



Families Worldwide

The majority of children begin their social life within a family environment. Some people narrowly define “The Family” as a household with two parents (one male, one female), joined by legal marriage, and their children. However, the reality of humanity is that families cannot be defined in such a narrow fashion. Families take on diverse forms, often include extended family members and can be headed by aunts, uncles, grandparents, men or women and sometimes children. Families constantly change over time and according to social context. In most cases families provide a secure and caring environment; however, they can also be a place where some of their members, notably women and children, are abused, and where children’s rights are violated by parental decisions. Therefore, it is essential that policymakers recognize three important points:

1. **Families are diverse.**
2. **Abuse and violations can occur within families.**
3. **Many children grow up or spend part of their childhood outside of a family unit.**

“As society undergoes constant cultural, political and social change, so are families becoming increasingly diverse. The obligation to protect families, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, requires societies and States to recognize and respect that diversity. It requires them to help every family ensure the well-being and dignity of all its members, whatever their choices in life.”

*Kofi Annan, 15 May 1999
(International Day of the Family)*

Families Are Diverse

Referring to ‘The Family’ without acknowledging diversity can stigmatize certain family forms. For example:

Informal unions:

- Between 9 and 24 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years in Uganda, Cameroon, Ghana, Madagascar, Namibia and Rwanda, and upwards of 55 percent of women in Mozambique, are in informal or consensual unions. In Latin America, rates of union range from 13 percent in Brazil to 36 percent in the Dominican Republic.
- Cohabitation among young women aged 20 to 24 years varies from as low as 5 percent in Lithuania to 22 percent in Spain and upwards of 60 percent in Austria and New Zealand.

Partnerships between two people of the same sex:

- In many situations across the globe, same-sex couples and children living with them are discriminated against. However, national or local legislation increasingly recognizes same-sex unions in many countries, including Canada, Denmark, Iceland, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, Hungary, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United States.

Diversity in households:

- In 1998, almost one third of all families with children in the United States and 22 percent in Canada were headed by single-parent families, 80 percent of which were led by women. In Europe, an average of 13 percent of children are living with only one parent.
- Female-headed households account for 42 percent of all households in Southern Africa, 10-24 percent in Asia, 22 percent in Latin America, and 30 percent in developed regions. Over a quarter of these women are aged 60 or older. Migration for employment has increased the number of households headed by one adult.
- Over 30 percent of all newborn babies in Costa Rica do not have a legally identified father: either the father is unknown or refuses to take any responsibility—economic or otherwise—for the child

- An estimated 45,000 households in Rwanda are headed by children, 90 percent of them girls.
- The HIV pandemic has resulted in many children becoming heads of households.

Abuse and Violations of the Rights of Individuals Can Happen Within Families

Measures to enhance the status of the family—which often treat the family as sacrosanct—must acknowledge the existence of physical and emotional abuse in families, including sexual abuse, incest, marital rape and forced marriages. Families do not always offer a safe and secure space for their members. For example:

Early and Forced Marriages:

- Parental authority and consent to marriage may override a daughter’s choice. Many young girls are married off unwillingly, often to men many years their senior. Forced marriage of young girls to older males leaves girls with little or no economic or social power.
- In Bangladesh a demographic and health survey in 1996-7 reported that 5 percent of 10-14 year olds were married.
- In Kebbi state, northern Nigeria, the average age of marriage for girls is just over 11 years, against a national average of 17 years.
- In rural Northern Ethiopia, average age of marriage is 13.5 years for girls and 19.5 years for boys.

Child Sexual Abuse:

- Girls are most vulnerable to sexual abuse by male relatives, neighbors and school teachers. In urban Zimbabwe half of reported rape cases involve girls less than 15 years of age.
- 53 percent of Guatemalan street children interviewed reported having been abused by a family member.
- A study in the United States found that 61 percent of a sample of 450 girls had been sexually abused, the majority by a family member.
- Children in abusive households suffer from the effects of violence, whether or not they themselves are physically abused.
- Child prostitution is a multi-billion dollar industry. Nearly one million children in Asia provide sexual services to adults.

Many Children Grow Up Outside of a Family

Children may be unaccompanied or displaced because of war, migration, abandonment, abuse or neglect. They may also be orphans or runaways.

- UNICEF estimates that there are 20 million street children in Asia, 10 million in Africa and the Middle East, and upwards of 40 million in Latin America.
- Unaccompanied refugee children are among the most vulnerable refugees and require special assistance and care. At any one time there may be up to 100,000 children who are separated from their families in Western Europe alone. As many as 20,000 of these children request asylum every year in Europe, North America and Oceania.

Relying on “The Family” as the only unit for policymaking fundamentally ignores these children and their specific vulnerabilities.

KEY ACTIONS

Governments and civil society must:

- Enact policies that reflect and respect the diversity of family forms worldwide. Stigmatizing people who are divorced, punishing single parents, casting stepfamilies as less-than-perfect, shaming unmarried couples, discriminating against same-sex couples and ignoring the needs of children living on the street are not positive approaches for supporting children.
- Enact policies that place the best interests of the child at the forefront. Children need parents and communities to support, educate, inform and empower them in order to realize their rights and meet their full potential.
- Adopt measures to protect children and young people trapped in abusive families.
- Ensure that unaccompanied children, whether refugees or street children, are given the emotional and material support and the legal help they need.

International Commitments

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 18 recognises the principle that both parents are responsible for the upbringing of their children and that the best interest of the child will be the basic concern of parents. The State is to assist parents or guardians in this responsibility, and to take measures to ensure that the children of working parents benefit from childcare services and facilities.

Article 19 recognises the right of the child to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, guardians or any other person.

Article 20 states that children have the right to receive special protection and assistance from the State when deprived of family environment and to be provided with alternative care, such as foster placement, kafalah of Islamic law, adoption or institutional placement.

Article 34 requires the State to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, including prostitution and involvement in pornography.

Article 2 outlines the obligation of States to ensure that children are not discriminated against on the basis of the status, activities, opinions or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians or family members.

International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo 1994, Programme of Action

Paragraphs 5.1, 5.2 (a), 5.8, 5.9 Recognizes that various forms of the family exist in different social, cultural, legal and political systems, and that families have different forms and functions.

Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, Platform for Action Paragraph 29 In different cultural, political and social systems, various forms of the family exist.

The diversity of families was reaffirmed at the ICPD Plus Five and the Beijing Plus Five reviews in 1999 and 2000.

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