MARRITAL BEHAVIOR OF THE ELDERLY POPULATION IN SERBIA¹

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to examine contemporary marital behavior of the population in Serbia older than 65 years. Models of marital behavior are a reflection of culture, tradition, local customs, economic status, cultural and historical heritage, and as such are subject to change. Extending the life expectancy of the population, and the change of socio-economic and cultural circumstances, had led to changing in marital behavior and marital structure of the old population. To track these changes and comprehend the current situation, we analyzed indicators such as the marriage and divorce rates for this age group, as well as current marital structure, comparing them with previous values. It is particularly noteworthy that for the first time (based on data from the 2011 census), we can analyze the frequency and characteristics of informal marriage unions (cohabitation), which provides important insights into the marital life of the elderly.

KEYWORDS: marital behavior, marriage, elderly population, cohabitation

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INTRODUCTION

Population older than 65 years today represents 17.8% of the total population of Serbia (according to data for year 2013, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia). Current demographic trends suggest that number, as well as the proportion of this population, will continue to grow (already with a younger age group from 60 to 64, so population aged 60 years and over represent 25.6% of the total population). However, the marital behavior of elderly population in Serbia hasn’t been studied much so far. Namely, study of marriages is usually approached from the perspective of the importance of marriage for reproduction, bearing in mind that marriage is a dominant frame for the population reproduction (76% of all births in our country occurs within marriage). Hence, greater attention is paid to marital behavior of fertile capable population and issues such as the age at first marriage, delay of marriage, divorce, who the children belong to after the divorce etc. However, taking into account the growing number of the population older than 65 years, there is a need for better insight into the marital behavior of this age group. Marital characteristics are often connected and have an impact on social inclusion, health, economic situation, as well as the psychological state and general well-being of elderly people.

A positive correlation between the life of elderly people in the marriage, or widely understood, in the partner community on the one hand, and longevity, as well as better economic, psychological and social situation on the other hand, was perceived long ago. Comparing demographic and socio-economic characteristics with mortality rates, Kaplan and Kronick [2006] found that mortality rates are significantly higher for those individuals who were not married, compared to those who are married and live with their spouses. This effect was more emphasized in individuals who had never concluded a marriage, as well as in men compared to women. Solomou & Co. [1998] reported in their qualitative research (which involved 2,049 persons older than 65 years) that elders who live with their spouses have higher level of life satisfaction and are more involved in the community. Opposite to this, majority of divorced men of this age felt the lack of social support, while men who had always been single felt the least support. The positive relationship between the life of elderly people in marital union and better economic opportunities also should not be neglected. In addition, changes in marital status of elderly people often have an impact on other members of the extended family (children, relatives), due to changes in life circumstances (change of residence, change in property relations, change of economic conditions etc.).

In Serbia, elderly persons are particularly vulnerable, they are often living in poor residential conditions and are exposed to a higher risk of falling into poverty (the poverty risk is higher for 40% to 50% than the risk valid for the total population). Nearly half of elders live in two-member or single-member elderly households, and the latter of these two are particularly threatened in terms of economic, health and social aspect. In addition, elderly people are

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often not integrated enough into the community and participate in social life in a much lesser extent than the rest of the population.

Monitoring and analysis of basic demographic data on elderly population marital status is therefore important for the perception of the general living conditions and well-being of elders. Therefore, this paper aims to clarify basic characteristics of marital structure and marital behavior of older population in Serbia over the last few decades. We believe that this information, especially in correlation with other socio-economic and health characteristics, may be of importance for perceiving the life of elderly people in all its complexity, as well as for finding ways in which these conditions and the situation can be improved.

MARRIAGES

Establishment of new marital unions in the population older than 65 years is not unusual, but it is still relatively rare. During the past 30 years number of marriages in elderly population (65+) is declining, although this population is becoming more numerous. Accordingly, the rate of nuptiality in the mentioned period is also in the fall. It is obvious that marital behavior of this population is changing towards making decision to (re)marry more rarely. This raises the question is it still true that in Serbia “marries both young and too young, old and too old, divorced and widowed” [Jovanović – Batut, prema Radovanović, 2001]. It is obvious therefore that the number of official marriages in elderly population is declining, and that there is a certain change in marital behavior of the population, although it is still not so noticeable.

Considering the total amount of concluded marriages in Serbia, concluded marriages of persons older than 65 years represent a relatively small percentage. Since share of elderly population in the overall population is increasing, it would

Graph 1. Trends in the rate of nuptiality for male and female population aged 65 years and over, Serbia, 1981–2013 (selected years)

Source: Demographic statistics for relevant years, RZS, Belgrade.
be logical to expect that shares of marriages are also increasing. However, this is not the case, that is to say that share of elderly population concluded marriages in the total amount of concluded marriages maintains at almost the same level over the last 30 years.

The larger number of elderly population marriages is concentrated within the youngest categories, and refers to the category of “younger elders”, that is to the contingent of older people from 65 to 70 years.

As it was expected, there are some differences in rate of nuptiality when it comes to men and women – namely, nuptiality rate throughout the period has higher values for men. In 2013, the rate of nuptiality for men was 1.4, while for women it was about three times lower (0.5). Similar relation existed throughout the monitored period. It is obvious therefore that men in these years decide to marry more often than women. One of the reasons may be the fact that in our society, men more often marry younger women. A smaller nuptiality rate for women of this age is partly the result of bigger number of women compared to men in these years, which is caused by the women’s longer life expectancy. Therefore women older than 65 years have a small selection of potential partners with whom they could (re)enter in the (new) marital union. Almost every second women who were older than 60 years is a widow (46%), so if we add to this the percent of divorced and unmarried women, the percentage of women older the 60 who may be a potential marriage partner is 55%. On the other hand, only one out of six men in these years is a widower (17%), while only 4% of them are single and 4% are divorced.

Therefore, frequency of marriage in this population is also caused by the unequal gender structure, which is numerically in favor of women, but from the perspective of the possibility to find a potential spouse, it is in favor of men.

Graph 2. Proportion of concluded marriages of the population older than 65 years in the total number of concluded marriages, for men and women, Serbia, 1981–2013 (selected years)

Source: Demographic statistics for relevant years, RZS, Belgrade.
Since nuptiality rate is bigger for male population, percentage shares of this age group’s concluded marriages in the total number of concluded marriages are also higher for male population. During the last 30 years this percentage has been about 2%, with small fluctuations from 1.7 to 2.2%. When it comes to female population the share is lower, and for the past 30 years it’s been ranging from 0.5 to 1%, with a maximum in 2006 (1.2%).

Different marital behavior of men and women, with differences in life expectancy, also causes their different marital structure. While over 70% of men in this age group are married, this is the case with only about 43% of women, while 45% of them are widows. The percentages of divorced and unmarried men and women are similar and smaller. This structure should also be viewed in context together with the fact that nearly half of senior citizens live in a single or two-member elderly households. With a loss of their spouse, elders are often forced to live alone, which makes them a highly sensitive group. Due to gender-specific mortality rates, women are particularly vulnerable to the risk of staying in one-member households. One-member elderly households are particularly vulnerable in economic terms, but also in terms of social exclusion, neglect, social isolation, health care etc.

On the other hand, studies have shown that marriage has positive health effects among members of elderly population, especially among men, as well as a positive correlation between marriage and general well-being.

Graph 3. Marital structure of men and women older than 60 years, Serbia, 2011

Source: Demographic statistics for relevant years, RZS, Belgrade.

COHABITATIONS

Besides formally recognized marriages, informal marriage unions, so-called cohabitations, should also be taken into account. In the last census of 2011 data on the number of persons living in consensual unions were collected for the first time. This provided us a valuable insight into contemporary
trends in marital behavior. This information is especially important when it comes to elderly population, bearing in mind that, in the past, cohabitations were typical for people from older age groups, that is for people who are divorced or widowed and who have not based formal marital union due to economic reasons and/or social standards. However, the 2011 census showed that today most of these forms of life partnership is concentrated within younger age groups (29% in the age group 30–39 and 23% in the age group 20–29), which is in accordance with the theory of the second demographic transition [Bobić 2002]. Out of the total number of persons living in cohabitation, 9.7% is older than 60 years. Out of the total number of persons over 60 years, 1.2% lives in this form of partnership. If we take into account only those who are out of marriage, the percentage is slightly higher – 3%.

It would be interesting to examine reasons that drive people of this age group to enter into an informal marital union, as well as socio-economic characteristics of this population. Research conducted in the Netherlands [Gierveld 2004], which included respondents aged 55 to 89 years, found that the factors that have impact on a decision about the type of the new partnership (cohabitation, living-a-part-together, formal marriage) are, among others, age in which the last relationship ended, the number of earlier partnerships’ break-ups, work activity, and other demographic variables taken into account when weighing the pros and cons of the new (non)formal partner community. Due to the lack of similar researches, we can just assume that similar factors influence the decision in our society, together with some more specific factors (e.g. avoiding change in property rights). A qualitative research on this topic could certainly provide more precise and accurate insights into the matter. From published census data it can be seen that majority of people over 60 years old who live in a cohabitation is urban population (61.9%), and that this form of partnership has higher prevalence in the region of Vojvodina (1.8, i.e. 3.97%) and Belgrade (1.4, i.e. 3.3%), compared to Šumadija and Western Serbia, and Eastern and South Serbia.

DIVORCES

Divorce rates for the observed population have recorded mild fluctuations during the observed period. The highest divorce rates were during the 80s, then dropped in the 90s, and have slightly increased over the last 15 years. Such a flow of the divorce rate is in accordance with the movement of divorce rates for the entire population of Serbia over the observed period. During the dramatic social, political and economic changes in the 90s the divorce rate decreased (because keeping marriage alive and family together is one of the strategies of “surviving” tough times), and before the start of the 21st century it slightly increased. Yet it still didn’t reach the values of 80s. Hence it is obvious that frequency of divorce in the population over 65 years follows the general trends when it comes to divorce in Serbia, judging by both its flow of changes and its relatively low values.

Share of divorces of persons older than 65 years in the total amount of divorces is slightly increasing. Thus divorces of men older than 65 years represent
3.6% of the total number of divorces among men in Serbia, while divorces of women of this age represent 1.4%. During the past 30 years divorce has significantly moved towards later years of married life, that is to say that an increasing percentage of marriages are divorcing after more than 25 years of marriage. Namely, in 1981 that percentage was 8.3%, while today (2013) it rose to 14.1%. Divorce moving to later stages of marriage can partly be explained by the fact that children become independent and leave the parental home during this period, which causes traditional marital union, in which partners are connected by parenting, to lose one of its most important connective elements. In such situations, when the partnership between the spouses is not strong enough so as to be able to compensate for the loss of parental role, divorce often happens. In the past, living in extended families, members of older generation played an important role in keeping grandchildren and family functioning, while today it is often not the case. However, termination of the marital union between persons older than 65 years can greatly affect younger members of the family. Both divorced persons and their families are affected by the need to change their place of residence after the divorce, since one of the former spouses, often goes to live with children / relatives after divorce. Thus, the increased divorce rates of the elderly population, especially elderly male population, should be considered in terms of the consequences that they have on divorced partners, as well as on their extended family members.

Divorce rates in male population throughout the observed period were approximately three times higher than rates for female population. Based on the data, men divorce to a greater degree in this period of life than women, but are also more likely to enter into a new marital union. Thus, the share of divorced within the marital structure is higher for about 3 times in women population than in men population, although the divorce rates are higher among men. The
share of divorced in marital structure has been constantly increasing in both sexes during the last four censuses.

CONCLUSION

Marital behavior of the population older than 65 years has not been the focus of previous marital analysis, since the nuptiality is often studied and analyzed in the context of the impact on fertility trends. However, elderly population constitutes 17% of the total population of Serbia, and there is tendency to future increase their share. In order to have the fulfilled and productive life of the elderly, it is necessary to have the insight in the marriage structure of the elderly population as well as contemporary trends in their marital behavior.

Analysis of basic demographic indicators of elderly marital status in the last 30 years, it has been found that there are no major changes, and the basic tendencies could be summarized as follows: the number and rate of formal concluded marriages had declined; the divorce rates in the last ten years increased slightly but are still significantly lower compared to the values from the 1980’s. In the marital structure changes are reflected in the slowly growth of divorced individuals. Male population is characterized by higher both marriage and divorce rates, which is associated with entering into a marriage with a younger partner, as well as with a smaller choice of potential marriage partners for women of this age, due to differences in gender composition.

Changes and trends in the marital life of the elderly should be considered also in the context of impact on the quality of their life, their economic and social security. Elderly individuals living in single-person elderly households are particularly vulnerable category, and it is shown that life in the partnership has positive effects on health, social inclusion and general well-being.

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САЖЕТАК: Циљ овог рада јесте сагледавање савременог брачног понашања популације у Србији старије од 65 година. Модели брачног понашања одраз су културе, традиције, обичаја локалне средине, економског статуса и сл. Као такви подложни су променама. Продужавањем очекиваног животног века, као и мењањем социо-економских и културолошких прилика, дошло је и до промена у брачном понашању и брачној структури старог становништва. Како бисмо пратили ове промене и сагледали актуелно стање, анализирали смо показатеље попут стопа нупцијалитете и диворцијалитета за ову старосну групу, као и актуелну брачну структуру, упоредивши их са ранијим вредностима. Посебно је важан анализ увид у брачно понашање ванбрачних заједница (кохабитација), што даје фаско увид у брачно понашање старих лица.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: брачно понашање, брак, старо становништво, кохабитација