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Mother’s Day invites us to consider how motherhood is changing and how it varies around the globe. Understanding these changes and their consequences for children and families is particularly important in these times of diminished government resources for programs supporting mothers and their children.

Several myths about moms, their relationships, their children, and their circumstances are debunked by a new report, the World Family Map 2014, which we released recently in collaboration with a consortium of international research institutions and non-government organizations. The project monitors key family indicators affecting child well-being in 60 countries in every region of the globe. We found that much conventional wisdom about moms that we hold here in the U.S. does not necessarily hold true abroad. Here are five myths about mothers and families:

1. **Single moms are more likely to be poor.**
   This is not always true. In the United States, single moms generally have lower incomes than married moms, and this circumstance is often cited as the primary reason why children raised by single mothers do more poorly than children living with two parents on child well-being outcomes, such as in education, health, behavior, and social-emotional areas. In many developing countries, however, we find that single moms are more likely to be highly educated and higher income than other moms. This means that children raised by single moms in these regions are not at the same economic disadvantage as children raised by single moms here in the U.S., on average. In Africa, Asia, Central/South America, and the Caribbean, single moms are typically of higher educational and socioeconomic status than mothers who live with partners. In poorer countries, family change often happens first among elites who have the economic resources and the educational background to experiment with nontraditional family life, or to leave an unsatisfying or abusive marriage. As countries develop economically, and single motherhood becomes more common, it becomes more concentrated among those with less income and education, as is the case in wealthier countries.
Children raised by single moms have worse outcomes than other kids.

In the United States, children living with a single mother are at higher risk for poorer health, educational, behavioral, and emotional outcomes. This is not true universally. An examination of psychological difficulties among 9- to 16-year-olds in the European Union finds that in only eight out of 25 EU countries do children have higher levels of psychological difficulties in single-parent families compared with two-parent families, taking controls into account: Italy, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria, Norway, Romania, and Austria. In fact, last year’s World Family Map reported on a number of developing countries where children of single mothers did as well on education outcomes as those in two-parent families. The report even cited a few countries where children living with a single mother had better educational outcomes than their peers living with two parents, net of controls. The explanation for this varies around the globe, but in some regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, research has found that when mothers control the resources, they are more likely to spend them on their children’s education.

Women in Europe have the highest rates of non-marital birth.

Central and South American countries, with a long history of consensual unions, lead the world in rates of cohabitation (living together without being married) and non-marital childbearing. For instance, in Peru (2012), 38 percent of adults of reproductive age were cohabiting, and in Colombia (2009-10), 84 percent of births were to unmarried women. Europe has the next highest rates of cohabitation and non-marital fertility in the world. For example, 26 percent of adults of reproductive age were cohabiting in France, and 56 percent of all live births were to unmarried women (2011). Cohabitation and non-marital childbearing rates are more moderate in the United States by comparison, where nine percent of adults were cohabiting in 2010 and 41 percent of births were to unmarried women in 2011.

In the U.S., studies have shown that children born to unmarried women and raised with cohabiting parents generally have poorer educational, health, and social behavioral outcomes. Since cohabiting unions tend to be less stable, there is a tendency for poorer relationships between parents, poorer parenting skills, more relationship turbulence, more economic hardship and more stress than among married couples. These negative consequences of cohabitation do not necessarily translate to children from cohabiting partnerships in Europe, where cohabitation often looks very different. For example, laws in Scandinavian countries give unmarried dads the same rights and responsibilities as married dads in the U.S. (including child support), and in both France and Sweden, which have the highest rates of non-marital childbearing and cohabitation in Europe, they also have the highest percent of GDP spent on family benefits, such as child payments and allowances, parental leave benefits, and child care support, easing the burden on unmarried moms.
**Living together without being married is becoming more common worldwide.**

While cohabitation is increasing in many regions of the world, it remains uncommon in the more traditional regions of the Middle East and Asia, with the exception of the Philippines. In most countries the percentage of married adults is still substantially higher than those who are cohabiting. This is true in the U.S. as well. Younger couples are more likely to cohabit than older couples, and many young cohabiters eventually marry. The reasons for the increase in cohabitation include a desire to try living together before marriage and thus delaying marriage, lack of financial resources to marry, a perception that marriage is unnecessary or even risky, and a desire for more flexibility and freedom.

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**Adults are satisfied with family life, but teens are not.**

Not necessarily. Families function as a refuge and source of emotional support when they are functioning well. While in most countries, the majority of adults express satisfaction with their family life, in other countries this is not the case. In Russia, for example, only 31 percent of adults are either completely or very satisfied with their family life.

Frequent communication among family members is considered an indicator of a healthy family. And while conventional wisdom suggests that teens want to have nothing to do with their parents, especially their moms, they actually have closer relationships with their parents than is generally perceived. The study revealed that teens, for example, talk quite a bit to their parents. Fifteen-year-olds spend time just talking to their parents every day or almost every day in countries studied around the world, from 40 percent in Macao to 92 percent in Germany. And generally, relationships get better by the time children reach their early 20s.

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So moms, take heart, and take (at least) a day to be proud of what you've accomplished. The World Family Map reveals that you are in good company with a diversity of families around the globe, and every country has families with strengths as well as challenges. By looking at international comparisons, we can see possibilities for strengthening motherhood and families more generally, if we can journey beyond the boundaries of our conventional thinking.

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