

Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand



Progress of the World's Women is UN Women's flagship report that tracks progress on gender equality around the world. This factsheet provides a brief overview of the key issues and relevant facts from the 2019-2020 report, *Families in a Changing World*, for the regions of Europe and Northern America and Australia and New Zealand.¹

1. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

Families in Europe and Northern America are some of the most diverse in the world, with only one in four comprised of couples with children of any age, including adult children. This region has the highest rate of couples without children, as well as one-person households, and one of the highest proportions of lone-parent households. In Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, women and men are both delaying marriage. Women's total fertility rate has continued to decline, with women in many cases having fewer children than they would like, reflecting lack of flexible work policies, parental leave or state support for childcare as well as unequal distribution of care and domestic work responsibilities. Women also continue to be the main caregivers for a rapidly increasing older population. While women's labour force participation remains high, women are less likely than men to have their own income and face disproportionate economic impacts from marriage/relationship dissolution and widowhood. Women comprise 50 per cent or more of all international migrants in these regions; however, they face a multitude of challenges often related to national migration and reunification policies.

2. FAMILIES ARE DIVERSE AND CHANGING

The report demonstrates the significant diversity in family structures and relationships—across regions, within countries and over time. Although in our database, data on household composition are not available for Australia and New Zealand, this diversity is well illustrated in Europe and Northern America:

- Europe and Northern America has the lowest percentage both of households comprised of couples with children (of any age) in the world (25 per cent); and extended households, which include other relatives and may include children (10 per cent).²
- The same region has the highest proportion of couples without children (24 per cent). One-person households are also widespread (27 per cent), more than double the global average (13 per cent).³ Lone-parent families, the majority of them lone-mother families, make up 9 per cent.⁴

Changes in marriage and divorce:

- Both women and men are delaying marriage in these regions. Between around 1990 and 2010, women's age at first marriage in Europe and Northern America increased from 25.4 to 27.2 years, while men's age increased from 28.1 to 29.6 years in the same period. Women and men in Australia and New Zealand married the latest in 2010 (30.0 and 31.5 years).⁵
- The proportion of never-married women aged 45-49 in Europe and Northern America increased from 6.2 per cent around 1990 to 10.8 per cent around 2010. The largest increase was in Australia and New Zealand, where the rate increased from 4.4 per cent to 14.1 per cent over this period.⁶
- In Northern and Western European countries such as Estonia (60.6 per cent), Denmark (59.4 per cent), Iceland (57.3 per cent) and France (57.2 per cent), a majority of women aged 25-29 in a union are choosing cohabitation over marriage. Cohabitation is less common in Eastern European countries such as Poland (7.7 per cent) and Belarus (9.0 per cent).⁷
- Globally, women are more likely to be divorced or separated than men because men are more likely to remarry, often to younger women.⁸ In Europe and Northern America, around 2010, 13.1 per cent of women in their late forties (and 8.7 per cent of men) were divorced or separated. The highest rate among women was found in Australia and New Zealand at 21.1 per cent (and 16.3 per cent of men).⁹

Fertility has declined while the number of older persons has risen:

- Women's total fertility rate in Europe and Northern America is projected to decrease from 2.1 live births per woman in 1970-1975 to 1.7 in 2015-2020, which is lower than the projected global average (2.4). In Australia and New Zealand, this rate is expected to decline from 2.6 to 1.9 live births during this period.¹⁰
- In Southern and Western European countries, such as Austria, Germany, Portugal and Spain, women have consistently delayed or reduced childbearing, with expected total fertility rates between 1.2 and 1.5 during 2015-2020.¹¹ Contributing factors include the social expectation that women fully devote themselves to childrearing, lack of incentives to redistribute childcare between women and men and rising economic insecurity and unemployment.
- Decent working conditions for parents, and welfare policies that combine maternal and parental leave and publicly-funded childcare, play an important role in supporting couples to realize their fertility aspirations. In Sweden, there have been significant increases in the number of births per woman (from 1.6 live births in 1995-2000 to a projection of 1.9 live births in 2015-2020)¹² to almost match women's actual fertility preferences.¹³
- The world population is ageing. Projections show that by 2020, older persons will make up 24.9 per cent of the population in Europe and Northern America and 21.9 per cent of the population in Australia and New Zealand.¹⁴
- Europe, where progress in the promotion of healthy, active and independent living among older persons is notable, has the highest proportion of above-80-year-old women living alone (55.7 per cent).¹⁵

3. LAWS ARE NEEDED THAT PROMOTE EQUALITY, RECOGNIZE FAMILY DIVERSITY AND PROHIBIT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Family laws, which govern marriage (including minimum age of marriage), divorce, child custody and guardianship, adoption and inheritance, often include gender discriminatory provisions but have largely been equalized in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand. However, action is needed to protect women's rights in diverse partnership forms.

- Wide variation exists in the rights afforded to cohabiting couples in the region. In France and Netherlands, women in cohabiting partnerships have comparable rights to married women if they register their partnerships.¹⁶ In Australia, both heterosexual and same-sex cohabiting couples have legal rights equivalent to marriage without the need to register, making it a model for other countries.¹⁷
- Thirty-two of the 42 countries and territories worldwide where same sex couples can marry or enter into legally recognized partnerships are in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand.¹⁸
- Some laws create obstacles for transgender people to create families of their choice: In 21 countries in Europe, married transgender people have to divorce as a mandatory requirement in order to transition.¹⁹
- Most European countries and states in the United States have introduced unilateral no-fault divorce. However, some countries, such as the United Kingdom, require a separation period, which can lock women into unhappy relationships if their partners refuse to cooperate.²⁰

There has been progress on laws on violence against women, but lack of implementation remains a problem:

- In the early 1990s, only a few countries in the world had laws against domestic violence. By 2018, 39 out of 43 countries and territories in the region where data are available had these laws in place. Of the four countries that do not have domestic violence legislation, three provide stronger penalties for crimes against a spouse or family member.²¹
- In Europe and Northern America, 6.1 per cent of ever-partnered women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.²²
- Women are at heightened risk of violence if they are indigenous, living with a disability or have an insecure migration status.²³ Data from Canada show that Indigenous women there are more than three times as likely as non-Indigenous women to experience domestic violence.²⁴
- As of 2018, 20 out of 43 countries and territories where data are available in the region had explicit legislation criminalizing marital rape.²⁵
- New Zealand has legislated for paid leave for victims of domestic violence, recognizing the impact that it has on a woman's employment.²⁶
- In Australia, the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council has become a major provider of services for Aboriginal communities to respond to family violence. The Women's Council

was able to obtain agreement between different national jurisdictions to ensure women's access to the criminal justice system.²⁷

4. WOMEN'S ACCESS TO AN ADEQUATE, INDEPENDENT INCOME UNDERPINS THEIR RIGHTS WITHIN FAMILIES

For women, having their own resources, such as owning assets or receiving income from a paid job or through social protection, puts them on a more equal footing with men in their intimate relationships, strengthens their bargaining position within families and enables them to exit partnerships if they so choose. For older women, having their own income or assets is critical in securing an adequate standard of living.

- Women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) for individuals aged 25-54 increased from 76 per cent in 1998 to 80 per cent in 2018 in Europe and Northern America and from 70 per cent to 79 per cent in Australia and New Zealand.²⁸
- Women's marital status has an impact in their LFPR. Married women aged 25-54 in Europe and Northern America had the lowest LFPR among women in the region (78.2 per cent), while divorced/separated women had the highest (86 per cent). Married men have the highest LFPR in the region at 95.2 per cent. In Australia and New Zealand, single/never married women had the highest rates within the region (79.6 per cent), while married men presented the highest rate among men in the region (93.5 per cent).²⁹
- The Nordic countries, with strong support for women's employment and universal social transfer systems, have the highest percentage of women with an independent income (above 90 per cent).³⁰
- Australia, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom and United States, which have market-driven solutions to work-family reconciliation, and Central and Eastern European countries show lower percentages of women with an income of their own (between 73 and 84 per cent and between 68 and 90 per cent, respectively). The proportion is lowest in Southern European countries (57 to 77 per cent).³¹

Divorce, widowhood and lone-motherhood can raise the risk of poverty:

- A 2015 study that included Australia, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States found that divorce has substantial negative effects on women's incomes, significantly larger than on men.³²
- Widowhood can exacerbate economic insecurity in old age; 20.3 per cent of women aged 55-59 are widowed in the Russian Federation and 19.6 per cent in Belarus.³³ Widows aged 50 or older in the Russian Federation are 2.8 times more likely to be in the lowest economic group than married or cohabiting women in the same age range.³⁴
- Some countries, such as Denmark and Sweden, have opted for a 'non-familial' approach, which pays no benefits to survivors but provides universal access to a minimum pension.³⁵
- Based on data from 40 mostly high and upper middle-income countries, lone-mother households are on average twice as likely to live in poverty, compared to dual-parent households.³⁶

- Child support from fathers is often inadequate to financially protect custodial mothers due to high percentages of arrears or defaults in payment.³⁷ Canada, United Kingdom and United States have low rates of child support, while much higher rates are achieved in the Nordic countries.³⁸

5. FAMILIES NEED TIME, MONEY AND SERVICES TO PROVIDE CARE

Families are sites of care where children are nurtured and older people are supported. They need support from governments to do this vital work, and this is best provided through time (maternity and parental leaves), money (social transfers to families with young children, as well as pensions) and services (high-quality care services for children and older persons).

Women still do the majority of unpaid care work:

- Even when women and men are both in full-time employment and contribute equally (or women contribute more) to household income, women still do more unpaid care and domestic work than men do.³⁹
- Data from Australia and the United States show that women have decreased their housework as their earnings have increased; however, the amount of unpaid work performed by their male partners has not increased.⁴⁰ Instead, women either replace their own time with purchased services or leave housework undone.⁴¹
- In 2016, unpaid domestic work in Australia was more equally shared between same-sex couples compared to opposite-sex couples: 57 per cent of female same-sex couples and 56 per cent of male same-sex couples contributed about the same. In opposite-sex couples, 39 per cent divided the work equally.⁴²
- A study of the results of time-use surveys from 11 countries, including Albania, Belgium, Finland, Serbia, United Kingdom and United States, confirmed that women with both young and older children contribute significantly more time to unpaid care and domestic work than men.⁴³
- The biggest discrepancies were found in Albania, where women in households with young children spent 506 minutes per day (8.5 hours) on unpaid care and domestic work while men spent 58 minutes (1 hour).⁴⁴
- Women are also primary providers of long-term care for ageing spouses, partners, parents and parents-in-law. Research from Europe and the United States reveals that while men assume a bigger share of unpaid care provided for older family members than for children, women still do a majority of the work.⁴⁵
- In a study of selected European countries, Luxembourg had the highest percentage of grandmothers (37 per cent) and grandfathers (31 per cent) aged 65 and older who provided childcare almost weekly or more often.⁴⁶

6. POLICIES AND REGULATIONS SHOULD SUPPORT MIGRANT FAMILIES AND PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Migration is a major force affecting families and women's enjoyment of rights within them. While it can open up new opportunities for women, it often requires families to navigate a complex web of policies and regulations that affect the conditions under which families can live together or apart.

- Women comprise 50 per cent or more of all international migrants in Australia and New Zealand and in Europe and Northern America.⁴⁷
- Many women migrate internally or internationally to fill an economic need and to generate income for their families. Increasingly, women from poorer countries migrate to fill jobs in wealthier countries in the domestic and care sectors.⁴⁸
- The migration journey can be particularly risky for women and children. Europe-bound women and children from Sub-Saharan Africa have suffered sexual violence perpetrated by guards while in Libyan detention centres; and migrant children have been forced into transactional sex within and outside refugee camps in Greece.⁴⁹

Despite many migrants' desire for family reunification, this may be restricted or denied:

- Women also migrate with the aim of family reunification. The extent to which they are able to achieve this varies widely. According to the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Sweden has the most welcoming policies toward migrant families (average score of 87.9), with Portugal and Spain with similarly high scores (86.4). The United States has a family integration score of 58.3, while Switzerland (35.6), Russian Federation (34.8) and Montenegro (33.3) had lower scores, due to restrictive policies for all dimensions of family reunification.⁵⁰
- Economic migrants in so-called skilled professions, such as migrant nurses, have far greater access to family reunification than those in less-skilled professions, such as migrant caregivers and domestic workers. Nursing has become a major sector of migrant women's employment globally, especially in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and United States.⁵¹
- Migrants with irregular status are not entitled to family reunification. In recent years, stricter policies and deportations of irregular migrants in the region have resulted in the separation of migrant families.⁵²
- Immigration policies that link family members' residency rights to those of the sponsor or that deny dependents permission to work can also foster legal, financial and social dependency within the family, weakening women's fall-back position and making it more difficult for them to escape a violent relationship.

7. FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES ARE AFFORDABLE

Analysis commissioned for the report shows that most countries can afford a package of family-friendly policies.⁵³ This package would guarantee that every member of society has access to basic income security and essential health care over the life cycle and would ensure that pre-school children and older adults can access quality care services.

- The analysis finds that to close income, health and care gaps, 33 out of 41 countries with data in Europe and Northern America could implement the required policies for less than 4 per cent of GDP.
- The remaining eight countries would need to devote between 5 and 7 per cent of GDP to implement these policies.

¹ Europe and Northern America includes: Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America. This factsheet also covers Australia and New Zealand.

² Regional values calculated by UN Women using country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a. For this analysis, data on China are based on estimates in Hu and Peng 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Estimates developed jointly by UN Women and the Population Division of UN-DESA using country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a. See Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2..

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- ⁵ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. .
- ⁶ Ibid. See Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2.
- ⁷ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESAm.
- ⁸ Shafer 2009; Berardo et al. 1993.
- ⁹ UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m.
- ¹⁰ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m. .
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Esping-Andersen 2016; Goldscheider et al. 2015.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ UN DESA 2017f.
- ¹⁶ Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2014.
- ¹⁷ Goldblatt 2008.
- ¹⁸ Ramón Mendos 2019.
- ¹⁹ Transgender Europe 2018.
- ²⁰ González and Viitanen 2006. See Gayle 2018 for coverage of a recent case heard by the UK Supreme Court in which they ruled that a woman who had been married for 40 years was not allowed to divorce her husband without his agreement and without evidence of him being at fault until they had been separated for five years.
- ²¹ UN Women calculations using data from the World Bank 2018e.]
- ²² UNSD 2018.
- ²³ Manjoo 2012.
- ²⁴ Statistics Canada 2014.
- ²⁵ UN Women calculations using data from World Bank 2018e.
- ²⁶ Roy 2018.
- ²⁷ Putt et al. 2016.
- ²⁸ Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m.
- ²⁹ UN Women calculations based on data from ILO 2018b, LIS various years and ABS 2016b.
- ³⁰ Muhafra 2018; Leite and Villaseñor 2018; Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas 2018.
- ³¹ The following countries from each grouping are included in this study: Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway from the Nordic cluster; Austria, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Switzerland from the Continental European cluster; Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia from the Central and Eastern European cluster; Greece, Italy and Spain from the Mediterranean or Southern European cluster; and Australia, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom and United States from the Anglo-Saxon or English-speaking cluster.
- ³² de Vaus et al. 2015.
- ³³ UN Women calculations using census and survey data covering the period 2006-2014 from UN DESA 2017k.
- ³⁴ Lloyd-Sherlock et al. 2015.
- ³⁵ Arza 2015.
- ³⁶ Nieuwenhuis et al. 2018.
- ³⁷ Raday 2018.
- ³⁸ Hakovirta 2011.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Bittman et al. 2003.
- ⁴¹ ILO 2018a.
- ⁴² ABS 2016.
- ⁴³ ILO 2018a. See Figure 5.4 in Chapter 5.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Bettio and Verashchagina 2010.
- ⁴⁶ UN Women calculations from USC Program on Global Aging, Health & Policy 2014.
- ⁴⁷ Regional averages calculated by UN Women using UN DESA 2017j.
- ⁴⁸ ILO 2013b. See also Lutz 2011.
- ⁴⁹ OHCHR 2016; Digidiki and Bhabha 2016; MSF 2017.
- ⁵⁰ For a full description of the 257 sub-indicators included in the MIPEX data, see <http://www.mipex.eu/methodology>. For the purposes of this analysis, only 19-sub indicators relevant to family integration were used. UN Women calculations from CIDOB and the MPG 2015.
- ⁵¹ Yeates 2009b; OECD 2015.
- ⁵² Golash-Boza 2014.
- ⁵³ Bierbaum and Cichon forthcoming.