

Central and Southern Asia



***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 Central and Southern Asia.¹**

1. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

Marriage in Central and Southern Asia remains largely universal. The average age of women's first marriage is the lowest compared to other regions and, despite significant progress, child, early and forced marriage continues to be prevalent. While close to half of households are comprised of couples with children, almost one third are extended families. Rates of widowhood are high, particularly in Central Asia. Family laws still contain gender discriminatory provisions, and married women in many countries in the region do not have the same rights as married men in terms of freedom of movement, inheritance or conferring their nationality. Most countries have legislation on domestic violence, but the region has the second highest prevalence rate of intimate partner violence in the world. Women's labour force participation rates in the region are strongly influenced by their marital status and have declined in the past 10 years.

2. FAMILIES ARE DIVERSE AND CHANGING

The report demonstrates the significant diversity in family structures and relationships—across regions, within countries and over time. This diversity is well illustrated in the Central and Southern Asia region.

Household diversity:

- Close to half of all households in the region (47 per cent) are comprised of couples with children (of any age, including adult children).²
- Extended households, which include at least one adult and other relatives and may include children, comprise almost one third (32 per cent) of all households.³
- Extended households can support individuals through periods of economic instability and change, as the various members can pool their resources and help absorb caretaking, health and educational responsibilities. They may also come with inter-generational conflicts, particularly in patrilocal societies where newlywed women move in with their husband's family.

- In 2012, women in Tajikistan who lived with their in-laws were around 25 per cent more likely to experience psychological abuse by their husbands.⁴ Research in India and Nepal also highlights the ways in which mothers-in-law control the choices of their daughters-in-law, ranging from choosing their clothes to making decisions over childbearing or children's marriages.⁵
- Lone-mother households make up 5 per cent of households, which is below the global average of 7 per cent.⁶

Marriage:

- While women and men have started to delay marriage, the average age of women's first marriage is still the youngest of all regions. It increased from 19.3 to 20.8 between around 1990 and 2010, while that of men increased from 24.1 to 25.0 years.⁷
- In much of Southern Asia, arranged marriage remains commonplace. However, in some places in India, particularly urban areas, this practice has been replaced by semi-arranged marriages, in which families may suggest potential matches but women make the final decision.
- Women in semi- and self-arranged marriages are three times as likely as those in family-arranged marriages to exercise agency in key areas of decision-making (i.e., expenditures, contraception, when to have children) and are also less likely to experience marital violence.⁸
- Dowry remains widespread in Southern Asia despite longstanding feminist campaigns and legislation prohibiting the practice in, for example, both Bangladesh and India. Dowry practices can fuel violence against women when the bride's family fails to pay the dowry in full or the gifts are deemed unsatisfactory.
- Despite significant declines, the incidence of child, early and forced marriage continues to be particularly high. Over the last 25 years, the percentage of girls who were married before the age of 15 decreased from 20 per cent to 8 per cent and those who were married before age 18 from 58 per cent to 29 per cent.⁹

Non-marriage, divorce and separation:

- Rates of never-married women aged 45-49 in the region are very low but rising, rates increased from 0.9 to 1.1 per cent between 1990 and 2010. The rates of never-married women aged 45-49 in the region remain lower than in any other region (the global average is 4.3 per cent).¹⁰
- Compared to the global average of 4.7 per cent around 2010, the proportion of divorced or separated women aged 45-49 in the region only increased from 0.9 to 1.4 per cent between 1980 and 2010; this rate is even lower for men, rising from 0.5 to 0.6 per cent.¹¹

Fertility:

- The total fertility rate within the region is projected to drop from 5.6 live births per woman in 1970-1975 to 2.4 births in 2015-2020 (same rate as the global average). This rate is predicted to further decline in the region to 2.2 by 2025-2030.¹²
- Some parents in the region reconcile their desire for smaller families with continued preference for sons through sex-selective abortions. By 2017, the countries with abnormally high sex ratios (greater than 105 males per 100 females) in Southern Asia were Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Maldives and Pakistan.¹³

- In terms of adolescent motherhood, women aged 20-24 from the poorest socio-economic group (19.7 per cent) are 3.9 times more likely to give birth before age 18 than women from the richest group (5.1 per cent).¹⁴

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 in Central and Southern Asia.

- In two of the countries in the region with data (Afghanistan and Islamic Republic of Iran), women are required by law to obey their husbands; in three (Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan), a married woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as a married man; in two (Afghanistan and Islamic Republic of Iran), a married woman is not allowed to travel outside of the home in the same way as a married man; in two (Islamic Republic of Iran and Nepal), a married woman cannot confer citizenship on her children in the same way as a married man; and in four (Bangladesh, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal and Pakistan), a married woman cannot confer citizenship on a non-national spouse in the same way that a married man can.¹⁵
- The legal age of marriage for girls is 18 in all countries in the region except Afghanistan (16), Uzbekistan (17) and Nepal (20). No information was available for Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives or Turkmenistan.¹⁶
- However, all countries in the region allow exceptions to the legal age of marriage, except Bhutan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁷
- In 7 out of 13 countries, sons and daughters have equal rights to inherit assets from their parents, and female and male surviving spouses have equal rights to inherit assets.¹⁸

Same-sex partners in the region have few rights or legal entitlements:

- As of 2018, there are 42 countries and territories worldwide where same-sex couples can marry or enter into legally recognized partnerships. No country in the region grants these rights.¹⁹
- However, in September 2018, the Supreme Court of India repealed Section 377 of the Penal Code, a colonial-era clause that had previously criminalized same-sex relations.

Lack of implementation of laws to combat violence against women and girls (VAWG) continues to have serious and enduring impacts on their lives:

- In the early 1990s, only a few countries in the world had laws against domestic violence. By 2018, 10 out of 13 countries in the region had these laws in place (the exceptions are Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran and Uzbekistan).²⁰

- Nevertheless, the region has the second highest prevalence rate of intimate partner violence: 22.9 per cent of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15-49 reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner within the last 12 months.²¹
- Available data on dowry-related killings from the National Crime Records Bureau in India indicate that female dowry deaths account for 40 to 50 per cent of all female homicides recorded annually, with little change between 1999 and 2016.²²
- As of 2018, Bhutan, Nepal and Uzbekistan are the only countries in the region that have explicit legislation criminalizing marital rape.²³

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 be married before the age of 18 than those with primary or no education.²⁴
- The rates of married or in-union women in the region who had their needs for family planning satisfied by modern contraceptives increased from 21.4 per cent in 1970 to 70.7 per cent in 2015.²⁵
- However, satisfied demand for modern contraception worldwide is lower in the least developed countries, among women in rural areas and in the poorest income groups.²⁶
- Nepal has made significant progress in improving women's access to sexual and reproductive health care, including access to safe and legal abortion. Following legislative reform in 2002, steps were taken to provide safe abortion services, including incorporating training into medical and nursing school curricula, establishing a simple process for certifying facilities, strengthening referrals between all reproductive health-care services and conducting information campaigns to educate the public and decrease stigma.²⁷

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

For women, having control over their own resources, such as owning assets or receiving income from a paid job or through state support, enables them to be 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 income and ownership of assets often leads to more equitable decision-making within the household:

- Research in Bangladesh over a decade found that being employed is positively associated with women's participation in household decision-making, including on their own health care, large household purchases, visits to their families and child health.²⁸
- However, economic activities that take place within the family, such as unpaid work in family farms and enterprises, have the weakest potential for transforming women's lives, including their capacity for personal agency and voice in household decision-making.²⁹
- In India, women who own assets such as land and housing have a greater degree of protection against intimate partner violence as well as an escape route out of abusive situations.³⁰

Women's labour force participation rate is influenced by their marital status:

- Women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) in the region among individuals aged 25-54 has decreased over the last 20 years from 36 per cent in 1998 to 34 per cent in 2018, while men's LFPR has remained steady during this period at 97 per cent.³¹
- Based on available data, LFPRs for women aged 25-54 who are married or in a union are particularly low (29.1 per cent), lower than in any other region.³² On the other hand, the LFPR for divorced or separated women is 65.2 per cent, followed by widowed women (58.5 per cent). The opposite trend is found among men married or in a union, who have the highest LFPR among men (98.3 per cent).³³
- The differences among women likely reflect their greater responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work once they are married. Among divorced women, higher LFPRs could reflect both the increased risk of poverty and greater levels of agency to pursue paid work beyond the confines of marriage.
- Only a fraction of women aged 15-49 in India (estimates ranging from 17 to 26 per cent)³⁴ receive a wage or income of their own, meaning that the great majority of women are financially dependent on their spouses, fathers, in-laws and other extended kin.³⁵

Women face disproportionate economic impacts from marriage, relationship dissolution and widowhood:

- An in-depth survey of 405 separated/deserted and divorced women in India found the overwhelming majority to be dependent on their natal families, particularly parents and brothers, in terms of both financial support and living arrangements after separation.³⁶
- Some of the highest shares of widowhood of women aged 55-59 are found in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan (26.8 per cent), Kazakhstan (23.3 per cent) and Tajikistan (22.4 per cent).³⁷
- Research in southern Kazakhstan found a higher incidence of multi-dimensional poverty among widows than married women (74.6 vs. 61.7 per cent).³⁸ In response, the Government has created policies that allow widows to access three types of survivor benefits: a pension based on the spouse's mandatory individual account, a pension based on social insurance and a state social benefit.³⁹

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

Families are sites of care, where children are nurtured and older people are supported. Families 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 and often must balance these responsibilities with paid work:

- Globally, women spend three times as much time doing unpaid care and domestic work as men do.⁴⁰ Marital status and the presence of young children in the household are significant factors impacting the time women dedicate to these tasks. Women in rural areas also tend to have increased unpaid domestic work due to lower access to basic infrastructure such as water on tap and labour-saving technologies.
- Research in low-income communities in India and Nepal found women particularly concerned about the adverse implications of their long working hours (paid and unpaid) for their children because of a reduction in the amount and quality of care they are able to provide.⁴¹

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

Migration is a major force affecting family life and women's enjoyment of rights within them. While migration 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.

- In 2017, international migrants made up 3.4 per cent of the global population, equating to approximately 257.7 million international migrants, a figure that includes 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum seekers.⁴²
- Developing countries host 85 per cent of the world's refugees and asylum seekers. In this region, Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan are among the countries that host the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in the world.⁴³
- When women migrate, other family members often step in to provide care for their children. In Sri Lanka, a survey of 1,200 families in which the mother had migrated found that fathers assumed responsibility for children's care in only 25.9 per cent of cases; in nearly three quarters of the cases female kin (often a grandmother) provided care.⁴⁴

8. FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES ARE AFFORDABLE

Analysis commissioned for the report shows that most countries can afford a package of family-friendly policies.⁴⁵ 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 out of 13 countries with data in Central and Southern Asia could implement the required policies spending less than 7 per cent of GDP.
- The other 5 countries would need to spend between 7.9 and 10.8 per cent of their GDP, which can require additional international donor support.

¹ Where data are available Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; Southern Asia includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

² UN DESA 2018a.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Becker and Turaeva 2016.

⁵ Simkhada et al. 2010; Dimri 2015.

⁶ Regional values calculated by UN Women using country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a.

⁷ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m.

⁸ Jejeebhoy et al. 2013.

⁹ UNICEF 2019b global databases, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other nationally representative sources, 2011-2018).

¹⁰ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m.

¹³ UN DESA 2017m, sex ratio of the total population (males per 100 females).

¹⁴ UN Women calculations from Demographic and Health Surveys (ICF International 2007-2017) and MICS (UNICEF various years).

¹⁵ See Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ See Annex 5 (II).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Annex 5 (I).

¹⁹ Ramón Mendos 2019, pp. 15-16.

²⁰ See Annex 5 (I).

²¹ See Annex 6.

²² NCRB undated.

²³ See Annex 5 (I).

²⁴ UNFPA 2012. See also: Field and Ambrus 2008.

²⁵ See Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3.

²⁶ UNFPA 2017.

²⁷ See Box 3.5 in Chapter 3.

²⁸ Meurs and Ismaylov 2019.

²⁹ Kabeer 2012.

³⁰ Pradeep and Agarwal 2005; Oduro et al. 2015.

³¹ Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m.

³² For this analysis, Northern Africa and Western Asia has the lowest LPFR for married/in union (27.4 per cent). However, estimates should be treated with caution as they only represent 53.7 per cent of the population.

³³ UN Women calculations based on data from ILO 2018b, LIS (various years) and ABS 2016b.

³⁴ UN Women calculations from IIPS and ICF International 2017 and NSSO, MOSPI, India 2009-2010.

³⁵ Mazumdar and Neetha 2011.

³⁶ Singh 2013.

³⁷ UN Women calculations using census and survey data covering the period 2006-2014 from UN DESA 2017k.

³⁸ Abilasanovna et al. 2016.

³⁹ U.S. Social Security Administration 2017.

⁴⁰ Based on average differences in female/male unweighted means. UN Women calculations based on UNSD 2018.

⁴¹ Chopra and Zambelli 2017.

⁴² UN DESA 2017c; UNHCR 2018a.

⁴³ UNHCR 2018a.

⁴⁴ Save the Children in Sri Lanka 2006.

⁴⁵ Cichon and Bierbaum forthcoming.