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## Family solidarity in Europe alive and well

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# Family solidarity in Europe alive and well

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SUSAN TER BEKKE ANDTINEKE FOKKEMA

**Families in Europe span more generations than they did a few decades ago. And each successive generation consists of fewer people. Yet family solidarity has remained strong, with parents supporting their children and vice versa. We do see considerable differences across Europe, however. In southern Europe, for example, it is far more common for the elderly to live in with their children and to have frequent contact with each other than in northern Europe. Similarly, southern Europeans feel a stronger sense of obligation towards their children and grandchildren than people in northern European countries.**

photo: Wim de Jonge



Families in Europe have undergone marked changes in recent decades. As life expectancy is rising, families today span a larger number of generations, but due to the declining family size each successive generation consists of fewer people. At the same time, family and marriage ties have become weaker. Marriage has lost ground to other living arrangements, divorce is on the rise and, due to growing mobility, family members are living further apart from each other. We also see that caring duties have come under increasing pressure as a result of the emancipation of women, in particular their increased enrolment in education and labour force participation. In cultural terms there has been a shift within families from parental authority (respect your father and your mother) to the individual autonomy of each member of family.

## **Lost or changing solidarity?**

According to some, these changes are a threat to family solidarity. They say that the degree to which parents and children are prepared to support and care for each other is decreasing. In this respect, the welfare state has not been of

any help. The need for children to care for their parents has declined as formal care for the elderly has been extended. Benefits such as state and other pensions and social security have made parents and children less dependent on each other in economic terms.

Others believe that family solidarity has not so much weakened, but has changed in character. Smaller families and the disappearance of distance-creating parental authority have paved the way for more intensive and more personal contact between parents and their children. They say that formal care facilities for older adults and caring for one's family are complementary: as part of the caring responsibilities are taken off their shoulders, informal carers are relieved somewhat of this heavy burden and are able to keep up these duties for a longer period of time. Parents, in their turn, are able to offer their children and grandchildren financial support in difficult times thanks to improved pension arrangements.

In 2004 a large-scale survey was held among people aged 50 and over in eleven European countries (the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, SHARE for short, see

box). Issues addressed were health, ageing and retirement. The results of this survey were used to gain a deeper insight into the state of family solidarity in Europe in our day and age. The most important results of this survey are presented here.

### Strong sense of duty to care

European older adults clearly feel a strong sense of duty when it comes to caring for their children and grandchildren. As shown in the Table, a large majority of people aged 50 and over felt that grandparents need to be there for their grandchildren if they have problems. A large majority also felt that it is the parents' duty to do their best for their children, even at the expense of their own wellbeing. No less than three quarters of southern Europeans aged 50-plus were of the opinion that grandparents should help their children care for the grandchildren. In the other countries, between 29 and 75 percent of the older adults agreed. These lower percentages are hardly surprising given that the statement appeals to a concrete duty of care, but not to the need for support. In Denmark about the same percentage older adults (34 percent) and in the Netherlands an even higher percentage older adults (42 percent) were of an opposite opinion. They did not feel that it is the duty of grandparents to help their children in this way. Older adults clearly showed less solidarity with their children and grandchildren when it comes to financial support. Whereas in the Mediterranean countries, 61 percent of those aged 50 and over felt that grandparents should contribute to the economic security of their grandchildren and their families, this was a mere 33 percent in the northern European countries. In Austria and Switzerland the number of people who agreed and disagreed was more or less equal. In Denmark and the Netherlands no fewer than 51 and 43 percent of the older adults respectively were of the opinion that grandparents have no obligation to contribute to the economic security of grandchildren and their families; 17 and 25 percent felt that they do.

### Help in kind: Old elderly 'net receivers'

Parents help their children and children help their elderly parents by providing administrative assistance, household help and personal care. They may provide this support either regularly (at least once a week) or occasionally. The exchange of help in kind was found to be more common in northern and central Europe than in southern Europe (see Figure 1). This is surprising as the geographical distance between older adults and their children is shortest in Italy, Spain and Greece and the frequency of contact is highest in these countries, and because the welfare state is less developed in the countries of southern Europe. Having said that, support given in central Europe and, even more so, in northern Europe is usually given on an occasional basis whereas support in southern Europe is given regularly (figures not presented).

Opinions about the duty of parents/grandparents to care for their children/grandchildren (weighted percentages)(\*)

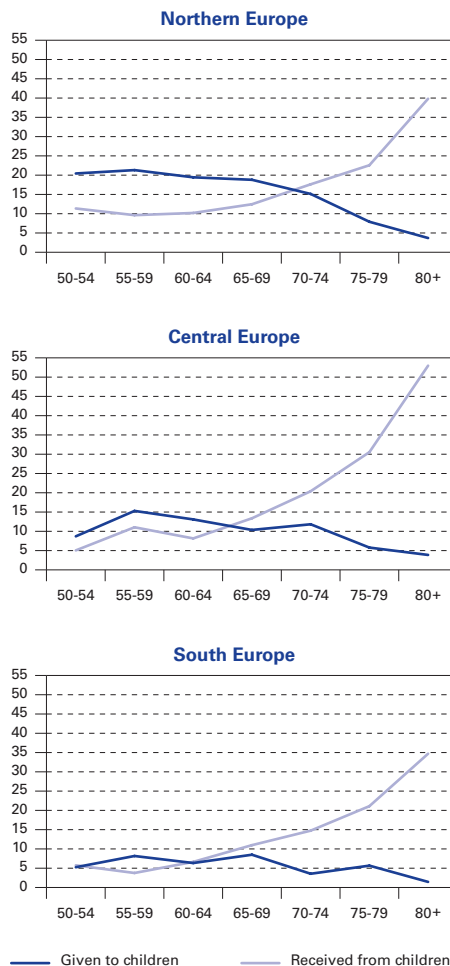
	It is the parents'/grandparents' duty to....		be there for grandchildren in case of difficulty		do their best for their children even at the expense of their own wellbeing		help the grandchildren's parents in looking after young grandchildren		contribute towards the economic security of the grandchildren and their families	
	(strongly) agree	(strongly) disagree	(strongly) agree	(strongly) disagree	(strongly) agree	(strongly) disagree	(strongly) agree	(strongly) disagree	(strongly) agree	(strongly) disagree
<i>Northern Europe</i>										
Sweden	78.4	7.7	88.4	4.2	51.9	26.1	41.9	28.6		
Denmark	76.0	10.2	70.2	13.6	37.5	34.3	17.0	50.8		
Netherlands	74.0	10.7	64.9	14.9	28.5	42.0	25.1	43.2		
Belgium	81.2	7.9	66.3	19.0	60.3	19.2	45.5	28.9		
<i>Central Europe</i>										
Germany	83.5	3.2	58.3	21.2	74.8	7.4	39.8	27.9		
France	89.3	2.9	72.0	10.7	69.4	9.7	49.4	17.5		
Austria	73.1	10.7	76.2	12.8	56.2	21.1	35.4	35.8		
Switzerland	70.9	12.2	69.4	17.2	49.5	25.1	32.9	38.8		
<i>South Europe</i>										
Italy	89.6	3.3	88.6	3.4	77.8	7.1	63.7	13.4		
Spain	87.1	2.6	89.8	2.8	69.1	10.9	58.0	14.4		
Greece	90.0	2.7	91.6	3.3	80.1	4.0	59.3	17.6		

(\*) The row percentages for each opinion do not add up to 100 because the category 'neither agree nor disagree' has not been presented.

Source: SHARE, 2004 – release 2.

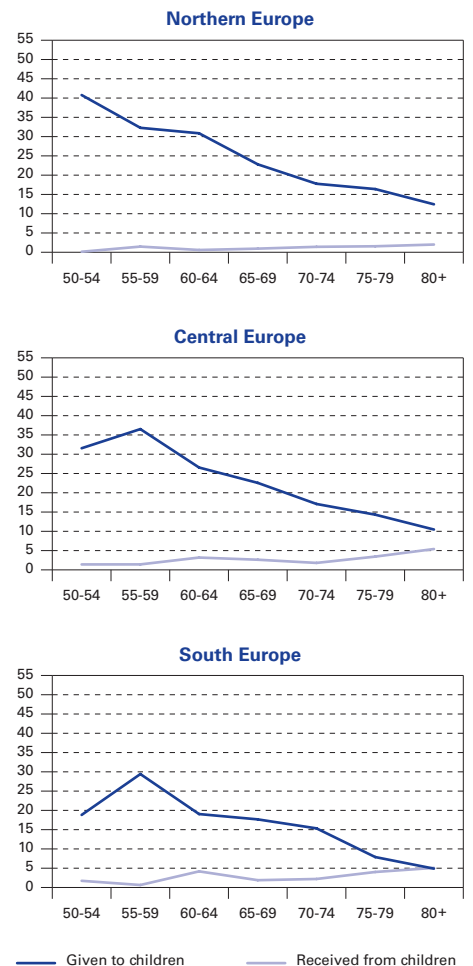
Figure 1 also shows that European older adults did not become 'net receivers' of help in kind until an advanced age. As they grow older, European elderly were found to gradually give

Figure 1. Exchange of help in kind in past 12 months between the 50-plus and their non-co-resident children, by age of the 50-plus (weighted percentages)



Source: SHARE, 2004 – release 2.

Figure 2. Exchange of material support in past 12 months between the 50-plus and their non-co-resident children, by age of the 50-plus (weighted percentages)



Source: SHARE, 2004 – release 2.

The data used were taken from the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (SHARE) – Release 2, which was largely funded by the European Commission under the Fifth Framework Programme. Additional funding came from the US National Institute on Ageing. Data collection for wave 1 was nationally funded in Austria, Belgium, France and Switzerland. Further support by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme is gratefully acknowledged. For methodological details, see Börsch-Supan and Jürges (2005).

In 2004, more than 19,000 people aged 50-plus were interviewed in eleven European countries. About 65 percent of the interviewees completed a written questionnaire (addressing various issues including their opinions about the duty of care) after the face-to-face interview. People who remained childless or whose children had died (1,281 men and 1,372 women) were not included in this study.

#### LITERATURE:

- Börsch-Supan, A. and H. Jürges (eds.) (2005), *The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe - methodology*, Mannheim Research Institute for the Economics of Aging, University of Mannheim.

less and receive exponentially more help in kind. The curves for giving and receiving support cross each other when the older adults reach the age of 60 (southern Europe), 65 (central Europe) and 70 (northern Europe).

#### **Material support: Young elderly 'net givers'**

European older adults gave more financial support than they received from their children. In the twelve months preceding the survey, 20

percent of older adults aged 50-plus had given 250 euros or more to their children. No more than three percent said their children had supported them. The percentage aged 50-plus offering financial support to their children was highest in the wealthiest countries of northern Europe (25 percent) and lowest in the least wealthy countries of southern Europe (15 percent).

Financial support given to children by Europeans aged 50 and over decreased as they grew older (see Figure 2). The children, in their turn, gave more and more financial support to their parents, however meagre, after their parents had reached the age of 75. The curves for giving and receiving support in southern Europe cross each other after the older adults have reached the age of 80. In northern and central Europe the curves do not cross each other: in these countries, parents remain 'net givers' in terms of financial support.

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