REVIEW ARTICLE

Navigating Global Family Diversity: Theory, Research, and Implications for Policy – A Narrative Review*

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Introduction: Families, as foundational social institutions, are undergoing significant transformations worldwide. Understanding these shifts is critical for researchers and policymakers seeking to support family well-being.
Aims: This study examines global family trends across marriage, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship patterns. It integrates theoretical perspectives with empirical data to assess both converging and diverging family dynamics.
Methods: We conducted a narrative review of peer-reviewed studies in multiple languages, utilizing translation tools where necessary. Studies were selected based on thematic relevance and geographic representation, focusing on research published since 2010 while allowing flexibility in underrepresented regions.
Results: Findings indicate that while family transformations are driven by modernization, economic development, and shifting gender norms, cultural and religious factors ensure distinct regional family patterns.
Conclusions: Family structures continue to evolve in response to global and local influences. Policies supporting family stability, social cohesion, and mental well-being are essential for sustaining strong family systems. Future research should further explore the role of policy in mediating family transitions across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: global family trends; family policy; social change; marriage, cohabitation, and divorce; kinship systems

Introduction

What we think of as "family" varies based on background, experiences, and culture. In some places, family means a nuclear form – two parents with their children; elsewhere, it may be an extended family with aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. In other places, family may mean a chosen set of people with close ties.

Family remains a key social institution, despite changes. Although definitions vary, families are social groups bonded by blood (or adoption) and legal obligations – often via marriage – who share living spaces and whose lives are intertwined across economic, political, educational, social, and emotional domains. Not all families meet all these conditions, but they are generally recognizable because they meet most of them.

Because families are universal, studying them is essential. Families are the central decision-making units of society. Economists worry about GDP, demographers about fertility, policymakers about legislation, but families

* An extended draft of this article is available upon request from the first author.

decide where to live, how many children to have, and who attends school. Families decide how to take advantage of programs and policies aimed at them. Ignoring families often means policies do not have the intended effect. In other words, families are ignored at one's own peril.

This study synthesizes empirical research on global family trends, focusing specifically on marriage, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship patterns across world regions.

Global Family Trends

Understanding global family trends requires attention to both broad patterns of convergence and the persistent diversity shaped by geographic, cultural, economic, and religious factors. While many regions have experienced declining fertility, shifting gender roles, and changes in family formation, these trends manifest differently across distinct social and historical contexts (Stone & James, 2022). To capture this variation, the study adopts World Bank regional classifications with minor modifications to reflect sociopolitical realities. Notably, we differentiate between Asia and the Pacific to account for distinct sociohistorical and demographic trends. Overseas territories and collectivities are categorized based on their level of political and economic integration. For instance, U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico are grouped within Latin America and the Caribbean, while Hawaii is considered part of North America. Similarly, French Guiana is categorized under Europe due to its governance structure, whereas French Polynesia is classified under Oceania.

Gender and Family Dynamics

Changing gender ideologies drive global family change. The Gender Revolution (Goldscheider et al., 2015) unfolded as women entered the labor force in large numbers, disrupting traditional family structures due to greater economic, decision-making, and cultural power. This led to more divorce, less marriage, and fewer children as women gained access to educational and economic resources. Research suggests that more equitable gender roles within households may foster greater stability in family life and potentially increase fertility rates (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015).

Socioeconomic Development and Family Transformation

Economic development plays a crucial role in shaping family structures (Mokomane, 2012), particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Change does not mean convergence; "persistent diversity with development" occurs as progress, shaped by local contextual and cultural factors, fashions family life distinctly. In sub-Saharan Africa, traditional family forms remain resilient despite rapid economic transformations (Pesando, 2019). In LMICs, family configurations vary widely, reflecting different partnership regimes, gender relations, and fertility patterns (Castro Torres et al., 2022). Marriage, non-marital childbearing, and extended family households remain the norm in the Middle East and North Africa (Doignon et al., 2023) and many parts of Asia (Raymo et al., 2023), sustaining the importance of structural changes and cultural characteristics in global family patterns.

Globalization and Family Patterns

Globalization has had a profound but non-uniform impact on family life (Ziehl, 2003); regional and cultural differences continue to shape family patterns. Globalization introduces new dynamics, mediated by local contexts, resulting in diverse family forms rather than a single, homogenized model. A cross-cultural analysis of family systems in 30 nations showed diversity and commonality of family dynamics, driven by psychological processes shaped by cultural and socio-economic factors, leading to diverse family forms (Georgas et al., 2006).

Marriage and Family Formation

Family diversity includes changes in marriage patterns, diverging across most LMICs (Pesando & Abufhele, 2019). Family change is uneven and multidirectional, with differences between rural and urban settings (Castro Torres et al., 2022), underscoring the importance of cultural and economic contexts. In Western societies, marriage is evolving, with increasing acceptance of cohabitation, delayed marriage, and alternative family forms, such as single-parent households, same-sex partnerships, and lifelong singlehood (Furstenberg, 2019). These changes reflect broader societal shifts, including greater individual autonomy and declining influence of traditional insti-

tutions. Traditional theories of family dynamics fail to account for these realities, necessitating a re-theorization that captures the interplay between structural and ideational factors, especially accounting for shifts in gender ideologies across the Western world (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015).

Migration, Urbanization, and Family Fragmentation

Migration and urbanization influence family dynamics by disrupting family arrangements. Urban living leads to smaller, nuclear families as city life makes extended family living less practical (Trask, 2022). The global urban population has increased from about 25% in 1950 to more than 50% today, a number that is only expected to rise in coming decades (UN Habitat, 2022).

Theoretical Perspectives on Family Diversity

Family structures and dynamics have always been part of the human experience across cultural, economic, and social contexts, driven by globalization, technological change, economic development, and shifting cultural norms. Traditional theories such as Modernization Theory, World Systems Theory, and Developmental Idealism have provided valuable insights into the mechanisms of family change (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Thornton, 2005; Wallerstein, 1974). However, as societies become more interconnected yet retain distinct cultural identities, there is a need for a theoretical framework that synthesizes existing theories to explain the diverse patterns of family life worldwide. We propose a new model, the *Integrative Convergence-Divergence Model (ICDM),* which builds on prior work and adds explanatory power to the motivations and drivers behind differing global family patterns.

The ICDM accounts for the simultaneous convergence and divergence of family patterns globally, driven by the interaction of global and local forces, by integrating key elements from existing theories, creating a fresh perspective that more fully accounts for the heterogeneity in family forms and functions observed worldwide. It offers a more comprehensive understanding of the forces shaping family dynamics. Below, we briefly overview the primary theories on which ICDM is based and then describe the ICDM in greater detail.

Prior Theories

These theoretical perspectives each highlight how broader societal transformations – from industrialization and global capitalist structures to shifts in values – can influence family formation, composition, and behavior.

Industrialization Theory posits that as societies industrialize, family patterns will converge to those seen in the West, focusing on how economic development is linked to family dynamics (Goode, 1963).

Developmental Idealism suggests that beliefs about modernity and development developed in the Western experience have become a global influence on family structures and behaviors. Under developmental idealism, Western ideas about family become global ideals because they are seen as both causes and consequences of social and economic development (Thornton, 2005), as education, media, and cross-national organizations help shape individuals' family aspirations.

World Systems Theory examines how global economic power structures shape family patterns by highlighting how capitalist systems make some family patterns more or less likely, particularly in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, focusing on economic dependency and power imbalances (Wallerstein, 1974).

Second Demographic Transition Theory claims that in industrialized societies, an ideational shift toward post-materialist values has led to delayed (and less) marriage, more cohabitation, and lower fertility, clarifying how cultural shifts contribute to family convergence in relatively wealthy regions (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

Convergence and Divergence Theories are key and demonstrate that as countries develop and change, their family patterns may become more similar, whereas divergence theories suggest the opposite, emphasizing the important role of local contexts and the influence of traditions, religions, and cultural practices (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

The Integrative Convergence-Divergence Model

We propose an integrative approach, the Integrative Convergence-Divergence Model (ICDM), which incorporates key insights from previous theories to better understand patterns of family change and similarity around the world. According to the ICDM, global family change reflects complex interactions between converging global

forces and diverging local contexts. ICDM acknowledges that family patterns shape and are shaped by myriad social forces, not limited to economic or ideational change. It acknowledges predominant trends toward similarity in family patterns, such as decreasing marriage rates and declining fertility, while emphasizing that strongly rooted local contexts produce diverging family patterns.

In terms of converging influences, ICDM recognizes that global forces like modernization, economic development, higher education levels, female labor force participation, and technological interconnectedness provide the energy to overcome prevailing family norms (Welzel & Inglehart, 2005). Economic prosperity is accompanied by more frequent nuclear family structures, delayed marriage, and more cohabitation, while the diffusion of individualistic values leads away from traditional, collectivist family dynamics toward more gender-egalitarian and individualistic relationships (Thornton, 2005). This occurs only to the extent individuals are in contact with such forces, explaining why researchers have observed large differences between rural and urban areas (Castro Torres et al., 2022), as cultural tradition and religious practices are often stronger in rural areas.

Furthermore, the global capitalist system shapes labor markets, migration, urbanization, and economic dependencies (Wallerstein, 1974), contributing to converging family patterns as individuals seek economic opportunity beyond their hometowns, leading to changes in both sending and receiving countries as transnational families navigate difficulties.

Not all influences are convergent. Local contexts are important due to proximity. Cultural traditions, religious beliefs, local political structures, and social praxis shape how families react to global diversity. In some countries, extended family networks remain central for cultural and economic reasons. Some scholars argue that the nuclear family is a historical aberration rather than the norm (Coontz, 2005). Extended kinship networks provide greater help with parenting, access to shared economic resources, and stronger social support (Glick, 2010). Examining local contexts means paying attention to religious beliefs and practices, linked to fertility rates and gender roles around the world, despite pressure from globalizing influences (Norris & Ingelhart, 2004; Stone & James, 2022).

Similarly, researchers observe divergent patterns in how societies resist or reinterpret global norms like cohabitation and divorce; although rising globally, these terms can mean different things (Cherlin, 2009). In some parts, cohabitation is the first step toward traditional marriage, or a divorce may be mediated by kinship groups, leading to ambiguity about whether a divorce officially took place. These realities lead to policy contexts and legal frameworks that build upon local divergences, which can inhibit or accentuate global family diversity (Therborn, 2004).

While Convergence and Divergence Theory explains how a society's family patterns grow similar or remain distinct, it does not fully account for why these processes operate differently across contexts. The ICDM extends this perspective by incorporating insights from Modernization Theory, World Systems Theory, and Developmental Idealism to illustrate how global forces – such as economic development, media, and transnational organizations – interact with local institutions and cultural norms to shape diverse family outcomes. Additionally, it addresses within-country differences that Convergence and Divergence Theory tends to treat broadly, recognizing how socioeconomic inequalities, rural-urban divides, and cultural pluralism shape family patterns. This multilevel approach explains both converging trends, such as declining fertility and delayed marriage, and persisting or emerging divergences, like the resilience of extended kin networks or the continued power of religion to shape family life. By emphasizing how global influences are filtered through regional and community contexts, ICDM provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of family change.

Additionally, the ICDM expands the focus beyond nation-states, consistent with Pesando (2019), to view global family diversity at the regional or larger level, while allowing for local idiosyncrasies. As Pesando (2019) states, "nation-states might be too small a unit to study changes in families" (p. 622) due to the interconnectedness of global economies, production mechanisms, technological advances, and media. Given increasing inequality within countries, studying family patterns at the national level may obscure family diversity. Integrating both converging and diverging processes with the ICDM allows for theoretical and empirical flexibility to study global family patterns, diversity, and change. In summary, the ICDM provides a comprehensive framework that integrates global and local influences to explain the diverse patterns of family life worldwide.

Methods

We identified relevant studies by reviewing published literature in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. When necessary, translation software (e.g., Google Translate, Microsoft Word, ChatGPT) was employed to facilitate access to sources in other languages.

Articles were selected based on relevance to study themes, with an eye toward geographic representation. While we enforced no strict publication period, preference was given to research published since 2010, although flexibility was required in regions where recent literature was sparse. Given the wide geographic scope of this review and the wealth of diversity across countries, we include selected examples to illustrate key trends and patterns rather than attempting an exhaustive account for each region.

Results

In the following sections, we outline how distinct world regions have experienced shifts in family life, focusing on marriage, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship structures. Each regional overview highlights key processes, dynamics, and changes shaping these family domains, setting the stage for an integrative understanding of both convergent and divergent patterns in contemporary family life.

Central Asia

The institution of the family in Central Asia is undergoing significant transformation due to cultural traditions, economic and technological change, and the aftermath of the Soviet empire. Urbanization, migration, and shifting gender roles have changed marriage practices, fertility rates, divorce trends, and family dynamics, redefining relationships and shaping family interactions.

Historically, marriage in Central Asia was family-arranged, especially in rural areas, where extended kinship networks dominated social life. Parts of these practices remain today in the form of Kyrgyzstani bride kidnapping, where between 1 in 6 and 1 in 4 rural marriages involve the nonconsensual abduction of the bride (Becker et al., 2017). Many still favor the practice due to its traditional roots, whereas others have linked nonconsensual abduction to psychological distress, lower marital satisfaction, higher divorce rates, and poor health outcomes for women and children (Borbieva, 2012).

While traditional marriage practices remain in rural areas, urban centers in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are seeing emphasis on love marriages due to modernization and increased numbers of women seeking education. Consequently, women seek greater decision-making control over their romantic partners (Dommaraju & Agadjanian, 2008). However, traditions such as patrilocal customs expect women to move into their husband's family home and care for their families-in-law, reinforcing patriarchal values (Nedoluzhko & Agadjanian, 2015). Women are expected to maintain household responsibilities even while pursuing employment (Kuehnast & Dudwick, 2004).

Rising divorce rates, particularly in urban areas in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, result from economic development, ideational changes, and women's growing autonomy among younger couples (Werner et al., 2018). Women are less reliant on men economically and increasingly able to leave unhappy marriages, despite strong stigmatization prevalent throughout the region, especially in rural areas (Spoorenberg, 2018). In these areas, societal pressure to maintain family ties remains strong, even in the presence of domestic conflict (Clifford et al., 2010).

Marital quality varies across the region. Marriages that begin as bride kidnappings tend to have lower levels of marital happiness and higher levels of intimate partner violence due to traditional gender norms and feeling trapped within such marriages (Borbieva, 2012). On the other hand, love marriages based on mutual consent report higher satisfaction and more equitable decision-making, especially in urban areas where female education and progressive gender norms are more common (Werner et al., 2018).

Collectivist values shape family patterns in Central Asia. Care for aging parents enjoys high social approval, and strong stigma is generated when children fail to do so, especially in rural areas where family networks influence marital, educational, and living decisions (UNICEF, 2021). Older children are expected to care for younger ones to enable adults to pursue economic necessities such as farm labor (Kuehnast & Dudwick, 2004).

An aspect specific to Central Asia is the large influence from Russia, where many labor migrants search for

employment. Labor migration influences family structure as men leave home, leaving women to manage caregiving and household responsibilities (Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2012). Children often suffer an emotional toll due to the prolonged absence of their parents. Migration empowers women to have greater household control and autonomy but often comes at the cost of economic hardship as they depend on remittances (Sagynbekova, 2017), which can reinforce traditional gender hierarchies.

As in many parts of the world, religion plays a significant role in family life in Central Asia. Despite Soviet efforts to minimize Islamic practices, Islamic traditions shape gender roles and family expectations, particularly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Buckley, 1998). Religious leaders influence family planning decisions by speaking against contraception and encouraging large families (Spoorenberg, 2018). The persistence of polygamy owes its continuity to religious norms and cultural rites (Cleuziou & McBrien, 2021).

Thus, families in Central Asia encounter a diverse family landscape shaped by tradition and modernization, Eastern and Western influences. In urban areas, love marriages, increasing divorce rates, and women's growing education and autonomy signal cultural shifts. Rural areas remain tethered to arranged marriages, high fertility rates, and collectivist decision-making. Migration to find work continues to shape family structures, gender dynamics, and caregiving responsibilities. Religion exerts a powerful influence on families at both individual and societal levels.

East Asia

Recent decades in East Asia have seen rapid social, economic, demographic, and political change as industrialization, urbanization, and shifting cultural norms have transformed family dynamics. Countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have witnessed changes in marriage, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship patterns. Family shifts have also been observed in the Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand. Together these trends have redefined family life in the region.

Marriage maintains its central place in East Asian family formation despite shifts toward cohabitation, divorce, and singlehood. Declining marriage rates and rising age at first marriage have been observed in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. In China, the marriage rate declined from 9.9 to 4.8 per thousand between 2013 and 2022, with average age at first marriage approaching 30 (Luo, 2024). Similar patterns have been observed in Japan (Raymo et al., 2023). In South Korea, financial insecurity means many are delaying or forgoing marriage (Kim et al., 2012). The Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand have experienced similar shifts (Abalos, 2023; Heuveline & Nakphong, 2023).

These changes in marital behavior can be tied to economic insecurity, especially in China, where accelerating housing and living costs and dowry practices place marriage out of reach, hitting rural areas acutely (Luo, 2024). Chinese norms dictate that men should be property owners prior to marriage, so many delay or forgo marriage. China's skewed sex ratio (with men outnumbering women), a remnant of the one-child policy, compounds this issue (Dyson, 2012). South Koreans face similar challenges with rising housing prices and high student debt (Kim et al., 2012). Economic concerns affect young adults in Thailand, where remarriage is becoming more common among women who can support themselves post-divorce (Pothisiri et al., 2023). Rising economic inequality and uncertain job prospects influence marriage decisions throughout the region (Park, 2021).

Beyond economics, women's increasing education and changing gender roles have reshaped marriage patterns. Filipino, South Korean, and Japanese women often prioritize careers over family as cohabitation becomes more accepted (Abalos, 2023; Park, 2021). Traditional norms create tension between career opportunities and caregiving responsibilities (Frejka & Gietel-Basten, 2016), leading to falling fertility rates due to delayed marriage (Cheng, 2020).

Cohabitation has become more accepted, particularly in urban areas, though less so than in Western societies (Mu, 2024). Taiwanese young adults see cohabitation as a more flexible option (Wang & Yang, 2023). Similar trends are observed in the Philippines and Cambodia, though it remains somewhat stigmatized (Abalos, 2023; Heuveline & Nakphong, 2023). These changes reflect broader shifts in family formation.

Divorce is becoming more common, more than doubling in China, from 0.96 (2000) to 3.1 (2020) to 2.0 (2022) per 1,000 population, despite a "cooling-off period" (Luo, 2024). Similar increases are observed in South Korea (Kim et al., 2012). Cambodia has reported greater acceptance of divorce, and Thailand has seen increases in remarriage rates (Heuveline & Nakphong, 2023; Pothisiri et al., 2023).

Shifting patterns in relationships have led to changes in family structures, as single-parent households, remarriage, and non-traditional family forms emerge. In Japan and the Philippines, rising divorce rates have led to more

single-parent households (Abalos, 2023; Raymo et al., 2023). In South Korea and Thailand, increasing remarriage challenges cultural norms (Pothisiri et al., 2023).

Parent-child relationships have evolved. In China, Japan, and South Korea, filial piety and respect for elders remain central (Sodei, 2004). However, industrialization and urbanization have weakened traditional influence as multigenerational households yield to nuclear ones. Japanese young adults are less likely to live with older parents (Sodei, 2004). This shift places greater pressure on social services as elder care responsibility transfers to the state. South Korea has implemented policies to address aging society needs, whereas Cambodian young adults continue to care for aging parents despite urban pressures (Heuveline & Nakphong, 2023).

Urbanization and economic development drive these changes. As families move to urban areas, traditional kinship influence wanes in favor of smaller, nuclear units (Raymo et al., 2023). Soaring costs make raising children challenging, leading to more people remaining single or having smaller families (Abalos, 2023; Kim et al., 2012; Luo, 2024).

To sum, families in East Asia are both beneficiary and casualty of complex changes. Changing marital patterns, increased acceptance of cohabitation and divorce, and declining marriage rates mean families experience greater uncertainty. Parent-child relationships are evolving as multigenerational households recede. Elder care, traditionally the domain of families, can be outsourced as urbanization and economic development transform the social landscape. The story of East Asian families is one of change and evolution.

South Asia

Like many parts of the world, the family is a core social institution across South Asia while undergoing significant social, demographic, political, and economic change. Patterns of marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and family dynamics have been influenced by cultural mores, social norms, globalization, urbanization, and debates about gender roles. Although characterized by a collectivist family outlook, where marriage and family are central to life, macro trends have influenced marriage, parent-child relationships, and intergenerational relationships.

Marriage remains central to family life yet is the focus of social change. Traditionally viewed as the union of two families rather than individuals, marriage has been seen in light of family and kinship dynamics such as caste, religion, socioeconomic status, and consolidation of power and honor (Jones & Yeung, 2014). In urbanized areas of the Indian subcontinent, especially India, love marriage is increasingly common as young people seek autonomy, although family involvement remains common (Vikram, 2024). Marriages in South Asia are increasingly the result of strong parental influence but ultimately the choice of individuals, a trend reflective of female education. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, marriage remains a key transition in a young person's life, and many women are still expected to marry early (Scott et al., 2021) if not pursuing higher education and lucrative careers (Ilie & Rose, 2016).

Age at marriage differs across South Asia. In India and Nepal, age at marriage is climbing in urbanizing areas, whereas in rural ones, where child marriage persists, age at marriage appears stable or declining (Kamal & Ulas, 2020). Early marriage is also common in Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially rural regions, where traditional values and gender roles, combined with limited educational opportunities for women, ensure the practice endures. Child marriage in the region also means women suffer from limited job opportunities and poorer health outcomes (Scott et al., 2021), affecting family dynamics and economic mobility.

Despite the growing presence of love marriages, practices common in the West, such as cohabitation, remain rare. Cohabitation is still stigmatized due to religious taboos and cultural mores, even in urban centers where Western values are increasing in relevance (Jones & Yeung, 2014). Strong emphasis on kinship and elder relations means the stigma ensures cohabitation remains legally and socially controversial. Familial piety continues to be deeply interwoven with marriage and sexuality.

Divorce, though highly stigmatized in many parts of the region, is slowly gaining acceptance across South Asia, most commonly among highly educated populations in urban centers. In Sri Lanka and India, women's economic independence means women can resort to divorce if necessary, although it is still considered a last option given the societal importance of marriage (Dommaraju & Jones, 2011). In contrast, in countries with an Islamic emphasis on marriage, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, divorce remains difficult or impossible due to traditional gender roles and societal opprobrium toward divorced women, making remarriage more difficult. However, divorce is increasingly available in cases of marital violence, marking growing societal acceptance of women's autonomy and the importance of equity in relationships (Jejeebhoy et al., 2014).

New research focuses on family dynamics such as marital quality, linked to children's wellbeing. In Nepal, studies show parental marital quality is linked to children's transition to adulthood by shaping expectations

for family life (Brauner-Otto et al., 2020). In India and Bangladesh, marital quality has been linked to mental health and family harmony (Chowbey, 2017). Intimate partner violence is common across South Asia, especially among married women (Jejeebhoy et al., 2014), driving down marital and relationship quality with influences on children and parent-child relationships, as women and children experience hostile family environments.

Parent-child interactions are changing as labor markets welcome more women and migration makes traditional family structures difficult to maintain. In many countries, it is common for one or both parents to work abroad, especially in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where many migrate overseas for better economic opportunities. In countries with limited social security systems, elderly parents depend on their children for support, creating a shift in intergenerational relations in places like China, Taiwan, and Singapur (Cheng, 2015). Migration strains filial piety as elderly parents, often left in rural areas due to high urban living costs, are cared for by other family members rather than their children. This shift influences family relations in countries where child-based elder care has been historically established (Chung et al., 2021).

In summary, families in South Asia are responding to and shaping rapid social change as traditional values meet modern influences. Marriage continues to occupy the primary place in family life yet is increasingly delayed. Family influence over marital choice is pervasive but gradually yielding to love marriages. Cohabitation and divorce, although rare and stigmatized, are becoming more common due to education and economic independence. Migration and urbanization create challenges and opportunities for families as South Asia's populations seek to maximize their wellbeing in a world shaped by modern changes undermining traditional approaches.

Middle East and North Africa

Family serves as the core social institution in the Middle East and North Africa, shaping individual identities, social relationships, and community sense. Families are deeply rooted in tradition and intertwined with dominant religions, primarily Islam but also Christianity and Judaism. Extended families sustain members emotionally, socially, and economically, enmeshing them in intergenerational kinship systems with deep involvement in personal affairs, collective decision-making, shared responsibility, and an enduring family reputation. Family facilitates cultural, religious, and moral transmission, leading to widely shared yet increasingly challenged understandings of gender roles and social mores, enabling it to serve as a key source for social cohesion and individual identity. Islamic principles continue to shape family and political life, while the pervasive role of religion is hotly debated throughout the region.

Marriage is central to family life but is in flux. Traditionally a key marker of adulthood arranged with strong familial influence, marriages today are delayed due to economic barriers. Islamic principles teach that marriage is sacred and roles of husbands and wives are complementary, but evolving social norms seek new applications as young adults navigate financial and social difficulties (Jarallah, 2022). Soaring living and housing costs coupled with pressures for high educational attainment make marriage inaccessible for some, resulting in "Waithood", where major decisions are deferred (Kovacheva et al., 2018). In conservative sectors, the importance of marriage remains entrenched, despite rising marital ages and declining but still high rates of consanguineous marriages (Sharkia et al., 2015). Where family ties and wealth preservation are emphasized, such as in Oman, consanguineous marriage remains common (Islam, 2012).

Cohabitation is largely stigmatized due to strong religious teachings prohibiting sexual relationships outside marriage, even criminalizing them in some countries. Some wealthier urban areas have shown signs of acceptance toward cohabitation among the educated class (Al-Hakami & McLaughlin, 2016; Kolman, 2018). Though rare and met with cultural resistance, this trend reflects a slow shift in how some segments of society approach relationships (Gilbert & Brik, 2022).

Divorce, though low by international standards, is becoming more prevalent as traditional views of lifelong marriage give way, even as divorce remains seen as a final resort under Islamic law. The United Arab Emirates' rising divorce rates signal changing social expectations and realities (Al Gharaibeh & Bromfield, 2012), often led by women seeking gender equality. Divorce's influence on child wellbeing is receiving greater attention. Saudi Arabian girls from divorced families struggle with interpersonal adjustment due to the psychological impact of divorce, linked to lower self-esteem and poorer social relationships (Al-Zamil et al., 2016). In Israel, divorce disproportionately affects women and the economically disadvantaged, widening the gap between rich and poor (Endeweld et al., 2022). Across the region, Islamic law and social norms intertwine, as individuals navigate divorce and its consequences.

Marital quality emerges from economic, gender, social, and religious influences as couples seek family harmony and gender complementarity, rather than the autonomy commonly sought in other regions. While becoming less

frequent, polygamy remains important, even if research has found it detrimental to Saudi women's marital satisfaction (Merdad et al., 2023). Families where fathers are involved report higher marital satisfaction and improved child outcomes, such as among Omani children who describe better emotional development and stronger family bonds (Baig et al., 2021).

Parent-child bonds remain strong because parents are heavily involved in their children's lives, shaped by cultural traditions, religious teachings, and filial piety. Parents influence children's educational and career goals. Jordanian parents promote children's critical thinking while grounded in traditional values like respect for Islamic principles (Al-Hassan & Rothenberg, 2021). The tension between autonomy and traditional values extends beyond Jordan as Qatari parenting styles emphasizing family cohesion are juxtaposed against children's independence (Ihmeideh, 2019).

In summary, families remain central even as marriage practices evolve, divorce rates rise, and many struggle with contemporary pressures. Marital quality, parent-child relationships, and kinship networks remain strong, as younger generations challenge traditional hierarchies while seeking to preserve family cohesion and religious traditionalism.

Oceania

In Oceania, families live across a vast geographic area and comprise a wide set of cultural traditions deeply embedded in historical and social landscapes. Family units are central to community life. In some areas, families are nuclear; in others, broader kinship networks prevail. Westernization, modernization, and urbanization have influenced family trends across marriage, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship patterns throughout this culturally diverse region.

Marriage has transformed in recent years. In East Timor, marriage-related exchanges reinforce social bonds and family identity, remaining influential despite modernization pressures (Silva, 2018). However, declining marriage rates and rising cohabitation are seen, as in Vanuatu, where adoption and child fostering respond to parental instability, leaving children in the care of extended family or trusted community leaders. Child fostering is sometimes used to strengthen social ties (Brandl et al., 2023). As traditional marriage and its rites are under strain, cohabitation becomes increasingly common as young couples opt for fewer formal constraints.

As marriage comes under pressure, divorce has become more common. In Papua New Guinea, divorce remains comparatively rare but is slowly becoming more common due to modernizing gender roles and search for greater gender equity (Stewart & Strathern, 2023). New Zealand has seen sharp increases in divorce, especially where social change and economic disadvantage burden marriage (Newton et al., 2024). Such shifts have consequences for the wellbeing of children and adults, contributing to changes in family structures.

Marital and family relationship quality, especially concerning intimate partner violence, is of increasing interest. Research shows attending to socioecological factors can buffer against violence and safeguard relationship quality (Bird et al., 2021). Father involvement in Papua New Guinea can protect against intimate partner violence, highlighting the interplay between masculine identities and parenting (Chan et al., 2017). Relationship quality depends on complex norms and expectations, leading to potential conflicts when traditional gender roles confront modern views on equality.

Parent-child relationships are challenged by migration due to economic pressure, leading to changing family situations with various caregivers (Brandl et al., 2023). Parental involvement in educational activities is positively correlated with children's developmental outcomes, especially among poor households (Sun et al., 2018). Conversely, economic and social disadvantages have strained parent-child relationships as parents navigate caregiving demands with educational and labor market expectations (Rarau et al., 2019).

Changes in intergenerational and kinship relationships are visible. In Micronesia, acceptance of modern family planning may lead to tensions between older and younger generations, as extended family systems accommodate shifting gender and reproductive norms (McDonald et al., 2024). Similar tensions are observed in Tonga, where older generations cling to traditional practices while younger generations seek individualistic financial wellbeing (Ongolea & Houkamau, 2024). Such tensions influence family dynamics, straining trust between family members.

Despite homogenizing influences from globalization and Westernization, many countries seek to preserve their cultural heritage. New Zealand emphasizes cultural heritage and community connection via retention of traditional knowledge among indigenous women, maintaining vibrant ethnic identities (Newton et al., 2024), leading to stronger intergenerational ties. While family dynamics are changing, efforts to preserve cultural practices allow families to bond and maintain social cohesion.

In conclusion, families in Oceania continue to value traditional practices while adapting to modern life and economic reality. Cohabitation and divorce are on the rise amidst changing gender roles, economic pressures, and migration. Parallel efforts to preserve cultural traditions maintain strong family bonds enabling families and societies to thrive.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is a region where social and familial relationships constitute the basis of communal society. Families are viewed as the fundamental unit, and children are accorded high value. These realities mean individuals are embedded within support networks extending beyond the nuclear household. Family dynamics, shaped by tradition, religion, and socioeconomic conditions, interact with urbanization and economic development. Marriage, cohabitation, divorce, relationship quality, and parent-child relationships are evolving at different paces across this diverse region.

Marriage remains the lynchpin in social relationships, drawing upon rich cultural values and practices. Differing approaches to marriage, including legal, traditional, customary, and religious marriages, make specifying when one is considered married difficult because marriage is often a process rather than an event. Child marriage is common in some areas, such as Mali, where rates are increasing among the rural and urban poor (Batyra & Pesando, 2023), despite some progress due to recent government efforts aimed at reducing the practice. In Kenya, bridewealth practices continue nearly universally in rural and commonly in urban areas due to their symbolic creation of family ties (Chae et al., 2021).

Interethnic marriage has increased – about 20% of marriages occur between different ethnic groups (Crespin, 2019). Such trends are shown in Ghana, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo, where interethnic marriage is increasingly common despite lack of societal acceptance in some areas (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2021).

Cohabitation is increasingly accepted, at least in rapidly growing cities. In South Africa, cohabitation has become an alternative to marriage, indicating changing approaches to traditional customs, as younger generations emphasize economic success and autonomy over long-term relationships amidst uncertain labor market prospects (Moore & Govender, 2013). Similar patterns are observed in Tanzania and Burkina Faso (Pesando, 2021).

Divorce has been rising, leading to declining union stability and effects on children's schooling because disruptions to the parental union can harm educational attainment (Odimegwu, 2020). Rising divorce rates suggest shifting social norms and conversations about gender roles as divorce becomes more accepted (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015).

Declining marital quality due to economic and social constraints contributes to relationship failures. In rural Niger, younger age at marriage is linked to lower satisfaction and participation in decision-making, leading to feelings of seclusion (Tomar et al., 2021). Traditional practices such as bridewealth are linked to poor outcomes when they take precedence over affection (Jensen, 2015).

Parent-child relationships are influenced by cultural norms surrounding family structure and parenting customs. In Senegal, child fostering reflects a commitment to the collective wellbeing of children and extended family. Despite potential benefits, this system may pose risks to children's health (Beck et al., 2015). The importance of children is also seen in strained marriages of couples struggling to conceive, destabilizing relationships (Fledderjohann, 2017).

Families often live in close proximity and experience pressure to provide support to extended kinship networks. In South Africa, grandparents often raise grandchildren when parents face financial difficulty or migrate (Mtshali, 2015), pulling children into extended family networks and creating strong intergenerational bonds.

Sub-Saharan African families remain at the core of society yet continue to endure profound changes as transformations sweep across the continent. Marriage remains key but practices like child marriage, interethnic unions, brideprice, and cohabitation challenge its supremacy. Union instability is common, as women seek autonomy and equity, challenging traditional gender roles. The family will likely remain a key site of social and political conflict as well as a rallying point.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Family dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean are central to social organization, cultural identity, and economic activity. While traditional family structures remain central, the region is experiencing significant changes in marriage patterns, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship ties. These changes reflect broader shifts reshaping the family landscape.

Marriage rates have fallen as younger generations opt for alternative family patterns, particularly in Uruguay (Bucheli & Vigorito, 2019). This is driven by economic pressures and gender roles that undergird increases in female-headed households, as many women view marriage as risky and unstable in places like Mexico and Nicaragua (Altamirano Montoya & Teixeira, 2016; García & Oliveira, 2011). Wealthier countries like Costa Rica and Brazil report similar trends, as cohabitation and informal unions replace traditional marriage (Gibbons, 2024).

Cohabitation's rise reflects cultural and economic shifts driving increased diversity in family forms. Young Chileans opt for cohabitation due to its perceived flexibility and affordability, whereas in Bolivia and Paraguay, economically independent women choose to cohabit for greater autonomy (Lesthaeghe & Esteve, 2016). In Argentina, cohabitation is seen as a "trial" marriage that can precede marriage rather than displacing it (Esteve et al., 2022).

Family diversity has led to more divorce, as unions become less stable. This is partly driven by more liberal divorce laws advocated by educated women seeking freedom from unhappy marriages (Bucheli & Vigorito, 2019). In Brazil and Colombia, divorce results from poor economic circumstances and shifting gender norms, making marriage navigation difficult (Grace & Sweeney, 2014). Post-divorce economic consequences can render women and children at risk of socioeconomic decline, as seen in Hispaniola (Flake & Forste, 2006).

Despite changes, family remains central, seen in strong intergenerational and kinship ties. Guatemalan and Costa Rican families report that extended families are key to navigating strains (García & Oliveira, 2011), particularly in rural areas where financial straits force families to pool resources. Parental poverty and migration necessitate grandparental childcare to maintain family stability (Castro Torres, 2023).

Parent-child relationships remain strong but evolve with changing structures. In Mexico, parenting styles are becoming more democratic, encouraging open communication (Gibbons, 2024). This shift may be evident in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, where educational advancements and economic development have led to changes in family formation and parent-child relations due to instability in cohabiting unions (Grace & Sweeney, 2014). Traditional, hierarchical structures persist in countries like Peru and Paraguay, where obedience and respect for elders remain central (Esteve et al., 2022; Glaser et al., 2006).

Economic inequality shapes family dynamics across the region. In wealthier countries like Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, wealthier families access high-quality education and healthcare, contributing to stability (Esteve & Lesthaeghe, 2016). In poorer areas like Haiti and Honduras, limited resources mean precarious conditions and more stress as households struggle to provide necessities (St. Bernard, 2003). Such inequality is visible in rural areas, making families reliant on informal networks (Castro Torres, 2023).

To sum, families in Latin America and the Caribbean are changing as key pillars like marriage, cohabitation, and divorce shift. Intergenerational kinship and extended family ties often fill gaps when formal resources are insufficient or unavailable.

North America

Just as in other regions, the family in North America has experienced significant transformations, as marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and family structures continue to shape and be shaped by changing social norms. These have led to changes in social policies, economic, health, and educational outcomes, translating into heterogeneity in well-being for adults and children.

Marriage remains a fundamental yet contentious institution. Declining marriage rates and rising age at marriage reflect an eschewal of traditional models, with many Canadian young adults opting for alternatives like prolonged singlehood or cohabitation (Ménard, 2011). Similarly, fewer adults in the United States are married, as the median age at first marriage approaches or exceeds 30 for both men and women (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Such changes reflect broader economic and cultural shifts, as marriage becomes increasingly the purview of the educated elite and becomes deinstitutionalized (Cherlin, 2020). Educated and affluent individuals are more likely to marry and maintain stable and happy marriages compared to those without similar social advantages (Cherlin, 2020; Smock & Schwartz, 2020).

As marriage declines, cohabitation ascends as a common step toward or replacement of marriage. Canadian and American young adults are more likely to cohabit rather than marry for their first coresidential union. In Quebec, cohabiting couples approach 40%, and nearly 60% of births occur outside marriage (Hamplová et al., 2021). In the United States, cohabitation is viewed as an alternative or precursor to marriage, even as such unions remain less stable (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). This difference in stability leads to high rates of relationship churning, as individuals enter and exit long-term relationships at higher rates than most other countries (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

Divorce has become more common, although it remains about half as common in Canada than in the United States. Both countries have seen dramatic rises in divorce among individuals aged 50 and over, termed "gray divorce" (Margolis et al., 2019), suggesting changing expectations for marriage at older ages. However, the general divorce rate in Canada has declined among younger cohorts due to increased hesitancy to marry (Margolis & Choi, 2020). In the United States, similar declines among younger cohorts are observed, while older adults experience rising divorce rates (Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Smock & Schwartz, 2020).

Researchers focus on how the quality of romantic relationships impacts family stability and well-being, demonstrating positive effects of high-quality relationships for better outcomes for adults and children. Canadian studies underscore how happy marriages improve health, whereas conflicts can damage marital quality, especially among older couples (Mitchell & Dhillon, 2023). While the link between premarital cohabitation and divorce has weakened, as cohabitation becomes normative (Sassler & Lichter, 2020), cohabitors generally report lower satisfaction and happiness compared to married individuals, reflecting different expectations, social support, and resources (Cherlin, 2020).

Family complexity influences how parents and children interact and affects intergenerational and extended family dynamics. In the United States and Canada, widespread divorce and remarriage have resulted in complex family structures, including stepfamilies and multigenerational households. In the United States, nearly one-third of children are expected to share a household with a grandparent, as extended family support becomes essential (Berger & Carlson, 2020). In Canada, more young adults live with their parents due to labor market struggles, rising debt, and high housing prices, a pattern mirrored in the United States (Mazurik et al., 2020).

Family change reflects broader socioeconomic and racial disparities, resulting in increasing inequality for children and parents. Single parents, often at risk of economic hardship and elevated stress, remain a concern in both countries because they have less access to valuable resources, resulting in more work-family conflict and emotional strains than coupled individuals (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). While extended family can help mitigate risks associated with single parenthood (Buehler, 2020), ethnic and racial socialization within families is essential for children's healthy social development, as the United States becomes more ethnically diverse (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020).

Overall, transformations in marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and family relations highlight increasing complexity in family relationships across North America as cultural, social, and economic norms challenge traditional ideals of family stability and cohesion. Such changes are reflected in public policy and social welfare programs designed to support a wide array of families and promote the wellbeing of every family member.

Europe

While the family remains fundamental in Europe, transformations in marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and other patterns reflect shifting support for the family's role. These shifts are crucial for understanding and addressing social concerns and inequalities that undermine wellbeing.

Recent decades have seen a marked decline in marriage across Europe, as fewer people marry and, when they do, at older ages. Swedish women reported a mean age at first marriage of 33 in 2011 (Coleman, 2013). This pattern is repeated across the continent, with the average age at first marriage increasing between 2010 and 2018 in most countries, Spain and Sweden leading (Majdzińska, 2022). In Estonia, the marriage rate dropped from about 10 per 1,000 in the 1970s to less than 4 per 1,000 in 2010 (Kutsar et al., 2012). Despite the decline, marriage retains symbolic value, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where it remained the most common type of first partnership during the transition from communism, though numbers have begun to decline (Mureşan & Oláh, 2019). Education is key to understanding marriage patterns; highly educated individuals in Hungary, Poland, and Romania were more likely to marry than their less educated counterparts (Mureşan & Oláh, 2019).

As marriage falls, cohabitation rises, though some choose prolonged singlehood. Cohabitation often serves as an alternative or precursor to marriage and is nearly universally spreading across Europe, with regional diversity (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011). In Northern European countries like Sweden and Denmark, over 60% of marrying-age adults have cohabited, and nearly half of individuals aged 26–35 currently cohabit. Estonia also shows high rates, with nearly 6 in 10 of those aged 18–45 having ever cohabited (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011). Cohabitation remains less common in Southern and Eastern Europe, where only 8% and 4% of young adults reported cohabiting in Spain and Portugal, respectively. In Poland, the percent of those cohabiting more than doubled in a 4-year period (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011). In Hungary, cohabitation has become the preferred first union, as direct marriages have fallen (Mureşan & Oláh, 2019).

More people are choosing to end their marriage. Across Europe, between one-half and two-thirds of first marriages are expected to end in divorce, as relationships become increasingly unstable (Mortelmans, 2021). In 2002 in Estonia, the divorce rate surpassed the marriage rate (Coleman, 2013). Legal and policy changes, such as unilateral and no-fault divorce laws, have resulted in divorce rates that increase annually (Mortelmans, 2021). Increased selection into marriage and greater cohabitation have contributed to a plateauing of divorce rates in some countries, though premarital cohabitation is associated with higher divorce risk (Mortelmans, 2021).

Married and cohabiting couples report differing levels of relationship quality. Cohabitors often report lower satisfaction and higher breakup intentions than married couples, with greater differences in countries where cohabitation remains deinstitutionalized (Wiik et al., 2012). Cohabiting couples report more disagreements overall than married couples across 22 European countries, even after accounting for economic and demographic factors (Van der Lippe et al., 2014). Married individuals tend to report high levels of satisfaction with their relationships (Sorokowski et al., 2017).

Parent-child relationships vary across the continent as changes in parenting practices and the impact of divorce influence interactions. Estonia has shifted from authoritarian parenting to more democratic approaches. Over half of young adults agreed their parents respected their opinions (Kutsar et al., 2012). Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) found that the negative association between parenthood and separation, as well as educational stratification, has resulted in growing inequalities in children's experiences, as their parents end relationships.

Intergenerational ties remain strong throughout the Mediterranean region, where families report close-knit relationships, coresidence, and frequent contact (Montoro-Gurich & Garcia-Vivar, 2019). Half of older adults live with their children in Spain and Italy, and 4 in 10 do so in Greece (Montoro-Gurich & Garcia-Vivar, 2019). More than half of grandparents across Europe provide care for their grandchildren, and more than a third of Italian parents report their parents help with daily childcare responsibilities (Bordone et al., 2017). Young adults leave the parental home at later ages in Southern Europe compared to other parts; Spanish and Italian young adults are often nearly 30 before establishing independent homes, while in Germany, France, and Britain, the age is often between 23 and 24 (Montoro-Gurich & Garcia-Vivar, 2019).

Declining marriage rates and climbing divorce and cohabitation rates mean European families feel the ground shifting as social, cultural, and economic change requires confrontation of new realities. Relationships are less stable, though many, especially marriages, continue to report high satisfaction. Some regions, especially the Mediterranean, report strong family ties as support networks sustain members through difficult transitions. Policymakers' ability to understand and address these developments will be essential to ensure access to opportunity for all European families.

Strenghts and Limitations

This manuscript has several strengths. First, it provides a comprehensive narrative synthesis of global family trends by integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings across diverse geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. By employing multilingual research literature and translation tools, the review ensures broad representation and inclusivity of findings, particularly from regions often overlooked in family scholarship. Second, the proposed Integrative Convergence-Divergence Model (ICDM) helps address simultaneous convergence and divergence in global family dynamics by aiming to capture complexity in global-local interactions influencing family structures and processes, enhancing explanatory power over previously fragmented theories. Third, the integration of policy implications bridges research, theory, and policymaking.

However, the manuscript also has limitations. The narrative review format lacks the methodological rigor associated with systematic or meta-analytic reviews and may introduce selection bias. Although efforts were made to include diverse geographic regions, some areas – particularly less-researched countries – remain underrepresented due to limited data availability or insufficient recent studies. Another limitation pertains to the inherent complexity of global family dynamics, which makes comprehensive coverage challenging in light of important regional subtleties. Consequently, we provide illustrative rather than exhaustive examples. Lastly, the proposed ICDM requires further empirical validation. Recognizing these limitations, future research could employ rigorous, systematic methodologies to validate theoretical propositions, expand empirical coverage in underrepresented regions, and clarify the complex interplay of global and local influences on family life.

Conclusion, Implications, and Future Directions

Family structure and stability are deeply connected to individual and societal well-being. Shaped by global and local forces, marriage, cohabitation, parent-child relationships, and broader kinship networks intersect with modernization, economic development, and shifting gender norms. These trends do not unfold uniformly across regions, as cultural traditions, religious values, and policy frameworks mediate the effects of global influences.

This concluding section highlights two critical areas that underscore the importance of strong family systems: the relationship between family dynamics and mental health and the role of policies in fostering family well-being. Understanding these connections provides valuable insights for researchers and policymakers seeking to strengthen families amid shifting social, economic, and political tides.

Family Dynamics and Mental Health

Family dynamics and mental health are inextricably linked throughout the life course. Family structure, relationship quality, and the stability of the home environment influence psychological wellbeing. Research from across the world demonstrates how marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and relationship quality impact mental health.

Marriage, especially when happy and stable, is associated with better mental health outcomes across time and space. One review found marriage accounts for around two-thirds of the variance in mental health indicators such as depression, suicidality, and alcohol use, after accounting for genetic factors (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017). Research shows that transitioning from singlehood into marriage is protective of mental health for both men and women (Amato, 2014), and Norwegian research demonstrates that the effects endure over time (Kravdal et al., 2023).

Not all marriages are equally beneficial, as the quality of family relationships shapes the benefits. When individuals report highly cohesive family relationships characterized by low conflict, depression tends to be lower across the life course from adolescence to midlife (Chen & Harris, 2019).

How cohabitation shapes mental health is more nuanced. Some research found that stable companionship, whether marriage or cohabitation, offers similar benefits, as entry into either relationship is associated with reductions in depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Amato, 2014). However, these benefits tend to be temporary, often dissipating in the first few years. Poorer mental health outcomes among cohabitors compared to married individuals have been found in Europe, particularly among women (Yucel & Latshaw, 2023).

Perhaps the clearest association of family structure and mental health is for divorce, which is consistently linked to substantial poor effects. A meta-analysis with over half a million participants found that experiencing parental divorce during childhood was associated with more depression and substance abuse in adulthood and increased risk of suicidal ideation (Auersperg et al., 2019). Family instability, with divorce as the primary cause for many children around the world, often leads to emotional and behavioral problems, with many adults and children experiencing persistent declines (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017).

Beyond spousal relationships, childbearing and the number of children can also affect mental health – though in complex ways. Parenthood often brings both stress and emotional rewards, depending on factors like social support, financial resources, and family functioning (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). At the same time, supportive intergenerational relationships – such as help from grandparents – can provide a buffering effect, offering emotional and practical resources that help protect against negative mental health outcomes. These additional dimensions of family life illustrate how broader kinship dynamics and parental roles can shape psychological well-being alongside marriage, cohabitation, and divorce.

The complex interplay between family dynamics and mental health is well established. Marriage generally bestows mental health advantages, especially when the relationship is happy and stable. Cohabitation may offer similar benefits, yet relationship instability can make realizing these benefits difficult. Divorce and family instability are nearly universally associated with negative outcomes, emphasizing how crucial stable and supportive family environments are.

The Policy Imperative of Supporting Families – How Policymakers Can Leverage Family Policies to Strengthen Social Cohesion and Improve Societal Well-Being

A key objective of this manuscript has been to showcase the diversity of family forms, dynamics, and trends across the globe, highlighting the importance of tailoring policy efforts not only to international agendas but also to each

country's cultural, socioeconomic, and political reality. Global policy frameworks offer overarching principles – such as promoting gender equality or securing child welfare – but regional and national policy measures must address local nuances. The responsibility for harmonizing these broad goals with on-the-ground needs often falls on interdisciplinary teams of experts working at both national and international levels, ensuring that research, policy, and practice remain meaningfully integrated and responsive to the needs of local families.

Such integrated teams of policymakers and experts confront the challenge of promoting social wellbeing in a complex global landscape. One effective way is by implementing policies that leverage the fundamental role of families. As the cornerstone of societies, families have a profound impact on social structures and individual lives. Policymakers have the opportunity and responsibility to enact policies that support families to prevent poverty, socialize children, and ensure families are characterized by legitimacy, companionship, and stability. These efforts benefit individual families and contribute to broader societal well-being and cohesion.

First, policymakers can help prevent poverty via family-centric economic policies. Poverty undermines social cohesion and hampers societal progress. Families, when supported appropriately, can prevent and alleviate poverty. Policymakers can implement a range of family-centric economic policies, including:

- Comprehensive Social Safety Nets: Establishing or strengthening social protection programs that provide financial assistance to low-income families can reduce poverty rates;
- Affordable Childcare and Education: Subsidizing childcare and ensuring access to quality education enable parents to work, increasing household income and reducing poverty. Offering support for parents who choose to stay home with their children fosters family wellbeing while recognizing the value of caregiving and the concomitant benefits for children;
- Parental Leave and Flexible Work Policies: Instituting paid parental leave and promoting flexible work arrangements help families balance work and caregiving responsibilities, strengthening family bonds while ensuring financial stability;
- Housing Assistance Programs: Ensuring families can find safe and affordable housing creates a stable environment conducive to children's healthy development and social cohesion.

By focusing on these areas, policymakers can strengthen families, reduce poverty, and alleviate social challenges. Such policies must account for diverse family structures and cultural contexts to maximize effectiveness.

Second, policymakers can ensure families have the resources to socialize children successfully.

The socialization of children is a critical family function that enables societies to both produce and benefit from productive citizens. Policymakers facilitate this by focusing on the following priorities:

- Investing in Early Childhood Development: Programs that support learning and development during early years have long-term benefits;
- Strengthening Education Systems: Involving parents in children's formal education improves outcomes;
- Promoting Health and Wellness: Access to healthcare services, including mental health, is essential to family wellbeing;
- Supporting Positive Parenting Practices: Governments can encourage positive parenting through resources and campaigns focusing on communication, discipline, and emotional support.

These policies create an environment where children can flourish, as they develop social skills, empathy, and a sense of civic duty. When policymakers invest in supporting children's healthy socialization, they ensure that families have the support they need to be successful.

Finally, policymakers can support families by ensuring romantic relationships are anchored in legitimacy, companionship, and stability. Legitimacy, or legal recognition of family relationships, provides access to rights, protections, and benefits. Viewing families as legal, economic, and social units reinforces social stability via shared norms and values.

Companionship, where individuals are committed to each other's wellbeing, leads to more stable relationships. Policies that focus on companionship in marriage are economical ways to support families. Marriage and relationship support programs can offer counseling, education, and conflict resolution resources, strengthening family relations.

Family stability is critical because stable families are the foundation of a healthy, prosperous society. When families break down, societies experience negative outcomes that strain government resources and impede devel-

opment. Therefore, maintaining family stability is essential. Governments can support families experiencing economic insecurities with policies providing job security, fair wages, and unemployment benefits.

Policies focusing on legitimacy, companionship, and stability can improve family life and societal wellbeing. Policymakers should recognize diverse family structures and cultural practices, shaping policies accordingly. Community engagement ensures policies are culturally appropriate and effectively address local needs.

Families – though they evolve in response to economic, social, and ideological shifts – remain central. The Integrative Convergence-Divergence Model (ICDM) provides a framework for understanding these complex patterns, recognizing that while family trends often converge globally, cultural and historical forces ensure continued regional singularity.

As policymakers consider strategies to enhance family stability and well-being, a nuanced approach is essential – one that acknowledges the interplay between economic development, social policies, and cultural and religious norms. Future research should explore how policies interact with family structures in diverse contexts and how emerging trends, such as digital transformation and shifting labor markets, will continue to shape families. Because the health of families directly impacts the health of nations, policymakers must prioritize families. Investing in families safeguards the success of the Sustainable Development Goals and ensures a high quality of life for all while building resilient communities.

Author contribution
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