



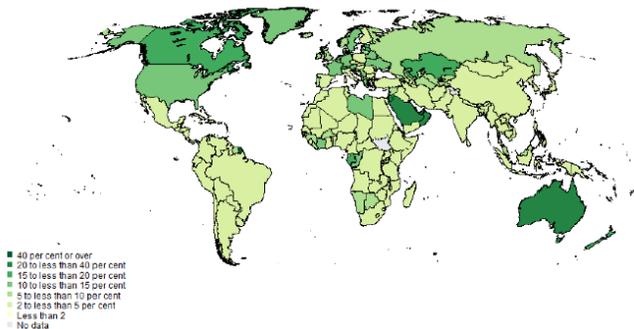
# Migration Trends and Families

## INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024, UNDESA supports research and awareness-raising activities on the impact of current megatrends including technological, demographic, urbanization, migration and climate change trends on families. In 2022, migration (along with urbanization) and its impact on families is the topic under consideration. As migration-related issues are visible throughout the 2030 Agenda and elsewhere at the United Nations forum, focusing on migrants and their families through effective policies grows in importance and deserves more attention.

## MIGRANTS AND REMITTANCES

Figure 1: International migrants as percentage of total population, 2019, UNDESA



Map data source: Geospatial Information Section, United Nations

Disclaimer: The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

The number of international migrants has been steadily rising from 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020, constituting 2.8 per cent and 3.6 per cent of the global population respectively. In 2020, women accounted for 135 million of migrants (3.5 per cent of the world's female population) while men accounted for 146 million (3.7 per cent of the global male population). Remittances are a primary form of income for many families in countries of origin and a financial safety net for their members but they are

### Key messages

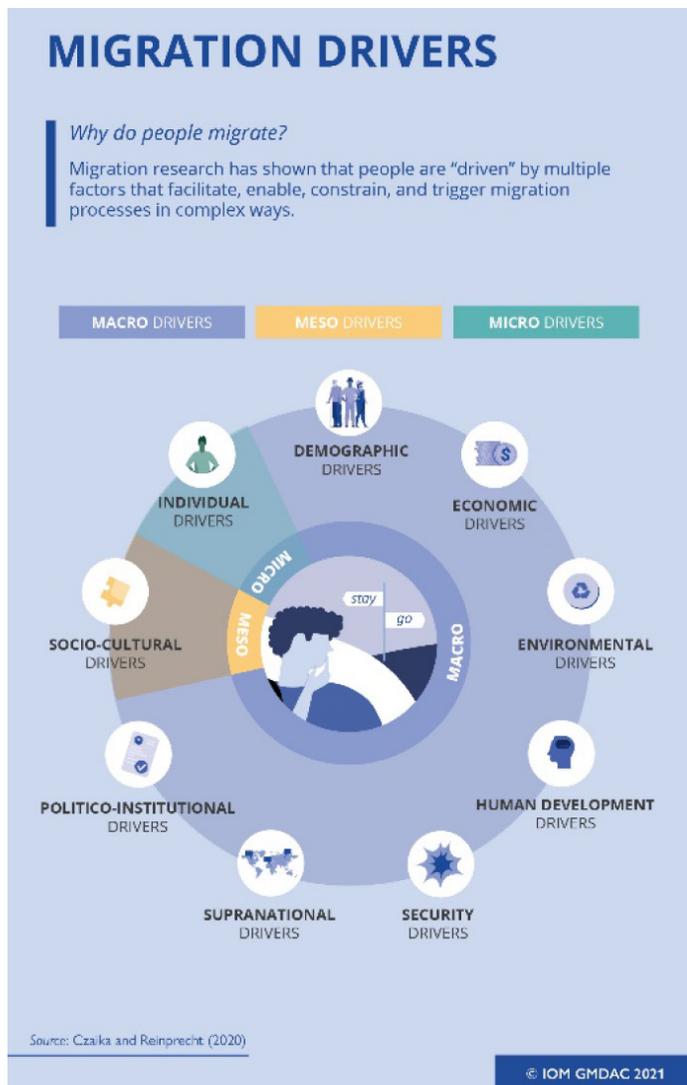
- » The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep-rooted inequalities around the world, at the same time demonstrating that migrants constitute the big part of essential frontline workers and their remittances contribute to global development.
- » It is indispensable to incorporate a family perspective into migration policy analysis. Since families socialize and provide economically and emotionally for the next generation, they should be seen as essential for migrants' integration into new societies. Thus, policies facilitating family reunification, social protection and intergenerational support are key in successful integration.
- » Migrants need various types of support in addition to economic assistance. They need access to quality education, health, including mental health, housing and other social assistance helping not just individuals but families supporting their cohesion. As transnational motherhood becomes a global phenomenon, policies supporting migrant women and facilitating reunification with their children are key.
- » As global data on migration is fragmented and incomplete, it is difficult to design policies supporting well migrant families and their members, especially children, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities. Increased availability, quality, and comparability of data disaggregated by migratory status, as well as of the use of different types of data sources, such as statistical descriptors and qualitative evidence, supplemented by case studies at local level, are indispensable for evidence-based policymaking.

also critical for economies, accounting for over 10 per cent of GDP in many low-and-middle-income countries. Remittances have been associated with improving human development outcomes across areas such as poverty, health, education, and gender equality. As of the mid-1990s, international remittances have significantly surpassed official development assistance (ODA) levels defined as government aid aiming at promoting the economic development and welfare of developing countries. Remittances to low-and middle-income countries reached an all-time high of \$589 billion in 2021 and exceeded the sum of foreign direct investments (FDI) and overseas development

assistance. Defying initial forecasts of the COVID-19 impacts, remittances registered just a 1.7 per cent drop in 2020 and are projected to increase by 7.3 per cent in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

## MIGRATION, INEQUALITY AND THE 2030 AGENDA

Figure 2: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/family-migration>



Migration, linked to globalization, illustrates economic disparities between different regions as well as rising inequalities between societies, with migrants relocating in search of better economic opportunities. Thus, in the 2030 Agenda, migration features under SDG10 (reduced inequalities), target 10.7, stipulating facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. Other targets within different SDGs note labour migration, remittances and migration data issues. Such visibility of migration in the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need for support of migrants through adequate policies and investment in data gathering. As

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development, Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2022. (New York: United Nations, 2022), available from: <https://developmentfinance.un.org/fsdr2022>

global data on migration is fragmented, incomplete and rarely disaggregated by age, sex, and disability, it is difficult to design policies supporting well migrant families and their members, especially children, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities. Increased availability, quality, and comparability of data on migrants and migration, obtained from different data sources, including at local levels, would facilitate the design and implementation of effective migration policies. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration has recognized some of such policies noting the need to facilitate “access to procedures for family reunification for migrants at all skills levels through appropriate measures that promote the realization of the right to family life and the best interests of the child, including by reviewing and revising applicable requirements, such as on income, language proficiency, length of stay, work authorization, and access to social security and services.”

As the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep-rooted inequalities around the world, at the same time demonstrating that in some countries, migrants constitute the bulk of essential frontline workers<sup>2</sup> and their remittances contribute to global development, urgent action is needed to promote fair migration policies.

## MIGRATION AND FAMILY LIFE

Migration is often driven by multiple factors, including socio-cultural drivers such as family. Importantly, migration itself is mostly a family decision and even when the migration decision is taken unilaterally, most migrants have a sense of family obligation and contribute to their families left behind, mainly through remittances as noted above. Both internal (mostly rural to urban) and international migration impacts family life. Individual family members leave behind their families embedded in social networks and face challenges rebuilding or creating new social networks in host countries. Labour migration often puts strain on families and contributes to family breakdown. Intergenerational relations between parents, grandparents and children as well as spouses and siblings are often negatively impacted as well. For instance, a growing phenomenon of ‘left behind children’ when young adults migrate to urban areas and leave their children in care of grandparents is likely to lead to intergenerational disagreements over parenting styles and expectations.

Irregular migration poses great risks and dangers to unaccompanied minors, who are often abused and exploited during irregular migration journeys to work in another country or to reunify with parents who migrated. Most countries are set up to only deal with a very small number of cases and large inflows of unaccompanied minors need special facilities, guardians, and create enormous challenges for the educational system.<sup>3</sup>

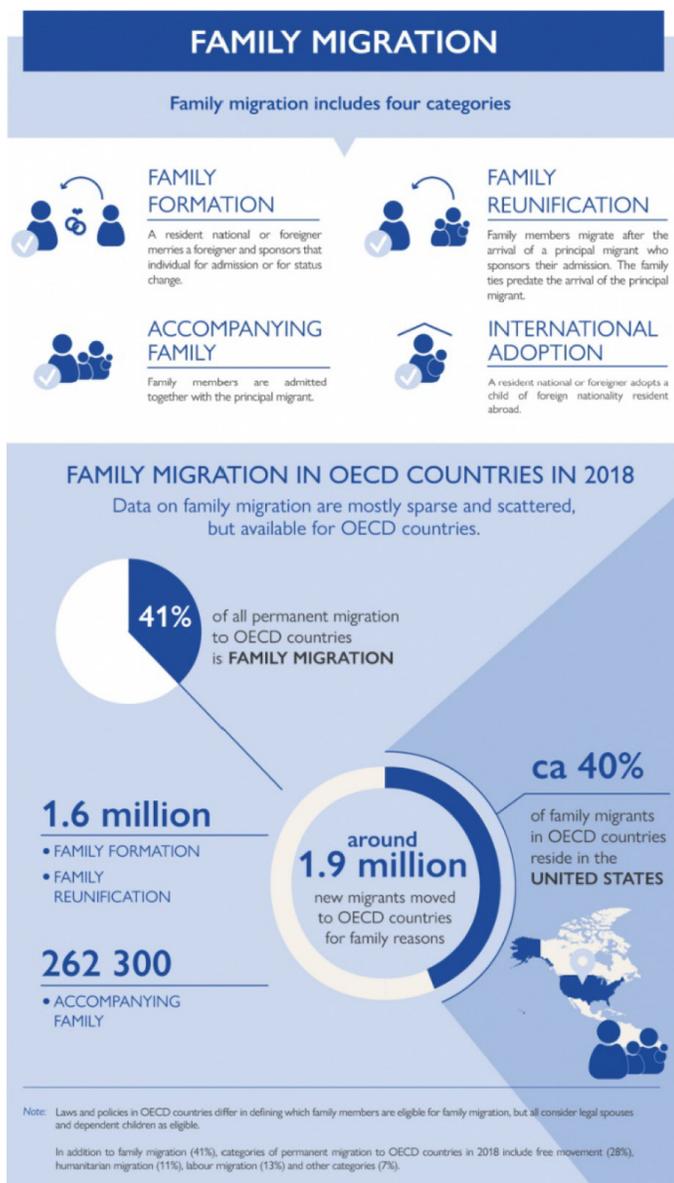
<sup>2</sup> For instance, 69 per cent of all immigrants in the United States labour force are essential workers. Data from Center for Migration Studies available at: <https://cmsny.org/data-on-essential-workers-recent-publications-and-tables/>

<sup>3</sup> Sherif Trask, Bahira (2022). Migration, Urbanization, and the Family Dimension (background paper prepared for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, Division for Inclusive Social Development, forthcoming)

Contemporary migration has been impacted by technological changes as well as geopolitical and environmental transformations. For instance, thanks to advancements in transportation and communication technologies, families can stay connected and multi-local families can maintain family relations. Countries, however, increasingly tend to restrict family reunification and prevent migrants from having family members visit or reside with them. Many countries tightened their borders and established restrictive laws to deter migrants from entering and obtaining legal status, with COVID-19 travel restrictions making family reunification even more difficult. Such policies have led to household fragmentation and put into sharper focus inequalities associated with international migration.

## FAMILY MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Figure 3: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/family-migration>



Notably, notwithstanding regional variations, family is the major driver of migration today. Family migration refers to family reunification, family formation, accompanying family members of workers as well as family adoption. Data on family migration is limited but available for OECD countries indicating that in 2018 around 1.9 million migrants moved to OECD countries for family reasons and family migration constitutes 41 per cent of total migration into OECD countries. Although family migration increased in most OECD countries from 2014 to 2018, in some countries, family migration diminished due to the shrinking of family reunification programmes with several countries imposing restrictions.<sup>4</sup>

Transnational families, whose members are physically separated between two or more nation-states but maintain close ties and relationships, are a growing phenomenon with the bulk of research focusing on transnational families in host countries (as opposed to those left behind) and transnational motherhood.

Historically, migration was seen as a male phenomenon resulting in the weakening of ties with family and community. Nowadays, however, with the expansion of jobs in manufacturing and service sectors, women account for 48 per cent of all international migrants. Transnational motherhood, characterized by mother-child separation is becoming more common with young mothers leaving their children with mostly female family members in search of economic opportunities lacking in their countries of origin. Whereas most migrant women obtain domestic service and care work legally, stricter immigration policies have led to more women taking on service sector jobs through illegal means which could lead to abuse and exploitation.

Transnational mothers take on the breadwinning role thus redefining gender roles and struggling to be perceived as good mothers and meet the social expectations ingrained in societies they leave behind. They tend to send remittances to other females in their families (rather than their husbands) to support their children's wellbeing and education. Such economic support replaces physical and emotional support with many left behind children struggling emotionally and psychologically. Such arrangements are referred to as global care chains linking migrants and families left behind through financial obligations and unpaid care work. Studies on transnational motherhood indicate that women find it difficult to justify and negotiate their parental roles at home and abroad. Little is known, however, about broader impacts of transnational motherhood on families left behind.<sup>5</sup> In this context, it should be emphasized that there is an urgent need for a more equal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women, so that fathers/male guardians take more equal share of the parental work.

<sup>4</sup> Migration Data Portal available at: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/family-migration>

<sup>5</sup> Sherif Trask, (2022).

Focusing research on transnational family units and not only its members is essential in order to understand how family members organize their economic and social obligations and continue to care for each other. This can lead to more strategic policy and programme planning.

## CURRENT MIGRATION POLICIES

The migrant integration policy index (MIPEX) identifies the following categories: labour market mobility, education, political participation, family reunification, access to nationality, health, permanent residence, anti-discrimination. Integration policies in 56 MIPEX countries are, on average, only halfway favourable with as many obstacles as opportunities for migrants to settle and integrate in host countries. Immigrants mostly enjoy basic human rights and long-term security but do not have equal access to opportunities to participate in all areas of life. On average, migrants in top destination countries for immigration, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States benefit more from equal rights and opportunities while immigrants in the Middle East and Asia face many obstacles in most dimensions of integration policy.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, current policies in place are only to some extent favourable for promoting family reunification and integration. Reunited families tend to benefit from a secure status and basic rights but disagreements persist about what defines a family and what the conditions of reunification should entail. For instance, many Western European countries restrict eligibility to nuclear families and require transnational family members to have high incomes and pass language or cultural tests. High-skilled family members are favoured while the most vulnerable such as those in need of social protection are ignored. Moreover, in the current political climate, transnational families face an uncertain future and family reunification is regarded as a controversial issue with increased restrictions on reunification put in place in several countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

Migration policies and programmes should reflect the reality that migration is not an individual phenomenon. Family migration is a driver of overall migration and as such family needs should be recognized in overall policymaking. When migrating individually, migrants are still part of families, and their migration decisions are largely motivated by the desire to improve the wellbeing of other family members, especially children. Rather than being perceived as victims, however, they should be seen as capable and active agents of their own lives, eager to become productive and economically independent citizens.

Better policies and better data are needed to facilitate orderly migration and recognize the contributions of migrants. To create supportive policies and programmes, more research is needed. A

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid