

**Protection of the Family- UNFPA submission**

**Introduction**

More than twenty years ago, at the [Cairo International Conference on Population and Development](http://www.unfpa.org/public/cache/offonce/home/sitemap/icpd;jsessionid=E5DCDEA8EF4D0430967988B1F4B93D2A.jahia01), the world community recognized that families, in their various forms, should be strengthened and enjoy comprehensive protection and support. With well-planned, gender-sensitive, human rights-based policies, families can play a crucial role in an inclusive and sustainable development that leaves no one behind without discrimination. The ICPD further, is a landmark agreement among nation states to empower each individual, men and women alike, to decide if and when they want to form family and to have the means by which to plan the size of the family they choose.

The twenty year review of the Programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development completed in 2014 and reflected in the UN Secretary General global report entitled *Framework of Actions for the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference of Population and Development Beyond 2014* shows remarkable shifts in the composition of households, with a rise around the world in the number of people living on their own, and more women who head households. The review process also noted the diversity in the forms of family and called upon appropriate public policies responses, responsive legal frameworks, and support including financial support, facilitating work-life reconciliation providing quality early childhood education and quality of care for both children and elderly.

The report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is an excellent opportunity to recognize these changes and call for new approaches and policies that are friendly to all families and will help combat poverty, advance gender equality, ensure work-family balance, and promote intergenerational solidarity.

In contexts of poverty and high fertility levels, the promotion of policies and programmes that aim to advance gender equality and the empowerment of the most vulnerable family members can harnesses a demographic dividend that will accelerate an inclusive economic growth and lift families out of poverty.

**Evolving and diverse family forms**

The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) called on States to develop policies to provide better social and economic support to families, acknowledge the rising cost of child-rearing, and provide assistance to the rising number of single- parent households. The Programme of Action recognized that the family could take various forms. Since then, there has been a rise in single-parent house- holds, a growing instability of marital unions in many societies, and a growing heterogeneity of household structures and living arrangements, including the one-person, single- parent, child-headed and grandparent-headed households that characterize many families today. Also, a growing number of countries have adopted legislation extending family protections to same-sex couples in union or recognizing their right to marry.

Hence, the principal objectives of the Programme of Action — to ensure that families and households have secure homes and that parents have the opportunity to give due attention to the well-being of their households, especially their children — need to be understood in a context in which households are growing increasingly more diverse in structure, a rising number of persons live alone, and children worldwide are more likely to be raised by a single parent, or a grand-parent.

Single parents with children represent a significant proportion of all households in countries, in all regions. The highest prevalence is observed in Latin America and the Caribbean. Among the countries with available data, over 10 per cent of households are composed of single parents with children in 7 of 12 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 5 of 17 countries in Europe and 3 of 11 countries in Africa. However, these proportions are likely to be underestimates, as they do not include families of single parents with children who may co-reside with other family or non-family members in non- nuclear households (i.e., extended or composite households).

The majority of single parents living with their children are women, ranging from slightly less than three quarters in the Philippines, Bermuda, the Republic of Korea, Turkey and Japan to more than 90 per cent in Rwanda and Malawi.

As trends in divorce are upward in several demographically large countries (India, China), and as the social acceptance of unmarried childbearing appears to be increasing, it is difficult to anticipate a forthcoming decline in the proportion of single-parent families.

The ICPD Global Survey conducted in 2014 showed that three aspects of social protection systems relevant to the well-being of families and households were addressed in the previous five years (from 2008 to 2013) by close to 80 per cent of countries: increasing efforts to ensure health, education and welfare services (85 per cent); supporting and assisting vulnerable families (84 per cent); and providing effective assistance to families and individuals (82 per cent). However, the global survey also indicated that providing financial and social protection schemes to single-parent families was less likely to have been addressed by Governments in the previous five years (61 per cent), despite the rise in the proportion of such households.

**Non-discrimination and gender equality**

Recognizing the lived reality that families are diverse is crucial in devising effective public policies for the family. Policies must be attentive to the specificities and needs of different family forms and sensitive to the reality that family members belonging to certain forms of families not conforming to the traditional or conventional one in a given sociocultural setting can be at particular risk of stigma and social exclusion.

Furthermore, laws, policies and programmes protecting the family must take cognizance of the unequal power dynamics that reside within families, which are often the reflection of discriminatory gender and social norms. In these contexts, some family members, in particular women and girls and family members with disabilities can find their decision making capacity denied, and are more vulnerable to violence and abuse. Intimate partner violence, the most common form of violence against women, usually takes place within the realm of the family. In certain settings, girls are subjected - at the hands of family members - to female genital mutilation; to child, early and forced marriages, and to so called “honour” crimes.

Furthermore, across the world, children’s rights are violated, and thus the family’s legitimacy and integrity eroded, when adult family members cause, tolerate or turn a blind eye to certain cases such as incest, sexual exploitation and abuse, or child labour. While families often care for and provide affection for family members in vulnerable situations, in other cases families can become sites where children living with disabilities, girls or women suffering from fistula, women unwilling or unable to meet their family’s expectations for child rearing, and family members whose sexual orientation and gender identity does not conform to parental expectations are ostracised from the community or simply abused.

**Families’ contribution to sustainable development**

When families, in their different forms, are grounded on universal human rights values of mutual respect, solidarity, equality and individual agency those families are better off, their communities are stronger, and we are all closer to the sustainable, more just and equitable future we seek.

One way UNFPA supports families to become a contributor towards the achievement of sustainable development and economic prosperity is through the development of social and economic policies that accelerate a **demographic dividend**. Mainly but not exclusively in Africa and South Asia a potential dividend for development is observed when fertility declines and a proportionately large young population is on the cusp of working age. The economic benefit can arise when a population has a relatively large proportion of working age people coupled with a history of effective investment in their empowerment, education and employment. These investments will enable young family members to achieve their capabilities, grow wealthier and contribute to collective development.

UNFPA is working to enable a demographic dividend beyond just having a favorable age structure. A dividend can only be realized if governments ensure the empowerment of girls and women, provide universal and high quality education that is tailored to new economic opportunities, and expand secure employment.

As evidenced in countries that have already benefited from a demographic dividend, channelling public investments towards the empowerment of adolescent and young family members by enabling them to enjoy their right to education, the right to autonomous decision making, protection from violence and abuse, and access to sexual and reproductive health is a critical success factor to accelerate a country’s demographic transformation which in turn will be triggering more prosperous societies in the long run.

**To conclude**

The protection of the family as the basic unit in society rests upon the implementation of policies geared towards unlocking the full potential of all family members as empowered rights holders. The promotion of gender equality is a bare minimum in that equation. Indeed, the pathway for gender equality in social, economic and public life must start at the household level by empowering parents to break the cycle of inequality and female subordination that reproduces from generation to generation. Families should therefore provide a nurturing environment for the realization of the rights of all its members. Above all, people – particularly women and girls – must be able to freely, safely and responsibly choose the paths their lives take, as they move from education to employment to household and family formation, should they wish to do so. With a view to ensuring that families, in all their diverse forms, are effectively supported, governments are encouraged to:

* **Adopt measures that enable parents to reconcile family and work responsibilities**, and housing, education and social support policies that recognize the growing diversity of household arrangements. Such measures include health insurance and social security, paid parental and maternity leave, flexible working schedules and day-care centres.
* **Review and repeal national laws that discriminate**, either directly or indirectly, against certain forms of families and their members. This also requires that discriminatory practices are not tolerated.
* **Invest in the education and health of adolescents and youth, including in their sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing.** Education on human rights, gender equality and sexuality should be part of a curriculum that will empower women and girls, to make informed choices and be active agents of their own development; and when time arises, to have the means to plan their families and lives.
* **Promote the engagement of men and boys in gender equality**. One interesting programme supported by UNFPA is the “Husbands schools” in Niger. This initiative engages men at the community level to promote sexual and reproductive health, including family planning and maternal health, which traditionally was perceived as a women’s affair. The issue is not only to discuss and debate those issues, but also to make husbands aware of their own responsibility in being supportive partners, particularly participation in unpaid care work and other household responsibilities.
* **Promote integral responses to violence against women and girls and harmful practices at all levels**, particularly in contexts where violent behaviour and harmful practices tend to be justified on the basis of social norms and patriarchal systems that defend the subordination of women to men. Government response should require a combination of legal, policy, programming, protection, public awareness and education measures.
* **Partner with a diversity of agents of change at the community level**, including local associations, women’s groups, youth groups and traditional and religious leaders, in the promotion of human rights and gender equality. While legal and policy measures are important government responsibilities, the development of this type of partnerships will ensure that the principles of human rights and gender equality are effectively owned by the communities. For instance, UNFPA experience on ending female genital mutilation through the engagement with the communities has led to thousands of communities declaring the abandonment of the practice in several countries in West and Central Africa.
* **Adopt special supportive measures** in favour of families comprising family members with disabilities, including, inter alia, access to health, education, vocational training and job opportunities.