

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *World Fertility Report 2003*, prepared by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, presents a compilation of key estimates and indicators of fertility, nuptiality and contraceptive use for 192 countries, referring mostly to the 1970s and to the 1990s but covering earlier when necessary or more recent periods when possible. The set of data presented permit an assessment of the unprecedented changes in nuptiality, contraceptive use and fertility that have occurred since the 1970s. In particular, the report documents the following key findings:

- 1. A major worldwide shift in the timing of marriage to older ages has occurred.** The median value of the singulate mean age at marriage for the world rose from 25.4 to 27.2 years among men and from 21.5 to 23.2 years among women. For developed countries, the increase has been even more striking, with the median rising from 25.2 to 28.8 years for men and 22.0 to 26.1 for women.
- 2. Both men and women are spending longer periods of their life being single.** The median of the percentage ever-married among persons aged 25-29 declined from 85 per cent in the 1970s to 76 per cent in the 1990s for women, and from 68 per cent to 56 per cent for men. Again, the reductions in the percentage of ever-married persons aged 25-29 are more substantial for developed countries, whose median values declined from 85 per cent to 62 per cent among women and from 74 per cent to 43 per cent among men.
- 3. Delayed marriage among young adults has not yet resulted in noticeable reductions in the percentage of persons marrying at least once over their lifetime.** Marriage or some form of consensual union continues to be nearly universal. In the 1970s, in three out of every four countries, 89 per cent or more of all men and all women aged 45-49 had been married at least once and that figure was still close to 89 per cent by the 1990s.
- 4. Divorce rates have increased in most countries with data available.** In developed countries, the median rate of divorce rose from 13 divorces per 100 for men and women in the 1970s to 24 divorces per 100 men and 27 per 100 women in the 1990s. In developing countries, the median rate of divorce increased from 7 to 12 divorces per 100 men and from 5 to 15 divorces per 100 women. That is, not only has there been a tendency for people to marry later, but the instability of marital unions has been rising. Both trends clearly have significant implications for reproductive behaviour.
- 5. A tremendous increase has taken place in the use of family planning.** Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the use of contraception among women currently married or in union increased in nine out of every ten countries with information available. The median level of contraceptive use at the world level increased from 38 per cent of women currently married or in union in the 1970s to 52 per cent in the 1990s. For developing countries, the median prevalence rose from 27 per cent to 40 per cent between those dates. By the 1990s, contraceptive prevalence in a quarter of all developing countries was 62 per cent or higher.
- 6. The use of modern contraceptive methods in developing countries has generally risen.** The median use of modern contraception in developing countries increased from 18 to 30 per cent between the 1970s and the 1990s. However, in a quarter of all developing countries the use of modern contraceptive methods remains rare, with levels of use remaining below 12 per cent.

7. **Between 1970 and 2000, the world population experienced a major and unprecedented reduction of fertility levels, driven mostly by the decline in fertility in developing countries** (figure I). Average fertility levels in the developing world dropped from over 5.9 children per woman in the 1970s to about 3.9 children per woman in the 1990s. The median fertility reduction in developing countries between the 1970s and the 1990s was of the order of 1.8 children per woman and a quarter of all developing countries appear to have achieved reductions of 2.6 children per woman or more.
8. **Whereas fertility was uniformly high in developing countries in the 1970s, the fertility levels of developing countries today vary over a wide range.** Thus, fertility remains above 5 children per woman in a number of least developed countries but it has reached below-replacement levels in about 20 developing countries.
9. **Fertility levels in developed countries, many of which experienced a “baby boom” during the 1950s and 1960s, have generally declined since 1970.** The median reduction in the total fertility of developed countries was 0.8 children per woman between the 1970s and the 1990s. By the late 1990s only four developed countries? Albania, Iceland, New Zealand and the United States of America? reported a total fertility of 2 children per woman or higher. Furthermore, in 14 developed countries, fertility was lower than 1.3 children per woman, an unprecedented low level of fertility in the recorded history of large populations.
10. **Levels of childlessness vary considerably among major areas.** In the 1990s, the proportions of childless women among those aged 45-49 tended to be high in developed countries and in countries of the Caribbean. At least 7 per cent of women aged 45-49 were childless in four of every five developed countries with data and in nine developed countries the proportion childless surpassed 10 per cent. Levels of childlessness were relatively low in Africa and Asia in the 1990s and moderate in Latin America. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, levels of childlessness declined in Africa, as sterility caused by sexually transmitted diseases decreased during the 1970s and 1980s.
11. **The profound changes in fertility levels occurring since 1970 have been made possible by major behavioural transformations related to union formation, marriage and the use of contraception.** Government policies on access to contraceptives have played an important role in modifying reproductive behaviour. In 1976, 52 per cent of all Governments reported that they had no intervention to modify fertility levels but by 2001 that percentage had dropped to 32 per cent (figure 2). Government support for family planning has increased steadily since the 1970s. By 2001, 92 per cent of all Governments supported family planning programmes and the distribution of contraceptives either directly (75 per cent), through government facilities, or indirectly (17 per cent), by supporting the activities of non-governmental organizations such as family planning associations.

The data on fertility, nuptiality, contraceptive use and policies relating to childbearing presented in this report were selected to reflect the major transformations of reproductive and nuptiality behaviour that have taken place since 1970, that is, over the course of a generation. Indicators reflecting changes by birth cohort and others indicating trends from a period perspective have been included. Data were derived from a variety of sources, including civil registration, population censuses and nationally representative surveys. The data presented have not been adjusted for coverage, undercount or other non-sampling errors. Thus, the values of certain indicators, particularly those pertaining to developing countries with deficient data, may not match those published by the Population Division in *World Population Prospects: The 2002*

Revision, since the latter have been adjusted as necessary. For each country, the values of 43 indicators are presented for each date, provided data are available.

The key findings of this report are discussed in more detail below. In discussing results, the unit of analysis is the country and the main focus is on changes of the distribution of countries according to the various indicators.

Nuptiality

Marriage or some form of consensual union continues to be nearly universal. In the 1970s, in three out of every four countries, at least 89 per cent of all men and all women aged 45-49 had been married at least once and that figure was still close to 89 per cent by the 1990s. Furthermore, in a quarter of all countries with the relevant data, the proportion of men aged 45-49 ever-married or in union was 97 per cent or higher in the 1970s and 98 per cent or higher in the 1990s. Similarly, in a quarter of all countries, at least 98 per cent of women aged 45-49 had been married or in union.

In the 1970s, the prevalence of marriage was highest in the countries of Asia and it continues to be high, although there have been some instances of significant reductions in the proportions ever marrying, especially among men in Japan and among women in Singapore or in Brunei Darussalam, Israel, Malaysia, Myanmar and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The countries of Africa are also generally characterized by a high prevalence of marriage or consensual unions, with three-quarters of them reporting that at least 96 per cent of men aged 45-49 and at least 98 per cent of women in the same age group had ever been married or in union by the 1990s. In fact, a number of countries in Africa appear to have experienced significant increases in the proportions ever married by age 45-49, particularly among men. Examples include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Uganda. In contrast, important reductions in the proportions ever-married among men and women aged 45-49 were recorded in Botswana, Reunion and South Africa.

Marriage or consensual unions are somewhat less prevalent in the countries of Latin America and especially in the Caribbean region compared with other regions of the developing world. By the 1990s in half of the countries of the Caribbean at most 72 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women aged 45-49 had ever been married or in union. Furthermore, significant reductions in the proportions ever married were recorded in Barbados, Jamaica, the Netherlands Antilles and St. Lucia between the 1970s and the 1990s. In the rest of the countries of Latin America, the proportions ever-married among persons aged 45-49 tended to be higher, but by the 1990s in half of the countries of the region at least 10 per cent of men and 9 per cent of women aged 45-49 had never been married or in union. These figures represent a change from the 1970s, when the proportions who never married tended to be higher. Between the 1970s and the 1990s at least half of the countries in Latin America recorded significant increases in the proportions of men and women aged 45-49 who had ever been married or in union. However, in Latin America and the Caribbean consensual unions are common and the data on proportions ever married must be interpreted with caution since the trends observed may be partly due to an improvement in the reporting of consensual unions over time rather than an actual change in the prevalence of marriage.

In Europe, Northern America and Australia/New Zealand, the prevalence of marriage or consensual unions continues to be high, with over 86 per cent of men and over 89 per cent of women aged 45-49 having been married or in union in three out of every four countries in those regions. However, between the 1970s and the 1990s, at least three-quarters of the countries

concerned experienced a reduction in the proportions ever married among men, the reductions being most marked in the Nordic countries and in Latvia, Iceland, Netherlands and the United States. Reductions in the proportions ever-married among women were less common but still significant in a number of countries, particularly in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden.

The data available permit a comparison of the proportions of men and women who had married or entered a union by age 25-29 in the 1970s and in the 1990s. This comparison indicates that a major worldwide shift in the timing of marriage has occurred: the median proportion ever-married among women aged 25-29 declined from 85 per cent to 76 per cent, and from 68 per cent to 56 per cent among men aged 25-29. Furthermore, three-quarters of all countries with the required data show a reduction in the proportions ever married by age 25-29. Those reductions are most marked in the countries of Europe, Northern America and Australia/New Zealand where young people are increasingly postponing the age of entry into unions, but similar trends are noticeable in all other regions. These changes may foreshadow a general overall decline in the prevalence of marriage and consensual unions among persons aged 45-49 in the future.

These changes are also reflected in the continuous rise of the age at marriage. Accordingly, the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM), an indicator of the mean length of single life, increased from the 1970s to the 1990s in three-quarters of all countries with data available. At the world level, the median value of the SMAM rose from 25.4 to 27.2 years among men and from 21.5 to 23.2 years among women. Particularly large increases in the SMAM were recorded among developed countries, with SMAM rising by more than 4 years in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. In developing countries, increases in the SMAM tended to be smaller in magnitude, particularly for men. However, gains of 3 years or more were recorded by a few countries in all regions, including Algeria, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Kuwait, Maldives, Malaysia, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan and Tunisia in Asia and Northern Africa; and the Bahamas, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Guyana, Martinique, the Netherlands Antilles, St. Lucia and the United States Virgin Islands in Latin America and the Caribbean. As already noted, in Latin America and the Caribbean some of these increases could be the result of changes in the reporting of consensual unions.

Divorce rates increased in most countries with data available. The median rate of divorce in developed countries rose from 13 divorces per 100 for men and women in the 1970s to 24 divorces per 100 men and 27 divorces per 100 women in the 1990s. Among the developing countries with data available, the median rate of divorce increased from 7 to 12 divorces per 100 men and from 5 to 15 divorces per 100 women. In three-quarters of all countries, whether developed or developing, having data for the 1970s and to the 1990s, divorce rates increased and in half of them the increases were of the order of 6 to 7 per 100. That is, not only has there been a tendency for people to marry later, but the instability of marital unions has been rising. Both trends clearly have significant implications for reproductive behaviour.

Contraceptive use

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the use of contraception among women currently married or in union increased in ninety per cent of all countries with information available for the two dates. The median level of contraceptive use at the world level increased from 38 per cent of women currently married or in union to 52 per cent. However, these global figures mask the important differences between developed and developing countries.

Among developed countries, contraceptive use was already high in the 1970s when at least half of all women who were currently married or in union in developed countries were using contraception. In fact, in three-quarters of all developed countries at least two-thirds of all women currently married or in union were users of contraception in the 1970s. By the 1990s, the level of contraceptive use had increased in 14 out of 44 developed countries, but it had declined in six of them. The reductions recorded in the level of contraceptive use were often the result of a decline in the use of traditional contraceptive methods and of greater reliance on modern methods. However, some of these differences may be spurious, resulting from changes in data collection procedures rather than from actual changes in behaviour. Nevertheless, the data indicate that developed countries as a whole experienced a marked increase in the use of modern methods of contraception, with the median level of such use rising from 54 to 61 per cent of women currently married or in union. At the country level, all countries with data available for the 1970s and the 1990s recorded an increase in the prevalence of modern methods, except for Austria, where such prevalence dropped by nearly 10 percentage points. In the case of Austria, this change may be partly due to the use of different data collection procedures.

Among developing countries, contraceptive prevalence was markedly lower in the 1970s than in the 1990s. For developing countries with information, the median level of contraceptive prevalence rose from 27 per cent to 40 per cent between those dates. By the 1990s, contraceptive prevalence in a quarter of all developing countries was 62 per cent or higher. However, in another quarter of all developing countries, contraceptive prevalence remained below 24 per cent of all women currently married or in union. Levels of use of modern methods were even lower. Although the median level of use of modern contraceptive methods in developing countries rose from 18 to 30 per cent between the 1970s and the 1990s, use of modern methods remains rare in many developing countries, with a quarter having levels of prevalence below 12 per cent. The latter include Afghanistan and Yemen in Asia and 25 countries in Africa.

By the 1990s, several developing countries had attained high prevalence levels of modern contraceptive methods. Thus, in Algeria, Egypt, Reunion, South Africa, Tunisia and Zimbabwe, over half of all women currently married or in union were using modern methods of contraception by the 1990s. Similar or higher levels had been attained by China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Hong Kong SAR of China, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam in Asia. In Latin America and the Caribbean, over half of all countries with data available had levels of modern contraceptive use higher than 50 per cent. Most of these countries had recorded impressive increases in the use of modern contraceptive methods between the 1970s and the 1990s. Indeed, over that period, at least half of all developing countries with data had seen their level of use of modern contraceptive methods rise by 20 percentage points or more.

In sum, major strides have been made in satisfying the demand for modern contraceptive methods in developing countries but low levels of modern contraceptive use still persist in many countries of Africa and in some countries of Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. As would be expected, the least developed countries and other low-income countries are more likely to exhibit low levels of modern contraceptive use than medium-income countries.

Fertility

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, fertility declined markedly at the world level. The median total fertility for all countries with data available dropped from 5.4 to 2.9 children per woman over the period concerned. Most of that reduction was caused by the decline of fertility in developing countries, whose median total fertility changed from 5.9 to 3.9 children per woman between the

1970s and the 1990s. There were also significant, though smaller, reductions in the fertility of developed countries, whose median total fertility declined from 2.3 to 1.4 children per woman over the same period.

Except for the Democratic Republic of Congo, French Guiana, Guinea and Mali, all other developing countries with data available for the 1970s and the 1990s appear to have experienced reductions in fertility levels, though estimates of change may be biased by differential reporting errors in the basic data. Nevertheless, the data presented in this report reveal an overall picture validated by other assessments of fertility trends. The median fertility reduction in developing countries between the 1970s and the 1990s was of the order of 1.8 children per woman and a quarter of all developing countries appear to have achieved reductions of 2.6 children per woman or more. China is one of the countries in this group, having reduced its fertility by about 4 children per woman since 1970. Other countries with large reported reductions of fertility include Algeria, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mexico, Thailand, Tunisia and Turkey. In contrast, fertility declined slowly (by less than one child since 1970) or not at all in 21 developing countries, 13 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Among developed countries, fertility reductions were the rule, though their magnitude was generally small but significant given the low levels of total fertility that already characterized most of those countries by the 1970s. The median reduction of total fertility among developed countries was of 0.8 children per woman and by the 1990s only four developed countries—Albania, Iceland, New Zealand and the United States of America—reported a total fertility of 2 children per woman or higher. In the 1970s, 36 developed countries had levels of fertility of at least 2 children per woman.

Taking 2.1 children per woman to represent a level of fertility ensuring population replacement when mortality is low, fertility levels in 12 developed countries were below replacement level in the 1970s whereas just one developing country had a similarly low level of fertility. By the 1990s, the number of developed countries with below-replacement fertility had increased to 41 and that of developing countries stood at 19. In 14 developed countries, total fertility was lower than 1.3 children per woman, a level unprecedented for large populations in recorded history.

The worldwide reduction of fertility has been accompanied by major shifts in the timing of childbearing. In half of all developing countries, the mean age at which women have children has decreased as the fertility rates of older women decline. In developed countries, the major tendency has been for the mean age at childbearing to rise as women postpone the beginning of childbearing. Data on the mean age at the birth of the first child indicate that it has generally been rising, both in developed and in developing countries. Increases in the mean age of mothers at the time of the first birth have been more pronounced in developed countries, three-quarters of which have seen their mean age at first birth rise by at least 1.7 years between the 1970s and the 1990s. In developing countries, such increases have been more modest, amounting to at least 0.5 years in three-quarters of all developing countries with data for the two periods. Consequently, important differences in the timing of first births remain between developed and developing countries. In the 1990s, the median value of the mean age at first birth was 26.4 years in developed countries and just 22.1 years in developing countries.

Important changes have also occurred with respect to the level of childlessness among women aged 45–49. Although the countries having comparable data for the 1970s and the 1990s are few, the available evidence suggests that there has been an important reduction of childlessness in Africa, where sexually transmitted diseases were an important cause of sterility in the 1950s and 1960s. In Latin America as well the levels of childlessness have generally dropped. In other

major areas there have been both increases and decreases of childlessness but, whereas levels of childlessness in the 1990s are fairly low in Africa and Asia (never surpassing 9 per cent and remaining in most countries below 5 or 7 per cent, respectively), they are high in the Caribbean and in developed countries. Thus, in three out of every four developed countries, at least 7 per cent of women aged 45-49 were childless in the 1990s and in three-quarters of Caribbean countries with data on the subject, the proportion of childless women among those aged 45-49 was at least 8 per cent. Particularly high levels of childlessness (above 10 per cent) were recorded in Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands Antilles, Portugal, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Switzerland and Uruguay.

Population policies

Major changes in the views and actions of Governments with regard to fertility levels and trends have taken place. In 1976, 52 per cent of all Governments reported that they had no intervention to modify fertility levels but by 2001 that percentage had dropped to 32 per cent (see figure II). Government support for family planning has increased steadily since the 1970s. By 2001, 92 per cent of all Governments supported family planning programmes and the distribution of contraceptives either directly (75 per cent), through government facilities, or indirectly (17 per cent), by supporting the activities of non-governmental organizations such as family planning associations.

The views of Governments on the adequacy of fertility levels have also changed considerably. Thus, whereas in 1976, 27 per cent of all Governments wanted to lower fertility, by 2001, 45 per cent did. Among developing countries, the percentage wishing to reduce fertility was even higher in 2001, amounting to 58 per cent. There was also an increase in the percentage of Governments wishing to raise fertility: from 9 per cent in 1976 to 13 per cent in 2001. As a consequence, the relative weight of Governments wishing to maintain current fertility levels declined from 13 per cent to 10 per cent. That is, today more Governments wish to change the fertility levels of their populations and are prepared to devise adequate interventions to achieve such goals.

Figure I. Distribution of 160 countries by total fertility level around 1970 and 2000

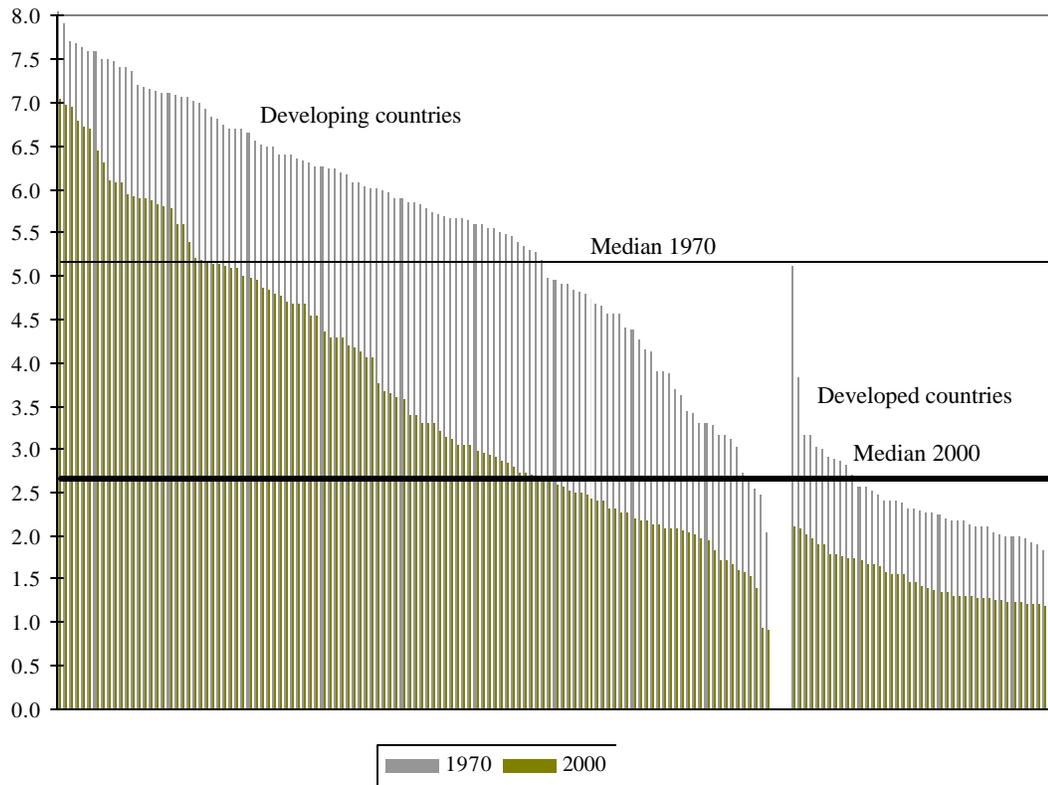


Figure II. Government policies on the level of fertility: 1976 and 2001

