

Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Oceania

(excl. 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 region of Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).¹

1. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

There is a great deal of diversity in family forms and demographic trends within this region. Overall, while marriage remains largely universal in the region as a whole, both women and men are marrying later. The fertility rate has continued to decline, although it remains relatively high in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). Women's labour force participation rate in the region has declined slightly since 1998 and is strongly influenced by women's marital status. The population is increasingly ageing in parts of the region and long-term care responsibilities continue to fall mostly on female family members, as do childcare and domestic work duties. Stronger legal protections and implementation are needed to combat violence against women. Many women in this region migrate, internally as well as across borders, often for work. When they leave their families behind, it is frequently grandmothers who take on the care of children.

2. FAMILIES ARE DIVERSE AND CHANGING

The report reveals significant diversity in family structures and relationships—across regions, within countries and over time. This diversity is well illustrated in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).

Household diversity:

- Couples with children of any age, including adult children, make up 36 per cent of households in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia; extended families, which include other relatives and may include children, comprise 27.5 per cent; and lone-parent households, the majority of whom are lone-mother households, are 7 per cent.²

Marriage:

- Eastern and South-Eastern Asia has witnessed a significant decline in arranged marriage over the last half of the twentieth century, but overall long-lasting heterosexual marriages remain largely universal in much of the region.³
- The age of marriage for women in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia increased from 22.6 to 24.5 years old between 1990 and 2010 and from 24.7 to 26.8 years old for men. Women and men are also marrying later in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). The age of marriage for women increased from 23.6 to 25.0 years old during this period and from 26.8 to 28.2 years old for men.⁴
- While child and early marriage has decreased in the last 25 years, 15 per cent of girls in South-Eastern Asia are married before the age of 18 and 2 per cent before the age of 15.⁵

Non-marriage, divorce and separation:

- In Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, the proportion of never-married women aged 45-49 increased from 1.6 to 2.5 per cent from 1990 to 2010, one of the lowest rates in the world.⁶ These rates are slightly higher in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), where the proportion of never-married women increased from 2.6 per cent to 3.7 per cent in the same period. In some industrialized Eastern Asian nations around 2010, however, the share of never-married women in their late forties was much higher: for example, in Japan (16.1 per cent) and Singapore (12.8 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 Eastern and South-Eastern Asia around 2010, 3.0 per cent of women in their late forties (and 2.7 per cent of men) were divorced or separated—slightly less than the global average (4.7 per cent of women and 3.1 per cent of men). In Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), the rates for women (4.8 per cent) and for men (3.0 per cent) are closer to the global average.⁹

Fertility:

- The global fertility decline is also evident in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, where the fertility rate decreased from 4.6 in 1970-1975 to 1.8 in 2015-2020, one of the lowest in the world. The fertility rate in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) is much higher; while it declined from 5.8 live births per woman in 1970-1975, it remains relatively high at 3.4 in 2015-2020 projections.¹⁰
- Although the rates of adolescent motherhood are relatively low, there are large discrepancies between girls from different economic backgrounds. Girls from the lowest wealth quintiles in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (16.6 per cent) are 6.6 times more likely to give birth before age 18 than girls from the highest wealth quintile (2.5 per cent).¹¹

Older persons:

- Persons aged 60 years and above accounted for over one eighth (13 per cent) of the world's population in 2017. However, projections show that by 2020, older persons will make up a relatively larger share of the population in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (16.6 per cent).¹²

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, creating an unequal playing field for women and girls in many parts of the world, including Eastern and South-Eastern Asia.

- The Philippines is the only country in the world where legal divorce is not permitted, although a bill to legalize it is currently under consideration by the Government.¹³
- Important steps have been taken in Indonesia to increase women's access to the religious courts that deal with most family law issues. Over the past decade, along with non-governmental organization PEKKA, the Government has introduced free legal advisory services and mobile courts and waived court fees. Between 2008 and 2018, there was an 18-fold increase in court cases being heard by judges traveling to the mobile courts. Out of the approximately 500,000 people who filed cases with the family courts in 2016, 57 per cent had their fees waived, had access to a circuit court or were given legal advice.¹⁴

Same-sex partnership rights:

- As of May 2019, 42 countries around the world have extended the right to marry or form a civil partnership to same-sex couples.¹⁵ In May 2019, Taiwan Province of China became the first country or territory in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage.¹⁶

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

- In the early 1990s, only a handful of countries in the world had laws against domestic violence. By 2018, 16 out of 17 countries and territories for which data are available in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia had these laws in place, the exception being Myanmar. In Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), 9 out of 10 countries with data available had domestic violence legislation.¹⁷
- Nevertheless, Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) has the highest prevalence rate of intimate partner violence among all regions, with 34.7 per cent of women and girls aged 15-49 subjected to physical or sexual violence by a current or former partner within the last 12 months. In Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia, this rate was 9.0 per cent.¹⁸
- By 2018, only 10 out of 17 countries and territories in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia for which data are available and 2 out of 10 countries in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) where data are available had explicit legislation criminalizing marital rape.¹⁹ The Philippines is among 12 countries and territories globally that has not provided for the removal of provisions in legislation exempting perpetrators of rape from prosecution when they are married to, or subsequently marry, the victim.²⁰

4. HIGH QUALITY PUBLIC SERVICES ARE CRITICAL FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND GENDER EQUALITY

Public services, including reproductive health care and education, play a critical role in supporting families and advancing gender equality. Access to reproductive health care, in particular, is an essential foundation for women's and girls' ability to exercise voice and agency in decisions about family life.

- Evidence from 78 developing countries shows that educational attainment is related to increased age of marriage: Women aged 20-24 with secondary education are much less likely to have married before the age of 18 than those with primary or no education.²¹
- The rates of married or in-union women in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia who had their family planning needs met with modern contraception increased from 60.5 per cent in the 1970s to 88.7 per cent in 2015, the highest among all regions. In Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), this rate is much lower, increasing from 33 per cent to 49.5 per cent during the same period.²²

5. 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) is influenced by their marital status:

- Although high by global standards, LFPR for women aged 25-54 in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia has decreased slightly over the last 20 years (1998-2018) from 78 to 76 per cent, while men's LFPR rate declined from 97 per cent to 95 per cent. There has been a more significant decline for both women and men in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand): from 72 per cent in 1998 to 56 per cent in 2018 for women and from 85 per cent to 65 per cent for men.²³
- Women's and men's LFPRs are influenced by their marital status, but in opposite ways. The highest LFPR for women in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia was among single/never-married women (87.1 per cent), while this rate was 74.4 per cent for women married/in a union. Men married/in a union, on the other hand, have the highest LFPR (95.7 per cent) and those who are single/never married have the lowest (86.8 per cent).
- In Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), divorced/separated women and men had the highest LFPR (66.5 per cent and 69.6 per cent, respectively), while widowed women and men had the lowest LFPR (48.0 per cent and 51.4 per cent, respectively).²⁴
- The differences among women likely reflect their greater responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work once they are married.²⁵

Women face disproportionate economic impacts from marriage and relationship dissolution:

- A 2015 study on six Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including the Republic of Korea, found that divorce has substantial negative effects on women's incomes compared to those of men. The social security and child support system, as well as women's labour market earnings and whether they re-partnered, influenced women's post-divorce economic outcomes.²⁶
- Custodial mothers are not sufficiently protected financially in most countries because the levels of child support from fathers are often inadequate, with high percentages of arrears or defaults in payment. In Malaysia, for example, where divorce rates have been historically high, many men breach court orders to pay post-divorce compensation (*mut'a*) and child support.²⁷

6. 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 do the majority of unpaid care work:

- Globally, women spend three times as much time doing unpaid care and domestic work as men do.²⁸ Marital status and the presence of young children in the household are significant factors impacting the time women dedicate to these tasks.²⁹
- A study of time-use in seven countries, including Japan and Republic of Korea, found that women's unpaid care and domestic work was more intense in households with young children and the amount of work decreased as the age of the youngest child increased.³⁰
- A study in the Republic of Korea revealed that the majority of care for older men was provided by their wives (76 per cent), while female relatives (7 per cent), male relatives (3 per cent) and non-relatives (14 per cent) provided supplementary support. In the case of older women, however, the bulk of unpaid care was provided by female relatives (43 per cent), while non-relatives (28 per cent), spouses (18 per cent) and male relatives (12 per cent) provided the rest.³¹

7. 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 they can live together or apart.

Women in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia migrate for a variety of different reasons:

- Many women migrate internally or internationally to generate income for their families.
- Migration for marriage is also significant, motivated by a variety of individual and family aspirations and needs. A common trend in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia is for women from poorer families in poorer countries (e.g. Lao PDR, Viet Nam) to migrate to wealthier settings (e.g. Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan Province of China) to marry men who are in a weak position to find a spouse in their own country but have a higher socio-economic status than the migrant women.³²

Women may also migrate with the aim of family reunification:

- Economic migrants in so-called skilled professions, such as migrant nurses, often have far greater access to family reunification than those in less-skilled professions, such as migrant caregivers and domestic workers.
- Family is often narrowly defined in regulations, meaning that partners who are not legally married—including same-sex partners, grandparents and adult children above a certain age—may not be considered for family-related migration even if they play a central role in caregiving relationships.³³
- These definitions can change, however. For example, in September 2018, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China began to recognize same-sex spouses of residents in visa applications.³⁴

When women migrate, other family members often step in to provide care for their children:

- In China, due to extensive migration and restrictions on migrants from rural areas accessing urban social benefits and services, the proportion of pre-school-age children who were left behind by both parents in grandparents' full custody rose sharply from 3.6 per cent in 1991-1993 to 26.6 per cent in 2009-2011.³⁵
- Research in Viet Nam found that men whose wives had migrated often assumed caregiving and domestic tasks in addition to undertaking income-generating activities outside the household, recognizing that they had a duty to assume these responsibilities.³⁶

Access to social protection, including health care is essential for migrant women and their families:

- In Thailand, the 30 baht universal health-care reform has been extended to migrants irrespective of their migration status. In 2005, coverage was extended to dependents, including spouses and children. A number of initiatives have been established to expand health-care access to hard-to-reach migrant communities, including mobile clinics, bilingual information services, one-stop centres and workplace outreach.³⁷
- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has taken important steps towards transnational social protection for some migrants. In November 2017, Member States signed the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.³⁸

8. FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES ARE AFFORDABLE

Analysis commissioned for the report shows that most countries can afford a package of family-friendly policies.³⁹ This package would guarantee that every member of society has access to basic income security and essential health care over the life course 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, 8 countries with data in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) could implement the required policies for between 3.5 and 9 per cent of GDP.
- In 11 Eastern and South-Eastern Asian countries with data, 4 countries could implement this agenda for less than 4 per cent of GDP and 6 countries could do so for between 4 and 8 per cent of GDP. For 1 country, 10 per cent of GDP would be required, likely necessitating additional international donor support.

¹ Eastern and South-Eastern Asia includes the following: Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; China; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China; Indonesia; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Japan; Malaysia; Mongolia; Myanmar; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Singapore; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Viet Nam; All references to Oceania in this factsheet refer to the region of Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand, which are included in the factsheet on Europe and Northern America. Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) includes the following: Fiji; Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Micronesia (Federated States of); Nauru; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu.

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 produced and published in Hu Peng 2015.

³ Jones 2005; Jones 2010; Rubio 2014 ; Kantorova 2013; UN DESA 2011.

⁴ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. See Figure 2.3.

⁵ UNICEF 2019b global databases, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other nationally representative sources, 2011–2018.

⁶ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. See Figure 2.5.

⁷ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates in *ibid*.

⁸ Shafer 2009; Berardoet al. 1993.

⁹ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m.

¹⁰ UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2017m.

¹¹ UN Women calculations from DHS (ICF International 2007-2017) and MICS (UNICEF various years).

¹² UN DESA 2017l and UN DESA 2017m.

¹³ BBC 2018.

¹⁴ Sumner with Zulminarni 2018.

¹⁵ Ramón Mendos 2019.

¹⁶ Justices of the Constitutional Court, Taiwan PoC; Horton 2019.

¹⁷ See Annex 5 (I).

¹⁸ UNSD 2018. See Figure 6.2

¹⁹ See Annex 5 (I).

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ UNFPA 2012.

²² UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2018b and UN DESA 2018c. See Figure 3.3.

²³ Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m.

²⁴ UN Women calculations based on data from ILO 2018b, LIS various years and ABS 2016b. See Figure 4.4.

²⁵ Mehrotra and Sinha 2017.

²⁶ de Vaus et al. 2015.

²⁷ Mohamad 2017.

²⁸ Based on average differences in female/male unweighted means. UN Women calculations based on UNSD 2018.

²⁹ ILO 2018a, Figures 2.14 and 2.15.

³⁰ Budlender 2010.

³¹ UN Women own calculations based on data from Yoon 2014, Table 3.

³² OECD 2017 ; Constable 2005. See also Yeoh et al. 2013; Chung et al. 2016; Le et al. 2014.

³³ Kofman 2004.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch 2018b.

³⁵ Chang et al 2017.

³⁶ Hoang and Yeoh 2011.

³⁷ Tangcharoensathien et al 2017; Moungsookjareoun and Kertesz 2019.

³⁸ ASEAN 2017a.

³⁹ Cichon and Bibaum forthcoming.