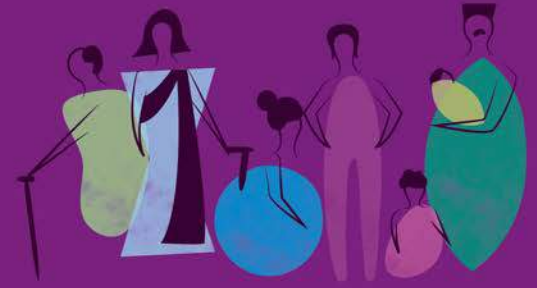


Northern Africa and Western Asia



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 Northern Africa and Western Asia.¹

1. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

While women and men are delaying marriage, it is still largely universal in this region, the only one in the world in which more than half of households are comprised of couples with children. However, fertility has declined significantly, resulting in smaller families. Despite some progress, family laws in the region still contain gender discriminatory provisions, and married women in many countries do not have the same rights as married men in terms of freedom of movement, inheritance or conferring their nationality. Stronger legal protections and implementation are also needed to combat violence against women and girls. Despite gains in women's education, women's labour force participation rate remains the lowest of all regions. The gender gap in time allocated to unpaid care and domestic work is at its widest in this region. Family reunification for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers remains challenging, with heavy burdens on women who remain in countries affected by conflict.

2. FAMILIES ARE DIVERSE AND CHANGING

The report demonstrates the significant diversity in family structures and relationships—across regions, within countries and over time. A number of changing trends in families are notable in Northern Africa and Western Asia.

Household diversity:

- Unlike any other region, more than half of households (59 per cent) are made up of couples with children (of any age, including adult children).² The vast majority of children under 15 years of age (70.3 per cent) live with two parents.³
- Extended households, which include at least one adult and other relatives and may include children, comprise 17 per cent of households.⁴ 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.

- About 8 per cent of households are comprised of lone-parent families (the same as the global average).⁵ The vast majority (88.1 per cent) are comprised of lone-mothers living only with their children.⁶

Marriage:

- Between around 1990 and around 2010, women's age at first marriage increased from 23.1 to 25.4 years, while men's age increased from 26.8 to 29.1.⁷ Women's educational attainment and paid work opportunities are among the factors driving the significant increases in their age at first marriage.
- Increases in women's age of first marriage in Algeria are particularly significant—between 1995 and 2015, age of first marriage increased by more than five years, from 23.7 to 29.1 years. The region is very diverse, however, and the age of first marriage for women in Iraq increased only slightly from 22.3 to 22.7 years, over the same period.⁸ Marriage continues to be an important rite of passage for (almost) all women in the region.
- Another contributing factor to delayed marriage is lack of economic resources and youth unemployment. In many countries, potential husbands are still expected to raise the money for a marriage ceremony, to set up a separate home and to serve as the exclusive provider. In Armenia, as a result of high marriage costs, a high proportion of adult children still live with their parents (16.1 per cent).⁹
- The incidence of child, early and forced marriage has decreased in the region over the last 25 years; the percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 15 decreased from 8 per cent to 4 per cent and those who were married before age 18 decreased from 29 per cent to 18 per cent during this period.¹⁰ However, the percentage of girls married or in a union before age 18 remains high in Iraq (24.3 per cent), Yemen (31.9 per cent) and Sudan (34.2 per cent).¹¹
- Conflict and crises can trigger higher levels of child and forced marriage. In refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, girls from urban Syrian communities are increasingly being married young. According to the latest household survey in Syria (2006), 13 per cent of Syrian women were married before the age of 18.¹² However, in 2016, as many as 40.5 per cent of Syrian women living in Lebanon were married before the age of 18 (compared to 6 per cent of Lebanese women).¹³

Non-marriage, divorce and separation:

- The share of never-married women aged 45-49 increased from 1.9 per cent around 1990 to 4.8 per cent around 2010, confirming that some women are gradually opting out of marriage and not just postponing it.¹⁴
- Globally, women are more likely to be divorced or separated than men, a phenomenon that can be explained by higher remarriage rates of men, often with younger women.¹⁵ The rate of divorce and separation among women in the region aged 45-49 increased from 2.1 per cent to 4.5 per cent between around 1980 and around 2010, while men's rate increased from 0.9 to 1.5 per cent.¹⁶

Fertility:

- Projections indicate that women's total fertility rate in the region has significantly decreased, from 6.1 live births per woman in 1970-1975 to 2.9 in 2015-2020, which is close to the global average (2.4). The region's TFR is expected to further decrease by 2025-2030 to 2.6.¹⁷

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 Northern Africa and Western Asia.

- Out of 24 countries and territories in the region where data are available, only six have legislation providing daughters and sons with equal rights to inherit assets from their parents and giving female and male surviving spouses equal rights to inherit assets.¹⁸
- In terms of women's equal rights in marriage, out of a total of 24 countries and territories in the region, in 10 countries women are required by law to obey their husbands, in 10 countries a married woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as a married man and in 13 countries a married woman cannot confer citizenship on her children in the same way as a married man.¹⁹
- The impact of these inequalities is particularly harsh given that, in most countries, access to employment and entitlements to public services and social protection are conditional on nationality, and increasing numbers of women and men migrate and set up families in places other than their countries of origin.
- Tunisia has long been a leader in the region in eliminating discrimination in family laws, and in 2018, initial steps were taken to legislate for equal inheritance rights.²⁰

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; however, Israel is the only country in the region to legally recognize same-sex partnerships.²¹
- At the same time, 68 countries worldwide have laws that explicitly criminalize consensual sexual relations between partners of the same sex. In 11 of the 68 countries, such relations are punishable by death, and 4 of these 11 countries are in this region.²²

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, 10 out of 24 countries in the region had these laws in place.²³

- In this region, 12.3 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.²⁴
- As of 2018, out of 24 countries in the region, only three have explicit legislation criminalizing marital rape: Cyprus, Georgia and Turkey.²⁵
- By 2018, 12 out of 189 countries and territories in the world still retained clauses in legislation exempting perpetrators of rape from prosecution when they are married to, or subsequently marry, the victim.²⁶ Eight of these 12 countries were in Northern Africa and Western Asia.
- In several countries and territories, including more recently Jordan, Lebanon, State of Palestine and Tunisia, public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts by women's rights organizations have led to the successful repeal of such laws.

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. 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.

- The decline in the region's total fertility rate from 6.1 to 2.9 (between 1970-1975 and 2015-2020)²⁷ is an indicator of greater gender equality in education and access to labour markets, as well as improvements in the availability of family planning.
- The rates of married or in-union women who had their family planning needs met with modern contraception in the region significantly increased from 24.7 per cent in 1970 to 64.0 per cent in 2015; however, this rate is notably lower than the global average of 77.2 per cent.²⁸
- There are a number of factors that prevent women from accessing modern contraception across the globe. Women report that cost, distance, the perception (or reality) that family planning services are only for married women and discriminatory treatment by service providers are common barriers.²⁹
- Studies in Jordan reveal women feel pressure from partners and other family members concerning their sexual and reproductive health.³⁰ Eleven per cent of female users of family planning clinics in Jordan reported that their husband had refused to use a contraceptive method or had stopped them from using one; 13 per cent of women reported coercion from a family member (including their own mothers, their mothers-in-law and their sisters-in-law).³¹
- Evidence from 78 developing countries worldwide 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.³²

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 remains low:

- Despite impressive gains in women's educational attainment, as well as rapid declines in fertility, the share of women in the workforce remains the lowest of all regions.³³
- Women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) among individuals aged 25-54 in the region increased slightly from 29 per cent in 1998 to 33 per cent in 2018, while men's LFPR rate decreased slightly during this period from 93 to 92 per cent.³⁴
- LFPRs for women who are married or in a union aged 25-54 are particularly low (27.4 per cent), lower than in any other region. On the other hand, the LFPR for single or never married women is 51.9 per cent, followed by divorced or separated women (43.7 per cent). The opposite trend is found among men married or in a union, who comprise the highest LFPR among men in this region (94.5 per cent).³⁵

Factors affecting women's labour force participation rate:

- Contributing factors to women's low LFPR are the decline in public sector employment, the main source of employment for educated women in the region, without an increase in private sector employment opportunities; and conservative social norms, especially regarding marriage. For example, women who are going to be married are more likely to exit paid work. The likelihood is highest for the year of the wedding in Tunisia and the year before the wedding in Egypt and Jordan. Unemployed married women are also much less likely to return to employment than their single counterparts.³⁶
- The unequal allocation of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities to women and the lack of accessible and affordable care services in the region further contributes to women's low LFPRs.

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, especially in rural areas and amongst married women:

- Globally, women do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men do.³⁷
- The gender gap in unpaid care and domestic work is at its widest in the Northern Africa and Western Asia region, where the median female-to-male ratio of time spent on unpaid care and domestic work is almost six.³⁸
- Marital status and the presence of young children in the household are significant factors impacting the time women allocate to unpaid care and domestic work. In Algeria and Tunisia, for example, married women's unpaid care and domestic work is double that of single women, while in Turkey it is almost three times as high.³⁹
- 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.
- In many of the countries in this region, early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision is left to the private sector so coverage tends to be low and skewed towards better-off urban families, thus excluding the children and parents who are likely to benefit most from access to quality services.⁴⁰

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 families can live together or apart.

- Contemporary trends in migration include increasing movement within and between developing countries. Bilateral migration corridors (including refugees) with the largest increases between 2010 and 2017 included Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey receiving refugees from Syria; and Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia receiving economic migrants from India.⁴¹
- Developing countries host 85 per cent of the world's refugees and asylum seekers. Among the countries that host the largest numbers are Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan and Turkey.⁴²
- Women migrate for a variety of reasons, including for economic reasons and for family reunification. Many women migrate within the region to work as caregivers and domestic workers.
- Country policies on family reunification vary widely and can be particularly challenging for asylum seekers and refugees. The experience of Syrian families is one example. Protracted conflict in Syria has resulted in 5.7 million refugees registered in other countries in the region in 2019.⁴³ Many displaced people have sought asylum in Europe. While the proportion of female and male refugees in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, is roughly equal (suggesting that families may be moving together), many male family members take the longer journeys alone with the aim of securing refugee status and eligibility for family reunification. However, the reunification process is not straightforward, and those without full refugee status may have to wait years for their families to join them.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 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, 11 out of 14 countries with data in the Northern Africa and Western Asia region could implement the required policies for less than 7 per cent of GDP.
- The remaining three countries would need to spend between 8.8 and 13.6 per cent of GDP, which would likely require additional international donor support.

¹ Where data are available, Northern Africa includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and Western Sahara; and Western Asia includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bahrain, Cyprus, Georgia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine (State of), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

² Regional values calculated by UN Women using published country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a. See Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2. Regional estimates are based on less than two-thirds of their respective regional population (36.1 per cent of the population) and should be treated with caution.

³ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates from UN DESA 2017m, UN DESA 2018a and UN DESA and UN Women 2019.

⁴ Regional values calculated by UN Women using published country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a. See Figure 2.2. Regional estimates are based on less than two-thirds of their respective regional population (36.1 per cent of the population) and should be treated with caution.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017m, UN DESA 2018a and UN DESA and UN Women 2019. Regional estimates are based on less than two-thirds of their respective regional population (36.1 per cent of the population) and should be treated with caution. See Figure 2.11 in Chapter 2.

⁷ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. For this analysis data are available for 11 countries covering 54.6 per cent of the population in Northern Africa and Western Asia, thus it should be treated with caution. See Figure 2.3 in Chapter 2.

⁸ See Annex 2 (I).

⁹ UN Women calculations using published country-level estimates from UN DESA 2018a.

¹⁰ UNICEF 2019b global databases, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other nationally representative sources, 2011-2018. See Figure 2.4 in Chapter 2.

¹¹ UNICEF 2019b.

¹² UNICEF 2006.

¹³ UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office and ICRW 2017, p. 11.

¹⁴ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. See Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ Shafer 2009; Berardo et al. 1993.

¹⁶ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from country-level estimates published in UN DESA 2017k and UN DESA 2017m. See Figure 2.7 in Chapter 2.

¹⁷ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m. Total Fertility Rates and population of women of reproductive ages (15-49) for the periods 2015-2020 and 2025-2030 are based on medium (standard) variant projections. See Figure 2.8 in Chapter 2.

¹⁸ World Bank 2018e. See Annex 5 (I).

¹⁹ Ibid, See Annex 5 (I) and Annex 5 (II).

²⁰ Library of Congress 2018.

²¹ Ramón Mendos 2019.

²² Ibid.

²³ World Bank 2018e. See Annex 5 (I).

²⁴ UNSD 2018. For this analysis data cover 41.7 per cent of the region's population, therefore regional aggregates should be treated with caution as they are based on less than two thirds of their respective population. See Figure 6.2 in Chapter 6.

²⁵ World Bank 2018e. See Annex 5 (I).

²⁶ See Annex 5 (I).

²⁷ Regional aggregates are UN Women calculations from estimates published in UN DESA 2017m. Total Fertility Rates and population of women of reproductive ages (15-49) for the periods 2015-2020 and 2025-2030 are based on medium (standard) variant projections. See Figure 2.8 in Chapter 2.

²⁸ UN Women calculations from UN DESA 2018b and UN DESA 2018c.

²⁹ Williamson et al. 2009.

³⁰ See Grace and Fleming 2016, Table 1, pp.15-17.

³¹ Clark et al. 2008, cited in Grace and Fleming 2016.

³² UNFPA 2012. See also: Field and Ambrus 2008.

³³ World Bank 2013.

³⁴ Weighted averages calculated by UN Women using data from ILO 2018c and UN DESA 2017m.

³⁵ UN Women calculations based on data from ILO 2018b, LIS various years and ABS 2016b. Estimates for Northern Africa and Western Asia should be treated with caution as they only represent 53.7 per cent of the population. See Figure 4.4 in Chapter 4.

³⁶ Selwaness and Krafft 2018, p. 13.

³⁷ Based on average differences in female/male unweighted means. UN Women calculations based on UNSD 2018.

³⁸ UN Women calculations based on UNSD 2018. See Figure 5.2.

³⁹ ILO 2018a, Figures 2.14 and 2.15.

⁴⁰ UNESCO 2015.

⁴¹ UN DESA 2017c.

⁴² UNHCR 2018a.

⁴³ UNHCR 2018b.

⁴⁴ See Box 7.3 in Chapter 7.

⁴⁵ Bierbaum and Cichon forthcoming.