

Living arrangements and well-being in old age: gender perspective in European regions

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Introduction

Several life course events shape living arrangements in old age: children leaving home, partners leaving due to death or separation, new partners starting to live in the household, children (and their families) returning, starting to live with others (relatives or nursing home). Previously, it has been shown that usually women remaining alone fare worse in their old age well-being than men (Gaymu & Springer 2012). Recent studies for several countries challenge this outcome (Young & Grundy, 2009; Hank & Wagner, 2013; Sakkeus et al. 2023a). Several trends might contribute to the phenomena. First, education levels and labour market engagement among women have improved. On the one hand, it has offered opportunities to remain without family ties. On the other hand, it has given the resources to manage one's own life. As an outcome more women choose to live alone in old age. Second, better health and diminishing gender gap in life expectancy has prolonged the time couples live together and thus contribute to the increased proportion of this living arrangement. Third, trends of separation and divorce, but also loss of a partner due to death contributes either to increasing the proportion of those living alone or starting to live with others (relatives or nursing homes).

Childhood socio-economic position may have long-term consequences on old age well-being (Blane et al., 2012, Wahrendorf & Blane, 2015). However, adulthood socio-economic position can reverse the situation (Niedzwiedz et al., 2014, Sakkeus et al., 2023b), although some studies report opposite outcomes (Wildman et al., 2018). Less is known about how both of these socio-economic circumstances modify the associations between living arrangements and well-being. In the studies where associations between living arrangements and well-being have been considered, we did not identify any for Europe which include life course socio-economic indicators. Sakkeus and her colleagues recently found for Estonian women that childhood and adulthood socio-economic positions (SEP), and in particular adulthood SEP, have largely contributed to the positive well-being of women living alone (Sakkeus et al., 2023a). It was better or on par with those living in couples, who are usually described by the highest levels of well-being (ibid). In general, favourable socio-economic conditions seem to decrease the differences in associations between living arrangements and well-being (Young & Grundy, 2009; Gaymu & Springer, 2012, Forward et al., 2022).

As women have gained in recent decades more socio-economic resources than ever before, we expect that this trend has decreased the differences in associations between various living arrangements and well-being. This might have also contributed to the decreased variation in well-being of living arrangements across European regions. Our main objective is to understand to which extent socio-economic conditions modify the associations of living arrangements with well-being in European regions by gender.

Data and methods

We use the SHARE wave 7 data, which for the first time covered most of the European countries. We grouped countries into the following seven regions: the Baltics (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia); Central Eastern Europe or CEE (Czechia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia); Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark,

Finland); Germanic countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland); Francophone countries (France, Belgium, Luxembourg), Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta); and South Eastern Europe (Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania). Our main variable of interest is well-being, based on the CASP-12 instrument (range 12-48) (Hyde et al., 2003). The main independent variable is the living arrangement type: living alone, in a couple, couple with others, or other arrangement. Although living alone in old age has become one of the main arrangements, in particular for women, there are still varieties in other living arrangements such as living alone with others or in other possible configurations, which we have combined together as “other” living arrangements, including those living in a nursing home.

We control for main characteristics usually associated with well-being, such as: age, disability status, number of children ever had, legal marital status (married and registered partnerships, never married, divorced and widowed). We also account for childhood economic circumstances (rooms per capita, no. of books, number of amenities, childhood family’s financial position) and adulthood socio-economic position (educational attainment level, current household income and current household net wealth), standardized using the methodology introduced by Niedzwiedz (2014). We include only people aged 65 and above. We use linear regression models, including variables step-by-step, and test the gender hypotheses in interaction with living arrangement type. We carry out the analysis for the whole Europe and separately by regions, to understand better the gender differences in association between well-being and living arrangement type within these regions.

Hypotheses

We assume that there are gender differences in well-being by different living arrangements. Thus, we expect arrangements with couples to be more beneficial for men. Among women, we expect living arrangements with greater burden of care to be less beneficial for their well-being.

Second, we expect that accounting for childhood and adulthood socio-economic circumstances improves well-being for women in various arrangements compared to living alone.

Regionally, we expect for both genders in Western regions (Nordic, Germanic, Francophone regions) couples to remain the most positive living arrangement for well-being, also after accounting for socio-economic circumstances. For Southern Europe and Eastern regions (the Baltics, CEE, SEE) we expect the main gender differences in well-being to come out in living with others (either as a couple or solo), where men would be negatively affected by the latter two living arrangements and women more positively, especially after accounting for socio-economic circumstances.

Preliminary results for Europe

In general, women have worse well-being than men in all regions. However, after accounting for the main structural variables this disadvantage disappears and becomes non-significant in the Baltics, Nordic and Germanic countries.

By living arrangements, initially, gender differences in well-being appear for those living as a couple and living as a couple with others compared to solo dwellers, with women faring significantly better than men. Accounting for regional variation removes gender differences for those living as a couple with others and in other arrangement. Controlling for childhood and adulthood socio-economic positions (SEP) does not alter the gender differences in well-being, however, now Southern Europe

fares significantly worse in well-being compared to other regions. Accounting for demographic structural variables removes gender differences in well-being for those living as a couple. Finally, there remain gender differences in well-being for those living with others, faring the worst.

Overall, well-being for Germanic, Nordic and Francophone countries is significantly higher than the well-being for the Baltics, CEE and SEE, and not to mention Southern Europe.

Gender differences in well-being within European regions

In the Baltics, no gender differences in well-being by living arrangement type are visible. Accounting for main structural factors of the population changes the positive gradient of living as a couple and as a couple with others into negative, leaving those living alone as the best for well-being in the Baltics. However, the gender difference remains non-significant.

In CEE, living in all other living arrangements is associated with higher well-being among women than men compared to living alone. However, it was significantly higher for women only when living as a couple and as a couple with others. Accounting for other variables decreases the gender difference, but does not change the principle associations much.

In the Nordic region, well-being of women living as a couple, but also living with others is considerably higher than that of men, whereas well-being for women living as a couple with others is lower than for men in this arrangement. Gender differences in well-being are not significant when living with others, throughout the models. Associations do not change much when SEP is considered. However, taking into account the main demographic structural factors, gender differences in well-being for those living as a couple become worse compared to those living solo, although are non-significant. Living as a couple with others remains significantly worse for well-being of women than men in the Nordic region.

In Germanic countries, well-being does not differ between men and women by any living arrangement, although living as a couple with others indicate somewhat worse well-being than other arrangements. Only after considering demographic structural factors, the well-being of women living as a couple or as a couple with others becomes significantly worse than men's. Considering SEP variables in the final model together with main structural factors removes the significant gender differences in well-being for those living as a couple with others compared to solo dwellers.

In Francophone region, well-being of women living as a couple or living as a couple with others is significantly better compared to men, and compared to solo living. These associations do not change much when considering other variables. Living with others is somewhat worse for women's well-being than men's, but gender differences remain non-significant throughout the models for this living arrangement.

In Southern Europe, well-being is higher for women than men in all living arrangements compared to solo living, however significant gender differences appear only for living as a couple and living as a couple with others. Accounting for SEP variables does not change these associations, however, demographic structural variables remove gender differences in well-being for those living as a couple with others.

South East European region is the only region where women indicate consistently worse well-being than men in all living arrangements. However, initially, gender differences are not significant only for

those living as a couple. Accounting for both childhood and adulthood SEP variables removes gender differences in well-being also for those living with others. Considering demographic structural factors decreases the well-being of women in all living arrangements to significant levels, leaving those living as a couple with others the worst compared to men. Finally, living alone seems to be the best option for well-being of women in the SEE region.

Discussion

This analysis indicates that there is no universal living arrangement that results in the best well-being outcomes in later life not by gender nor by regions. Rather, some clusters of countries (Germanic, Nordic and Francophone) that have had an opportunity to develop welfare states for a longer time indicate higher well-being compared to other European regions in all living arrangements. This is in line with previous studies pointing towards individuals in such countries enjoying also smaller inequalities in quality of life (Niedzwiedz et al., 2014).

Specifically, we find that living as a couple is associated with better well-being for women than men in Southern Europe, but also in CEE and Francophone regions. In the latter two, actually those living as a couple with others have the best well-being, compared to living alone. However, living alone, especially among women, is associated with significantly better well-being compared to other arrangements in SEE and Germanic regions, while it indicates better well-being, albeit at non-significant levels also in the Baltics and Nordics. Living as a couple is detrimental for women's well-being in SEE and Germanic regions, and at non-significant levels also in the Baltics. Specifically, for SEE and Germanic countries then, it can be confirmed that men benefit when living as a couple due to relying mostly on their partner, while women benefit from living alone as they tend to build strong support networks outside of marriage and partnership (Klinenberg, 2012).

Accounting for demographic structural factors explained some of the gender differences in well-being by living arrangements in several regions, while considering childhood and adulthood SEP indicators often didn't change the associations. This is in line with some of the previous research (Read et al., 2016). However, gender differences were affected for those living with others in SEE compared to those living alone, and for those living as a couple with others in Germanic countries. These findings suggest that socio-economic benefits may be distributed unevenly across different living arrangement constellations, affecting well-being through life time SEP in some European regions.

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