

How are families changing?

Over the years, the family, considered the natural and fundamental group unit of society, has changed in its formation and structure. There can be various reasons behind these changes, including developments in the economy, technology, politics, and demographics.

Demographic transformation is one of such changes experienced by many countries in recent years impacting the life and well-being of families worldwide. It is within this context that the chosen theme by the United Nations for the 2023 International Day of Families, celebrated on the 15th of May, is 'Families and Demographic Change'.

Demographic trends are mostly shaped by fertility and mortality patterns. According to the Eurostat, among the EU member states, France reported the highest total [fertility rate](#) in 2021, with 1.84 live births per woman, while the lowest total fertility rate in 2021 was recorded in Malta (1.13 live births per woman). On the other hand, Eurostat data shows life expectancy has risen, on average, by more than two years per decade since the 1960s. In 2021, [life expectancy at birth in the EU](#) rose to 80.1 years.

Declines in fertility rates and longer life expectancy resulted in a rapidly ageing population aged 65 years and over. This ageing population is projected to rise from 10% in 2022 to 16% in 2050.

In parallel to ageing, the structure of families is becoming increasingly diverse with different types of families such as single-parent families, nuclear families, extended families, childless families, and same-sex families amongst others. This has happened due to a shift in culture.

Over the past 50 years we have also seen a shift in the family structure; from interconnected extended families, made up of parents and children and other relatives (such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles) living in the same household to smaller and detached nuclear families, consisting of parents and their children.

Culture shapes our views on key issues such as the roles of family members. Although gender gaps persist, more women are participating in the labour market. Hence, men are not the only

breadwinners working outside the home. According to the [data](#) published by the National Statistics Office (NSO), the female employment rate stood at 72.3% in 2022, whilst that of males stood at 84%.

The participation of women in the public sphere has strengthened, whilst in the private sphere, women are still shouldering the bulk of unpaid and domestic work. The [Gender Equality Index \(GEI\) 2022](#) that measures the progress of gender equality in the EU shows that women in the EU are more than twice as likely as men to provide the bulk of childcare for under-12s, and housework and care are not shared equally within homes and continue to be done mainly by women.

In fact, in 2021, the GEI data shows that in Malta, 37% of women reported taking care of children aged 0–11 for more than four hours a day, compared to 14% of men, which is the lowest share of men across the EU. Moreover, 56% of women compared to 25% of men were entirely or primarily responsible for the care of children aged 0–11.

This scenario has steered policymakers to develop and implement family-friendly policies to achieve equality between men and women at the place of work as well as in home life. In effect, the Work-life Balance Directive, passed by the European Parliament in 2019, was transposed into Maltese law via Legal Notice 201 of 2022 that came into effect in August.

The new rights to increase the quality of life of workers and families and decrease gender inequalities in careers and the labour market. These rights cover paternity leave, parental leave, carers' leave and the right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes.

Whilst these measures should leave positive results, further developments of such initiatives need to be considered in order to balance the participation of women and men in both the public and private spheres. This would significantly bring about equality between women and men whilst strengthening the family structure.



Family formations and structures may differ or change, but the importance of the role of families remains and cannot be replaced. The family is the most powerful system in our societies and is known for building competence and character.

Nevertheless, families do better in a supportive policy environment—one in which, for example, workplaces recognise that employees are also family members that need to be supported in their responsibilities as parents, workers and caregivers. In this regard, our responsibility is to continue working to empower families in every possible way to develop within this ever-changing environment.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2276 8200, equality@gov.mt or NCPE's social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter - NCPE.Malta)

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