



Youth at the United Nations

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Changing Families: Chances and Challenges for Young People Today

Briefing Notes on Youth is a new awareness-raising activity from the United Nations Programme on Youth. The primary purpose of the *Briefing Notes* is to provide information on an issue from a youth policy-making perspective. It is hoped that it would also be a catalyst to promote further research and stimulate the debate on youth issues.

Introduction

There are 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15-24 in the world today (United Nations 2005a, p. iii). Every single young person was affected by the remarkable changes in family structures and dynamics that the twentieth century witnessed. Major trends such as globalization, rising migration, the ageing of societies and HIV/AIDS, have contributed to fundamental changes in family structures. These changes have an impact on core functions of the family, such as primary socialization. Thus, youth around the world is currently facing specific challenges but also opportunities. The purpose of this briefing note is to highlight major trends concerning families worldwide, and to draw attention to some observations regarding this topic along selected priority areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY).¹

Seen from a variety of cultural, social and political perspectives, the structures of families differ widely. However, for practical purposes and in order to respect the cultural diversity of different family types, a family, in its nuclear form, can be described as "a group of people linked by marriage, legally or customarily regulated, and their dependents, based on either consanguinity or adoption." (United Nations, 2003a, p.7).

In addition to this general characterization describing what a family is, the field of sociology and anthropology give theoretical definitions about the function of families.² According to these, the primary role of the family is to (re)produce society, either biologically, socially, or both. Thus, a family produces and creates society in terms of socio-cultural aspects, such as certain cultural values. It ideally also provides a stable and secure social environment for the individual development of all family members. A family specifically serves to locate children socially, and plays a major role in their acculturation and socialization. Hence, aspects such as physical and emotional nurturing, as well as i.e. providing conditions for good health and sufficient education, are some explicit functions of families. Furthermore,

the family has an economic role, which is strongly related to its socio-cultural function: Families are the cornerstone for the formation of an economically productive household.³ They strongly influence societies through their specific socio-economic mode of production and have an impact on the reproduction and/or creation of cultural values. Therefore, in responding the situation of young people, major consideration must be given to the family contexts in which they live.

Families today: Major trends and selected facts

The understanding of families and their relationship to societies differs among regions and nations. However, even if a variety of contexts framing the conditions for families need to be considered, four major trends have been identified.⁴



Firstly, the structure of families is changing globally. A shift from extended to nuclear families, as well as an increase in the number of one-person households and the emergence of new forms of unions in some countries, such as unmarried cohabitation, living-apart-together and same-sex-unions, has become evident during the past years. Furthermore, falling fertility rates, migration, and an increase in divorce rates are responsible for smaller-size households.

The household size has fallen to an average of 3.7 persons in Eastern Asia, 4.9 in Southern Asia, to 4.1 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 5.7 in Northern Africa and to 2.8 in developed regions.⁵ Moreover, mainly in the developed regions, today women give birth later in life; in Northern, Southern and Western Europe for example, the age at first birth has risen from 24.2 to 27.3 within the last three decades. Also, remarkably recognizable in all the regions of the world, they have fewer children; in some regions, the fertility rate decreased by almost 50%. Furthermore, particularly for women, the age at first marriage has

increasingly risen (to between the mid to late twenties in the developed regions, and to between the early to mid twenties in other regions of the world) (see table 1).

Secondly, demographic ageing has a strong impact on families today. Lower fertility rates and higher life expectancy contribute to a larger share of older persons within the overall population. Globally, the number of persons aged 60 years or over is expected to almost triple, increasing from 672 million in 2005 to nearly 1.9 billion by 2050. Whereas 6 out of every 10 of those older persons live today in developing countries, by 2050, 8 out of every 10 will do so. In developed countries, 20 per cent of today's population is aged 60 years or over, and by 2050 that proportion is projected to be 32 per cent.

The older population in developed countries has already surpassed the number of children (persons aged 0-14), and by 2050 there will be two older persons for every child. In the developing world, the proportion of the population aged 60 or over is expected to rise from 8 per cent in 2005 to close to 20 per cent by 2050. Support ratios (number of working people in relation to retired persons) have

been declining (United Nations 2005b). Therefore, ageing has a strong impact on families in terms of inter-generational solidarity, housing, social security systems, care-giving and health costs.

Thirdly, a rise in global migration has affected families substantially. Primarily the hope for better economic opportunities has been the main factor for migration. As a result, 185 million people, who equal nearly 3% of the world population, reside outside their country of birth (IOM 2005). Migration of any family member can cause major stress on family life.

In the sending country, this may be because of the absence of one or more family members, and in the receiving country due to cultural, ethnic, racial and religious differences and lack of integration. Equally important is the increasing trend of mainly economical motivated internal migration. East and South Asia for instance have seen a marked increase in internal migration driven by a growth in manufacturing and urbanization (ibid, p. 12).

Predominantly men but increasingly also women are migrating internally to seek employment. Besides, more and more young people have to move for example from rural to urban areas in order to find a better job, and eventually support the families with their remittances. However, migration as a strategy to improve economic conditions may or may not be successful. Nevertheless, it has a strong impact on the individuals and the families concerned.

Finally, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has an impact on families - mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa. More than 40 million people live with HIV/AIDS today; two thirds of them live in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS 2005). The pandemic affects the most productive members of society who often just started their own families: There are 10 million young people infected with HIV worldwide (63% in Sub-Saharan Africa; UNAIDS 2004). Hence, coping with the loss of often young family members (particularly as social and economic



Table 1.

| Region | Age at first marriage a | | | | Age at first birth b | | Total fertility rate c | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|------|-------------|------|----------------------|-------------|------------------------|------|
| | around 1970 | | most recent | | around 1970 | most recent | 1970 | 2000 |
| | F | M | F | M | | | | |
| Northern, Southern and Western Europe | 22.5 | 25.9 | 27.0 | 29.8 | 24.2 | d 27.3 | 2.35 | 1.50 |
| Eastern Europe | 21.6 | 24.8 | d 22.7 | 25.7 | 22.9 | 23.6 | 2.15 | 1.27 |
| Northern Africa and Western Asia | 20.6 | 25.4 | 23.1 | 28.0 | 23.2 | d 23.9 | 6.23 | 3.44 |
| South Asia | 18.5 | 23.4 | 21.6 | 26.6 | .. | 20.9 | 5.75 | 3.18 |
| Eastern Asia | 22.6 | 25.4 | 23.9 | 25.8 | .. | .. | 4.95 | 1.66 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 22.0 | 25.6 | 23.0 | 25.7 | 23.0 | 22.7 | 5.30 | 2.55 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 19.6 | 25.1 | 21.2 | 26.4 | .. | 20.0 | 6.80 | 5.47 |
| Northern America | 21.5 | 23.6 | 26.3 | 28.7 | .. | 25.2 | 2.28 | 1.99 |
| Developed Oceania | 21.5 | 24.3 | 28.2 | 30.3 | 24.0 | 28.0 | 2.77 | 1.78 |
| Developing Oceania | 21.2 | 25.2 | .. | .. | .. | .. | 5.89 | 4.09 |

Notes:

a. Reported here is the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) -- a census-derived proxy indicator for the mean age at first marriage, which is the average length of single life among those who marry before age 50. Regional aggregates of SMAM are weighted averages of national estimates from United Nations (2004) with countries' population size in 1970 and 2000 from United Nations (2005) used as weights.

b. Estimates of the mean age at first birth for some countries are derived from civil registration data. For developing countries lacking a reliable civil registration system, the median age at the birth of the first child for women aged 25-29 at the time of a survey has been used instead of the mean age at first birth. Regional aggregates of the age at first birth are weighted averages of national estimates from United Nations (2004) with countries' population size in 1970 and 2000 from United Nations (2005) used as weights.

c. Total fertility rates are specially computed aggregates from United Nations (2005).

d. Estimated on 40-50 per cent of population. Two dots (..) indicate that data are not available for at least 75 per cent of the region's population.

Sources: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2004). World Fertility Report 2003 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.04.XIII.10); United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2005). World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision, CD-ROM Edition - Comprehensive Dataset (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.05.XIII.11).

resources), as well as the necessity to care for infected relatives and an increasing number of orphans, causes major stress on families and societies.

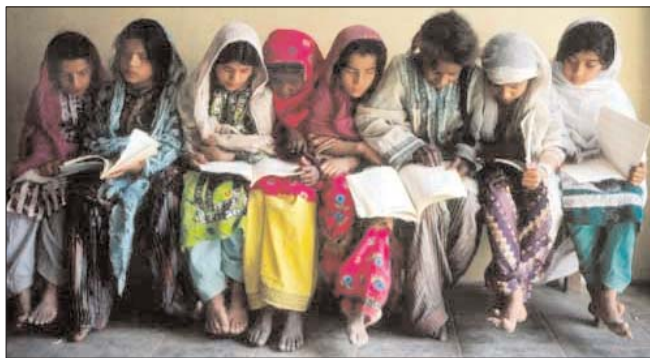
Observations along the WPAY: Resulting challenges and chances for youth

When taking a closer look at the effects that changing families have on young people, one main observation seems to be rather obvious: The issues of "family" and "youth" are strongly interrelated. Changes in the structure of families influence young people's lives but also create new opportunities. Also, the decisions young people make about their own lives have an impact on how families evolve.

Furthermore, this interrelation needs to be considered as multi-dimensional. On the one hand, the four trends can be interpreted as challenging the ability of families to fulfill basic functions of production, reproduction and socialization as well as meeting the needs of family members for health, nutrition, shelter, physical and emotional care, and personal development. Therefore, this has a major impact on young people. On the other hand, the dynamics of changing families can lead to new opportunities with regard to education, participation and employment, especially for youth in developing countries and particularly for girls and young women.

Additionally, although less obvious, it should be mentioned that the changes within family structures, particularly the postponement of marriage and child bearing, as well as the increased repetition of marriage at later age, may well lead to the conclusion that nuptuality and child bearing become a less dominant feature of the transition from adolescence to adulthood and may eventually not be considered youth issues at all. These main remarks should be kept in mind while looking at more specific observations along selected priority areas of the WPAY.

Education and youth participation in decision making. Due to a number of reasons (such as large-scale governmental investments in education and the efforts undertaken by i.e. UNESCO through lobbying for the importance of schooling particularly in developing and least developed countries),



awareness has increased within families that education is a precondition for a healthier and economically more secure life. Therefore, the current generation of youth has to be considered as the best educated ever; more young people go to school than ever before (UNESCO 2006).

In this respect, a stronger recognition of high-quality education as a necessity to develop the ability to fully participate in societies can also be noted. One result of the changing expectations about family formation appears to be that young people actually have more choices and available opportunities with regard to education. However, the increasing opportunities for better education are often contrasted with an inability of families to pay for it because of difficult socio-economical situations. Costs are a main consideration for families deciding whether to send children to school or not; many families still cannot afford school expenses. Other times, youth are forced to quit school, either in order to contribute to the income of the family or to take care of family members.

Employment. Many young people have more choices with regard to their lives and career paths. With economic independence, they are able to move out of their parental home, without getting married.



Many young women in particular can choose whether or not to marry and have children - or the possibility to have both families and careers. Yet the picture is not always optimistic, and it is important to recognize the difficulties young people have to establish themselves outside the parental home or to combine a fulfilling career with having children. The burden falls mainly on women, who sometimes find they can not have both and have to choose one option. Youth employment remains a major concern.

The unemployment rate of young people increased from 11.7% in 1993 to an all-time high of 14.4% (88 million) in 2003 (United Nations 2005a, p. 16). Hence, young people are often forced to delay their transition to independence and self-sufficiency, and to postpone decisions to marry and have children. Too many young people, especially in the developing countries, find no alternative but to earn money in dangerous, health threatening and insufficiently paid day-to-day jobs, mostly in the informal sector, to make a living on the edge of the poverty line.

Hunger and Poverty, health and HIV/AIDS are strongly interrelated with the previously addressed priority areas, and with one another. Poverty affects health and health affects poverty; both weaken the ability of families to provide security for their members. A significant number of families live below the poverty line; more than 200 million young people live on less than \$1 a day, and an estimate of 515 million live on \$2 a day (United Nations 2005a, p. 32). Although they may provide love and nurturing, families in poverty often lack the resources to provide safe environments, education and health care for their children. Without these



advantages young people may find it more difficult or even impossible to escape poverty. Youth who form families of their own at an early age may likewise not be able to provide their children with an adequate socio-economic support system. This can lead to an "intergenerational transmission of poverty". Although young people are generally among the healthiest groups in any society, there are a number of issues of concern regarding their health. Because ensuring good health during youth can have lifelong benefits and because many young people experience with tobacco, alcohol and narcotic drugs, which can cause harm, it is important to raise awareness of youth health issues. Also because youth is the period during which sexual relations are generally initiated, sexual and reproductive health issues are an important youth concern. Since almost half of all new HIV infections are among young people (UNAIDS 2005), this particularly includes awareness and the necessary knowledge to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS - particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, as noted above, young people living in households with members infected by HIV, are forced to take on new roles and responsibilities in their families, such as caring for infected children/siblings and parents. Thus, youth is strongly affected by these problems families are facing.

Intergenerational relations. Declining birth rates in most countries mean that nuclear families are getting smaller. Increasing life expectancy also means that societies are ageing. Projections indicate that during the next fifty years the numbers of older persons will continue to increase while the numbers of children and young people will remain constant or

decline. These demographic projections contain numerous implications, both at the personal (family) level and at the policy level. Within families, relationships are increasingly "vertical" - across generations - rather than "horizontal" - within generations. Today, a young person's family is likely to be composed of parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents, rather than a large number of siblings and cousins of similar age. This may lead to increased levels of reciprocity across generations, for although more households are composed of nuclear families, family relationships across generations continue to be strong. In other words, young people may not live with their grandparents as they did in the past, but they continue to maintain strong ties to them. Support flows in both directions. At the policy level, however, social policies and services often fail to recognize intergenerational solidarity and therefore tend to weaken it, by allowing adversarial relationships to develop between generations: policy discussions often assume that resources devoted to one generation are resources that are taken from another. The ageing of societies needs to be acknowledged as a fact, which is often interpreted as a disadvantage for young people. Given demographic projections and its consequences, this negative perspective can be counter-productive. Thus, it is increasingly important to promote strong intergenerational communication and relations through policies that identify common policy objectives across generations and programmes that support the natural intergenerational solidarity that exists in most families.

Drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. Young people are in a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, which is firstly characterized by efforts to achieve independence from parents and other adults, and secondly by the tendency "to find themselves, taking increased risks, making choices that may involve trade-offs, and taking advantage of opportunities that may lead to uncertain outcomes" (United Nations, 2005a, p. 137). Thus, young people (particular those, who live in difficult circumstances) are at risk of drug abuse and delinquency (which highly correlates with alcohol and drug abuse). Young people in all countries may be confronted with problems such as divorce or unemployment within



their families. Youth in developing countries, are more likely to face hunger, poverty and under-nutrition, as well as separation of the family due to migration of family members to cities or foreign places of work. As discussed above, healthy families provide youth with stable support through reliable social relationships, safe accommodation, and economic resources covering basic needs. Therefore, problems affecting those functions of the family have a direct impact on young people in this sensitive phase of life. Due to the previously discussed changes in structure as well as to social, economical and physical stress factors, many families can not fulfill their role sufficiently. They are therefore often not able to prevent youth from drug abuse and delinquency.

Girls and young women are particularly affected by changing family structures but also influence them. Gender stereotyping and discrimination may prevent them from fully participating in society, while keeping them entrenched in traditional family roles and patterns (United Nations 2003b, p. 12).



Increasingly, however, girls and young women are able to decide for themselves whether and when to marry, and their choices affect structural changes of the family. As noted, more and more of them marry later and have fewer children. Furthermore, the importance and value of educating girls has been increasingly recognized in most countries of the world.

Thus, they have received expanded opportunities in education and the workplace, resulting in larger economic independence and more personal freedom independent from pressures of family members. Increased educational and economic opportunities for girls and women can therefore accelerate gender equality, arguably most profoundly among younger generations of women. On the other hand, many girls and young women continue to experience disadvantage from certain challenges families are facing.

The number of households headed by women is increasing. While this may be a sign of emancipation, it is also more likely that women are forced to take on the responsibility for the social and

economic well-being of a family, and are often solely responsible for earnings. This could be due to a variety of reasons, such as widowhood, forced or economically motivated migration or marital instability (United Nations 2003b, p. 50f.). These women face the burden of raising children and meeting the basic economic needs of their families, and are often disadvantaged with regard to quality of education and ability to earn sufficient income. It should also be noted that girls and young women in most families are still assumed to be the "care givers", providing support and nurturing to family members in need. With the ageing of societies and the continuing heavy toll of HIV/AIDS, women and girls are likely to continue to be faced with increased burdens of care - which certainly limits their opportunities in terms of education and employment - unless families and societies share family responsibilities more equitably and overcome long-standing gender stereotyping.

Concluding remarks

This brief analysis has demonstrated that the issues of "family" and "youth" are complex and strongly interdependent. Since youth issues cannot be understood without taking the situation of families into account, addressing issues related to youth also means examining the situation of families. A young person is a member of a family, and the family is one of the main variables shaping a young person's life. Certainly, on the other hand, the situation of young people also has a strong impact on families, for example, with respect to changing family structures due to increased levels of education of young women.

Policies and research addressing youth should consider the influence of family and reflect the changing family context. Otherwise, they miss a major context variable affecting young people, may fail to recognize their comprehensive situation and context, and may therefore not meet their needs effectively. Every young person belongs to a family, and every person has his or her own very personal understanding of family. Effectively addressing the needs of youth and families means making efforts to support families to be able to respond to emerging challenges and changes in society.

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equivalent to a family; these are different concepts. The difference between the household and the family is that a household may consist of only one person but a family must contain at least two members and that the members of a multi-person household need not be related to each other, while the members of a family must be related. Moreover, a family cannot comprise more than one household; a household, however, can contain more than one family, or one or more families together with one or more non-related persons, or it can consist entirely of non-related persons (United Nations Statistics Division, <http://unstats.un.org>).

4. See for example the UNDESA report "Major Trends Affecting Families" (2003)

5. See <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/majortrends.htm> (website of the UN Programme on the Family)



Contact

The United Nations Programme on Youth of the Division for Social Policy and Development is located within the Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) at the United Nations Secretariat in New York.

The Programme acts as a focal point within the United Nations system on matters relating to young people, particularly in relation to the priority areas identified in the World Programme of Action for Youth. Specifically, the Programme aims to:

- Enhance awareness of the global situation of youth and to increase recognition of their rights and aspirations;
- Promote national youth policies, programmes, and coordinating mechanisms as integral parts of social and economic development, in cooperation with both governmental and non-governmental organizations; and
- Strengthen the participation of youth in decisionmaking processes at all levels in order to increase their contribution to national development and international cooperation.

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Notes

1. The ten priority areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 50/81 of 1995, include the following: Education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure-time activities, girls and young women and youth participation in decision making. Five additional priority areas identified by the General Assembly in its resolution 58/133 of 2003 are as follows: Globalization, information and communication technology, HIV/AIDS, youth and armed conflict, intergenerational relations.

2. See for example: Allan (1999), Coltrane et al (2000), Newman/Grauerholz (2002).

3. A household is a socio-economic unit that consists of individuals who live together (referring restrictively to private households, consisting of one or several persons who are members of the household, as opposed to collective households such as barracks or convents). A household consists of a group of individuals who share housing accommodations and their principal meals (IUSSP, 1982). Statistically, a household is not