

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002,¹ adopted in 2002 at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, called for research on the advantages and disadvantages of different living arrangements for older persons, including familial co-residence and independent living, in different cultures and settings. Up until now, even the most basic demographic descriptions of the current living arrangements of older people have not been available for many countries.

Populations everywhere are growing older, and the number of persons aged 60 years or over is expected nearly to triple by 2050. Not only are more people surviving to reach old age, but those who attain old age are living longer than ever before. As a consequence, families comprising three or even four generations have become common, considerably expanding the alternatives for living arrangements of older persons. At the same time, long-term shifts in economies and societies are transforming many aspects of day-to-day family life, including traditions favouring lifelong co-residence of parents and children as a basic means of ensuring support for young and old.

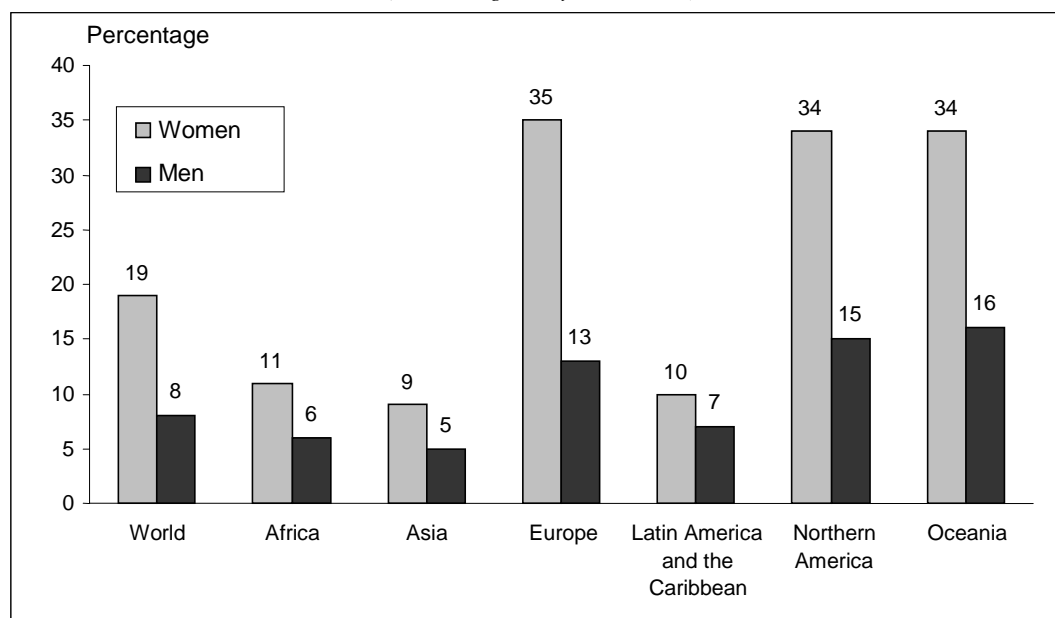
The present publication provides the first global survey and analysis of the patterns and trends in the living arrangements of older persons. Comparable data are presented for more than 130 countries. The publication analyses the demographic, social and economic correlates of living arrangements of people aged 60 years or over as well, focusing on co-residence with family members, solitary living and the institutionalization of older persons.

Among the findings reported are the following:

1. **About one out of every seven older persons, approximately 90 million people, live alone.** The large majority of these people, about 60 million, are women. Worldwide, 19 per cent of older women live alone, compared with 8 per cent of older men (see figure I).
2. **There is a widespread trend towards independent forms of living arrangements among older persons.** The trend towards living alone or with spouse only is in accordance with a general preference for independent living in economically developed countries, and there is a growing preference for separate residence in some developing countries as well.
3. **The reason that more older women than older men live alone is that older women are less likely to be married.** Worldwide, about 45 per cent of women aged 60 years or over are currently married, while among men the comparable proportion is approximately 80 per cent. Among the unmarried, however, more men than women live alone in most countries.
4. **While the most common arrangement in the developed countries is for older persons to live apart from their children, a large majority of older persons in the developing countries live with their children.** Around three quarters of older persons in the less developed regions are living with a child or grandchild. In European countries, by contrast, the average is about 25 per cent (see figures II and III).

¹ *Report of the Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid, 8-12 April 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.02.IV.4), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

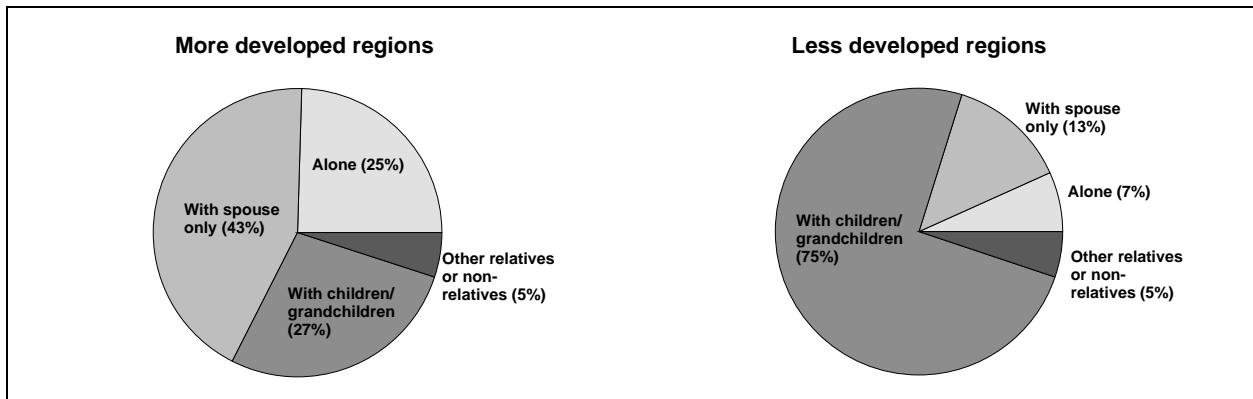
Figure I. Proportion of older men and of older women living alone, for the world and major areas
(Persons aged 60 years or over)



NOTE: Based on the population in households.

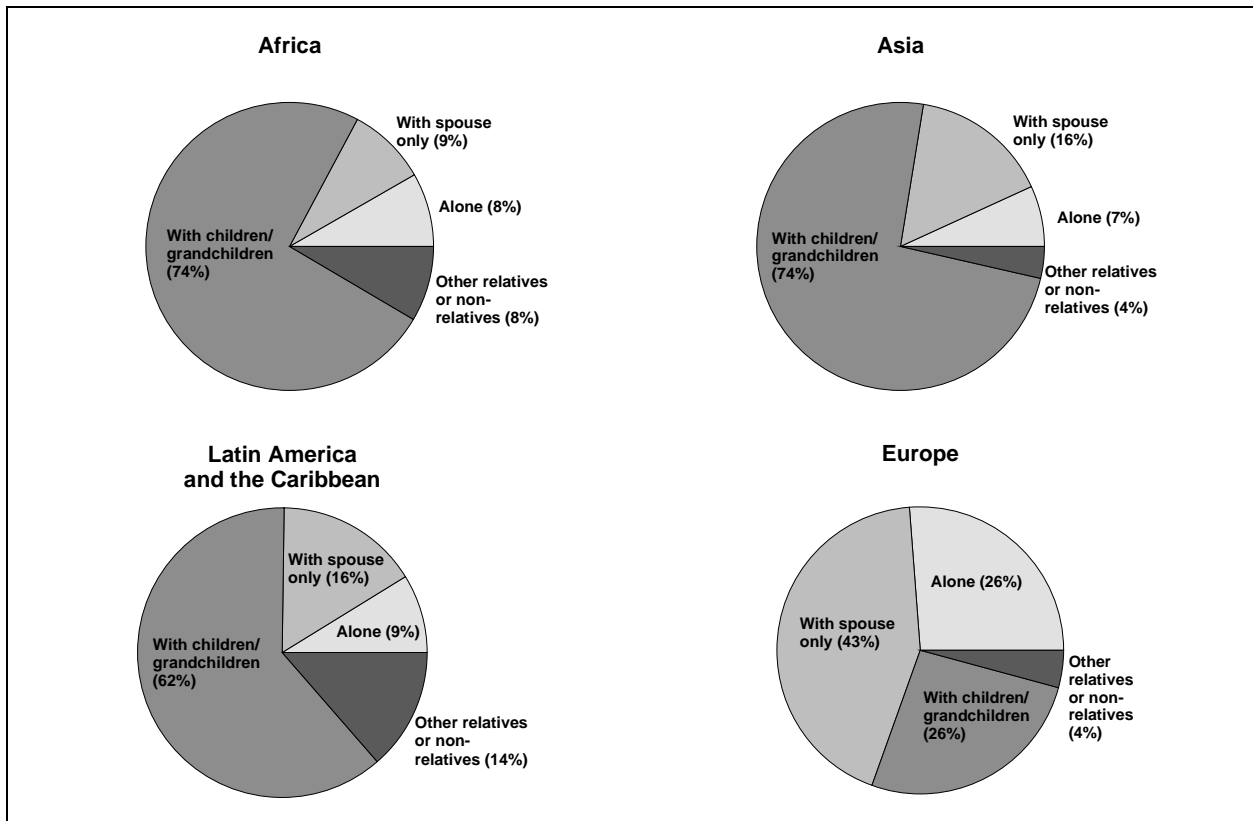
5. **In many developed countries, institutional living has become an option for older persons who have difficulty managing on their own or who need specialized medical services.** The question how to provide long-term care for older persons who need assistance, and the escalating costs of providing such care, have become pressing policy concerns in developed countries. In some countries, policies promoting “ageing in place” in the community appear to have halted or reversed earlier trends towards higher rates of institutionalization.
6. **In many of the countries with high rates of HIV infection, the proportion of older persons living with grandchildren, but not with children (skipped-generation households), has increased.** In the countries where at least 10 per cent of adults had been infected with HIV, the proportion of older persons in skipped-generation households grew by 2.7 percentage points, in a period averaging only seven years.

Figure II. Living arrangements of older persons in more developed and less developed regions
(Persons aged 60 years or over)



NOTE: Based on the population in households.

Figure III. Living arrangements of older persons, by major area
(Persons aged 60 years or older)



NOTE: Based on the population in households.

Other key findings reported are these:

- **Living arrangements vary enormously from place to place.** For instance, the proportion of older persons living with a child or grandchild ranges from 4 per cent in Denmark to almost 90 per cent in Bangladesh, while the proportion living alone varies from less than 1 per cent in Bahrain to almost 40 per cent in Denmark.
- **About one quarter of the older population in the more developed regions live alone, but under 10 per cent in the less developed regions do so** (see figure II). The proportions living alone are lowest in South-Eastern and South-Central Asia, where about 1 out of every 20 older persons lives alone, and highest in Northern and Western Europe, where about 1 out of every 3 older persons do so.
- **Living arrangements of older women differ from those of older men.** Older women are, on average, more likely than older men to live alone (see figure I). Older women are also more likely to live in skipped-generation households or with other relatives, whereas older men are more likely to live in couple-only households.
- **Older persons living either alone or in skipped-generation households tend to be an especially disadvantaged group in the less developed regions.** It is older women who are most likely to be found in such situations.
- **Over 10 per cent of older women live in skipped-generation households in most sub-Saharan African countries and in some Latin American and Caribbean countries.** In Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, from 21 to 25 per cent of all older persons—and from 30 to 34 per cent in the case of older women in Malawi and Rwanda—live in households with their grandchildren, but not with their children.
- **Older persons in the more developed countries typically experience an “empty nest” phase of life.** In these countries, the percentage of older persons living with children declines substantially as age advances from the sixties to the seventies and the youngest children mature and leave home. By contrast, in many developing countries, the percentage of older persons living with a child remains high at older ages, suggesting a predominant pattern of lifelong co-residence with at least one child.
- **The proportion of older persons who live with a child has been declining.** This is so, even as the percentage of older persons who have living children is increasing.
- **An earlier trend towards higher levels of solitary living has slowed or halted in some of the more developed countries.** Examples include Canada, Italy and the United States of America. The reasons are likely to involve a combination of longer life, which tends to decrease the percentages widowed, declines in the proportion who never married, and an upward trend in the age at which children leave home.
- **Countries with higher levels of social and economic development have lower levels of co-residence with children.** National levels of development explain much of the variation in living arrangements of older persons around the world. This suggests that as levels of income and education rise, and as fertility decline leads to a smaller number of offspring, living arrangements in the developing countries will more closely resemble those of the more developed regions. However, cultural factors may have long-enduring

effects on living arrangements. For example, even after taking development levels into account, older Europeans are less likely to live with children than are older persons in the less developed regions.

- **Within developing countries, higher socio-economic status is often associated with higher, not lower, levels of co-residence with children.** More specifically, in countries with low levels of development, co-residence with children tends to be associated with higher social and economic status. Among countries at moderate levels of development, these differentials tend to disappear or even reverse direction; and in economically advanced countries, older persons living as a separate couple tend to have a higher socio-economic status than those living with children.
- **Co-residence with children is an important element of the flow of support between family members.** This is particularly so with respect to informal support that depends on physical proximity such as assistance with basic activities of daily living. For those who are married, support in performing activities of daily living is primarily provided by spouses. Furthermore, it is wives rather than husbands who mainly provide support in basic activities of daily living.
- **In most countries, the level of institutionalization is higher for women than for men.** Women's greater likelihood of being widowed is the main reason for their greater likelihood of institutionalization. Indeed, unmarried older men are usually more likely to live in an institution than are unmarried women.
- **The main factor accounting for differences among countries in levels of institutionalization appears to be a society's ability to support the costs of institutional care.** Recent trends in a number of developed countries seem to indicate, however, that institutional care is increasingly reserved for those with the greatest need for more intensive care, who tend to be the oldest and the frailest.

Living arrangements of older persons are part and parcel of the challenges that the ageing of populations are posing for Governments and families in the twenty-first century. Governmental policies need to include a combination of measures that promote self-reliance among older adults, provide services for those who are in need, and encourage continued involvement of family members in the care and well-being of the older generations.