the postponement, or prevention, of childbearing: the proportion of women aged 28–32 living without a spouse was 20% in 2019, compared to 14% in 1999. The corresponding proportion of men aged 30–34 was 28% in 2019 compared to 20% in 1999.
- In 2019, first-time mothers in Finland were 2 years older, on average, than first-time mothers in 2000; first-time fathers were also older than the average age 20 years ago: the age difference between parents has remained at around 2 years over the last decades.
- A married couple with children is the most common family model in Finland, representing 57% of all families in 2019. Nevertheless, the number and proportion of one-parent families is on the rise. Lone-mother families represented 17% of families with children in 2000 and 20% in 2019; lone-father families represented 2% of families with children in 2000 and 3% in 2019.
- The average age of mothers at the birth of their first child has increased.

Current situation

Over the course of the last few decades, women's average age at the beginning of childbearing has increased. In 2019, first-time mothers in Finland were older than had previously been the case: the average age of first-time mothers in 2019 was 29.6 years, compared to 27.6 in 2000 (see figure I). This is connected to decreasing female fertility rates for the birth of the first child among women under age 30, coupled with increasing rates of fertility in older age groups.

On average, men are two years older than women when they become parents for the first time. In 2019, men became fathers for the first time at age of 31.6. Like mothers, first-time fathers were older than in previous decades: the difference in the ages of first-time mothers and first-time fathers has remained at around two years over the last decades.

Figure I: Mean age at first birth for first-time mothers and fathers: 1985–2019

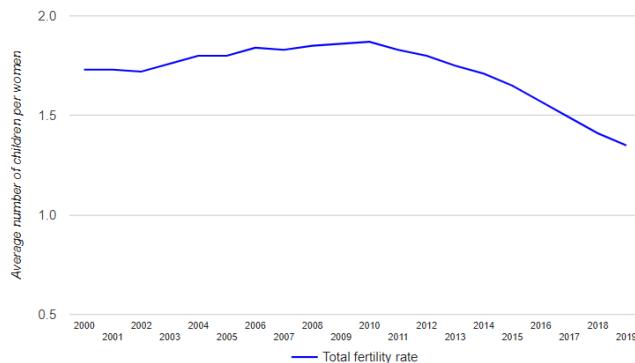


Source: Statistics Finland, Birth rate (https://www.stat.fi/tup/maanmuutto/perheet/synttavuus_en.html).

Total fertility rate has been declining since around 2010

In Finland, the total fertility rate has declined remarkably since 2010, when it was 1.87 children per woman — by 2019 the fertility rate was at an all-time low, at 1.35 children per woman. Compared to the rate in 2000, the birth rate fell in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (see figure II). The decline has been connected to the postponement of childbearing to older ages. As reported above, in 2019 the mean age of women giving birth for the first time was 29.6 years, and for first-time fathers the mean age was 31.6 years.

Figure II: Total fertility rate: 2000—2019



Source: Statistics Finland, Birth rate (https://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/perheet/syntyyys_en.html).

The mean age at first birth is increasing - why?

Since the 1970s, on average, women have been giving birth to their first child at later ages than previously recorded — this during a period of time when women's participation in education and the labour force has continued to grow exponentially. In the Family Barometer 2017,¹ women, unlike men, expressed concern over career breaks caused by combining childbearing and employment, possibly because having children was considered either undesirable or inappropriate in the work environment, in particular for women in fixed-term employment.² To address this situation, women have adopted different ways of working, including part-time work, in order to schedule family leave: the demands of fixed-term employment on women have been a contributing factor in the decision to postpone childbearing.³

Traditional obligations for women, such as childcare and other family responsibilities, on the one hand and the demands of working life and career on the other have been perceived as contradictory and difficult to coordinate. In general, employers have not been expected to anticipate the situation of women of reproductive age, and jobs that were family-friendly were rare and sought after. For men, having children has not been seen as a reason for absence from work nor for adding childcare to their responsibilities in the home.⁴

It has also been suggested that the upswing in the number of small families and delayed childbearing are evidence of new kinds of problems and challenges, including difficulties in conceiving children and unwanted childlessness.⁵ In addition, a growing proportion of Finnish women of childbearing age live alone, without a spouse, as do a growing number of men in the same age bracket, and this has contributed significantly to the trend towards postponing, or preventing, childbearing. For example, in 2019, 20% of women aged 28–32 and 28% of men aged 30–34 lived alone without a spouse, compared to 14% of women and 20% of men in 1999.

Living arrangements for children aged 18 and below

Married couples with children are the most common family model in Finland, representing 57% of all families with children in 2019. Although there has been a steady decline over the years in this type of family, both in absolute and relative terms, other types of families with children are still far less prevalent.

In 2019, **one-parent families** represented almost one-fourth (23%) of all families with children. Families of mothers and children represented about 20% of all families with children. Even though the number of families with a single father and children has

grown, the number is still very low, and such families make up only 3% of all families with children. Nevertheless, the overall number and the share of one-parent families is on the rise. In 2000, 17% of families with children were composed of mothers and children and 2% were composed of fathers with children.

Source

- [Statistics Finland, Families with underage children by type in 1950–2019 \(corrected on 24 August 2020\)](#)

About the data

Definitions

- **Mean age at first birth:** Refers to the mean age of parents when having their first child: having children refers to biological children not to adopted or foster children.
- **Total fertility rate:** Mean (average) number of children a woman would have by age 50 if she survived to age 50 and was subject, throughout her life, to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a given year. The total fertility rate is expressed as the number of children per woman aged 15–49.⁶
- **Living arrangements⁷ of children from birth to age 17:** Refers to the place of residence where the children are registered: the information does not necessarily describe the everyday practices of families.⁸

Coverage

Women of childbearing age (conventionally ages 15–49) in Finland. Living arrangements for children cover children from birth to age 17. Analysis is at the national and subnational level.

Availability

Information on the mean age at first birth by sex is based on the Finnish Population Register.⁹ The main source for producing Finnish population statistics is the Population Information System, which is maintained by the Digital and Population Data Services Agency. Data on fathers are based on population data in the statistical reference period, according to which the names of fathers have been recorded for nearly 98% of children in the Population Information System.

Footnotes

1. Family Barometer (Perhebarometri).
2. Rotkirch, A., Tammisalo, K., Miettinen, A. and Berg, V., "Miksi vanhemmuutta lykätehdin? Nuorten aikuisten näkemyksiä lastensaannista", Perhebarometri (Family Barometer), University of Helsinki, 2017.
3. Sutela, H., "Miehet ja aikainen työ ja perheellistyminen Suomessa 1984–2008", Tutkimuksia 259, Statistics Finland, Helsinki, 2013.
4. Rotkirch, A., Tammisalo, K., Miettinen, A. and Berg, V., "Miksi vanhemmuutta lykätehdin? Nuorten aikuisten näkemyksiä lastensaannista", Perhebarometri, University of Helsinki, 2017.
5. Klemetti, R. and Raussi-Lehto, E., Edistys, ehdokkuus ja vaikuta – Seksuaali- ja lisääntymisterveteyden toimintaohjelma 2014–2020, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki 2014.
6. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Fertility Data 2019.
7. In family statistics, children comprise the following persons living with their parents: biological children, adopted children, including biological children and adopted children of one of the spouses (foster children and children in the care of the family are not classified as children).
8. For example, in case of divorce, the child is only included in the family of one parent even if the parents, in practice, have joint custody. Children's shared residence was studied in the ad hoc module of the Labour Force Survey carried out by Statistics Finland in 2018. Data on shared residence were published on 17 June 2019. According to the results, there were altogether around 110,000 children living in two homes and 40,000 of those children resided for equal amounts of time in both homes.
9. In Finland, the last population registration was carried out on 1 January 1989. Since then, the Population Information System has been updated by notifications of changes. Annual notifications of changes in the population are expected by the last day of January of the following year.

Average number of children; age at childbirth; and childlessness



Key points

- Globally, the mean age at childbearing went up slightly between 1995 and 2020, from age 27.5 to 28.1: women have children at relatively young ages in Latin America and the Caribbean (27.3 years) and Central and Southern Asia (27.5 years); women have children at relatively more advanced ages in Australia and New Zealand (30.8 years).
- Globally, the average number of children born per woman declined slightly from 2.8 in the period 1995–2000 to 2.5 during the period 2015–2020 and most regions experienced a decline over the period.
- The sharpest decline in the average number of children born per woman was observed in sub-Saharan Africa (from 5.9 to 4.7 children per woman), while a slight increase was observed in Europe and Northern America (reaching the lowest observed average of 1.7 children).
- The use of contraception among women of reproductive age is most prevalent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (60%) and Australia and New Zealand (58%) and lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (29%) and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) (28%).
- Childlessness is highest in Australia and New Zealand (14.4%) and in Europe and Northern America (12.2%) and lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (8.1%) and Central and Southern Asia (5.6%). The prevalence of childlessness has increased in the past two decades, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (47% increase) and Australia and New Zealand (46% increase).

Mean age at childbirth

The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, recognized the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so. How many children and when to have them are decisions that have implications on many facets of women's and men's lives.

In order to ensure the desired family size, women and men often use contraception, either to space or limit the number of children. To understand the implications of these factors from the point of view of societal change, it is important to examine both the mean age at childbearing, which provides useful information about the timing of births by age of the mother, and the determinants of childlessness, given the link between fertility to population growth.

The mean age of childbearing is of significance because of its effect on the growth rate of the population, which has important implications for the size of future populations.² The time between one generation and the next is directly affected by the ages at which women bear children, including the distribution of births across the reproductive age span.

Substantial differences among regions in the mean age at childbirth

Globally, during the period 1995–2020, the mean age at childbearing went up slightly, from age 27.5 to 28.1 (see figure I). The rise in the mean age, often described as fertility postponement, is primarily due to a progressively later start to childbearing.³

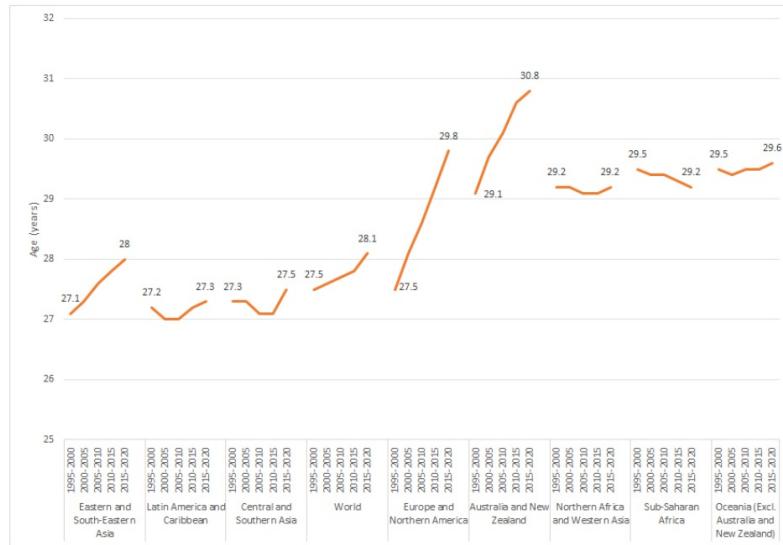
There are regional differences in both levels and trends of the mean age at childbearing. The pattern in both Central and Southern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean has followed a similar trend (a U shape), and these two regions have the lowest mean age at birth (age 27). In sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), the mean age has been fairly constant, at around age 29. The mean age at childbearing is highest in Australia and New Zealand and Europe and Northern America, and it has increased noticeably in both regions in 2020 (to age 30.8 and age 29.8, respectively).

The observed upswing in the mean age at childbearing is likely due to women postponing the timing of their first births coupled with a reduction in the total number of births per women due to fertility control through the use of contraception. This

World's Women 2020

increase in the mean age reduces the age span within which women are having their children, thereby leading to a reduction in the total number of births per woman. Data on total fertility rates over time (see figure II) show a general downward trend over the past three decades during which time the mean age at childbearing has increased.

Figure I: Female mean age at childbearing by region: 1995—2000, 2000—2010 and 2015—2020



Source: Based on data from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, online edition (accessed on 26 June 2020) (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>).

Average number of children born per woman (total fertility rate)

The timing of the first birth and the total number of children a person might have is dependent on age at marriage or entry into a union, education and employment opportunities, gender roles and expectations, access to family planning and the social and economic context in which the parents live.

Women are having fewer children over the childbearing years

Globally, the average number of children born per woman declined slightly from 2.8 during the period 1995–2000 to 2.5 during the period 2015–2020 (see figure II). Most geographical regions show a decline in birth rates, but with marked differences. In general, regions with high fertility have experienced a sharper decline in fertility than in those with lower levels of fertility.

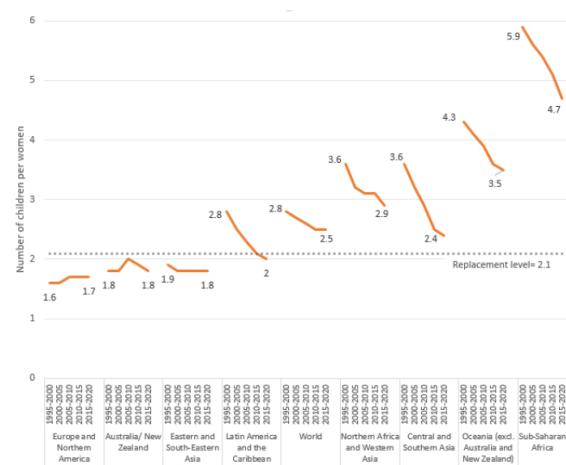
Sub-Saharan Africa (from 5.9 to 4.7) and Central and Southern Asia (from 3.6 to 2.4) show the sharpest decline in the average number of children born per woman during this period. On the other hand, regions with low fertility levels (below 2 children per woman, on average), such as Europe and Northern America, Australia and New Zealand and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, show minimal changes over the same time period. In fact, data show that there has been a slight increase in the average number of children born per woman since the mid-1990s in some European countries,⁴ including Belarus, Germany and the Russian Federation.⁵ The pattern of increasing fertility in recent years has also been observed in Australia and New Zealand, and to some extent in: China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region; Japan; and Mongolia. It should be borne in mind, however, that in most of these countries, fertility levels, even with the slight increase, have remained below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.

Trends in the average number of children born per woman should be considered in conjunction with trends in the mean age at birth as well as the use of contraception, as both factors influence the lifetime fertility of women. Analysis of the mean age at childbearing shows an upward trend in the period since the mid-1990s, resulting in a shorter span of childbearing.

Concomitantly, available information on country experiences (see figure III) shows an inverse relationship between

contraceptive use and levels of fertility.

Figure II: Average number of children per woman, by geographical region: 1995—2000, 2005—2010, and 2015—2020



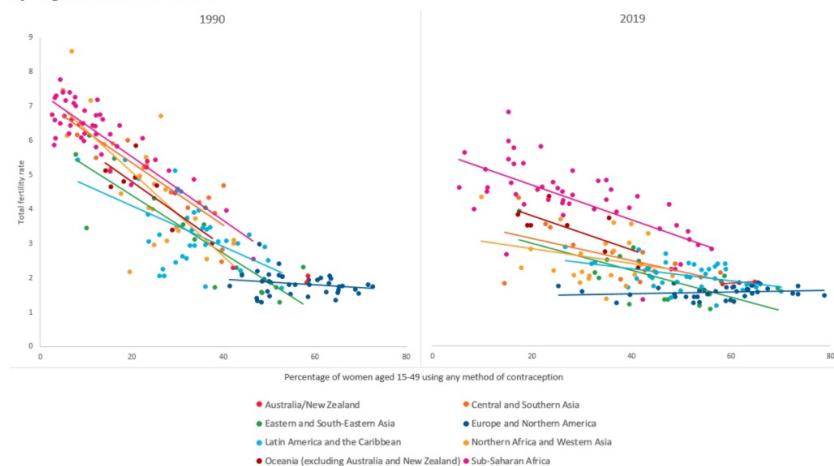
Source: Based on data from UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, online edition (accessed on 26 June 2020) (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>).

Use of contraception

A major contributor to the observed changes in levels of fertility is the use of contraception. The availability and use of contraception contribute to the ability of women and men to decide freely on the number, timing and spacing of their children. There is a strong inverse relationship between contraceptive use and the level of fertility, represented by the total fertility rate (see figure III) over the past three decades. With the increase in the use of contraception, fertility levels have fallen in all regions in the period 1990—2019.⁶ In general, regions with lower levels of fertility have higher proportions of women that are using contraception.

The observed decline in births in high fertility regions (sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia) attests to the link between the increased use of contraception and observed changes in levels of fertility. The observed variations and spread among countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and Central and Southern Asia help to explain why, in spite of the decline in births, levels of fertility are still higher there than in other regions. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, the persistently higher levels of fertility compared to observed levels of contraceptive use may be partly due to the fact that many family planning programmes in the region are promoted as birth-spacing programmes.⁷

Figure III: Total fertility rate compared to prevalence of contraceptive use among women aged 15–49 by region: 1990 and 2019



Source: Prepared by UNDESA, Population Division (correspondence with the Population Division on 25 June 2020)

The COVID-19 crisis could leave significant numbers of women and couples without access to essential sexual and reproductive health care. Globally, it had been estimated that 77% of women of reproductive age (15–49 years) would have their needs for family planning met with the use of modern contraceptive methods in 2020. However, considering the potential impact of COVID-19 on method-specific use, this could fall to 71%, resulting in around 60 million fewer users of modern contraception worldwide in 2020 if these disruptions last for a whole year. Overall declines in contraceptive use will depend on the methods used by women and their partners and on the types of disruptions experienced in individual countries. Countries should include family planning and reproductive health services in their essential services planning and should develop strategies to ensure that women and couples are able to exercise their reproductive rights during the COVID-19 crisis.⁸

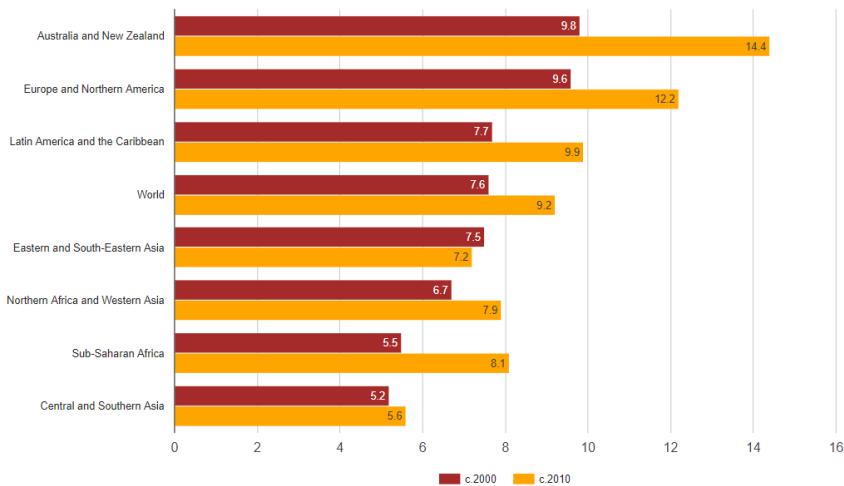
Childlessness among women aged 45—49

For a variety of reasons, some women never have children. While for some women childlessness is voluntary, for others it is not, and the lack of offspring may be a cause of emotional distress to them and to their families. In other cases, research shows that childlessness may be linked to women's level of education and employment opportunities. This is because highly educated women may postpone childbearing to later ages because of real or perceived obstacles to balancing work life and childrearing or not finding a partner.⁹ This perpetual postponement may result in not having any children at all.

Childlessness on the increase

The prevalence of childlessness has increased in the past few decades (see figure IV). Globally, the proportion of childless women aged 45–49 increased from 7.6% to 9.2% over the last two decades. Europe and Northern America and Australia and New Zealand have much higher proportions of childlessness than other regions. All major geographical regions, except Eastern and South-East Asia, which recorded almost no change, show an increase in the incidence of childlessness over this time period. Proportionately, the increase in childlessness has been highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where the proportion jumped from 5.5% to 8.1% over the last two decades (a 47% increase), and in Australia and New Zealand where the percentage of childless women is over 14% according to most recent data (a 46% increase compared to two decades ago). Other regions with substantial increases in childlessness over the past two decades include Europe and Northern America, where the increase was from 9.6% to 12.2% (a 27% increase), and Latin America and the Caribbean, which showed an increase in childlessness from 7.7% to 9.9% (a 29% increase). There was a smaller increase, however, in the Central and Southern Asia region, from 5.2% to 5.6% (an 8% increase).

Figure IV: Proportion of childless women aged 45–49, by geographical region: c.2000 and c.2010 (latest available) (Percentage)



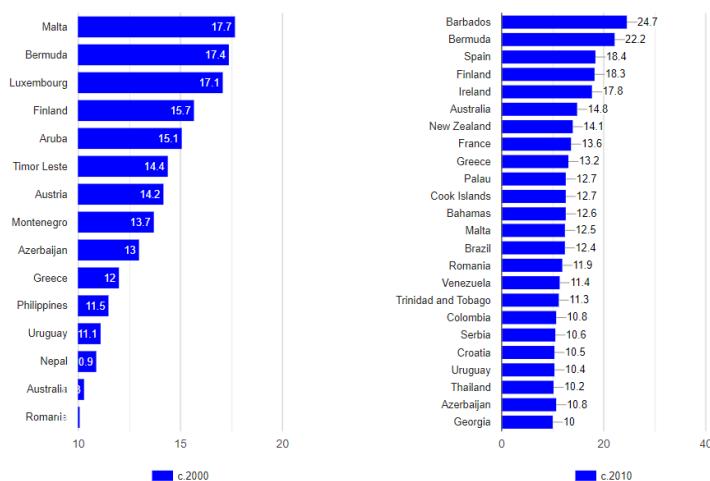
Source: UNDESA, Statistics Division, UNdata (<http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=tableCode:40>) (accessed on 12 May 2020).

Note: Unweighted averages

There are very wide variations among countries in definitive childlessness, that is, among women who have reached the end of the reproductive period. Data on countries with the highest (above 10%) proportions of childlessness over the last two decades show that, generally (see figure V), Australia and New Zealand and countries in Europe and Northern America have much higher proportions of childlessness than other regions. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa and in Northern Africa and Western Asia have the lowest proportion of women without children (below 5%), although childlessness is growing at a fast pace in sub-Saharan Africa (see figure IV).

Around 2000, there were 15 countries with over 10% of women aged 45–49 without children. More than half of those countries and territories were in Europe and Northern America: Austria, Bermuda, Finland, Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro and Romania. Countries and territories with high proportions of childless women in other regions in 2000 included Nepal (Southern Asia) and the Philippines (South-Eastern Asia), both with 11%; Azerbaijan (Western Asia) with 13%; and Aruba (Caribbean) with 15%.

Figure V: Countries and territories with highest proportions of childless women aged 45–49 years: c.2000 and c.2010 (latest available) (Percentage)



Source: UNDESA, Statistics Division, UNdata (<http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=tableCode:40>) (accessed on 12 May 2020).

In 2019, two decades later, the list of countries with at least 10% of childlessness has grown to 24 countries and territories, most of which are in Europe and Northern America, with the highest rates of childlessness in Bermuda, Croatia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Romania, Serbia and Spain. Countries and territories with high proportions of childless women in other regions include Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and Brazil (South America), both at around 12%, the Bahamas (Caribbean), the Cook Islands and Palau (Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand), all with around 13%.

The observed rates of childlessness and changes over time are a reflection of how changes in social norms coupled with the availability of modern methods of contraception and family planning have worked together to de-link sex from biological reproduction.¹¹ As a result, women have greater control over their own sexuality and reproduction with far-reaching implications for their health and their capacity to control the most intimate decisions that affect their lives. It should be noted that, in societies where women are expected to marry and have children, preferably at a young age, and where childbearing is highly valued, being childless may be shunned and may be far from being voluntary.¹²

About the data

Definitions

- **Female mean age at childbearing:** Mean (average) age of mothers at the birth of their children if women were subject throughout their lives to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a given year.¹³
- **Total fertility rate:** mean (average) number of children a woman would have by age 50 if she survived to age 50 and was subject, throughout her life, to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a given year. The total fertility is expressed as the number of children per woman.¹⁴
- **Childlessness** is measured as the proportion of women aged 45–49 who have never had a child. Childlessness may be intentional or not.
- **Contraceptive use:** percentage of women aged 15–49 who report that they themselves or their partners are currently using at least one contraceptive method of any type.¹⁵

Coverage

Estimates of the total fertility rate are calculated for women aged 15–49. The mean age at childbearing is calculated for women of childbearing ages (conventionally aged 15–49). The analysis of childlessness covers the female population aged 45–49. The information is presented for countries worldwide and by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.¹⁶

Footnotes

1. United Nations, Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II, para. 94.
2. UNDESA, Population Division, 2019: "Potential impact of later childbearing on future population", Population Facts, No. 2019/5, December 2019 (<https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/potential-impact-later-childbearing-future-population>).
3. Neels, K., Murphy, M., Ni Bhrolchain, M. and Beaujouan, E., "Rising Educational Participation and the Trend to Later Childbearing", *Population and Development Review*, vol. 43 (4), December 2017.
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14. UNDESA, Population Division, *World Fertility Data 2019*.
15. UNDESA, Population Division, *World Fertility and Family Planning 2020: Highlights*, New York, 2020.
16. Regional groupings under Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.

Mean age at first marriage; child marriage; and adolescent birth rate



Key points

- The age at which women and men first marry is rising in all regions worldwide: on average, women are getting married or entering into informal unions at age 23, about 3.5 years younger than men, who marry, on average, at age 26.5.
- Regions in which girls first marry at the youngest ages, Central and Southern Asia, Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), sub-Saharan Africa, and Northern Africa and Western Asia, also report the widest gender gap in age at first marriage. In contrast, Australia and New Zealand, and Europe and Northern America have the highest female mean age at first marriage and the smallest gender gap.
- In many countries, different minimum ages for marriage for women and men are set out in legislation, introducing a gender bias into national legal frameworks. Available data show that, with or without parental consent, marriage before age 18, for both adolescent girls and boys, is not allowed by law in 54 developing countries and 48 developed countries.
- Child marriage before age 18 has slowly declined in all regions with representative data, from 26% in the early 2000s to 20% by 2019. Sub-Saharan Africa, where 35% of women aged 20–24 have been married before age 18, is the region with the highest rate of child marriage, while Central Asia has the lowest incidence (8%). Southern Asia has recorded the largest decline in child marriages before age 18, from 52% to 29% over the same time period.
- Child marriage before age 15 has gone down globally, from 8% to 5%, since the early 2000s, although sub-Saharan Africa, where 11% of girls marry before age 15, remains the region with the highest prevalence.
- While child marriage is more common among girls than boys,¹ available data for selected countries show that at least 10% of men aged 20–24 married before age 18.
- The rate of motherhood among adolescent girls, although declining in all regions, is still high, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and to some extent in Latin America and the Caribbean. At 101 births per 1,000 women in 2020, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of adolescent fertility, and Eastern Asia the lowest (7 births per 1,000). High rates of motherhood for adolescent girls should be looked at in the context of the likelihood that not all childbearing is taking place in the context of a marriage or union.

Background

Marriages and entering into unions are generally viewed as a first step in establishing a family, sharing resources and providing care, a key element among the building blocks of all societies.

The age at which women first marry or enter into union, or first become pregnant is an important indicator of their level of empowerment, as it shapes their reproductive behaviour and is linked to their opportunities for education and employment.² Girls aged 15–19 who either become pregnant or enter into marriage are more likely to give birth early and to have extended lifetime fertility,³ and are more likely to discontinue schooling,⁴ with implications for their participation in the labour market, given that education has a substantial impact on employment prospects.⁵ Child marriage, before age 18, is also a violation of a child's rights.

It is estimated that 21 million girls aged 15–19 in developing regions become pregnant, approximately 12 million of them give birth in their teenage years,⁶ and it is probable that the remaining 9 million have their pregnancies terminated. It is recognized that becoming pregnant and giving birth early in life is associated with elevated health risks for both mothers and babies. Pregnancy and complications in childbirth are the leading causes of death among girls aged 15–19 globally, with 99% of maternal deaths among women aged 15–49 worldwide reported in low- and middle-income countries.⁷ Moreover, babies born to mothers under age 20 face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery and severe neonatal conditions.⁸

In response, many countries have made the reduction in the adolescent birth rate a priority.⁹ Adolescent girls who become

pregnant may be forced to discontinue schooling, thereby reducing their opportunities for socioeconomic development, in many cases leading to lower earnings, the perpetuation of poverty cycles and social and political exclusion over the course of their lifetimes,¹⁰ as well as long-term impact on their mental health.

Age at first marriage

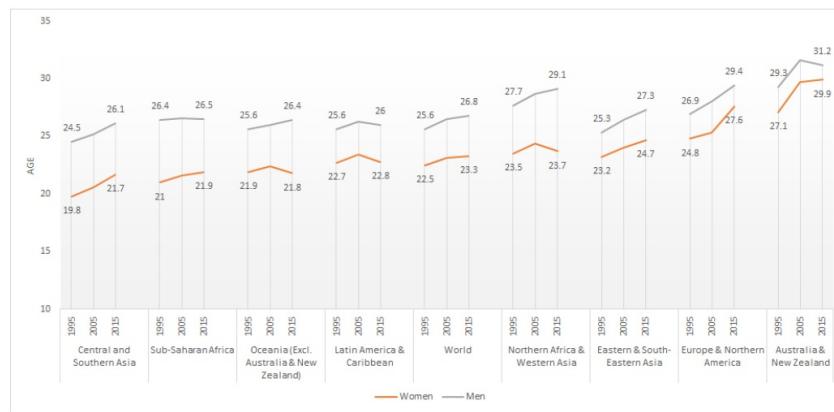
Women and men are marrying/entering into unions at later ages

Women continue to marry at younger ages than men, 3.5 years younger on average. Globally, the mean age at first marriage¹¹ for women has remained at around age 23 over the last 20 years (see figure I). During the same time period, the average age for men increased from age 25.6 to age 26.8, resulting in an increase of about half a year in the gender gap in mean age at marriage.

Central and Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), the regions where women marry at the youngest ages (on average at age 22), also show a larger gender gap in mean age at first marriage (around 4.5 years), although the largest gender gap in the mean age is in Northern Africa and Western Asia (5.4 years). In contrast, the gender difference in mean age at first marriage in Australia and New Zealand and Europe and Northern America, where women marry, on average, at age 30 and age 28, respectively, is less than 2 years.

In terms of change over time, during the period 1995–2015, the mean age at first marriage increased for both women and men in all regions, with few exceptions and with different magnitude. Women in Europe and Northern America, and Australia and New Zealand showed the highest increase (3 years) in mean age at first marriage, followed by women in Central and Southern Asia (2 years). In Europe and Northern America and in Australia and New Zealand there was also a reduction in the gender gap in age at first marriage.

Figure I: Singulate mean age at first marriage by sex and by geographical region: 1995, 2005, 2015 (Age)

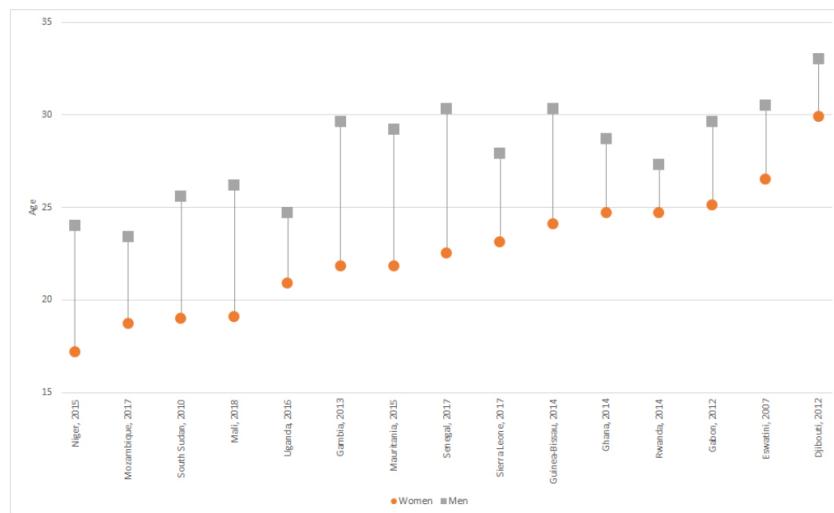


Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019 (<https://population.un.org/MarriageData/Index.html#/home>).

It is worth noting that the observed gender gaps in the singulate mean age at first marriage at regional levels mask intraregional differences in nuptiality patterns between women and men. Available data for selected countries with women's lowest and highest ages at marriage in sub-Saharan Africa (see figure II) show significant disparities across countries within the region. For example, there is 13-year difference in women's mean age at marriage between Niger (17 years) and Djibouti (30 years).

Differences between countries are also noticeable in the gender gap in the mean age at marriage, ranging from 3 years in Rwanda and Djibouti to a high of 8 years in Senegal and the Gambia. This information is useful for studies about the socioeconomic outcomes for women and men, taking into account their ages at first marriage, as well as the differences in age between spouses.

Figure II: Singulate mean age at first marriage by sex in sub-Saharan Africa, by country: 2007–2018 (latest available) (Age)



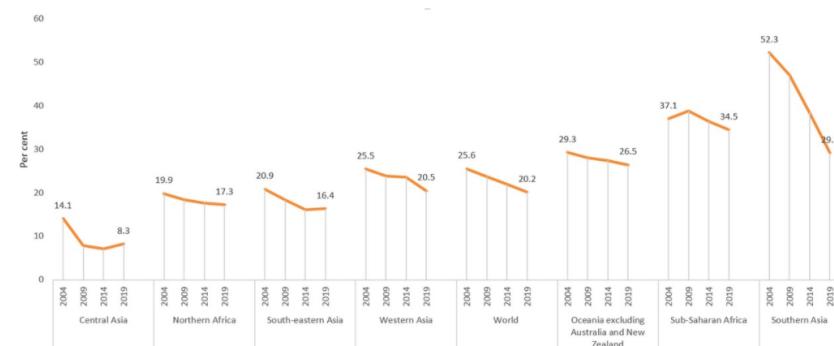
Source: UNDESA, Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019 (<https://population.un.org/MarriageData/Index.html#/home>).

Child marriage

Marriage before the age of 18 is a violation of a child's rights. The development of girls who are married in childhood may be compromised by their withdrawal from education, stunted career prospects and social isolation, and, commonly, by early pregnancy and its attendant risks.¹² Child brides may enter unions that put them at risk of [intimate partner violence](#), or in which they are not empowered to exercise autonomy in decisions affecting their lives, including their [reproductive health](#).¹³ Child marriage can also result in early pregnancy and have negative consequences for the health and survival of mothers and babies. Research also shows a significant negative association between very early marriage (before age 15) and the overall psychological well-being of women.¹⁴

National legislation in many countries prohibits child marriage, although legal protections are far from universal, often allowing for exceptions to the minimum age at marriage. Furthermore, legislation in some countries sets different minimum ages for marriage for women and men, introducing a gender bias into the legal framework. Available data also show that not all countries or territories have laws banning marriage before age 18. With or without parental consent, marriage before age 18, for both women and men, is not allowed by law in 54 developing countries and 48 developed countries.¹⁵

Figure III: Percentage of women aged 20–24 who were first married or in a union before age 18: 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 (Percentage)



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Council, Progress toward the Substantive Development Goals, Report of the Secretary General – Supplementary Information (E/2020/57).

Note: Analysis is based on a subset of 91 countries world-wide covering 77% of the global population of women aged 20–24. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50% of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for Europe and Northern America; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Australia and New Zealand.

Despite a general downward trend, child marriage is still prevalent in selected regions

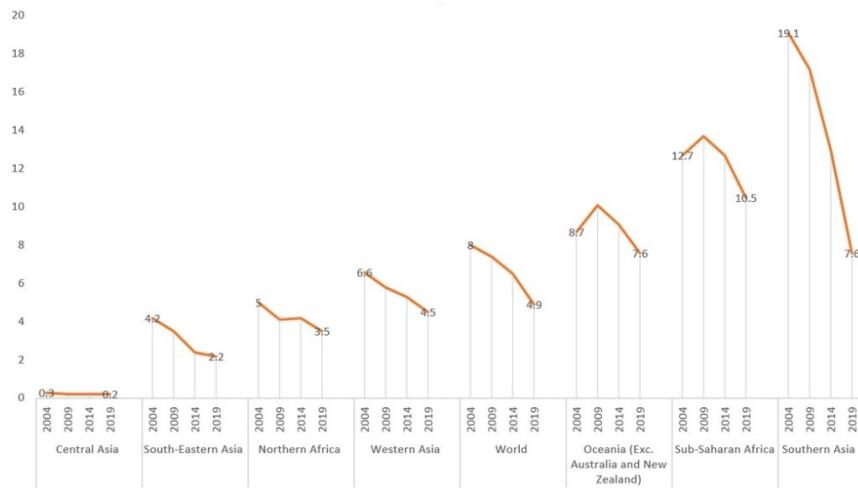
Worldwide, about 5% of women aged 20–24 were married before age 15, and girls remain disproportionately affected, with one in five young women in that age group married before age 18, compared to 1 in 30 young men.¹⁶

While child marriage still exists, it is becoming less common, and has declined at an accelerated rate since 2009 (see figure III). The most significant progress has been observed in Southern Asia, where the level of child marriage has fallen by more than a third, from nearly 50% in 2009 to 29% in 2019. The highest rates of child marriage are in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where the prevalence is (35%); only modest progress has been made since 2009.¹⁷

In 2019, worldwide, an estimated 5% of women aged 20–24 had been married or in a union before age 15, representing a 3 percentage point decline from the estimated level in 2004 (see figure IV).

In 2004, the Southern Asia (19%) and sub-Saharan Africa (13%) regions had the highest proportions of women married before age 15, while countries in Central Asia had the lowest proportions (0.3%). By 2019, however, while in Southern Asia there had been a significant decline in the proportion of women married before age 15 (11 percentage points, reaching around 8%), child marriage had declined at a more modest rate in sub-Saharan Africa (2 percentage points) and was still reported at around 11%.

Figure IV: Proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married or in a union before age 15 by region: 2003, 2008, 2013, 2018 (Percentage)



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Council, Progress toward the Substantive Development Goals, Report of the Secretary General – Supplementary Information (E/2020/57).

Note: Analysis is based on a subset of 91 countries world-wide covering 77% of the global population of women aged 20–24. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50% of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for Europe and Northern America; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Australia and New Zealand.

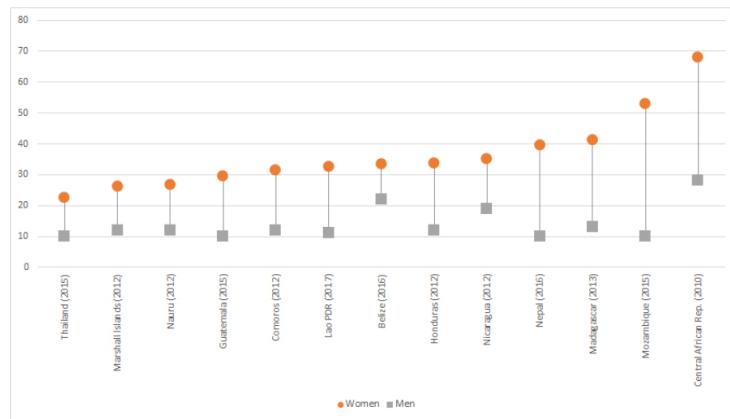
Early marriage for boys

Although more is known about early marriage for women, there is substantial evidence about early marriage for men. Available data for selected countries show that the proportion of men aged 20–24 who married or entered into a union before age 18 is at least 10% (see figure V). While more information is needed to verify both the magnitude and trends, this data show that in some countries, such as the Central African Republic (28%), Belize (22%) and Nicaragua (19%), sizeable proportions of the male population are married while still too young to take care of a family. Child grooms may have to assume adult responsibilities for which they may not be prepared, including early fatherhood, which may result in additional economic pressure to provide for

the household, and, as with girls, constraints on their access to education and their opportunities for career advancement.¹⁸ It should be noted that child marriage is a human rights violation for boys just as it is for girls.

The international community, through SDG target 5.3, is seeking to eliminate child marriage by 2030. While the world has made progress towards this goal, reaching it will require coordinated action and additional investment. To end child marriage by 2030, progress must be 17 times faster than the progress made over the last decade.

Figure V: Proportions of women and men aged 20–24 who were married or in a union before age 18 in selected countries: 2010–2017 (latest available) (Percentage)



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2020 (<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>) (accessed on 29 January 2020).

Adolescent birth rate

Adolescent fertility on the decline

Globally, adolescent fertility has declined from 56 births per 1,000 adolescent women (aged 15–19) in 2000 to 41 births per 1,000 in 2020 (see figure VI).¹⁹ The level of adolescent fertility has declined substantially over the past 20 years in all geographical regions, matching levels and trends in the decline of child marriage, although with marked regional variations.

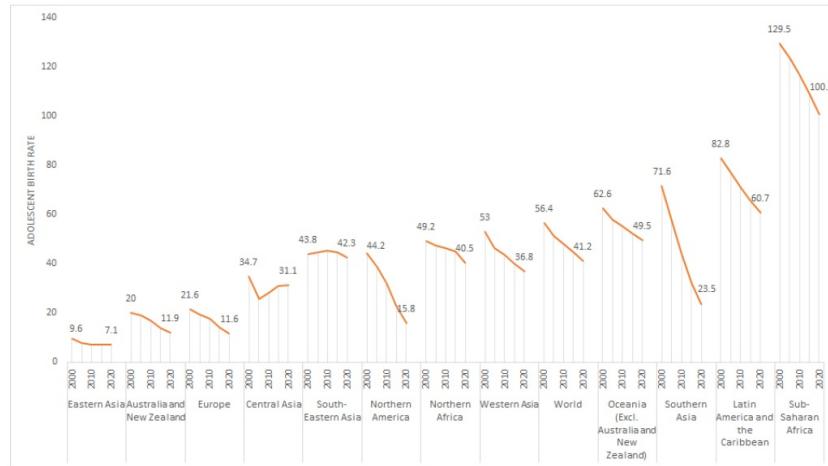
While the birth rate among adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa declined from 130 to 101 per 1,000 between 2000 and 2010, the level has remained higher than in any other region. Southern Asia registered the largest drop, from 72 to 24 births per 1,000 adolescent girls, while Latin America and the Caribbean registered a decrease from 83 to 61 births per 1,000 - the second highest rate after sub-Saharan Africa in 2020. At the other end of the spectrum, Eastern Asia (7 births per 1,000), Australia and New Zealand (12 births per 1,000), Europe (12 births per 1,000) and Northern America (16 births per 1,000) had the lowest adolescent fertility rates in 2020. Observed disparities across and within regions in the levels of the adolescent birth rate, as well as differences across and within countries, indicate that large numbers of young people do not have access to means of controlling their fertility, with important implications for their well-being.²⁰

It should be noted that while the estimated global adolescent fertility rate has declined, the actual number of children born to adolescents has not.²¹ This is mainly due to the fact that in some regions of the world there is a large and growing population of adolescent girls aged 15–19. For example, in the period 1995–2020, the population in this age range in sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the highest adolescent birth rate, increased from an estimated 30 million to 58 million. Consequently, although the adolescent fertility rate is declining in the region, the number of babies being born to adolescent mothers may not be declining. The increase in the numbers of adolescent girls as a result of the population momentum, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, may lead to difficulty in providing the requisite social and health services, including sexual and reproductive health services.

There are major risks associated with **adolescent childbearing**. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19 globally,²² and the risk is highest for girls under age 15. It should be noted that many pregnancies are unwanted, but the affected adolescents may not have access to the requisite knowledge or sexual and reproductive health services to prevent pregnancies. Furthermore, many adolescent pregnancies are terminated, often in contexts where it is illegal to terminate a pregnancy.

Preventing pregnancy among girls under age 15 is an important measure to insure that they receive adequate education and life-long livelihood opportunities, including access to reproductive health care. Addressing very early fertility is critical for breaking the cycle of deprivation brought about through early childbearing, including the widely recognized potential health, social and economic disadvantages that young mothers face.²³

Figure VI: Adolescent birth rate per 1,000 women aged 15–19:2000, 2010, 2020



Source: United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (document E/2020/57) (<https://undocs.org/E/2020/57>).

About the data

Definitions

- **Mean age at first marriage**, also known as the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM), is the average age at first marriage among those who ever married or entered into a union before age 50.
- **Child marriage** refers to any formal or informal union between a child under age 18 and an adult or another child.²⁴ Although Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.3.1²⁵ captures only child marriage among girls, "child marriage" refers to unions in which a girl or boy under age 18 lives with a partner as if married. Informal unions are generally defined as those in which couples live together (cohabitare) as if married but for which there has been no formal civil or religious ceremony.
- **Gender gap in age at first marriage** is the difference between women and men in the age at first marriage.
- **Adolescent birth rate** is the annual number of births to girls aged 10–14 or adolescents aged 15–19 per 1,000 women in those age groups.

Coverage

Estimates of the mean age at first marriage cover women and men ever married before age 50.

Measurement of child marriage covers women aged 20♦–24 who were first married or in a union: (a) under age 15; and (b) under age 18.

Analysis of the adolescent birth rate covers only births to women aged 15–19.

The information is presented for countries worldwide and by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals.²⁶

Footnotes

1. The higher rate of marriage among adolescent girls compared to adolescent boys implies that the former get married to or form unions with older men.
2. UNICEF, Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects, New York, 2014.
3. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development (UNDESA), Population Division, "Fertility among very young adolescents", Population Facts, No. 2019/1, April 2019.
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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 persons were identified as a topic requiring more attention and research.¹

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

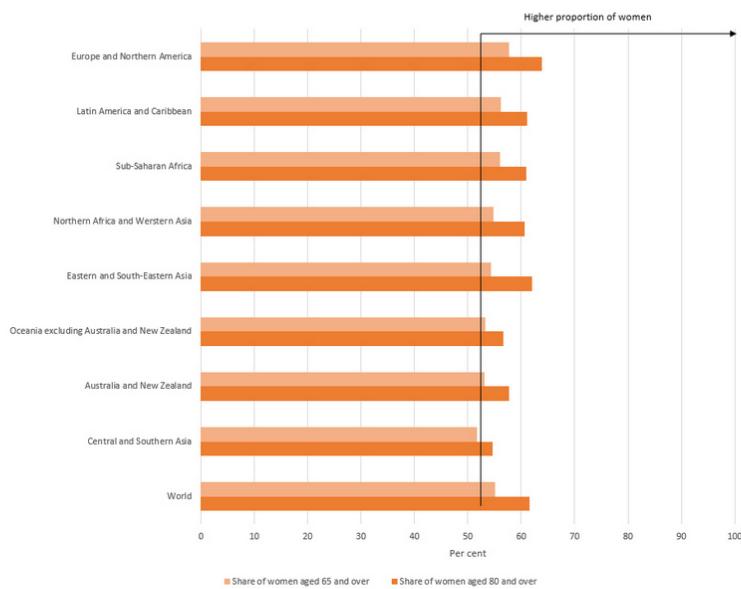
Women comprise more than a half of all older people throughout the world (see figure I). Globally, the share of women among the population aged 65 and older is 54%, and at the regional level, the share ranges from 51% in Central and Southern Asia to 56% in Europe and Northern America. The proportion 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 persons 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 persons 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 poorer 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/>).

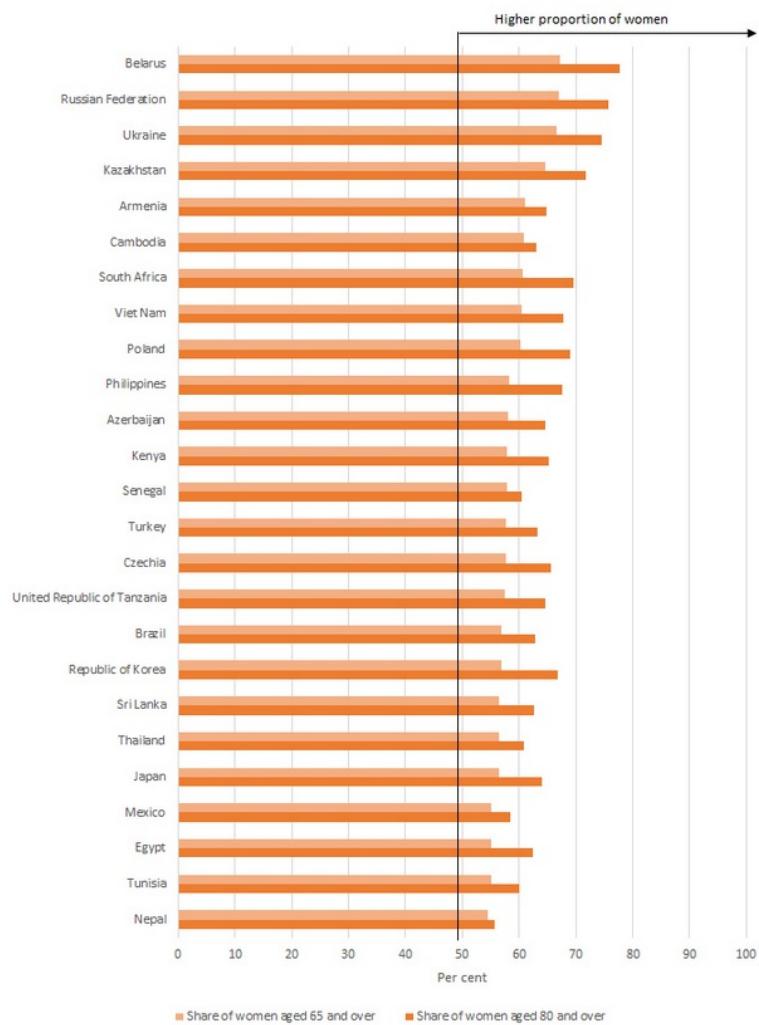
Note: The vertical line (-) indicates the same number of women and men.

National differences in the proportion of women among older persons

Certain countries have higher shares of women in their population of older persons (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 persons 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.

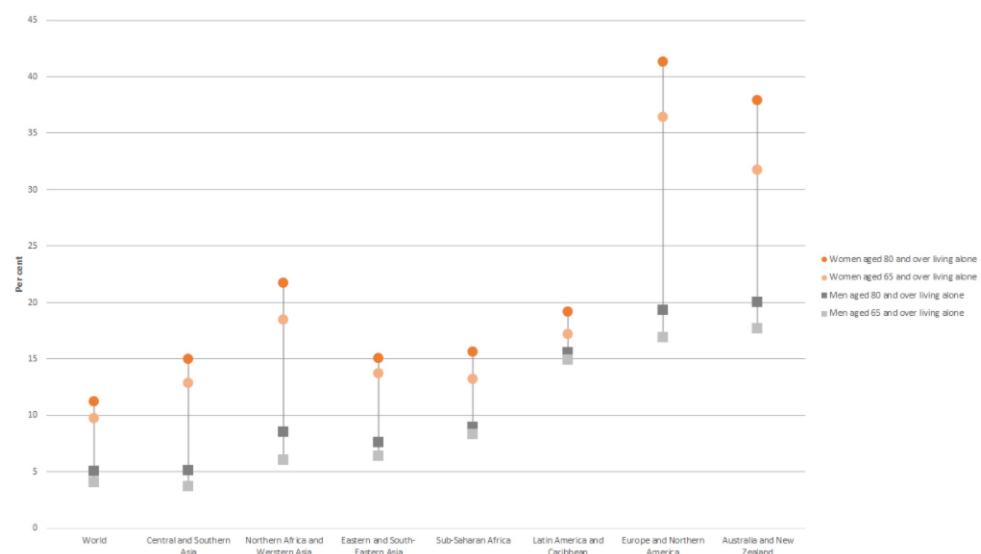
Older women are twice as likely as older men to live alone

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 persons 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 persons 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 17% 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)



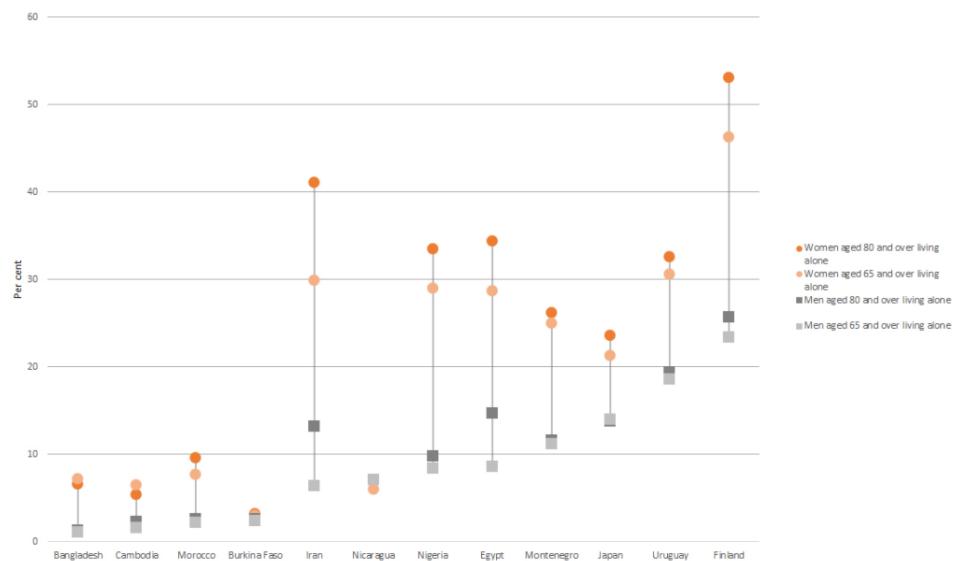
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). Database on the Households and Living Arrangements of Older Persons 2019.

Note: Unweighted averages.

National differences in the living arrangements of older persons

There are wide variations in the percentage of persons 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 persons 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

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Chapter 2

Health

Introduction

Health outcomes for women and men are affected by gender inequalities and norms

Good health is a fundamental human right and a necessary precondition for individual and societal development. Differences in the health of women and men are determined by three interrelated factors: development, biology and gender. Each of these factors contributes to distinct health trajectories for individuals throughout the life cycle.

Medical and technological improvements and changes in behaviour in favour of healthier living over several decades are extending the lives of both women and men. In the case of women, maternal and reproductive health needs are increasingly being addressed through improved health systems and the delivery of services, including health care before, during and after childbirth, and access to modern methods of contraception. The risk of maternal death has been reduced globally by 38% between 2000 and 2017, with the greatest reduction achieved in Southern Asia (reduction of 59%). However, despite a 40% reduction in maternal mortality in countries in sub-Saharan Africa since 2000, the region accounted for roughly two-thirds of global maternal deaths in 2017.

Since 2000, there has also been a decline in smoking rates among both women and men, although worldwide men are still 4.5 times more likely to smoke than women: in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia men are almost 13 times more likely to smoke. The risk of dying prematurely from any of the four major non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular disease; cancer; diabetes; and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) has decreased between 2000 and 2016, reaching 21.6% for men and 15% for women.

Gender inequalities, norms and expectations are determining factors in the health outcomes of women and men. For women, early marriage, together with poor access to information and education and lack of decision-making power within the family or in a couple relationship, increase the exposure of adolescent girls and adult women to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, which is still a major concern, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where 58% of all new HIV infections are reported among women. The intersections between infectious diseases, including HIV, and structural inequalities cannot be overstated. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts must be made to mitigate and overcome interruptions in health services and supplies. Models show that if no action is taken, a six-month complete disruption in HIV services, including antiretroviral therapy, could lead to more than 500,000 additional deaths in the period 2020–2021 in sub-Saharan Africa from AIDS-related illnesses, including tuberculosis.

Gender norms and expectations also contribute to early pregnancy and high fertility, increasing the likelihood of maternal death, which is still the leading global cause of death among young women (15–29), particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for over two-thirds of all maternal deaths in 2017. In addition, reduced access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights during the COVID-19 pandemic will bring the estimated proportion of women of reproductive age that have their needs for family planning satisfied with modern contraceptive methods down from 76.8% to 71% globally. In this context, emerging research suggests that

COVID-19 pandemic-related worries may influence how women feel about having children and may impact their plans about when and/or how many children to have.

Traditional gender roles also have a harmful effect on men. Adolescent boys and young men often take up habits and risky behaviours that are associated with stereotypical ideas of masculinity. About 73% of all deaths from road traffic injuries occur among young men under age 25, and men are the victims in 84% of intentional homicides in the population under age 29. Despite its downward trend, suicide remains a leading cause of death in some regions and is a global concern that includes a strong gender component. Suicide attempts are about two to four times more frequent among women, though men are more likely to use lethal means, resulting in higher suicide mortality rates among the male population. Men also smoke tobacco and drink alcohol to a much greater extent than women. These risky behaviours contribute to non-communicable diseases later in life. At age 50 and older, men are at a higher risk of dying from cancer than women, with mortality rates that are at least twice as high for several types of cancer (trachea, bronchia, lung, oesophagus, liver, stomach and bladder). Men over age 50 are also significantly more likely than women to die from ischaemic heart disease or cirrhosis of the liver. Marked gender differences in health and mortality patterns are also present in older ages: women aged 70 and older are between 20% and 30% more likely than men to die from Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia. Women face a double burden: not only they are at higher risk of dementia as they live into older ages, they are also likely to be the main caregivers as partners, daughters and daughters-in-law.

All narratives of Health

Chapter 3

Education

Introduction

Women's participation in education is on the rise worldwide

Worldwide, substantial progress has been made in the achievement of universal primary education, and girls and boys around the world participate equally in primary education in most regions. While the progress in achieving gender equality in secondary education is encouraging, it lags behind levels reported in primary education, and gender disparities are wider and occur in more countries at the secondary than at the primary level. Among positive global trends, evidence shows that, girls — once they have access to schooling — tend to do better than boys in terms of academic achievement at the primary and secondary levels and beyond. In tertiary education, enrolment is increasing faster for women than for men. However, gender disparities persist in the fields of study chosen by women and men. Women continue to be underrepresented among graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM studies), constituting slightly more than a third (35%) of the world's STEM graduates. Women are also a minority in scientific research and development, making up less than a third (30%) of the world's researchers. Moreover, women scientists and researchers are more likely to find work in academia or in the public sector while men are more likely to work in the private sector, which offers higher salaries and wider opportunities.

Because of the remarkable progress in the level of school participation, global rates for out-of-school children, adolescents and youth have shown a substantial decline over the past two decades across primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels of education. Nevertheless, global out-of-school rates have stagnated in recent years, reflecting pockets of exclusion and hard-to-reach populations. As of 2018, 258 million children and youth were not enrolled in school and gender parity in the out-of-school rate had not been achieved in any region in the world, with girls generally having a higher out-of-school rate than boys in most regions, particularly in primary school (9% for girls versus 7% for boys).

In 2020, as the COVID-19 virus spread across the globe, more than 190 countries implemented nationwide school closures, with about 90% of all students (1.57 billion) out of school. Although distance-learning solutions have been provided in around 80% of countries with school closures, at least 500 million children and youth are currently excluded from these options. The sheer magnitude of school closures is likely to set back progress on access to education and to negatively affect educational outcomes.

Global literacy rates for both adults and youth have risen steadily over the past two decades and gender disparities have also narrowed, both for adult and youth populations. However, the gender gap in literacy among adult women and men remains significant; worldwide, on average, 90% of men are literate compared to about 80% of women, with wider gender gaps reported in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Asia and Western Asia.

ICT skills are indispensable tools in an increasingly digital world and are essential in building a professional career in countries worldwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ICT has been the main media allowing people to maintain their personal connections as well as to carry on their day-to-day business operations. Women are disadvantaged in this regard, with lower levels of

access to the Internet (48% compared to 58% for men at the global level in 2019), and fewer ICT skills than men, particularly in developing regions, making the digital divide a very visible gender divide.

All narratives of Education

Chapter 4

Economic Empowerment

Introduction

The unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work restrains women's economic potential

As of 2020, only less than 50% of women of working age participated in the labour market, compared to around 75% of men, resulting in a gender gap of 27 percentage points globally, similar to the gap observed in 1995, despite a slight decline in participation for both women and men over the past 25 years. In Southern Asia, Northern Africa and Western Asia, women's participation in the labour market is particularly low, below 30%, and there are significant gender differences, of around 50 percentage points, in participation.

The most significant gender gap in labour market participation, which has remained relatively unchanged at above 30 percentage points since 1995, is observed during the prime working ages (25–54), when family responsibilities and the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work in the household impede the ability of women to join the labour force. Household composition is a major factor in explaining the large gender gaps in labour market participation observed in countries worldwide: on average, 82% of women of prime working age living alone are in the labour market, compared to 64% of women living with a partner and 48% of women living with a partner and children. Women's participation rates show a gradual recovery as children grow older, family responsibilities are reduced and mothers have the time and energy to enter or re-enter the labour force.

Women's working conditions differ from men's. According to available data, women are more likely than men to work part-time in almost all countries (95%), to have informal jobs in a majority of countries (56%) and to be engaged as contributing family workers to a much greater extent than men (18% of women versus 7% of men). While these jobs offer more flexibility in terms of working hours, they provide lower pay, reduced job security, fewer training and promotion opportunities and limited access to social protections. Women's higher rate of participation in part-time work may also partially explain the observed persistent gender pay gap at around 12% in favour of men, although, the fact that women and men are oftentimes employed in different sectors and occupations appears to have a more significant impact.

Family responsibilities and the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work between women and men add to women's daily work and may prevent them from participating in the labour market. On an average day, women spend about three times as many hours on unpaid domestic and care work as men (4.2 hours compared to 1.7). Gender inequalities in the amount of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is lowest in developed regions (where women spend twice as much time as men) and highest in Northern Africa and Western Asia (where women spend more than seven times as much time as men on these activities). In 65% of countries with comparable trend data a small decrease has been observed in the time spent by women on unpaid domestic and care work relative to that spent by men. However, preliminary data from some countries show that the COVID-19 pandemic may have diminished that positive trend. While unpaid domestic and care work has intensified during the pandemic for both sexes, with an observed reduction in the gender gap thanks to a higher contribution by men, women continue to take on the majority of such work, spending about two more hours per day than men.

Asset ownership is beneficial for both women and men, protecting them and their families from economic shocks, yet gender differentials in asset ownership and ownership rights are substantial. As reported in 2017, women continue to have less access to formal financial services (65%) than men (72%), particularly in Western Asia and Northern Africa, and are thus less likely to be able to carry on businesses or fulfil their potential as entrepreneurs. Globally, women are also less likely than men to own a mobile phone (by 7 percentage points) or to have access to the Internet (by 10 percentage points), a gender gap in access to basic ICT services that has grown wider since 2013 in developing regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate gender disparities in labour market outcomes, as many women work in the subsectors hardest hit by COVID-19 and the imposition of lockdown measures, including in paid domestic work, accommodation and food service activities and the retail trade. Women are also on the front lines in the battle against the pandemic, making up over 70% of workers in the health sector and facing higher infection risks than men in the workplace.

All narratives of Economic Empowerment

Chapter 5

Power and Decision-making

Introduction

Progress in achieving gender parity in all spheres of political and public life remains slow

Women need to have a more prominent role in power and decision-making, a highly visible area where access has been restricted and progress has been slow. Women's participation in political and public life has steadily increased: women's representation in parliament has more than doubled globally, reaching 25% of parliamentary seats in 2020, mainly as a result of the adoption of gender quotas and milestones achieved in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Gender quotas have also contributed to women's access to local government positions, a necessary condition for ensuring the inclusion of women's interests and perspectives in local decision-making. Worldwide, women held 36% of elected seats in local deliberative bodies, 10 percentage points higher than their level of representation in national parliaments.

Women's representation among cabinet ministers has quadrupled over the last 25 years, and in 2020, on average, one in five ministers (22%) was a woman. In the judiciary, 40% of judges were women in 2017, an increase over the proportion of 35% reported in 2008.

Despite the steady increase in the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women, as of 2020, women held at least 50% of seats in only four national parliaments. Overall, few women held key positions in the higher echelons of parliamentary hierarchies, particularly at the top levels, as president or speaker of the house. As of 2020, women held only 20.5% of high-level legislative positions, which is still too low a percentage to have an effective influence on policymaking.

In terms of executive power, as of 2020, gender parity among cabinet ministers had been reached or surpassed in only 14 countries; female ministers continued to be concentrated in ministries related to the family and social issues; and only 20 countries had a female Head of State or Government, an improvement over the 12 countries with a female Heads of State in 1995. While women are at the centre of efforts countering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, too few women are yet in charge of leading response and recovery efforts.

Although higher representation of women in decision-making roles in the private sector has been proven to have a positive effect on corporate profitability, the proportion of women in managerial positions remains low. Globally, women held only 28% of managerial positions in 2019 – almost the same proportion as in 1995. The underrepresentation of women in management positions is even more visible at higher levels of decision-making: in 2020, only 18% of enterprises surveyed had a female Chief Executive Officer, and among Fortune 500 corporations only 7.4%, or 37 out of 500 Chief Executive Officers, were women (compared to 1 out of 500 in 1998).

Overall, female representation on corporate boards has been slowly growing, particularly in developed countries, thanks in large part to the adoption of legislative quotas. At the current pace, the goal of 30% of women's representation on corporate boards will not be reached until 2029, and 30% is not the 50/50 gender parity aimed for by women's groups worldwide.

All narratives of Power and Decision-making

Chapter 6

Violence against women and the girl child

Introduction

Violence against women and the girl child remains a global issue

Women throughout the world are subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence, regardless of their income, age or education, oftentimes leading to long-term physical, mental and emotional health problems. Around one third of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner; and 18% have experienced such violence in the past 12 months.

Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence, peaking during women's reproductive years in both developed and developing countries. The prevalence of such violence declines with age but persists among older women, who are at greater risk of experiencing violence at the hands of their grown children while still at risk of violence from their domestic partners. In addition to intimate partner violence, women and girls are subjected to sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence by non-partners, including people known to them. In the most extreme cases, violence against women can lead to death: globally, an estimated 137 women are killed by a member of their own family every day.

There has been progress in the fight to eliminate all forms of violence against women: attitudes are changing and intimate partner violence is becoming less acceptable. During the 8-year period from 2012 to 2019, women's acceptance of being beaten by their partners decreased in almost 75% of countries with trend data. A handful of countries with trend data have recorded a decrease in intimate partner violence since 2005 and female genital mutilation is becoming less common in some countries and subregions where the practice is prevalent.

Laws to address domestic violence are not yet universally available (153 countries have such laws); gaps are the largest in Northern Africa, Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where less than 50% of countries have passed such laws. Fewer countries have laws on sexual harassment (103 countries) and fewer still have laws directly covering marital rape (43 countries).

In 2017, with 40% of judges being female worldwide, it is clear that gradual progress has been made towards parity in the number of judges to apply laws addressing domestic violence. However, if recent trends continue, the share of female judges will reach parity only by 2035. The situation among police officers is less positive, with women accounting for only 13% of all officers and recorded progress towards parity reported at a much slower rate, increasing by only 3 percentage points over the past 13 years.

At least 200 million girls and women alive today have been subjected to female genital mutilation in countries across Africa and the Middle East where this specific form of violence against women and girls is concentrated. Despite recent progress in some countries, the prevalence of the practice remains extremely high in parts of Northern Africa, Eastern Africa and West Africa. In six countries, at least 75% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 have undergone female genital mutilation.

Alarmingly, 58% of women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by an intimate partner or a family member, that is, someone they would usually have trusted. While, overall, men are four times more likely to be murdered than women, women are four times more likely to be murdered by their intimate partners.

The periods of lockdown imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have isolated people, disrupted social connections, including access to support programmes for women and girls, and have aggravated mental health problems in all sectors of the population. Many women and girls have been isolated in unsafe environments where they are at heightened risk of experiencing intimate partner violence.

All narratives of Violence against women and the girl child