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# **The socio-demographic evolution of divorce and remarriage in Belgium**

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## ABSTRACT

A wide range of socio-demographic indicators show a rising prevalence and, by consequence, a rising societal importance of divorce in Belgium. In order to clarify the incidence and characteristics of divorce, the most recent official demographic statistics of Belgium are analysed. While offering socio-demographic explanations in an international context for this phenomenon, it seems that the observed increase in the number of divorces has not reached its upper limit yet.

The longitudinal and transversal divorce rates exhibit a steady increase since the 1960s, with a strong acceleration in the mid 1990s. Based on the figures up to the year 2000, an estimated 45% of Belgian married couples will get divorced within 40 years of marriage. Considering that this percentage has quadrupled in only 30 years, divorce has become a phenomenon of enormous societal importance. Furthermore, Belgian couples divorce sooner in marriage life. Whereas in 1988 the peak in the average marriage duration before divorce lay at 8 years of marriage, in 2000 this shifted gradually to a duration of 4 years (with a relatively stable median duration of 12 years). Conversely, Belgian couples also divorce increasingly later in marriage life: 25% of the divorcees in 2000 separated after a marriage duration of 20 years or more. The median age of divorcees has remained relatively stable, if not risen, at approximately 40 (men) and 38 (women) years of age.

In 1960, for the vast majority (82%) the ground for divorce was fault based, while in 2000, in part because of a change in legislation in 1995, up to 75% judicially agreed on divorce by 'mutual consent'. Consequently, the official initiative of divorce is taken increasingly by both partners.

Remarkably, divorcees do not to dislike the institution of marriage. In 1999, an estimated four in ten remarried within 7 years. As a result, one third of the total number of marriages in 1999 were remarriages (of which 97% after being divorced). Without this phenomenon, even though the absolute and relative number of remarriage is not increasing, the already low number of marriages would even be lower.

These changes in the divorce behaviour in Belgium can be understood as the consequences of demographic, cultural and legal developments. Processes such as individualisation, detraditionalisation and differentiation broke down traditional barriers and opened up the individual range of possibilities. Marriage and relationships became increasingly conditional and breakable because of the weakened social and legal restrictions regarding the termination of marriage and the stronger individual demands on marriage. As the individually perceived quality of the relationship becomes the extremely fragile legitimisation of the marriage, the risk of ending the marriage increases enormously.

## INTRODUCTION

In Belgium, the systematic calculation and analyses of the longitudinal divorce rates have been neglected for a decade now. With a few exceptions (Corijn, 1999), little empirical research has been done into the demographic characteristics of divorce in Belgium. The Belgian news media nonetheless remained interested in this topic, without paying the necessary attention to the long-term demographic context. For example, Flemish newspapers gave front-page coverage to the release of the new divorce figures by the Belgian National Institute of Statistics in July 2002. Unfortunately, the article (inadvertently) gave the incorrect impression that seven in ten Belgian marriages eventually end in divorce (De Standaard, 5/7/2002). In order to dispel these sorts of misunderstandings and to clarify the incidence and characteristics of divorce, the evolution of the most recent demographic statistics of Belgium will be analysed in an socio-demographic context.

Divorce is a fast growing social phenomena in contemporary Western society. A wide range of demographic divorce indicators show a rising prevalence and, as a consequence, a rising societal importance of divorce. In this paper, these indicators will be analysed systematically as a preparation for further substantial research into the societal and personal consequences of divorce. First, we will describe the various divorce rates and characteristics of divorce and remarriage. In the conclusion, the socio-

demographic evolution of divorce and remarriage in Belgium will be analysed. All findings will be framed and linked together in the socio-cultural and demographic context of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### BELGIAN DIVORCE LAW

New divorce legislation was implemented in Belgium on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1994. The duration of the proceedings of divorce by mutual consent was shortened from eighteen to six months. Whereas formerly divorcing couples had to appear three times at the court, this 'period of reconciliation' was reduced to two court appearances. Because of the curtailed proceeding duration, the divorce could be declared in the same year of the petitioning. The principle of fault remains within the Belgian divorce law. Judicially, the question of guilt is important in terms of alimony payments. The 'guilty' spouse can be coerced by the magistrate to pay alimony to the claiming 'innocent' party. Also in 1995 (April 13<sup>th</sup>), a new law on parental authority formally included the principle of co-parentship or joint custody for the first time. Furthermore, involved third parties (such as grandparents) can legally obtain visitation rights with the children. The law of April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2000 shortened the divorce proceeding duration based on separation from bed and board from five to two years. In conclusion, the law of February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001 provides the possibility, with the agreement of both spouses, of the appointment of an authorized divorce mediator (i.c. lawyer, notary or social worker) by a magistrate (Corijn, 1999).

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF DEMOGRAPHIC POPULATION DATA

In this research, the most recent available population statistics of the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) of Belgium are used. This method has several, both positive and negative, methodological and substantial implications. The population data of the NIS contain a number of relevant variables for a significant period of time. In this paper we use historic population data, mainly since the post-war period. This period is limited here mostly to a shorter and more recent period of time. Except for the small margin of error (mostly due to bureaucratic counting mistakes), we can make valid claims about a total population (i.c. the inhabitants of a country), without the need for (flawed) extrapolation or (vague) generalisation and significance tests. The downside of this method entails the limitation to the predetermined variables by the NIS. For example, we lack subjective data, such as information on subjective reasons for divorce. Additionally, the historic population data do not contain panel data, thus the reconstruction of the (family) life course is not possible. In combination with the limited and predetermined cross tabulation of the available variables, the restrictions of the research possibilities are clear.

## I. DIVORCE RATES

### 1.1. DIVORCE AND MARRIAGE IN BELGIUM IN ABSOLUTE FIGURES

In order to examine the recent divorce trends in Belgium, it is necessary to start with the absolute number of divorces and marriages (see table 1 and figure 1). Even though the significance of these numbers is limited, it is nonetheless of descriptive use. On a basic level, the absolute annual number of marriages and divorces in Belgium shows an inclination to slowly converge since the early 90s.

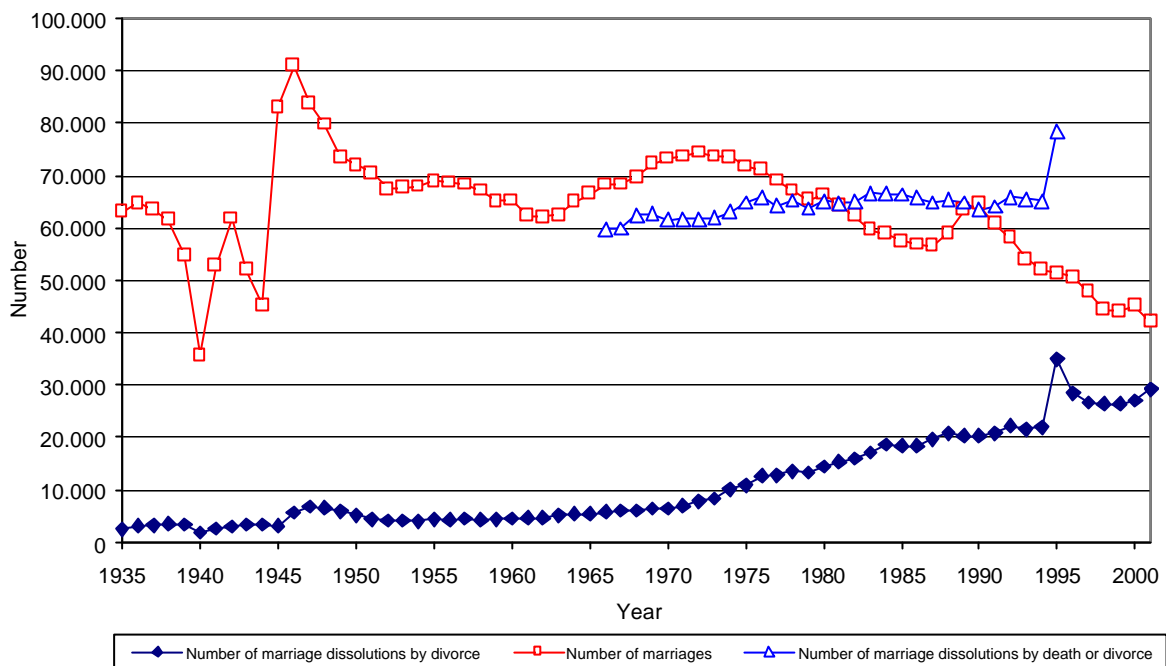
*Table 1: Evolution of the absolute number of divorces and marriages in Belgium, 1970-2001*

Year	Divorces	Marriages	Year	Divorces	Marriages
1970	6 403	73 261	1986	18 380	56 780
1971	7 024	73 644	1987	19 722	56 631
1972	7 832	74 352	1988	20 809	59 075
1973	8 336	73 664	1989	20 256	63 511
1974	10 133	73 567	1990	20 311	64 654
1975	10 977	71 736	1991	20 845	60 740
1976	12 665	71 142	1992	22 262	58 156
1977	12 867	69 073	1993	21 602	54 112
1978	13 528	67 127	1994	22 041	51 962
1979	13 381	65 429	1995	34 983	51 402
1980	14 457	66 369	1996	28 402	50 552
1981	15 323	64 380	1997	26 748	47 759
1982	16 004	62 341	1998	26 503	44 393
1983	17 125	59 629	1999	26 423	44 171
1984	18 645	58 962	2000	27 002	45 123
1985	18 440	57 559	2001	29 314	42 110

Source: NIS population statistics

The annual number of divorces exploded in 1995, due to the implementation of a new divorce legislation in Belgium. In 1993 and 1994, a substantial number of unhappy couples anticipated this law reform and consequently postponed their divorce plans to 1995. This law reform made the instigation of divorce proceedings more attractive and thus explains in part the strong increase in the number of divorces in 1995 and, to a lesser extent, in later years (Corijn, 1999). In the Capital Region of Brussels, the number of divorces is exceptionally high. In 2001, this number even exceeded the number of marriages for the first time in Belgian history (4.910 divorces for 4.768 marriages).

Figure 1: Evolution of the absolute number of marriages and marriage dissolutions in Belgium, 1935-2001



## 1.2. CRUDE DIVORCE RATE

The absolute number of divorces may have descriptive merits, it does not take the changes in the population volume or the number of married couples – the risk population – into account. The crude divorce rate corrects for the first lack (the divorce rate of the married corrects both, cf. infra). By relating the number of divorces with the number of inhabitants (i.e. per 1 000 inhabitants), the changes in the size of the population are controlled for. Using this crude rate, it is possible to compare countries (or regions) with each other. Before comparing the rate of Belgium with other (mostly European) countries, the crude divorce rate of Belgium since 1970 is analysed.

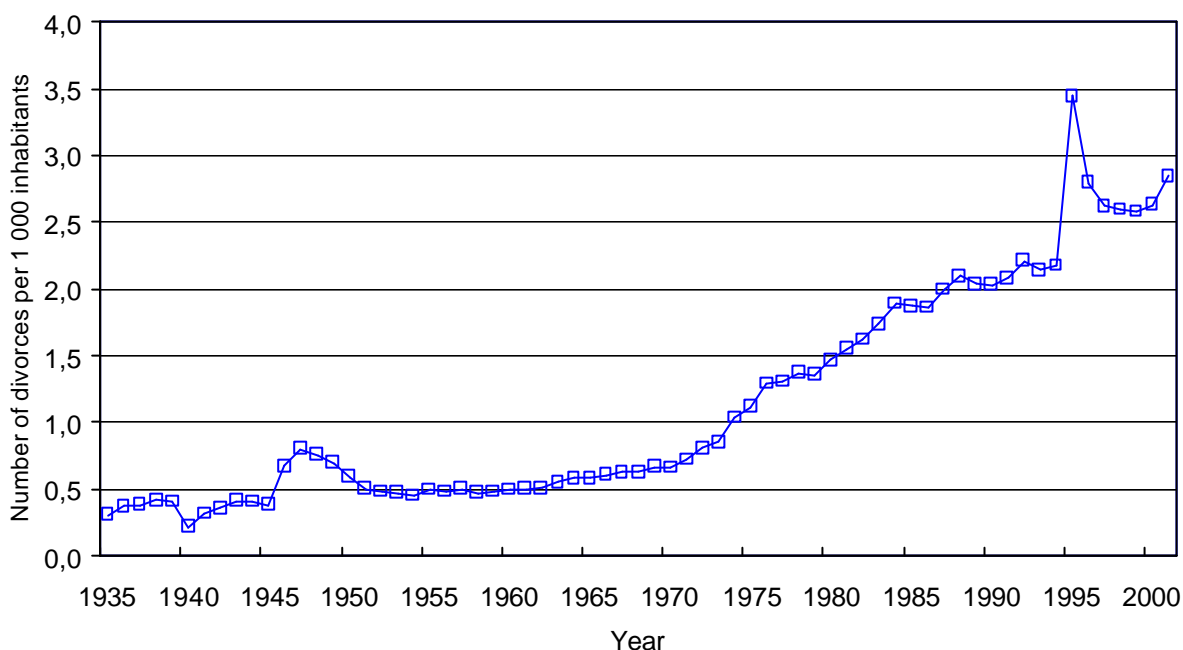
Table 2: Evolution of the crude divorce rate in Belgium, 1970-2001

Year	Rate	Year	Rate
1970	0,663	1986	1,863
1971	0,724	1987	1,997
1972	0,805	1988	2,096
1973	0,854	1989	2,036
1974	1,035	1990	2,034
1975	1,119	1991	2,080
1976	1,289	1992	2,211
1977	1,308	1993	2,139
1978	1,375	1994	2,176
1979	1,358	1995	3,449
1980	1,468	1996	2,793
1981	1,555	1997	2,624
1982	1,623	1998	2,595
1983	1,738	1999	2,581
1984	1,891	2000	2,631
1985	1,870	2001	2,843

Source: NIS population statistics; own calculations

The Belgian crude divorce rate rose by 37% in the last ten years, doubled since 1980 and more than quadrupled since 1970. Again, it is clear that the change in divorce legislation in 1995 had a strong effect on the divorce behaviour. However, after the strong increase of 59% in 1995 (compared with 1994), the following downward trend was strong as well (-19% in '96 and -6% in '97). In spite of this decrease, a new breaking point can be observed in the year 2000. The acute up-and-down effect due to the change in legislation seems to have worn off in 2000, because the relative number of divorces rose again in 2000 (with 2%) and in 2001 (with 8%). After four years of decrease, a new increase is observed.

Figure 2: Evolution of the crude divorce rate in Belgium, 1935-2001



As stated before, the crude divorce rate has the advantage that cross-cultural comparison is possible. In order to put the Belgian divorce behaviour into context, the crude divorce rates of the European countries (EU15) and Russia, USA and Japan are displayed in table 3. All countries of the European Union show an increasing divorce rate since the 1960s. The level of increase differs strongly between countries. With some exceptions, the Northern countries of the European Union appear to have the highest divorce rates. The highest divorce rate in the Union in 2001, can be found in Belgium. (For some countries, the figures of 2001 are not yet available, so this situation might change.) For the second time in history, Belgium leads the European crude divorce rate ranking. The first time was in 1995 due to an exceptional change in legislation, which stabilised the years after. In 2001, the high divorce rate in Belgium is probably still a corollary of the new divorce law. The shortened duration of the proceedings by mutual consent made divorce more attractive.

Because Belgium has the highest divorce rate in Europe, the importance and relevance of studying the Belgian divorce patterns in a European context becomes clear. The Belgian crude divorce rate may be the highest in the European Union, the rates of the United States of America and the Russian Federation

exceed it largely. The divorce rates of the USA (4,1) and Russia (4,3) in 2000 are respectively 52% and 59% higher than the rate of Belgium.

Table 3: Crude divorce rates in an international comparative perspective, 1960-2001

	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998	1999	2000	2001
Belgium	0,5	0,6	0,7	1,1	1,5	1,9	2,0	3,5	2,6	2,6	2,6	2,8
Finland	0,8	1,0	1,3	2,0	2,0	1,8	2,6	2,7	2,7	2,7	2,7	2,6
Denmark	1,5	1,4	1,9	2,6	2,7	2,8	2,7	2,5	2,5	2,5	2,7	2,7
United Kingdom	0,5	0,7	1,1	2,3	2,8	3,1	2,9	2,9	2,7	2,7	2,6	.
Austria	1,1	1,2	1,4	1,4	1,8	2,0	2,1	2,3	2,2	2,3	2,4	.
Sweden	1,2	1,2	1,6	3,1	2,4	2,4	2,3	2,6	2,3	2,4	2,4	2,4
Luxembourg	0,5	0,4	0,6	0,6	1,6	1,8	2,0	1,8	2,4	2,4	2,3	2,3
Germany	1,0	1,1	1,3	1,9	1,9	2,3	1,9	2,1	2,3	2,3	.	.
The Netherlands	0,5	0,5	0,8	1,5	1,8	2,3	1,9	2,2	2,1	2,1	2,2	2,3
Norway	0,7	0,7	0,9	1,4	1,6	2,0	2,4	2,4	2,1	2,0	2,2	.
France	0,7	0,7	0,8	1,2	1,5	1,9	1,9	2,1	2,0	2,0	.	.
Portugal	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,2	0,6	0,9	0,9	1,2	1,5	1,8	1,9	1,8
Switzerland	0,9	0,8	1,0	1,4	1,7	1,8	2,0	2,2	2,5	2,9	1,5	.
Spain	.	.	.	.	.	0,5	0,6	0,8	0,9	0,9	.	.
Greece	0,3	0,4	0,4	0,4	0,7	0,8	0,6	1,1	0,7	0,9	0,9	0,9
Italy	.	.	.	0,2	0,2	0,3	0,5	0,5	0,6	0,6	0,6	.
European Union	.	.	.	.	1,4	.	.	.	.	1,8	.	.
Russian Federation	1,5	1,9	3,0	3,6	4,2	4,0	3,8	4,5	3,4	3,6	4,3	.
United States	2,2	2,5	3,5	4,8	5,2	5,0	4,7	4,4	4,2	4,2	4,1	.
Japan	.	.	.	.	1,2	.	1,3	1,6	1,9	2,0	2,1	2,3

Source: Council of Europe; Eurostat; NCHS; Census; own calculations

By comparing Belgium to the United States, some tendencies can be clarified. For the crude divorce rate to be so high in the USA, (re)marriage must be popular in order to keep the 'risk population' – the married – large enough. The crude *marriage* rate of the United States was 10,5 in 1980 and 8,4 in 1999, whereas in Belgium these rates were respectively 6,7 and 4,3. So, Americans do not only divorce more, they marry more too than Belgians. The differences become clearer when we look at the rate of the number of divorces per 100 marriages. In the USA this is 49,7 in 1980 and 50,6 in 2000; In Belgium 21,8 (1980) and 59,8 (2000). Whereas this rate remains relatively stable in the US, in Belgium it has more than doubled in twenty years. The cultural background of marriage and divorce behaviour in the United States may not converge with the standard patterns in (the dissolution of) marriage in Europe, the comparison still shows the relativity of the high divorce rates in Belgium.

The marriage rate in Belgium is relatively low and would even be lower without the apparent inclination to remarry. Up to one third of the marriages in Belgium in 1999 are remarriages (of which only 3% after being widowed). In 1980 this proportion was only 13%. Divorcees seem to remain loyal to the 'holy institute' they previously abandoned. The characteristics of remarriage in Belgium will be explained later on.

The previous rate should be interpreted carefully, because the ratio of the number of divorces per 100 marriages is insensitive to the change in cohort volume through time (e.g. the number of people at marriageable age at a given moment). Particularly when significantly fewer couples marry now than twenty years ago, the situation changes. The larger number of couples who married in the seventies or eighties can divorce up to 30 years later, which can increase the divorce rate *now* while the marriage rate became lower in the meanwhile. Thus, the ratio of the number of divorces per 100 marriages is only a reliable measure when the marriage rate remains relatively stable, which makes it of little use. This is more reason to investigate other, preferably longitudinal, divorce rates. But first, the divorce rate of the married can offer more accurate information.

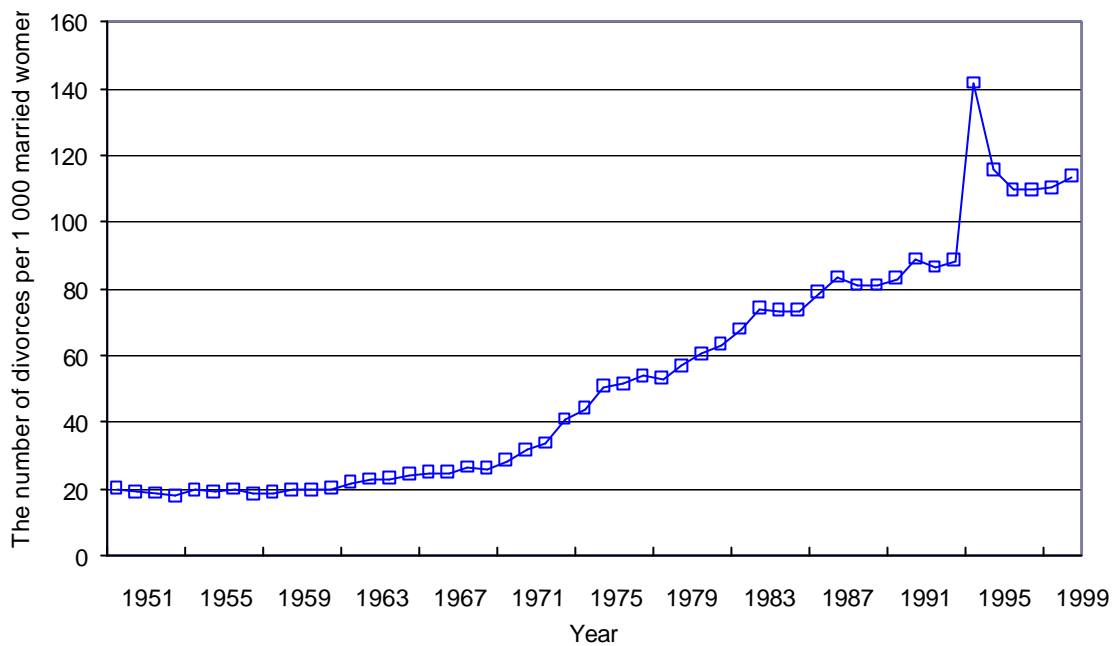
### 1.3. ADJUSTED DIVORCE RATE (OF THE MARRIED)

The adjusted divorce rate of the married – the number of divorces per 1 000 married women – is more reliable than the crude divorce rate because it avoids the problem of compositional changes in the (risk) population. This measure's denominator is limited to the risk population because – obviously – only married couples can divorce. Specifically, the number of married *women* is used. In figure 3 the evolution of this rate since 1951 can be observed.

The slope of the curve is similar to the slope of the crude divorce rate (see figure 2). The same interpretation can be given as well. The rate rose by 40% in the last ten years, doubled since 1980 and multiplied by factor 5,8 since 1960. So, the increase in the number of divorces started slowly but systematically in the early 1960s and reached a high peak in 1995. Again, this can be explained by the implementation of the new divorce law. After this boost of 60% in 1995, a decrease followed: -18% in '96 and -5% in '97. Still, the number of divorces per 1 000 married couples rose again in 1999 (with 0,5%) and in 2000 (with 3%).

The adjusted divorce rate may be the best indicator yet, because it takes the changes in the population into account. However, it still lacks a longitudinal perspective. In order to tackle this, it is very useful to closely investigate the total divorce rate and the longitudinal divorce rate.

Figure 3: Evolution of the adjusted divorce rate in Belgium, 1951-2000



#### 1.4. TOTAL DIVORCE RATE

The total (or transversal) divorce rate is an estimation of the proportion of marriages that eventually will dissolve when the age specific divorce behaviour and the mortality rate of a given year would remain stable in the future. More technically it is the summation of the duration specific divorce rates – or the summation of the number of divorces in a given year, subdivided into the duration of the marriages, divided by the total number of marriages in the specific year of marriage.

As can be seen in table 4 and figure 4, the Belgian total divorce rate has multiplied by factor 5,2 in the last thirty years. It doubled since 1982 and escalated with 48% since 1990. The new divorce law caused a significant increase of 60% in the total divorce ratio in 1995. In the subsequent years, a part of this strong increase was compensated by a decrease of 18% in 1999 and 5% in 1997. Starting in 1998, the total divorce rate rose again (e.g. with 4% in 2000), ending up – for the time being – with a total divorce rate of 45% in 2000. So, according to the most recent total divorce rate, it is estimated that – *ceteris paribus* – close to half of the Belgian marriages will eventually end in divorce, if the age specific divorciality and mortality patterns would remain unchanged.

*Table 4: Evolution of the total divorce rate in Belgium, 1968-2000*

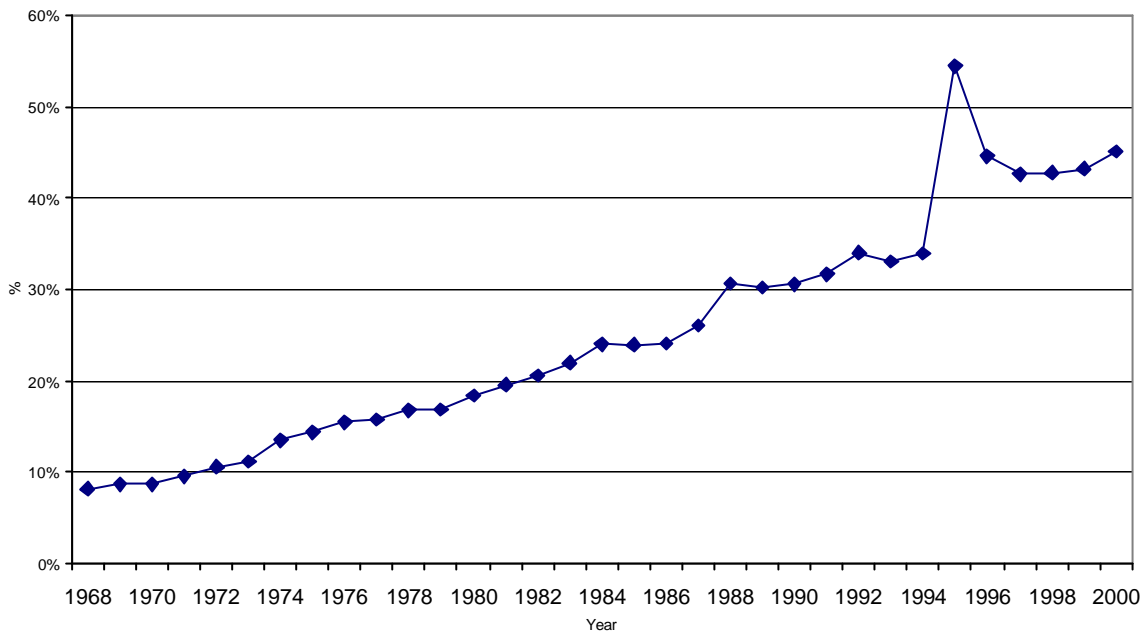
Year	%	Year	%
1968	8,1	1985	23,9
1969	8,7	1986	24,1
1970	8,6	1987	26,1
1971	9,5	1988 *	30,7
1972	10,5	1989	30,2
1973	11,1	1990	30,6
1974	13,5	1991	31,7
1975	14,3	1992	34,0
1976	15,4	1993	33,1
1977	15,7	1994	34,0
1978	16,8	1995	54,5
1979	16,8	1996	44,6
1980	18,4	1997	42,6
1981	19,5	1998	42,8
1982	20,6	1999	43,3
1983	22,0	2000	45,1
1984	24,0		

Source: NIS population statistics; own calculations

\* From 1968 to 1987, the total divorce rate is calculated based on a possible marriage duration of 25 years. From 1988 on, due to the importance of divorce after more than 25 years of marriage, the total divorce rate is calculated on a 40 years marriage duration basis.

Then again, the condition that the divorcibility and mortality patterns do not change over time is unlikely on the long-term. Given that the (absolute and relative) yearly number of divorces has been rising every year, apart from a few exceptions, for more than four decades now; given the steadily decreasing yearly number of marriages since the early 1990s and given the importance of remarriage (cf. supra), the required stability in divorcibility can not be expected. Consequently, it is difficult to make accurate predictions about the future divorce patterns. Nevertheless, we believe that the end of the expanding divorce rates (and the decreasing marriage rates) is not near. As it will be pointed out later, we expect that the end of the increase in the proportion of marriage dissolutions probably will not be reached in the near future.

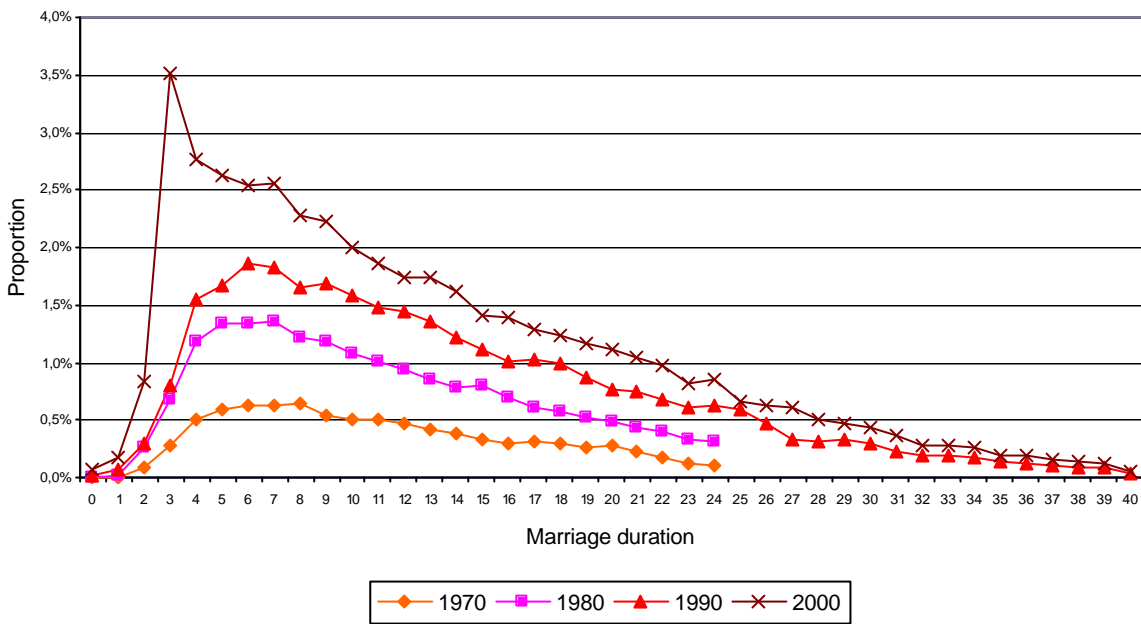
Figure 4: Evolution of the total divorce rate in Belgium, 1968-2000



The distributions of the duration specific total divorce rates can shed more light on the changing divorce patterns in Belgium (figure 5). In comparing the distribution of the total divorce rate of 2000 with those of 1970, 1980 and 1990, it becomes clear that observed total increase must be allocated to a general increase and a specifically high increase in the first ten years of the marriage duration. The distribution of the total divorce rate of 1970 describes a rather flat but slightly scewed curve, implying a somewhat equal spread. During the last three decades, the distribution has transformed to a very scewed and unequal spread. The specific transversal divorce rate of 2000 with a three-year marriage duration has multiplied by factor 4 since 1990, factor 5 since 1980 and factor 12 since 1970. The summated duration specific rates of the divorces with a marriage duration up to five years have multiplied by factor 2 since 1990, factor 3 since 1980 and factor 7 since 1970. This implies a strong advancing of the marriage duration at divorce.

The outliers in the early marriage years and the general increase indicate that, next to the changed divorce legislation in 1995 (which explains the significant increase in the first five years of the 2000-slope), divorce is considered more and sooner in the duration of a marriage. This is, in all probability, related to the increased acceptability of (early) divorce and the increasing relational demands for continuing a marriage.

Figure 5: Evolution of the duration specific distribution of the total divorce rate in Belgium, 1970-2000



The total divorce rate can be compared internationally (table 5). In the context of the other countries of the European Union, the Belgian total divorce rate is high. The highest transversal divorce rates are found in Northern Europe, especially in the Scandinavian countries. The Southern countries have the lowest rates. One of the main causes of these inter-European differences in divorce behaviour has little to do with demography or even marriage itself. Apart from legislative differences, the regional differences in religion (practice), explain for a large part the divergent divorce rates. In the traditionally catholic countries, such as Italy and Spain, the internalised religious doctrine constitutes a socio-cultural barrier to the premature dissolution of a marriage. The breakdown of the traditional religious and socio-political barriers also had (and has) cultural consequences. The secularised countries have a more liberal value system than the conservative catholic countries. In the more secularised countries in the North of Europe, dogmatic religion has lost much of its former grip on the social structuring of marriage and its dissolution (Matthijs, 1998).

Table 5: Total divorce rates (%) in an international comparative perspective, 1960-2000

	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998	1999	2000
Sweden	16	18	23	50	42	45	44	52	51	53	55
Finland	11	13	17	26	28	28	42	48	50	51	51
Luxembourg	.	.	10	10	26	31	36	33	46	48	47
Belgium	.	.	10	16	21	27	31	55	43	43	45
Denmark	19	18	25	36	40	46	44	41	41	42	45
United Kingdom	.	.	16	28	35	39	37	40	43		
Austria	14	14	18	20	26	31	33	38	39	41	43
Norway	9	10	13	21	25	33	43	45	41	40	
Germany	12	13	17	25	25	34	29	33	39	39	
France	9	11	12	17	22	30	32	38	38		
The Netherlands	7	7	11	19	25	35	30	36	36	37	38
Switzerland	12	13	15	21	27	29	33	38	43	50	26
Portugal	1	1	1	2	7	11	12	16	21	24	26
Greece	.	.	5	5	10	11	9	17	13	16	
Spain	.	.	.	.	.	8	10	15	.	.	
Italy	.	.	5	3	3	4	8	8	.	.	
Russian Federation	17	19	34	38	42	41	40	50	.	.	

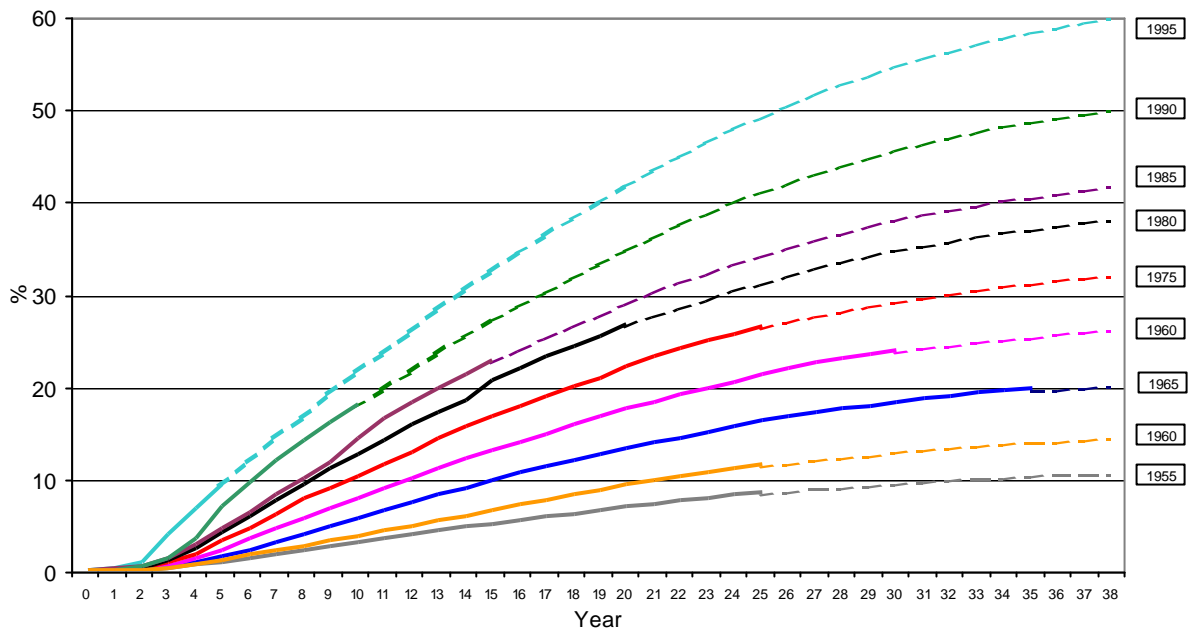
Source: Council of Europe; own calculations

### 1.5. LONGITUDINAL DIVORCE RATE

Because the total divorce rate has the inclination to underestimate the real divorce frequency in times of rising number of divorces, the longitudinal divorce rate is more reliable (Matthijs, 1988). It provides accurate information about long-term cohort specific divorce behaviour. Technically, this rate is constructed by the division of the duration specific number of divorces by the total number of marriages of the original marriage cohort. By the summation of these cohort and duration specific rates, this indicator exhibits the cumulative percentage of dissolved marriages of a marriage cohort. The advantage of this longitudinal rate is the possibility to differentiate into time and cohort specific divorce patterns. Not only are the differences between different marriage cohorts taken into account, the changes through time of a specific cohort become visible as well. However, the downside of this indicator is the necessary time gap between the year of marriage and the moment of calculation. To be able to be exhaustive, this gap should be 40 years or more in order to allow for divorces after a long marriage duration. In other words, the longitudinal divorce only includes the incidence of divorce of a marriage cohort over the observed period of time, without an accurate extrapolating into the future (which is what the total divorce rates does). In spite of this, we will attempt it later on in this paper.

Figure 6 and table 6 display the most recent and the estimated Belgian longitudinal divorce rates. The marriage duration range of the cohorts up to 1962 is limited to 25 years (because the subdivisions of the Belgian population statistics were limited to a 25 year duration). For the later cohort years, the duration is limited to 40 years. Considering that the statistics of the year 2000 are the last available, the current maximal duration is 38 years (2000 minus 1962).

Figure 6: Observed and estimated longitudinal divorce rates per marriage cohort in Belgium, 1955-1995



Just observing the known longitudinal divorce rates in figure 6 already give a good impression of the changing divorce patterns in Belgium. All lines show a constant increase, although at different increase speeds. During the first years of marriage, the increase is the strongest. In the lines of the 1975 cohort and later, a bend or kink can be observed relating to the change in legislation in 1995. (For example, the 1985 slope exhibits an acute increase after 10 years of marriage, which corresponds with the year 1995.) The younger the marriage cohorts are, the steeper the slope is. There is no sudden downfall in the slope, but the marginal increase in the cumulated proportion of divorces slowly diminishes. The proportion of dissolved marriages of the cohort of 1955 after a marriage duration of 25 years is 8,45%. In the 1993 cohort, this proportion is already reached after 5 years of marriage. This again indicates the magnitude of the changes in divorce patterns in only 30 years.

Table 6: Evolution of the longitudinal divorce rate by marriage duration and year of marriage in Belgium, 1955-1995

Year of marriage cohort	Marriage duration						
	5 years	10 years	15 years	20 years	25 years	30 years	35 years
1955	0,97	3,08	5,07	6,83	8,45		
1956	0,98	3,21	5,31	7,32	9,07		
1957	0,99	3,38	5,55	7,74	9,59		
1958	1,02	3,45	5,72	8,09	9,90		
1959	1,11	3,63	6,17	8,59	10,53		
1960	1,13	3,76	6,51	9,21	11,39		
1961	1,23	4,10	7,19	9,75	12,12		
1962	1,27	4,37	7,80	10,53	13,08	14,85	16,11
1963	1,30	4,67	8,34	11,31	13,81	15,65	16,95
1964	1,41	5,16	8,90	12,27	15,05	17,08	18,56
1965	1,52	5,65	9,77	13,23	16,16	18,29	19,61
1966	1,61	6,10	10,27	13,90	16,95	19,26	
1967	1,70	6,56	10,74	14,65	17,93	20,41	
1968	1,78	6,90	11,49	15,58	18,85	21,47	
1969	2,10	7,42	12,29	16,53	19,93	22,62	
1970	2,26	7,82	13,06	17,49	21,23	23,85	
1971	2,47	8,35	13,73	18,31	22,20		
1972	2,55	8,71	14,17	19,00	23,16		
1973	2,85	9,34	15,35	20,22	24,45		
1974	3,07	10,05	15,98	20,82	25,36		
1975	3,15	10,26	16,67	22,17	26,33		
1976	3,54	11,12	17,45	23,36			
1977	3,80	11,66	18,37	24,26			
1978	3,81	12,08	18,83	25,01			
1979	4,06	12,28	19,11	25,68			
1980	4,15	12,56	20,47	26,54			
1981	4,75	13,57	21,74				
1982	4,82	13,54	21,84				
1983	4,93	13,96	22,72				
1984	4,97	13,99	22,73				
1985	4,53	14,40	22,66				
1986	4,51	15,03					
1987	4,79	15,76					
1988	5,06	16,46					
1989	5,32	17,18					
1990	6,90	18,08					
1991	7,63						
1992	8,21						
1993	8,49						
1994	8,61						
1995	9,24						

Source: NIS population statistics, own calculations

By carefully extrapolating the observed divorce slopes of the cohorts, we can attempt to estimate – under the condition that the current divorcibility patterns remain stable – the as yet unknown proportion of marriages per cohort that eventually will divorce after a marriage duration of 38 years (the dotted lines in figure 6). This extrapolation or prognosis is done by increasing the last known proportion (of a cohort

with a specific marriage duration) with the same factor as the known increase of the cohort of the previous year with the same marriage duration. The used formula for the estimation is:

$$X_i = X_{i-1} (Y_i/Y_{i-1})$$

Where: X equals the proportion of dissolved marriages of cohort year X;

Y equals the proportion of dissolved marriages of the previous cohort year (Y equals X-1);

and i equals the specific years of the marriage duration.

However, using the *observed* increase, can be done only once per cohort. After that, we base the extrapolation on the *estimates* of the previous cohort years. In the end, the construction of the estimate of, for example, the year 1995 with a marriage duration of 38 years, is based on 15 previous estimates (estimate on estimate on estimate, etc.). So, changing one estimate, effects all later estimates. Therefore, the higher the cohort year and the higher the marriage duration, the less reliable the estimates become. By producing an estimated proportion for each cohort per marriage duration based on the previous cohort year, we assume that divorce behaviour will not change drastically over the period of one year. This might be acceptable initially. However, when it is applied for a period of 20 or 30 years, it is needless to say that this is no longer necessarily true. Because the divorce rate will apparently become quite high (60% for the cohort of 1995), a certain 'divorce exhaustion level' should be reached at a certain point in time. By this we mean that a certain number of couples will stay together until death. Because we are not able to take this into account, unrealistic estimated divorce rates can be constructed. For example, using this formula for estimating the divorce rate for the 2000 cohort – where we as yet only know the divorce rate for the year of the marriage itself (0,06%) – we actually end up with an estimated divorce percentage of 92%, which is highly unlikely. At this rate, statistically more than 100% of the marriages could break up one day.

It might be impossible to foresee or predict the future accurately, we still presume that social phenomena are rather rigid. Taking the disadvantages and problems of this method of extrapolation into consideration, we remain confident that, with a high degree of reservation, useful information can be attained (see table 7). We know for sure that 17% of the marriages of 1962 eventually ended in divorce. We now prudently estimate that approximately 42% of the marriages of 1985 will have ended in divorce after a duration of close to 40 years (i.c. in 2023). For the couples that entered into marriage in 1995, we estimate that around 60% will end up in divorce sooner or later. It seems that the currently observed increase in the number of divorces has not reached its upper limit yet.

Table 7: *Estimated proportion of dissolved marriages at 38 years of marriage in Belgium, 1955-1995*

Year of marriage	Estimated proportion dissolved marriages
1955	10,7
1960	14,4
1965	20,1
1970	26,1
1975	32,1
1980	38,1
1985	41,7
1990	50,1
1995	60,0

Source: NIS population statistics, own calculations

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF DIVORCE AND DIVORCEES

The various divorce rates demonstrate the changing divorce patterns on a whole. It is however equally important to investigate the specific characteristics of the divorces and the divorcees.

### 2.1. DURATION OF THE ANNULLED MARRIAGE

In table 8 and figure 7, the distributions of the divorces of a specific year divided into categories of marriage duration are displayed. Since 1988 two main tendencies can be detected in the evolution of this distribution. First, since the late 1980s a larger part of the divorcing couples divorce early in their marriage life: whereas 12% of the divorces of 1988 were within 5 years of marriage, this proportion increased to 18% in 2000. Second, a larger group of divorcees divorced rather late: after more than 20 years of marriage. This proportion of the marriages that get divorced after more than 20 years shifted from 21% in 1988 to 25% in 2000. These tendencies may wrongfully seem contradictory. This double shift in the marriage duration is mainly at the expense of the 'middle years' of marriage. Since 1988 fewer couples divorce after a marriage duration between 6 and 20 years. In 1988, 67% of the divorcees annulled their marriage after a marriage duration between 6 and 20 years. In 2000, this was only 57%. Proportionally, but not absolutely, the somewhat extreme sides of the duration scale increased in incidence. It must be mentioned nevertheless that the proportion of marriages that are terminated before 16 years of marriage has remained quite stable in the last two decades. This percentage fluctuates between 60% and 63% throughout this period.

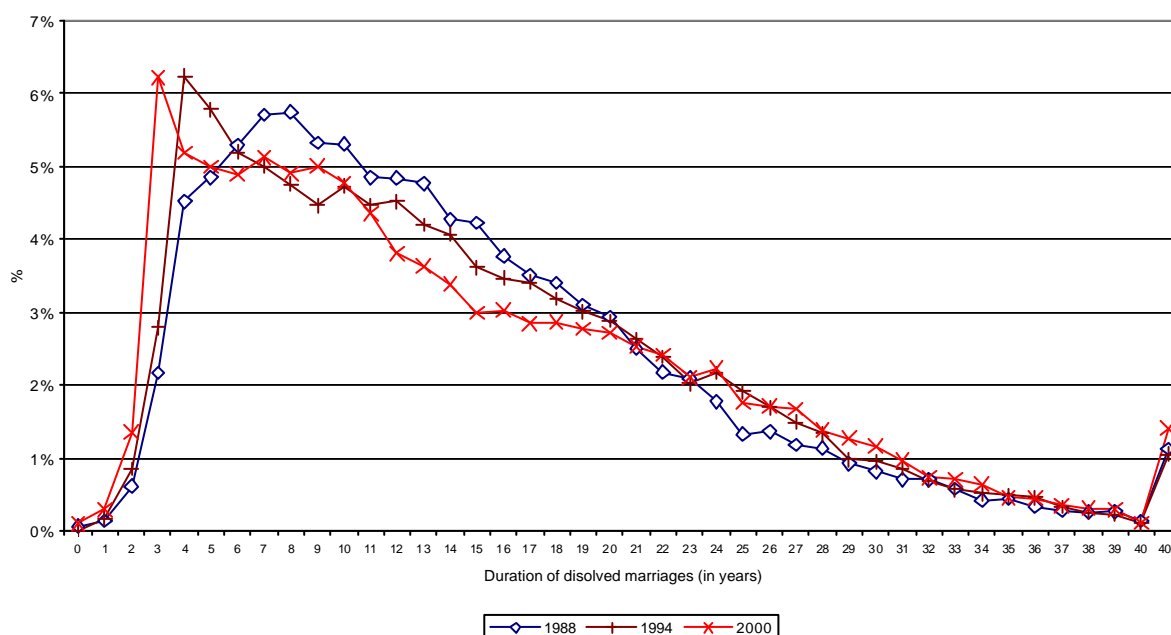
Table 8: Evolution of the duration of the annulled marriage in Belgium, 1988-2000 (%)

Year of divorce	Duration of the marriages ending in divorce (in years)								
	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41+
1988	12,4	27,4	23,0	16,7	9,9	5,4	2,8	1,3	1,1
1989	12,4	27,0	22,6	17,1	10,1	5,6	2,9	1,3	1,0
1990	12,4	26,3	22,3	16,9	11,0	5,5	3,0	1,4	1,2
1991	13,2	25,6	22,1	16,7	10,9	5,8	3,1	1,4	1,1
1992	14,0	24,3	21,5	16,9	11,4	6,1	3,2	1,5	1,1
1993	14,5	24,3	20,9	16,8	11,6	6,1	3,1	1,5	1,2
1994	15,9	24,1	20,9	16,0	11,1	6,5	3,1	1,4	1,0
1995	18,2	24,7	19,4	15,1	11,2	6,3	2,8	1,3	1,0
1996	18,0	24,6	18,2	15,2	11,5	6,7	3,1	1,5	1,2
1997	17,7	25,1	18,0	14,8	11,7	6,8	3,2	1,5	1,2
1998	17,7	25,3	17,7	14,8	11,4	6,8	3,4	1,5	1,4
1999	17,8	25,2	17,8	14,6	11,3	7,1	3,3	1,5	1,4
2000	18,2	24,7	18,2	14,2	11,1	7,2	3,5	1,5	1,4

Source: NIS population statistics, own calculations

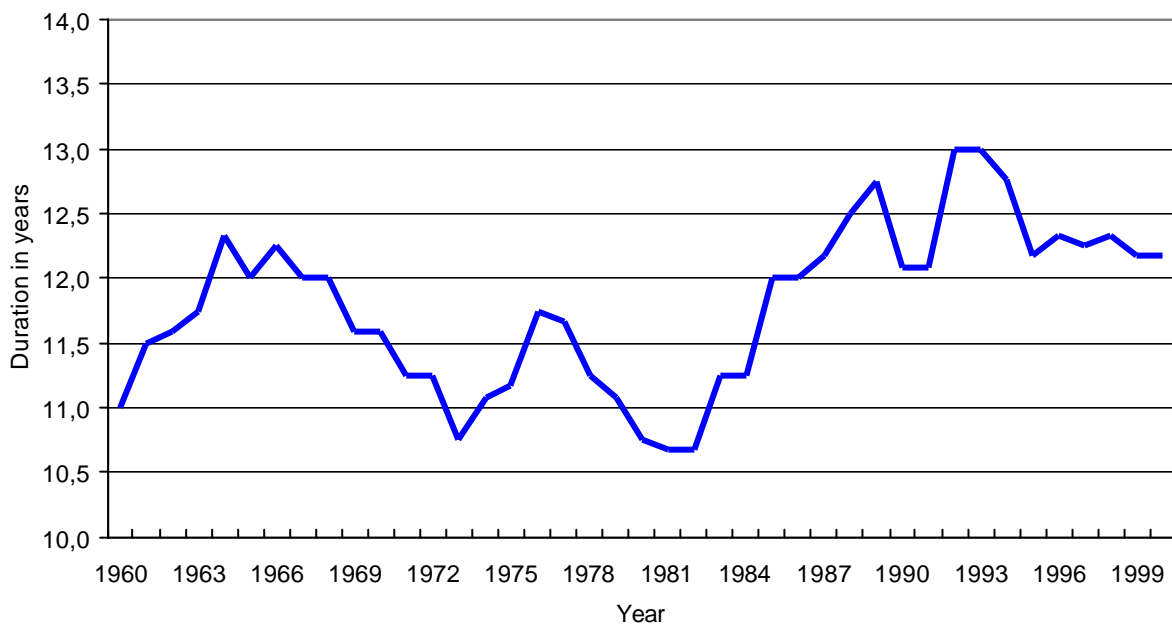
Figure 6 demonstrates the (growing) importance of the early marriage years concerning the event of divorce. A clear shift can be noticed in the modus (or the peak of the lines) during the 12-year observation period. Within the divorces of the given year, the largest part of the divorces occurred after 7 or 8 years of marriage in 1988, after 4 years in 1994 and after only 3 years in 2000. Currently, the first five years of marriage pose the highest divorce risk. When a marriage does not work as expected, it appears to be clear to the spouses after a few years of marriage. After this high-risk period, the overhanging ‘threat’ of divorce does not disappear. In 2000, the risk of divorce between four and ten years of marriage remains quite stable (at approximately 5%). After ten years of marriage, the risk gradually diminishes. Because of the decrease in the risk population (the married) in time due to occurring divorces, we must however assume that in reality the divorce risk does not decrease that strong after ten years of marriage.

Figure 7: Evolution of the duration of the annulled marriage in Belgium, 1988, 1994 and 2000 (%)



The *median* marriage duration<sup>1</sup> provides additional information concerning the evolution of the marriage duration of the dissolved marriages (figure 8 and table 9). The median marriage duration in 2000 is 12,7 years. This implies that half of the divorces in 2000 occurred within 13 years of marriage. Although there is some spread in the median duration between 1960 and 2000, it remains rather stable between 10,7 and 13 years. The simplification of the divorce legislation in 1995 shortened the divorce proceedings by six months. The duration of the marriage at divorces increased equally (Corijn, 1999).

Figure 8: Evolution of the median marriage duration at divorce in Belgium, 1960-2000



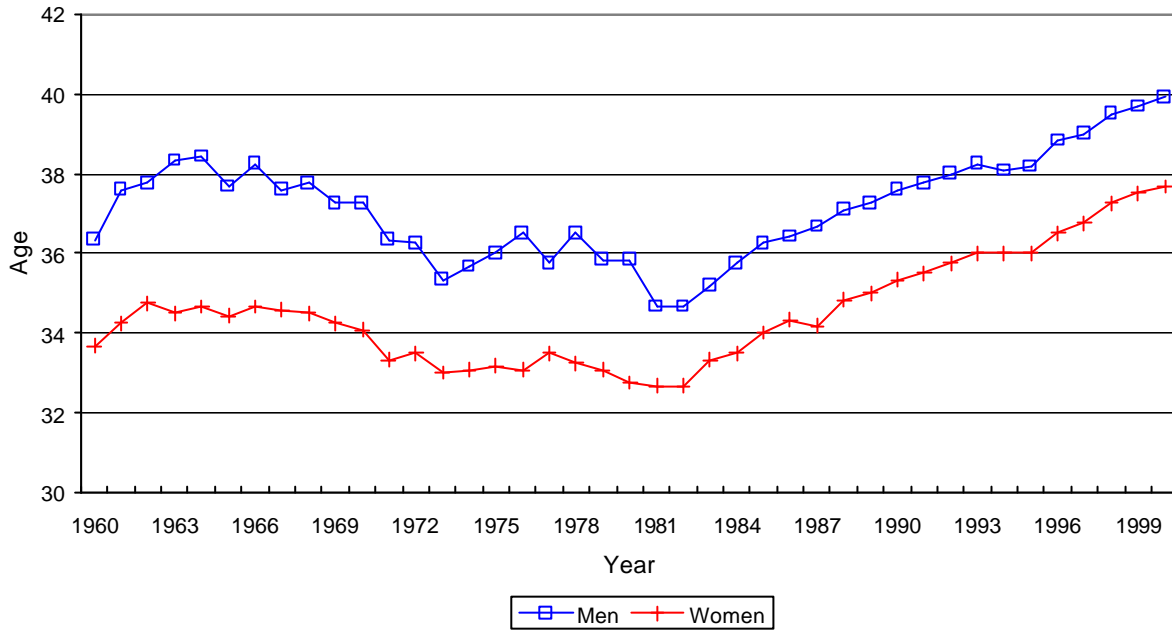
## 2.2. MEDIAN AGE AT DIVORCE

The median age at divorce of the former husbands and wives has to be linked to the age at marriage. In figure 9, the slopes of the median age at divorce of men and women are shown. In the 1970s the median age at divorce decreased slightly, but since the 1980s it is increasing again. In the 1960s couples progressively married at a younger age, therefore they could divorce at a younger age as well. Since the mid 1970s however, Belgian couples tend to marry at a later age and consequently divorce at a later age too (Sardon, 1992; Corijn, 1999). The median age at divorce of women is continuously lower than that of men. This also is a consequence of the age at marriage. On average, Belgian women marry at a younger age than men. This gap between men and women is however closing slightly. The difference in median age at divorce (and marriage) between men and women of three years in the 1950s and 60s gradually reduced to approximately two years in 2000. In 2000 the median age at divorce is 40 for men and 38 for women. This signifies that half of the divorces in 2000 involved women younger than 38 and men

<sup>1</sup> The median, the middle value of the distribution (half of the scores lie above and below the median), is used because high values inflate the mean but not the median.

younger than 40. The median age at the first marriage in Belgium has been increasing continuously for more than a decade, largely due to the increasing popularity of unmarried cohabitation (as a preparation for or test of marriage) and other alternative forms of cohabitation. The median first marriage age in 2001 is 26,2 for women and is 28,5 for men.

Figure 9: Evolution of the median age of the divorcees in Belgium, 1960-2000



In table 9, the median marriage duration and median age at divorce are presented since 1950.

Table 9: Evolution of the median marriage duration and the median age at divorce in Belgium, 1950-2000

Year	Median duration of the annulled marriage	Median age of the divorcees	
		Male divorcees	Female divorcees
1950	12,67	39,25	36,42
1960	11,00	36,33	33,67
1961	11,50	37,58	34,25
1962	11,58	37,75	34,75
1963	11,75	38,33	34,50
1964	12,33	38,42	34,67
1965	12,00	37,67	34,42
1966	12,25	38,25	34,67
1967	12,00	37,58	34,58
1968	12,00	37,75	34,50
1969	11,58	37,25	34,25
1970	11,58	37,25	34,08
1971	11,25	36,33	33,33
1972	11,25	36,25	33,50
1973	10,75	35,33	33,00
1974	11,08	35,67	33,08
1975	11,17	36,00	33,17
1976	11,75	36,50	33,08
1977	11,67	35,75	33,50
1978	11,25	36,50	33,25
1979	11,08	35,83	33,08
1980	10,75	35,83	32,75
1981	10,67	34,67	32,67
1982	10,67	34,67	32,67
1983	11,25	35,17	33,33
1984	11,25	35,75	33,50
1985	12,00	36,25	34,00
1986	12,00	36,42	34,33
1987	12,17	36,67	34,17
1988	12,50	37,08	34,83
1989	12,75	37,25	35,00
1990	12,08	37,58	35,33
1991	12,08	37,75	35,50
1992	13,00	38,00	35,75
1993	13,00	38,25	36,00
1994	12,76	38,08	36,00
1995	12,17	38,17	36,00
1996	12,33	38,83	36,50
1997	12,25	39,00	36,75
1998	12,33	39,50	37,25
1999	12,17	39,67	37,50
2000	12,17	39,92	37,67

Source: NIS population statistics

### 2.3. ESTIMATED NUMBER OF CHILDREN INVOLVED IN DIVORCE

A divorce does not only concern the spouses. It has consequences for the close environment of the couple. The family members, parents, friends and especially children are necessitated to bear the implications of the break-up. Although the children involved in a parental break-up do not necessarily suffer from the divorce – it might even be an improvement (Everett, 2001) –, the phenomenon of ‘children of divorce’ still requires attention. It is difficult however to assess the magnitude of the effect of family disintegration on children, because the NIS lacks information on the number of children involved. In 2001, the number of children involved in Belgium is not known for three in four divorces. We only know that 9% of the couples were childless and 16% had one or more children at the time of the divorce (table 10). The missing data are due to the voluntary character of the registration of the number of children at divorce.

Table 10: Evolution of the estimated annual number of children involved in divorce in Belgium, 1970-2000

Year	Distribution of number of children involved in divorce (%)						N divorces (100%)	Estimated number of children involved *	
	0	1	2	3	4 +	Unknown		E(0,5)	E(1)
1970	58,0	22,1	11,5	5,1	3,3	0	6 403	4 866	4 866
1981	38,2	14,5	8,1	2,5	1,2	35,5	15 323	9 393	12 110
1982	33,2	13,2	7,9	2,3	1,0	42,4	16 004	9 844	13 235
1983	33,0	12,1	7,4	2,0	1,0	44,5	17 125	10 256	14 062
1984	35,0	12,1	6,7	1,7	0,8	43,7	18 645	10 439	14 511
1985	28,6	12,2	6,6	1,6	0,7	50,4	18 440	10 808	15 451
1986	28,0	11,2	6,8	1,7	0,5	51,7	18 380	10 735	15 487
1987	30,7	11,6	6,9	1,6	0,9	48,3	19 722	11 599	16 359
1988	19,2	10,7	6,5	1,7	0,5	61,3	20 809	12 902	19 284
1989	12,9	10,3	6,7	1,5	0,6	68,0	20 256	13 108	19 995
1990	14,4	10,1	6,2	1,4	0,4	67,4	20 331	12 672	19 528
1991	14,8	9,4	5,5	1,4	0,0	68,5	20 845	12 658	19 794
1992	13,0	8,5	5,8	1,5	0,4	70,8	22 262	13 767	21 653
1993	11,1	8,7	5,7	1,3	0,4	72,8	21 602	13 390	21 256
1994	10,8	7,9	5,2	1,4	0,3	74,3	22 041	13 475	21 662
1995	8,5	5,8	4,3	1,1	0,3	80,1	34 983	20 559	34 565
1996	9,0	5,0	3,8	1,0	0,4	80,9	28 402	16 355	27 839
1997	9,2	5,6	4,5	1,3	0,4	79,0	26 748	15 987	26 557
1998	9,8	8,1	5,7	1,4	0,4	74,6	26 503	16 654	26 536
1999	8,9	8,5	5,8	1,5	0,5	75,0	26 423	16 900	26 806
2000	8,9	8,2	5,9	1,5	0,4	75,1	27 002	17 192	27 329

Source: NIS population statistics; own calculations

\* Estimates: when unknown, the number of children is allocated by factor 0,5 or by factor 1.

Still, the absolute number of divorces can be used as an indicator for the number of children that are faced with parental divorce. We believe the average number of children per divorced couple to be close to one. So, we try to estimate this number by multiplying the number of divorces (of which the presence of children is unknown) by factor 0,5 or 1. The actual number of children involved in divorce is

estimated to lie between this lower (0,5) and upper (1) limit, because we assume that the annual number of children involved in divorce is slightly lower than the annual number of divorces. Based on these estimates, between 20 and 25 thousand Belgian children were confronted with parental divorce in 2000, whereas in 1980 this was approximately ten thousand.

The (known) number of childless divorcees decreased over the years, which leads us to believe that having children is not a threshold to divorce anymore for some. We still have to be careful, considering the lack of data. The new divorce legislation of 1995 legally supported co-parentship or joint custody and gave involved third parties the possibility of visitation rights with the children. We suppose these changes made divorce less unattractive to couples with children. Therefore, we expect that the estimated increase of involved children of 1995 and later years is not only due to do increase of the absolute number of divorces, but also because of an increase in the average number of children in those dissolved families. It is nevertheless unclear how long these children remain in a single parent constellation. By means of repartnering or (followed by) remarriage of the divorced parent(s), the children can be reintegrated in a new (step)family structure.

#### 2.4. DIVORCE GROUND AND INITIATIVE OF DIVORCE

In 1960, for the vast majority (82%) the ground for divorce was fault-based (called '*divorce based on certain facts*' in Belgium), while in 2000 up to 75% judicially agreed on divorce by mutual consent (table 11). As a consequence of the steady shift to divorces by mutual consent, the official initiative of the divorce proceedings are taken increasingly by both partners together (figure 10). In 2001, 69% of the divorces were initiated by both partners (while in 1968 this was only 20%). The wife was the petitioner in 18% and the husband in 13% of the divorces. Since 1971, the wives (alone) consequently initiated the divorce slightly more than the husbands (alone). In the latter part of the 1970s, the petitioning happened equally by husband, wife or both of them. Since 1980, the legal initiator of the divorce was increasingly (and dominantly) both husband and wife. The new divorce legislation of 1995 clearly had an additional effect on this already ongoing trend. Whereas in 1994 56% of the divorces were instigated by both spouses, this proportion soared to 74% in 1995 and remained stable at that point until 2001, when it decreased a little again. It is however too early to make out if this decline is a once-only event or the start of a new downward trend.

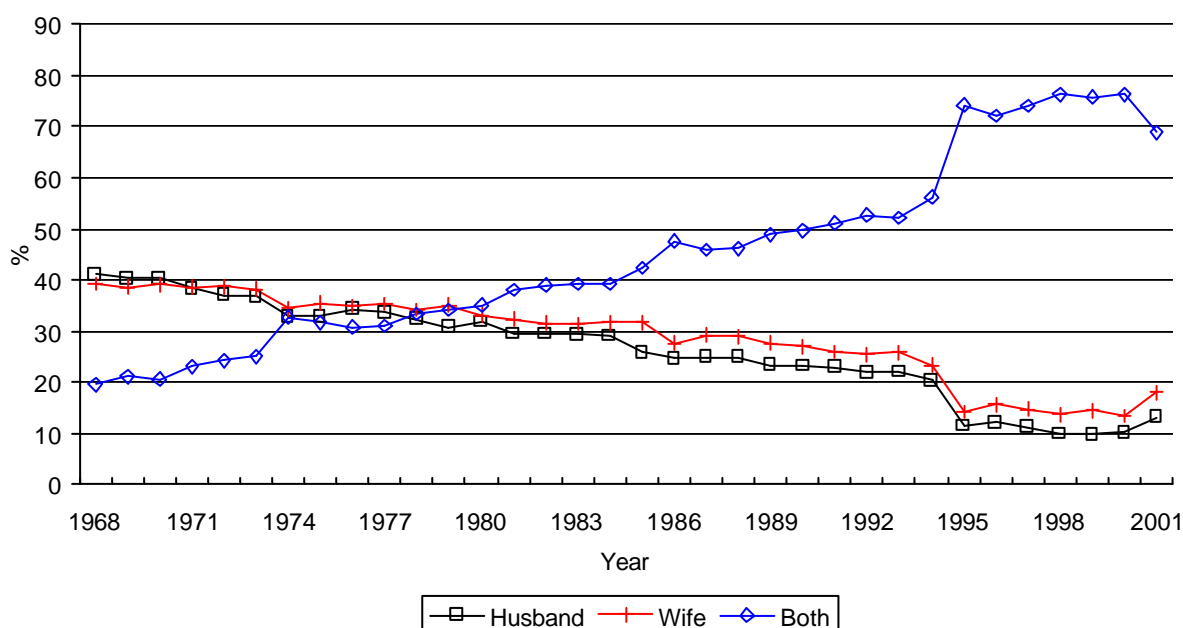
Table 11: Evolution of the ground for divorce in Belgium, 1960-2000

Year	Fault based	By mutual consent	N (100%)	Year	Fault based	By mutual consent	N (100%)
1960	81,5	18,5	4 671	1981	59,4	40,6	16 027
1961	81,3	18,7	4 796	1982	58,5	41,5	16 828
1962	82,5	17,5	5 378	1983	58,4	41,6	18 132
1963	81,4	18,6	5 385	1984	58,1	41,9	19 092
1964	77,5	22,5	5 809	1985	55,9	44,1	18 933
1965	76,0	24,0	5 890	1986	56,5	43,5	18 882
1966	75,2	24,8	6 154	1987	57,0	43,0	20 386
1967	79,4	20,6	6 547	1988	54,9	45,1	20 419
1968	79,5	20,5	6 847	1989	53,9	46,1	20 292
1969	78,0	22,0	6 509	1990	52,1	47,9	20 444
1970	78,8	21,2	6 935	1991	50,7	49,3	21 204
1971	76,1	23,9	7 323	1992	49,8	50,2	22 737
1972	74,9	25,1	8 359	1993	44,9	55,1	20 235
1973	74,0	26,0	8 375	1994	43,4	56,6	21 739
1974	66,3	33,7	10 961	1995 *	36,2	63,8	28 074
1975	67,2	32,8	12 330	1996 *	29,2	70,8	22 613
1976	68,3	31,7	13 754	1997	34,1	65,9	20 614
1977	67,7	32,3	13 780	1998	28,7	71,3	26 424
1978	64,7	35,3	14 086	1999 *	.	.	.
1979	63,6	36,4	14 215	2000 *	24,6	75,4	26 781
1980	62,5	37,5	15 365				

Source: NIS population statistics

\* Incomplete data. The figures of the Court of Appeal of Luik in 1995, the District Court of Charleroi, Oudenaarde, Veurne, Neufchâteau, Namen, Dinant and Eupen in 1996, Mechelen, Charleroi and Doornik in 1997, Kortrijk and Verviers in 2000 and the total data of 1999 are not available at the National Institute of Statistics of Belgium (NIS).

Figure 10: Initiative of divorce in Belgium, 1968-2001



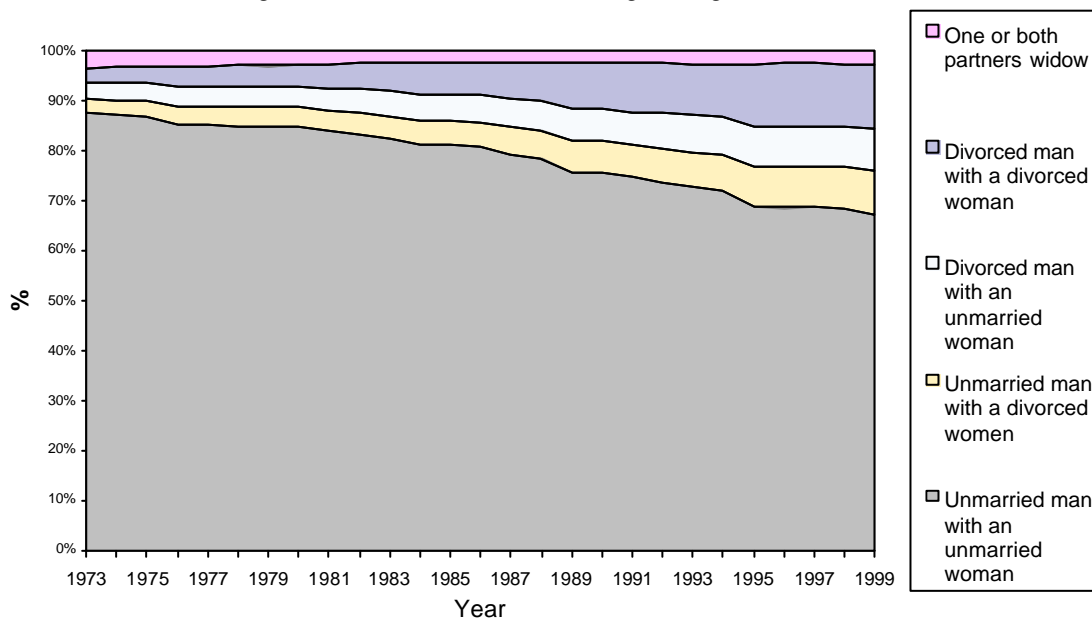
### III. REMARRIAGE

Divorce is not a final endpoint in terms of family (re)formation. Remarriage (and repartnering) can play an important role in the family life course of Belgians whose marriage ended prematurely. However, one has to be careful when using the term 'remarriage'. A remarriage composes of a marriage in which *one or both* partners were previously married but got divorced or were widowed at some point.

#### 3.1. PREVIOUS CIVIL STATE AT MARRIAGE

The previous civil state at marriage indicates the marital status of couples when they enter a marriage. This civil state can be single, divorced or widowed. The vast majority of the Belgian couples are, and have always been since the 1970s, both previously single when they entered into marriage (figure 11). However, the magnitude of this majority has been decreasing systematically since the 1970s. Whereas all other constellations only added up to 12% in 1970, this proportion of remarriages increased to one third in 1999. This steady augmentation is caused predominantly by the escalation in the divorce rate and the subsequent tendency to remarry after being divorced. The proportion of marriages after one or both of the spouses were widowed is and was small compared with the other marriage constellations. It decreased even more since the 1970s. As stated before, 20% of the remarriages in 1973 involved one or two widows, whereas this is only 3% in 1999.

Figure 11: Previous civil state at marriage in Belgium, 1973-1999



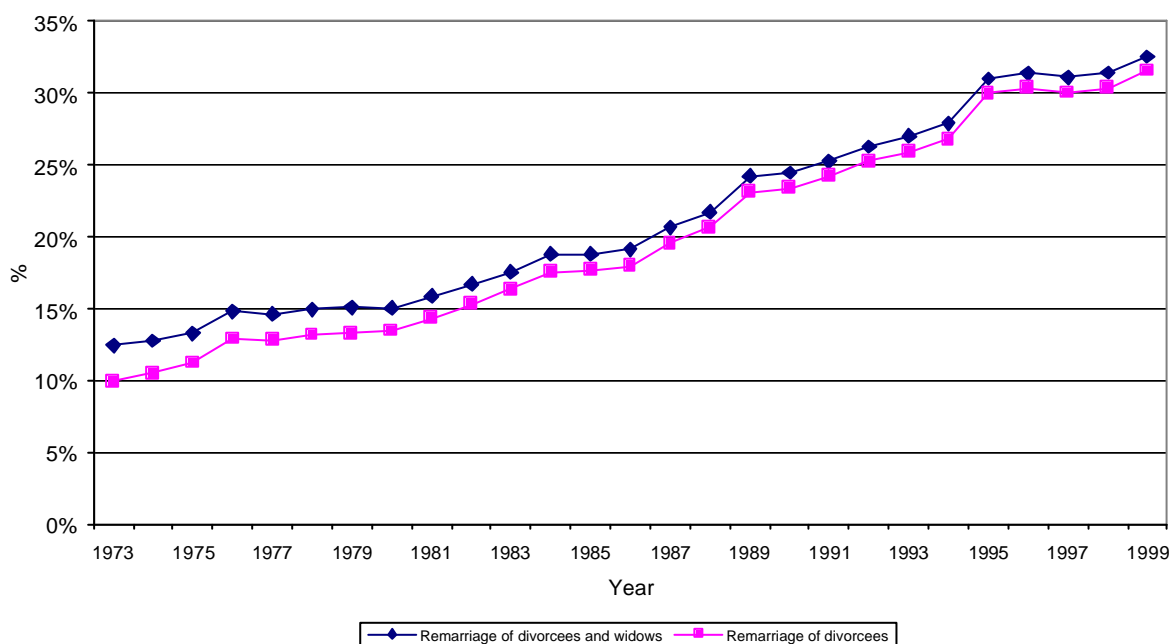
The preceding marital status at marriage is influenced strongly by other demographic processes such as mortality and divorcality. The rising life expectancy and the rising divorce rates explain why there are much less remarrying widows than there are remarrying divorcees. The lion's share of the remarriages today involves divorcees, because being widowed mostly happens past the culturally accepted marriageable

age of widows. In order to populate the ‘remarriage risk population’, the termination of marriage therefore primarily occurs by divorce in contemporary Belgium, as in most countries (Matthijs, 1986).

### 3.2. ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE NUMBER OF REMARRIAGES

In the 1970s, the evolution of the absolute number of remarriages in Belgium demonstrated a stable course between 9 and 10 thousand each year. In the latter part of the 1980s, it increased strongly (from approximately 10.000 in 1986 to 15.000 in 1989). But in the subsequent years, it regained its previous stability again between 14 and 15 thousand annual remarriages in Belgium. The proportion of remarriages in the total number of marriages however shows a different evolution (figure 12). Since the 1970s, this proportion almost constantly rose, while the absolute number stayed fairly stable. This divergence in the evolution of remarriage in absolute and relative terms is the consequence of the decrease in the total number of marriages during this period. The relative proportion of remarriages in the total marriage frequency was 33% in 1999. When only the remarriages of divorcees (therefore not widows) are considered, this proportion is 31,6%.

Figure 12: Proportion of remarriages in total number of marriages in Belgium, 1973-1999



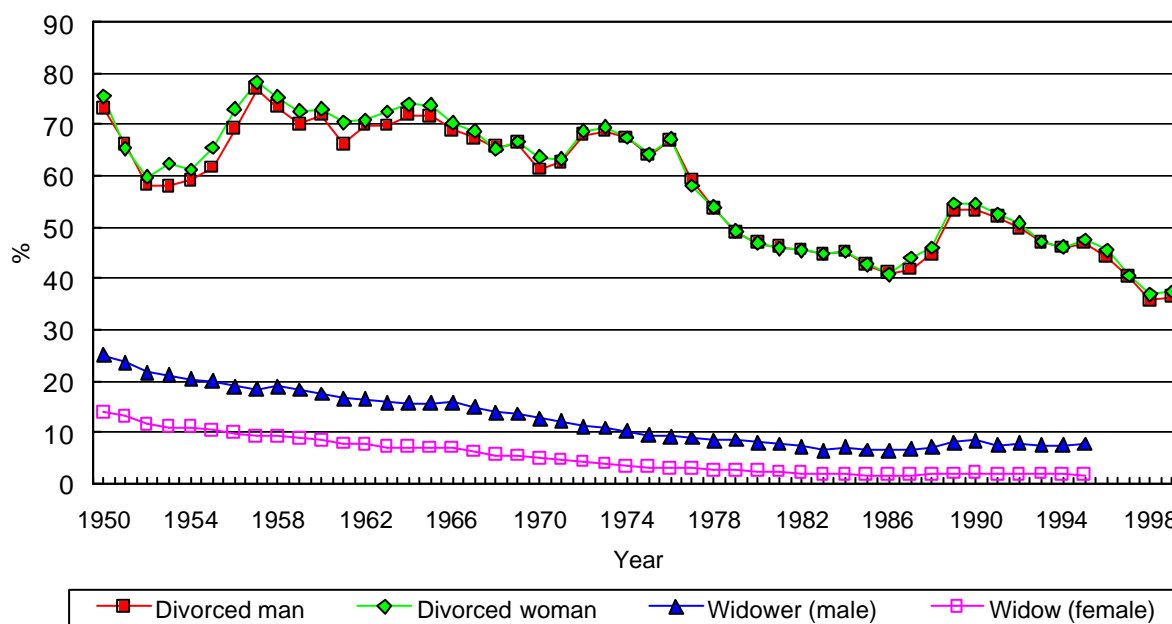
As previously stated, remarriage refers to a previous marriage of one or both spouses. We can differentiate remarriage between those marriages where only one spouse previously was married and those where both previously were married. The remarriages concerning both spouses we can entitle ‘double or bilateral remarriages’. The proportion of bilateral remarriages in the total number of remarriages in Belgium manifests a remarkable stability throughout the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This proportion ranges between 40 (1973) and 46% (1999). So, close to half of the remarriages in 1999 are bilateral remarriages. This tendency of homogamy of the previous marital state can be related to the

special characteristics of the matrimonial market for divorcees (and widows). The remarriage risk population consists of singles of an older age than the singles in the regular first marriage market. The difference in family history between first marriage and remarriage candidates coincides with a difference in age, socio-economic status and corresponding lifestyle. Because of these differences, courtship is somewhat less likely between the previously unmarried and previously married. For single parents, the presence of children might also deter younger, previously unmarried, marriage candidates. These factors bring people with equal characteristics together, resulting in a fairly homogamous remarriage market.

### 3.3. ESTIMATED REMARRIAGE INTENSITY

The absolute and relative remarriage rates do not take the size of the remarriage risk population into account. In order to ascertain the remarriage intensity, it is necessary to set out the number of remarriages to the number of divorcees and widows. We can approximate the remarriage intensity by assuming that most remarriages occur less than eight years after the termination of the first marriage (figure 13). Technically, the remarriage intensity is estimated by dividing the number of remarriages of a given year by the average number of divorcees (or widows) of the given year and previous six years (see Roussel, 1981).

Figure 13: Estimated remarriage intensity by previous civil state and sex, in Belgium, 1950-1999



The estimated remarriage intensity of divorcees in Belgium halved from three fourths in 1950 to approximately one third in 1999. The most current estimate of the remarriage intensity (1999) reveals that 36% of divorced women and 37% of divorced man remarry within seven years. For widows the chances of remarriage are a great deal lower. The already rather low estimated proportion of 14% (widow) and 25% (widower) in 1950, shrunk to respectively 2% and 8% in 1995. The varying course of the inclination of divorcees to remarry turned into a decline in the late 1970s until a short revival between 1985 and 1990

(due to a temporary slowdown of the divorce rate increase). The remarriage intensity has been decreasing again ever since.

The incidence of remarriage is age and sex specific. Young divorcees and widows (between 20 and 30 years old) have a significantly higher chance of remarrying than those of 40 years and older (Corijn, 1999). The reason why mainly 'twenty-something' divorcees remarry, can be attributed to a stronger willingness to remarry and to the availability of suitable partners in the specific age segment of marriage market. Because of the importance of age homogamy, older divorcees (and widows) have lower remarriage chances. Men remarry more than women, especially when they are widowed. Our estimates do not show this, because of the limitation of the duration to seven years. Other more adequate calculation methods are available (such as the total marriage chance), but the interpretation of the evolution of the remarriage intensity is generally similar to those more accurate estimates (Matthijs, 1986). The observed but incorrect gender equality in remarriage intensity is an artefact of the estimation duration. Women actually remarry less than men. Because the estimation of the remarriage intensity is limited to seven years, an overestimation of the intensity occurs in the case of women.

The unequal chances of remarriages between male and female widows, although declined, remained throughout the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is due to the male tendency to remarry with a younger wife, the shortage of marriageable men at older age and a greater female loyalty to the deceased husband (Matthijs, 1986, Lopata, 1981). Divorcees remarry more than widows, mainly because of the higher age of widows, but also because divorce can be planned: some will divorce because they have a remarriage perspective. The greater loyalty towards the deceased spouse is also an explanation for the difference between divorcees and widows (especially in the case of women).

The diminishing remarriage intensity can most likely be related to the augmenting popularity of alternative post-divorce forms of partnership. More and more, remarriage is replaced by unmarried cohabitation. The trend of repartnering instead of remarrying after divorce is probably due to the declining interest in the legal bounds of marriage. In these post-modern times, marriage is not believed to have a monopoly on relationships. There may also be an alternative post-divorce version of the so called 'marriage squeeze' in the case of high-educated female divorcees, because they have less chance of finding a suitable new partner (Matthijs, 1986). Age, educational and economic homogamy still play a significant role in (re)marriage, although shared relational values are subjectively perceived to more important (Van den Troost, 2000)

Both the first marriage rate and the remarriage intensity have been decreasing in the 1990s, but still the proportion of remarriages in the total number of marriages enlarged during the same period. This seemingly paradoxical relation is caused by the difference in the strength of change. The first marriage rate is decreasing stronger than the remarriage intensity, resulting in an increase in the proportion of remarriages.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The divorce rates in Belgium exhibit a steady increase since the 1960s, with a strong acceleration in the mid 1990s. Based on the figures up to the year 2000, an estimated 45% of Belgian married couples will get divorced within 40 years of marriage. Considering that this percentage has quadrupled in only 30 years, divorce has become a phenomenon of enormous societal importance. Furthermore, Belgian couples divorce sooner in marriage life. The modus in the average marriage duration at divorce lies at 4 years in 2000. Conversely, Belgian couples also divorce increasingly later in their marriage life: one fourth of the divorcees in 2000 separated after a marriage duration of 20 years or more. More and more, divorce has become a decision of both spouses as well. The majority of divorcees judicially agreed on divorce by mutual consent. Consequently, the official initiative of divorce is taken increasingly by both partners. Remarkably, divorcees do not seem to dismiss marriage as a way of living. Up to 1999, close to four in ten divorcees remarried within 7 years. As a result, one third of the total number of marriages in 1999 were remarriages (of which only 3% after being widowed). Even though the absolute and relative number of remarriages is not increasing, the already relatively low number of marriages would even be lower without the phenomenon of remarriage. In order to understand these changes in the divorce behaviour in Belgium and the Western world in twentieth century, they have to be framed in a wider cultural, legal and historic-demographic context.

According to Inghart (1977), a silent revolution occurred in the value orientation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western world. Traditional materialistic values were replaced by a post-materialistic and pluralistic emphasis on individual self-realisation and autonomy. The foundation of this cultural pluralisation lies within a process of structural differentiation of society (Berger, 1967). The canopy of the governing values system came under pressure and fragmented into separate, but interdependent cultural systems, such as the family system. This process of individualisation of the family is sociologically one of the most important characteristics of the modern developments of the relationship between family and society (Kooy, 1967:155). New expectations and ideals regarding family life emerged and caused new demographic behaviour. This changed behaviour rooted in the shift in the relational value system and the emancipation from dogmatic normation. Because (originally religious) absolute norms lost their self-evidence, new interpersonal arrangements have to be (re)defined through constant interaction and deliberation. This detraditionalisation and individualisation of the private life world increased the individual freedom of decision-making (Heelas, 1996). These external changes of the private life sphere are related to internal structural changes as well. Egalitarian family relations, (gender) equality, self-fulfilment, respect, trust, autonomy and independence are the new (family) values characterising the shift from hierarchical to negotiation households (De Swaan, 1979). Because family and labour responsibilities can coincide for both spouses, the economic independency of women increased as well (van den Elzen, 1996; Fokkema, 1999). This breakdown of the traditional cultural normation of relationships however decreased their former predictability, stability and self-evidences (Laermans, 1993; Beck, 1992, 1995, 1997, 1998; Giddens, 1994; Halman, 1991). With the liberation of absolute norms came insecurity and unclarity.

The synchronisation of mutual desires and wishes in a relationship became increasingly less ascribed, resulting in a fragile search for balance. The (originally religious) pretence of unbreakability was shed and replaced by conditionality and temporariness. This new form of relationship culture can be designated as post-modern, as a contrast to the modern family culture of the 1950s (Van den Troost, 2000; Kerkhofs, 1998; Castells, 1997; Bauman, 1997; Lammertyn, 2000; Shorter, 1975).

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the demographic indicators pointed in the direction of the traditional life course. The Parsonian ideal typical construct of the nuclear family was reality: almost everybody married young, had many children and stayed together until death (Matthijs & Van den Troost, 1998). The traditional views on marriage, family, education and sexuality eroded, especially in the case of adolescents in the beginning of their life course (Vanhove, 2001). This manifested first in the decrease in fertility (to beneath the substitution level) and later in the increase in the proportion of illegitimate births as well. Since the 1960s, the traditional interwoven link of marriage, sexuality and reproduction was loosened. Marriage lost its function as the primary mechanism of transition between the family of orientation to the family of procreation. This resulted in decreasing (re)marriage intensity, increasing chance of divorce and the growing multiformity of habitation forms (such as unmarried cohabitation and living alone). Therefore, the start, course and termination of relationships changed substantially in the period of a few decades (Matthijs & Van den Troost, 1998, Matthijs, 2000).

Guttentag and Secord (1983) point out that the discrepancy between the number of unmarried men and women at marriageable age (or the sex ratio) affects the dyadic power in relationships. A surplus in women should improve the negotiation position of the man, which could lead to a lower validation of and commitment to marriage by men (Espenshade, 1985:232). Love, loyalty and exclusiveness would become less valued. As a reaction, women would redefine their gender roles and pursue independence. This would lead to a significant increase in the marriage terminations. A shortage in women would have the opposite effect. Women would become scarce and high-valued products, which would stimulate the segregation between instrumental and expressive (gender) roles in the family (Matthijs, 1986, 1998). The economic independence of women would be held back and husbands would commit themselves more in the relationship. In this situation, people would marry soon and a lot, fertility would be high and divorce rare. Because the fragile balance of marriageable men and women is affected strongly by the fertility rate of the previous generation, the post-war baby boom resulted in a shortage of men for the subsequent generation (Matthijs, 1998). The resulting tension on the marriage market in the early 1970s, made marriage less attractive and introduced the start of the long-term metamorphosis of marriage. But the sex ratio theory of Guttentag and Secord only fits the societal developments of the family up to the 1980s because the sex ratio turned slightly in favour of women. We would expect a return to the more traditional family roles and an increase in marriage stability. The apparent high and rising divorce rates contradict this. So, the cultural consequences of the post-war women deficit and the coinciding processes of individualisation, emancipation and secularisation appear to be enduring. The demographic cause of the cultural changes regarding the family (i.e. the sex ratio) may have disappeared, but the cultural affects still remain (Matthijs, 1986).

According to Espenshade (1985), economic changes instigated the erosion of the traditional family. Caused by societal processes such as individualisation, urbanisation, secularisation, emancipation, the increasing economic independency of women and the higher level of education, the traditional family lost parts of its economic, religious and educational functions. Because of this function loss, the ultimate legitimisation or *'raison d' être'* of the family was reduced to the reproductive, socialisation and emotional function. Parallel with this, a new post-materialistic value pattern emerged. The breakdown of the former power of the traditional (religious) institutions made it possible to pursue self-constructed or self-selected values and norms (Halman, 1991, Matthijs, 1986). Easterlin (1976, 1978) acknowledges that the diminishing grip of religion on the functioning of the family instigated the rise in the number of divorces in the 1960s. The process of modernisation and the increasing prosperity and social security started a Maslowian evolution in which post-materialistic values such as self-accomplishment and autonomy acquired more importance (Inglehart, 1977; Lesthaeghe, 1987:24; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988). The emotional function of marriage was then upgraded to the new relational moral. Loyalty, mutual respect and autonomy became major criteria in the subjective perception of the marriage quality, especially for women (Halman, 1991:197; Van den Troost, 2000:152). This reorientation from hierarchical to emotional criteria of marriage quality implies an increase in the explicit and quasi-enforceable relational expectations. When those expectations are not met, it can result in the termination of the relationship.

The cultural developments and the changes in divorce legislation influenced each other mutually. Both the social and the legal sanctioning of marriage termination diminished. The rising absolute and relative number of divorces can be related to coinciding legal and societal changes. In the post-war period, the (catholic) Belgian people generally disapproved and resisted divorce. Even when a marriage was perceived as unhappy, divorce was not considered easily. The relatively few divorces in the 1960s probably involved the more extreme cases where one of the partners probably resisted the divorce (victims of domestic abuse, persistent adultery, etc.). Those cases are likely to be settled in a (long and expensive) fault-based divorce proceeding. During the last decades, divorce gradually became more acceptable. The processes of individualisation and cultural differentiation enlarged the individual freedom significantly in the last decades of the twentieth century. With this, the level of condemnation of divorce and the social pressure to preserve marriage both declined significantly. Because of the increasing number of divorces, the social visibility increased as well, which reinforced the acceptability moreover (Matthijs, 1988). In 1999 only one fifth of the Belgians disapproved of divorce, whereas this was 44% in 1981 (Dobbelaere, 2000). Simultaneously, the expectations about marriage changed as well. When marital expectations are not met, it is more widely accepted today that the partners terminate their relationship (Van den Troost, 2000). This phenomenon of divorce normalisation implies less severe motives for ending a relationship. As a consequence, when partners are dissatisfied, the threshold for breaking up is lowered considerably. The revision of the Belgian divorces legislation in 1995 made it legally easier as well. The duration of the divorce proceeding (especially by mutual consent) became significantly shorter. By lowering the legal demands of divorce – the absence of the need of a guilty party, the simplified petitioning hearings and the shortened duration of the proceedings – it was made possible to convert a marriage with low marital

satisfaction into a divorce almost painlessly. So, the changes in the divorce behaviour are therefore caused by two seemingly paradoxical phenomena: the weakened social and legal restrictions regarding the termination of marriage and the stronger individual demands on marriage. Because marriage quality became the dominant criteria for the preservation of a marriage and because of the lower legal threshold of divorce, the bounds of marriage progressively became conditional and breakable (Van den Troost, 2000).

The increase in the number of divorces late in marriage life – after twenty years or more – can be explained by the increased demands on marriage as well. Children (if present) are likely to have left the parental home when their parents are married for twenty years or more. This can create an ‘empty nest’ feeling for the parents. After a long time of mainly parenting, the dyadic relationship between husband and wife becomes the centre of the family again. It is not unlikely that this relationship does not meet the expectations anymore, which can lead to divorce. The decreasing marriage fertility is an additional reason why the divorce rates are rising (Matthijs, 1988). Even though the number of children involved in divorces has been increasing, the presence of children probably still is one of the most important reasons why a divorce is postponed.

Although the remarriage intensity is decreasing, a large part of the divorcees still choose to remarry. Considering the high divorce rates and the decreasing marriage rates, one might suspect that divorcees have lost interest in (re)marriage. This appears not be the case entirely. This seemingly paradoxical tendency can be related to the subjective differentiation between marriage as an institute and marriage as an interpersonal commitment. The traditional institute of marriage has lost popularity, but the willingness to commit has not. Although this commitment has become conditional and breakable, couples still want a lasting relationship. Marriage remains to be viewed by many as an adequate form or vessel in which this commitment is practised, for as long the commitment lasts.

A lot can be gained by raising the expectations on marriage but this makes the marriage highly vulnerable and fragile. Marriage has to be a ‘pure relationship’ and is therefore permanently evaluated (Giddens, 1992; Jacobs, 2000). The future role and meaning of marriage, relationships and family is unclear. Maybe this observed metamorphosis of the family will lead to new partnership forms such as ‘open marriages’, ‘free floating couples’ or ‘friendship marriages’. While the interpretation of what a marriage should imply is not taken for granted anymore, marriage now still remains to be the preferred form of a lasting relationship for many, under the condition that the great expectations are met sufficiently. The individually perceived quality of the relationship became the ultimate but fragile legitimisation of the marriage. When disillusionment is all what is achieved, divorce is a legitimate way out (Shorter, 1975; Van der Avort, 1987; Halman, 1991:245; Kooy, 1967:200; Van den Troost, 2000).

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