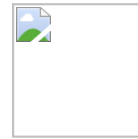




Family Matters



Circular No. 19

Follow-up to the International Year of the Family - April 1999

- [The Family Unit](#)
 - [International Day of Families, 15 May 1999](#)
 - [Backgrounder on the international theme AFamilies for All Ages@](#)
-

[Back to *Family Matters*](#)

The Family Unit

The Follow up to the International Year of the Family is the responsibility of the Family Unit, the Division for Social Policy and Development within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The follow-up activities to the International Year of the Family are in accordance with intergovernmental mandates e.g. General Assembly resolutions 50/142 of 21 December 1995 and 52/81 of 12 December 1997 respectively. [The Family Unit welcomes ongoing information and data on family-related policies and programmes from concerned actors and focal points].

[\[Back to top\]](#)

International Day of Families, 15 May 1999

The International Day of Families is being observed for the sixth time on 15 May 1999. It was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993.

The international theme for 1999 is AFamilies for All Ages@. This theme was suggested in the context of the International Year of Older Persons, and provides the opportunity to celebrate the contributions of older persons to families and societies, as well as, to highlight their role and the inter-generational dimensions of families in the context of demographic ageing. In addition, the programme of action adopted by the World Summit for Social Development calls for strengthening family support system as one way to protect older persons and promote their

independence.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

A backgrounder on the international theme "Families for All Ages" has been prepared. An brief version is presented below.

- [The Life Course of Individuals and Families](#)
 - [Families for All Ages: The Developmental Stages of Their Individual members Challenges and Opportunities:](#)
[Children](#), [Young Adults](#), [Young Families](#), [Older Persons](#)
 - [The Influence of Demographic Changes on the Family](#)
-

The Life Course of Individuals and Families

A family is a living entity, holding together in a dynamic relationship members of different ages and generations.

As individuals move along their particular life-path B coming of age, marriage, parenthood, maturity, growing dependence and ultimately death B they alter also the chemistry of the family that contains them. For the family these milestones can bring tension, even crisis, and always the need for adaptation; but also renewal and regeneration.

A passed-down understanding and awareness of the significance of these milestones and the corresponding needs of the various members and of the unit as a whole underpinned societies over the ages. A similar understanding is now required also of the policy makers and the practitioners who have the social responsibility for ensuring the support that may be needed from outside the family at such times as a union (family formation); the addition of new members (birth, adoption of children); separation (young/adult children leaving the home, illness or incapacity); marriage dissolution or death of a family member.

The family stages present challenges that can be further exacerbated by factors like poverty, armed conflicts and certain cultural mores that rigidly define and govern when and how certain life events should take place and the roles and rights of each family member. Age of unions/marriage; right to child custody upon the separation of the parents/legal guardians; rights and responsibilities of a widowed woman, etc. are examples of situations/transitions within the life course of families often defined by cultural mores and local policies.

Families for all ages can thus be interpreted in two broad ways that are complementary. On the one --hand, the responsibility of families to nurture, care and provide support to all of their members with respect to their ages; on the other, the need of families for assistance, support and protection to perform their

functions during the different phases of their life cycles.

These approaches promote greater attention to the needs of individual members of the family based on their particular needs, and an understanding of families as systems. This can assist policy makers in the development and implementation of more asserted actions. Family and individual support are then provided within the context of the life course of both, the individual and the family.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Families for All Ages: The Developmental Stages of Their Individual members B Challenges and Opportunities

Children

Families play a strategic role in the survival, development and protection of children, notably with respect to socialization, education and the inter-generational transmission of culture and values. Parents and families, like schools and day-care centres, have the opportunity to mold younger generations.

The effects of poverty on the socialization and education of children can be devastating. Adequate and affordable child-care services and family supportive work environments are central in supplementing and facilitating the full development of children and parent-child relationships.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Young Adults

Young family members can, and often play a considerable role in socialization within the family. They can have a positive impact on their parent=s personalities. Parents can receive from their children information on many issues with which they normally do not deal with. Young people bring into the family fresh ideas and propagate social, cultural and political changes emanating from schools and colleges. For example, immigrant refugee parents often learn from their children the language and customs of the new country. Young people also make significant contributions to sharing household tasks, including income generation through their participation in the labor force and caring for other family members.

Enabling youth to make responsible choices, ensuring their safety and health, and overcoming discrimination are therefore critical. Families are central to this, and the necessary skills and support must be made available to them.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Young Families

Families headed by young people need special attention. Young people benefit from schooling by acquiring skills that facilitate their incorporation into the labor market and practical knowledge that they can apply in all areas of their lives like decisions of family formation and reproductive choices. These affect their development and

options of life, as well as influence the ability of the young parents to provide, care and nurture their children. Relationship and parenting skills and opportunities for young parents to continue their education and incorporation into the labor market, are components of an enabling environment that supports and strengthens these young families.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Older Persons

In the traditional extended family, the ageing enjoy high prestige as custodians of village lore and morality, and as persons standing nearest to departed ancestors. As long as they are physically able, they also contribute to productive work in farming and in the household. Within the extended family, the elderly thus enjoy a sense of belonging, as well as emotional and physical security. Overall, many elders rely on and are satisfied with the support they receive from their families.

Research shows that the extended family continues to play its traditional role, though often at a distance, with good relationships maintained between ageing persons and their adult children. Even in the most developed countries, the family continues to be an important provider of care and supportive services to older persons, especially through daughters and daughters-in-law.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

The Influence of Demographic Changes on the Family

At the same time, given the concurrent phenomena of decreasing family size and increasing numbers of older persons, as well as other demographic and social factors affecting family structure, formal institutions have arisen to share or take over some of the traditional responsibilities of families.

Many social policies relating to older persons still need to be improved. A current policy issue is thus to find a proper balance between the family and government assistance: to help the family continue to be responsive to the needs of its older members and yet to provide outside care when critically required. Clearly, social policy must take into consideration not only the needs of the older persons but the links between the generations.

The falling birth rate and the resulting decrease in the number of children available in a family to care for ageing parents is also affecting the capacity of the family to continue its care-giving role. A second factor taxing the resources of families as care providers is the increase in the numbers of the very old, who may require intensive nursing and other support. While family members may wish to continue care for very old relatives, they will, in most cases, lack the skill and physical capacity to provide continuous nursing supervision. Linked to the growing prevalence of the very old is the increasing probability of families encompassing four or five generations. It becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for a middle-aged person to care for two generations of elderly relatives, in addition to carrying out the roles of parent and grandparent.

The preponderance of widowed women among the old is another actor affecting the availability of family support. The tendency of men to marry women several years younger than themselves and the longer life expectancy of women in many areas implies that older women have a high probability of experiencing a long period of widowhood in later life. The loss of a spouse means loss of socio-economic support and companionship, and makes older women vulnerable to poverty and social isolation when support systems and protective legislation do not exist.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Copyright © United Nations / Division for Social Policy and Development
Updated: 29 November 1999. Comments and suggestions: desktop@un.org



UN

| [Home](#) | [Search](#) | [Parliament](#) | [Research](#) | [Governments](#) | [Regions](#) | [Issues](#)