

Latin America and the Caribbean



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 Latin America and Caribbean region.¹

1. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

Women in Latin America and the Caribbean are marrying later and having fewer children, while a substantial proportion of women have opted for cohabiting partnerships. Child and early marriage and adolescent motherhood remain common. Divorce and separation rates continue to rise, and the region has the highest rate of lone-mother households in the world. Access to public services, including reproductive healthcare, remains constrained, particularly for women in lower socio-economic groups and rural areas. Women's labour force participation has increased more than in any other region, and women migrants contribute substantially to the economic wellbeing of their families. However improved policies are needed to help reduce and redistribute women's unpaid care work and to protect and promote the rights of women migrants. Stronger implementation is needed to enforce laws on violence against women in families.

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 Latin America and the Caribbean.

Household diversity:

- Households comprised of couples living with children make up 39.9 per cent of households in the region, while extended families, which include other relatives and may include children, account for almost one-quarter of households in the region (23.6 percent).²
- Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest rate of lone-parent households in the world (11 per cent), of which the vast majority are lone mothers, who often juggle paid work, child rearing and occasionally care of other dependents.³

- Innovative methods in data collection in countries including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico and Uruguay will provide more representative data on the diversity of families, supporting more effective and family-friendly policies and legislation.

Marriage:

- The age of marriage for women in the region increased from 22.7 to 23.6 between circa 1990 and circa 2010.⁴ However, child marriage and early union formation before the age of 18 remain a significant problem, with 24.7 percent of women aged 20-24 reporting being married/in a union before the age of 18, a slight increase over the past 25 years (23.5 per cent).⁵

Non-marriage, cohabitation, divorce and separation:

- The share of never-married women aged 45-49 increased from 11.4 per cent around 1990 to 13.4 per cent around 2010 and is the second highest rate in the world.⁶
- Cohabitation has risen exponentially in the region over the last four decades: in Panama, 73.9 per cent of women aged 25-29 in a union were cohabiting in 2010; 70.7 in Uruguay; and 65.5 in Argentina.⁷ With the liberalization of divorce and changing social norms, the practice of cohabitation has expanded as a prelude to marriage, a pattern of life after divorce and as a life-long choice.⁸
- Around 2010, 9.6 percent of women aged 45-49 were divorced or separated—more than twice the global average (4.7 percent).⁹

Fertility:

- Women's total fertility rate is projected to decline in the region from 5.0 live births per woman in 1970-1975 to 2.0 in 2015-2020.¹⁰
- Early pregnancy, however, is prevalent, with 18.2 percent of women aged 20-24 having given birth before age 18; the rate for women aged 20-24 from the poorest quintile is 30.1 percent.¹¹

Older persons:

- Projections show that by 2020, older persons (those who are 60 years and above) will make up 12.8 percent of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean.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. In Latin America and the Caribbean there has been substantial progress, but some gaps remain:

- The legal age of marriage for girls and boys is 18 or older in all countries and territories in the region for which there are data.¹³ However most countries in the region allow exceptions to the legal age

of marriage. In Colombia, for example, boys and girls can get married as young as 14 with parental consent.

- A number of countries, including Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay have taken measures to legally recognize cohabiting partnerships. Cohabiting couples in Colombia, for example, have similar rights to married couples in respect of healthcare, pensions, citizenship, child support and alimony payments.¹⁴

Same-sex partnership recognition:

- As of May 2019, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Uruguay are among the 42 countries around the world that have extended some form of partnership recognition to same-sex couples. On the other hand, nine countries out of 33 in the region explicitly criminalize consensual sexual relations between partners of the same sex.¹⁵

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

- In the early 1990s, only a handful of countries in the world had laws against domestic violence. By 2018, all the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean for which we have data, with the exception of Haiti, had laws on domestic violence in place.¹⁶
- Nevertheless, implementation remains a problem in many countries in the region, with 11.8 per cent of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15-49 reported being subjected to physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the last 12 months.¹⁷
- Official data from 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean reveal that a total of 2,559 women were victims of femicide in 2017. Data for 2016 and 2017 show that Belize, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Trinidad and Tobago are the countries with the highest prevalence of femicides in the region.¹⁸
- As of 2018, 23 out of 33 countries for which data is available in the region have explicit legislation criminalizing marital rape.¹⁹

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

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

- The projected decline in the total fertility rate in the region from 5.0 to 2.0 (between 1970-1975 and 2015-2020) is an indicator of greater gender equality in education and access to labour markets, as well as improvements in the availability of family planning.²⁰
- While women in Latin America and the Caribbean have increasingly had their family planning needs satisfied by modern contraception since the 1970s (from 39.0 per cent to 82.6 per cent), access remains more constrained for poor and rural women.²¹

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, puts 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 labour force participation rate (LFPR) is influenced by their marital status:

- In Latin America and the Caribbean, women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) for individuals aged 25-54 has increased more than in any other region in the last two decades (from 57 to 67 per cent).²² This increase was highly stratified, with women from poorer socio-economic groups having lower LFPR than their wealthier counterparts.²³ Men's LFPR remained high during this period at 93 per cent.²⁴
- Among women in the region, married or in union women have the lowest LFPR (60.4 per cent). Divorced/separated women have the highest LFPR for all the women in the region (80.7 per cent). Among men in the region, LFPRs are high regardless of their marital status.²⁵
- Differences in LFPR 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 their higher risk of poverty, and greater levels of agency to pursue paid work, beyond the confines of marriage.

Lone mothers face high risks of poverty and challenges in receiving child support:

- Lone-mother households, particularly in the poorest economic group, continue to face elevated risks of poverty. Levels of child support from fathers are often inadequate, with high percentages of arrears or defaults in payment. In Colombia, for example, only 28 per cent of custodial mothers received child support in 2008; however, where it was received, it had a significant positive effect on poverty rates.²⁶
- In order to qualify for state support, lone-mothers may have to prove their inability to receive child support from the father. Research among lone mothers in the Caribbean revealed a range of reasons why they did not want to seek court assistance for child support from their ex-partner, including the time, energy and other resources needed to make an application, embarrassment, likely harassment or violence by the ex-partner and irregular payment of any amounts awarded.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. Without this unpaid care work, the vast majority of which is done by women, economies and societies would grind to a halt. Families and women need support from governments to do this vital work, and this is best provided through time (maternity/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 do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men do.²⁸
- In 11 Latin America and Caribbean countries, women in the poorest income group allocate 103 more minutes to unpaid care and domestic work each day than women in the richest group, while men's contributions remain similarly low across all income groups.²⁹
- Women in rural areas tend to have increased unpaid domestic work due to lower access to basic infrastructure such as water on tap and labour-saving technologies. In Bolivia, for example, only 38 per cent of the poorest households have water on-site (piped water) compared to 99 per cent of the richest.³⁰

Policies are needed to support families to care:

- In many countries in the region, maternity leave is not widely available. Chile and Uruguay are leaders in the region for their efforts to extend maternity and parental leave, including to informal workers.
- Chile and Ecuador have made important progress in increasing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) coverage. Ecuador's Centres for Child Development (Centros de Desarrollo Infantil) have increased childcare coverage for children 5 years and younger from less than 3 per cent in 2000 to over 22 per cent in 2015.³¹ This initiative has also formalized and professionalized a new workforce of childhood education promoters.
- In Uruguay, the combined actions of women's organizations and legislators placed care on the public agenda with an innovative and comprehensive national care system that includes care services for children, older persons and people living with disabilities (El Sistema Nacional de Cuidados – SNIC).

7. POLICIES AND REGULATIONS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT MIGRANT FAMILIES AND PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Migration is a major force affecting families 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 they can live together or apart.

- Women comprise 50 per cent or more of all international migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean.³²
- Many female migrants report experiencing violence and exploitation on the journey, sometimes at the hands of smugglers. A survey of 467 migrants in Mexico, for example, found that 68.3 per cent of those entering the country had been victims of violence in transit: 31.4 per cent of women had been sexually abused in transit, as well as 17.2 per cent of men.³³

Access to public services and social protection is essential for women and families in the context of migration:

- When women migrate, other family members often step in to provide care for their children. In Mexico, for example, many grandmothers who were already members of the household when their daughters migrated meet the daily caring needs of their grandchildren.³⁴
- In 2018, Colombia regularized thousands of Venezuelans, making them eligible for services including pre- and post-natal care. Argentina has also demonstrated that covering non-emergency health services for both regular and irregular migrants is possible.³⁵

8. FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES ARE AFFORDABLE

Analysis commissioned for the Report shows that most countries can afford a package of family friendly policies.³⁶ This package would guarantee that every member of society has access to basic income security and essential healthcare 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, 18 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean out of 24 countries with data could implement the required policies for less than 5 per cent of GDP.
- Five countries would need to invest between 5 and 9 per cent of GDP.
- For one country, 15 per cent of GDP would be required, which would require additional international donor support to achieve.

¹ Where data are available Latin America and the Caribbean includes: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

² Regional values calculated by UN Women using published country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a.

³ Ibid.

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

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 published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m.

⁷ Esteve A. et al. 2016.

⁸ Esteve and Lesthaeghe 2016.

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

¹⁰ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m.

¹¹ UN Women calculations from ICF International 2007-2017.

¹² UN DESA 2017m.

¹³ Data are available for 33 countries in the region. See Annex 5 (II).

¹⁴ Alzate Monroy 2004.

¹⁵ Ramón Mendos 2019, pp.15-16.

¹⁶ UN Women calculations using data from the World Bank 2018e.

¹⁷ See Annex 6. For this analysis, estimates for Latin America and the Caribbean should be treated with caution as it only represents 48.4 per cent of the population.

¹⁸ UN ECLAC Undated.

¹⁹ UN Women calculations using data from the World Bank Group 2018e. See Annex 5.

²⁰ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m.

²¹ UNFPA 2017, Figure 3, p. 22.

²² Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m.

²³ UN Women 2017c.

²⁴ Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m.

²⁵ UN Women calculations based on data from ILO 2018b; LIS (various years) and ABS 2016b.

²⁶ Cuesta and Meyer 2014.

²⁷ Budlender 2015.

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

²⁹ CEPAL 2018. The unweighted average is based on latest available data points for a set of 11 countries: Argentina (2013), Brazil (2012), Chile (2015), Colombia (2012), Ecuador (2012), El Salvador (2010), Guatemala (2011), Honduras (2009), Mexico (2014), Peru (2010) and Uruguay (2013), assigning each country the same relative importance.

³⁰ UN Women calculations based on ICF International 2018, accessed on 15 March 2019.

³¹ Ministerio de Inclusion Economica y Social 2013, pp. 25–26; Ministerio de Inclusion Economica y Social 2018.

³² Regional averages calculated by UN Women using UN DESA 2017j.

³³ MSF 2017.

³⁴ Oliveira 2018. See also: Dreby 2010.

³⁵ OECD and ILO 2018

³⁶ Bierbaum and Cichon forthcoming.