

Divorce and remarriage in England and Wales

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SUMMARY

This short article provides a summary of the demographic consequences of divorce over the past two decades: the growth in the proportion of the population who are divorced; the increase in the age at divorce and the ageing of the divorced population; and the decline in the rates of remarriage after divorce. In addition, the extent and timing of remarriage after divorce are investigated, as well as the corresponding features of remarriage after being widowed. The differentials between men and women are presented and discussed throughout the article.

PURPOSE OF ARTICLE

The main stimulus for this article has been the recent debate in Parliament on draft legislation to ensure the equitable splitting of pensions between husbands and wives on divorce.^{1,2,3,4} Many married women have contributed to their marriage by their caring and domestic responsibilities which have enabled their husbands to work and build up pension entitlement. If they divorce, the wife can be left without pension provision. Although the proposed pension sharing will apply equally to men and women, the main beneficiaries will be women. The issue is one of increasing importance, since past trends in divorce and remarriage have resulted in a growing divorced population, which is projected to increase further in the future⁵. The prospect exists, therefore, that, some twenty five years hence, just over 1½ million women aged 55 and over will be divorced, equivalent to one in 6 of all women in that age-group.⁵ Details of these projections of the population by legal marital status are published in a separate article in this issue.⁵

BACKGROUND

It is well-known, and well documented,^{6,7} that the divorce rate - the annual number of men and women divorcing per thousand married men and women in the population that year - has increased markedly over the last three decades, more than quadrupling in size. Although the divorce rate has remained approximately constant over the most recent few years - at around 14 couples per thousand per year - it has reached a level high by European standards, and is such that, were divorce rates by duration of marriage to persist at recent levels, about 4 in every ten couples would ultimately divorce⁶. Divorce therefore has become a relatively more common event, which has affected, both directly and indirectly, a growing proportion of the entire population.

DIVORCE AND THE DIVORCED POPULATION

Of those who divorce each year, a proportion subsequently remarry, whilst the remainder either live outside a partnership or else start living in an informal union. As is charted in another article⁸ in this issue (Figure 2 in that article), the proportion of divorced women who are cohabiting is higher than twenty years ago, most of the increase having occurred during the 1980's. Currently, just under one quarter of divorced women are cohabiting, and just over one quarter of divorced men. In contrast, the annual proportions of divorced men and women who have remarried - the remarriage rates - have declined dramatically over the last two decades up to 1996; reducing to about one quarter their 1976 level for divorced men and to around one third for divorced women (Figure 1).

There are therefore three main factors which have determined the change in the size of the divorced population: in general, a year-by-year

increase in the numbers of newly divorced men and women adding to the existing numbers of the divorced; a declining number of divorced men and women leaving the divorced population each year through remarriage; and an increase in the numbers of the divorced who are either living outside a partnership, or else are cohabiting. The net effect of these trends has been that the divorced population has grown in absolute and relative terms, so that, amongst the adult populations of all men and women aged 16 or over in 1996, one in 13 men and one in 12 women were divorced - 8 and 9 per cent, respectively (Figure 2). These proportions are between three and four times their 1976 values.

DIFFERENTIALS BY SEX

One striking feature concerning the events of divorce, remarriage, cohabitation amongst the divorced, and the proportions of the population who are divorced, is the demographic asymmetry between men and women. The only situation where the numbers - and proportions - of men and women are equal is, by definition, at divorce. Thereafter, there are differences between divorced men and divorced women in the proportions cohabiting, remarrying and remaining divorced. These differentials are apparent in Figures 1 and 2 (and indeed in every subsequent Figure). Each of these features either measures, or is the direct result of, the greater likelihood of divorced men repartnering - either through marriage or through cohabitation - than women. It is worth recalling that repartnering by living in an informal union - cohabitation - does not affect the legal marital status of being divorced, whereas, of course, remarriage ends that status.

Figure 1 Remarriage rates for divorced men and women aged 16 and over, 1976-96, England and Wales

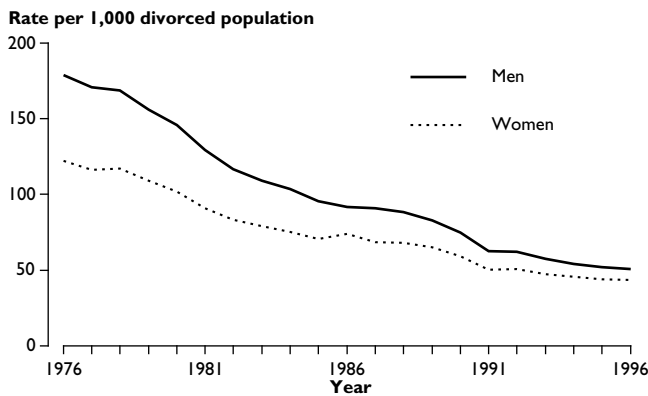


Figure 2 The divorced population as a percentage of the total population aged 16 and over, 1976-96, England and Wales

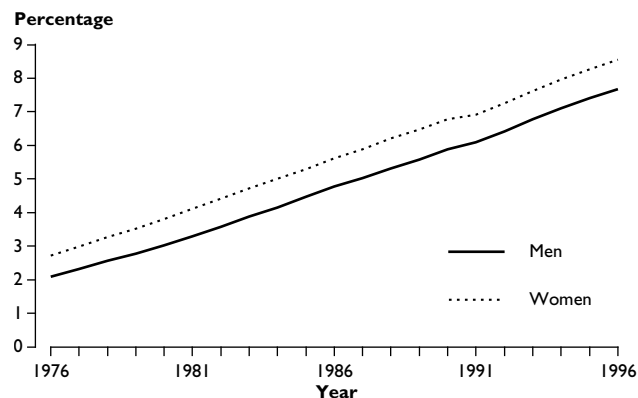
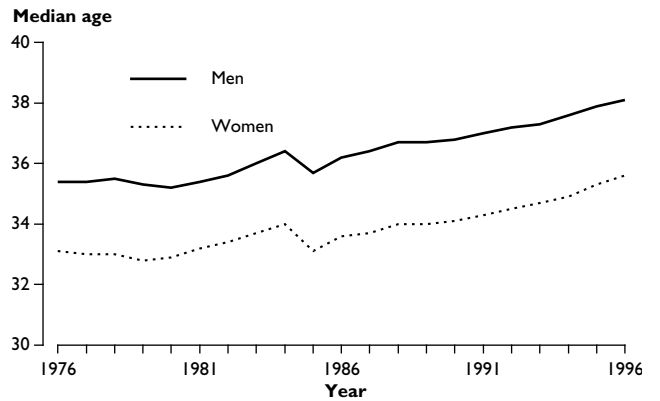


Figure 3 Median age at divorce, 1976-96, England and Wales



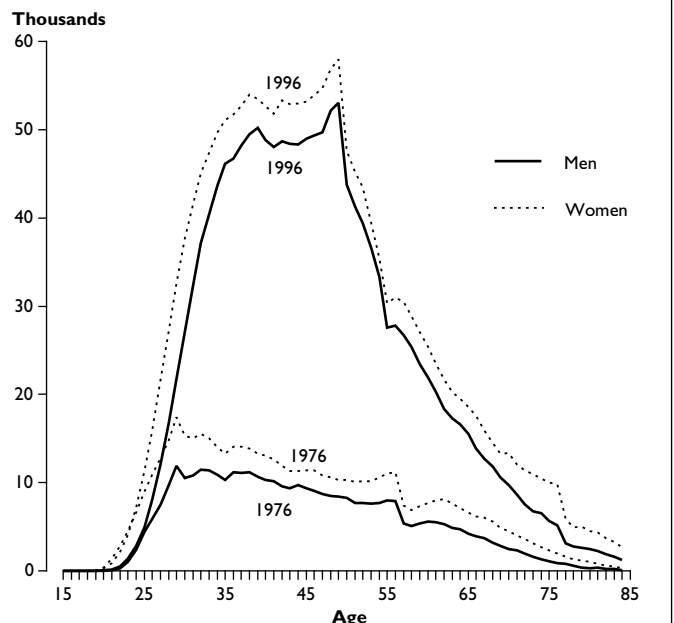
THE INFLUENCE OF AGE

Repartnering after divorce becomes progressively less likely with increasing age, especially for women, as judged by remarriage rates^{5,7} and proportions cohabiting^{8,9}. Since men and women have tended to divorce at successively older ages over the last two decades - see Figure 3 - it is quite possible that the differential between divorced men and women in repartnering will increase. Indeed, the projections by marital status in this issue suggest that the gap between the proportions of divorced men and women in the population will widen slightly, to become 10 and 12 per cent, respectively, in 2021⁵.

Within the 1996 divorced population, men and women aged from about 35 to 49 were relatively the most numerous, with divorced women outnumbering divorced men at every age - see Figure 4. It may be appreciated that the ratio of the number of divorced women to that of divorced men increases with increasing age after about age 50, so that by age 65, there are about 125 divorced women to every 100 divorced men.

Figure 4 also shows the age profiles of divorced men and women in 1976. Besides illustrating the growth over the two decades 1976 to 1996 at every age in the numbers divorced, the comparison between the

Figure 4 Number of divorced men and women in the population by age, 1976 and 1996, England and Wales



1976 and 1996 profiles also shows that the divorced populations have become older. This trend is partly the result of older age at divorce, but is also likely to be due to a growing proportion of the divorced population having been divorced longer ago, and so older in age. The shapes of the age profiles are also influenced by the numbers of men and women born in past years and the proportions of them who married - besides the proportions of the latter who subsequently divorced. Hence, the peak age of the 1976 profiles occurs at 29 for both men and women, and at 49 for the 1996 age profiles - drawn from those born in the peak "baby boom" post-war years of 1946/47.

DIVORCE, BEING WIDOWED, AND REMARRIAGE - TIMING EFFECTS

In general, marriages tend to be ended by divorce at the shorter durations of marriage, whilst marriages ended by the death of one or other spouse usually occur amongst longer-duration marriages. Although durations of marriage ended by divorce may be derived from the information on divorce forms, the corresponding marriage durations up to the time of death cannot be calculated from the death certificates of married men and women, since date of marriage is not recorded.

Information on this general subject is, however, available from the General Household Survey¹⁰, GHS, which, since 1986, has collected the full marital history from each respondent aged between 16 and 59. Care has to be taken in interpreting the results from GHS analyses for the following reason. The age range of respondents to recent GHSs - under 60 - in conjunction with their marriages or divorces several decades earlier means that information derived from the GHS can refer only to those who were very young at their marriage or divorce. Furthermore, considering different groups of respondents who first married in successive decades progressively lifts this age restriction, so that for those who first married in the most recent decade, only those married at the oldest ages - say 50 or over - would have been excluded. This lack of age comparability could have been overcome by restricting attention to a common, narrow, young, age group, but this action would have severely reduced the sample numbers upon which the results were based. The following analyses are based on results from the combined

1989 to 1996 GHSs, accepting the implicit broadening of the age range for successive cohorts. However, comparisons of the results for men and women from the *same* first marriage or divorce cohort are valid, and attention will be focused on this aspect. Fortunately, in the present context, the required emphasis is on a comparison between the sexes.

Proportions of first marriages ending in divorce or widow(er)hood

Figure 5 shows the cumulative proportions of first marriages which ended, by duration of marriage, for men and women who first married in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. For each marriage cohort, the proportions of spinster marriages which ended in divorce exceeded those of bachelor marriages, at least for the longer durations of marriage. The explanation lies in the marital statuses of the spouses of these two groups - there would have been relatively more divorced men who had married spinsters amongst the spinster marriages than divorced women who had married bachelors amongst the bachelor marriages - and other factors being constant, the risk of divorce is higher for a divorced person remarrying than for a single, never-married one.

The differential in the proportions of marriages which ended by the death of a husband or a wife is much more marked; wives being approximately twice as likely as husbands to be widowed at every duration of marriage. Comparing the cumulative proportions divorced and widowed from the same marriage cohort indicates that the proportion divorced builds up comparatively early in marriage and subsequently moderates, in contrast to the proportion widowed which builds up very slowly and subsequently accelerates.

PROPORTIONS REMARRYING AFTER THEIR FIRST MARRIAGE ENDED IN DIVORCE OR WIDOW(ER)HOOD

Irrespective of the decade in which their first marriage ended in divorce, the proportions of men who remarried exceeded those of women at every duration following the divorce (Figure 6). Of men who divorced in the 1970s, one half had remarried within 5 years, whereas amongst women who had divorced in the same decade, one half had remarried within a longer time-span of 7 years.

Figure 5 Cumulative percentages* of first marriages which ended in divorce or widow(er)hood, by duration of marriage and marriage cohort, Great Britain

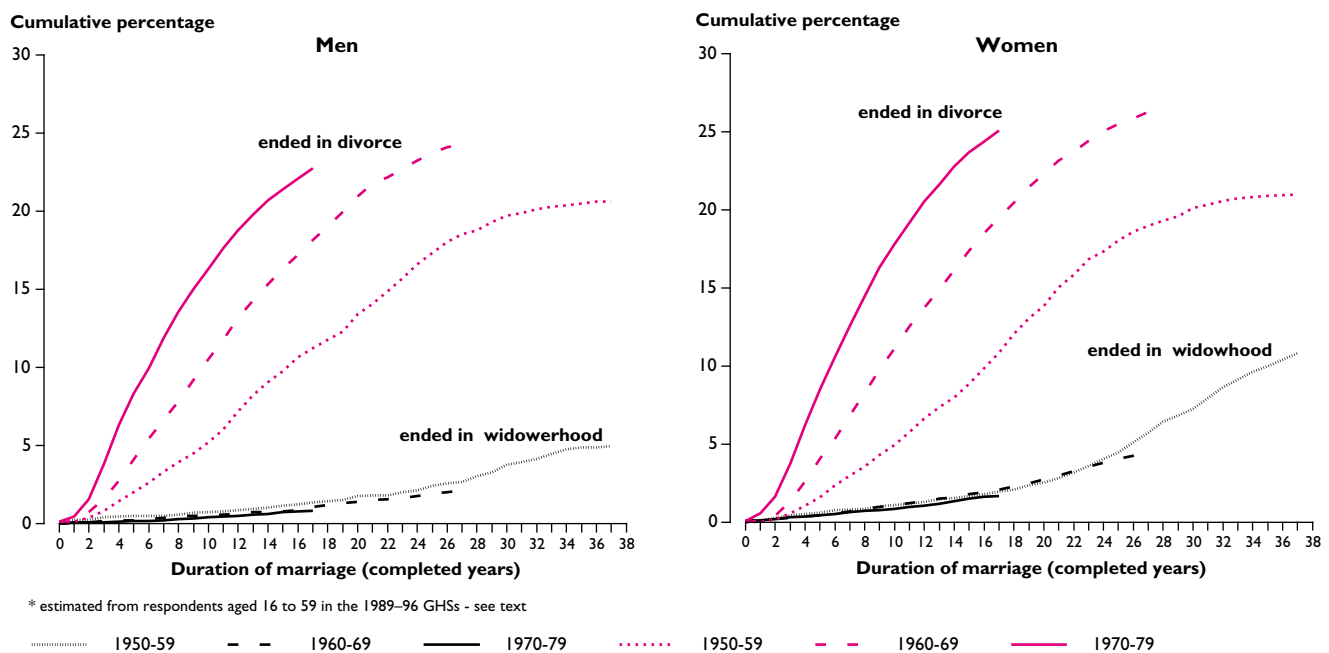
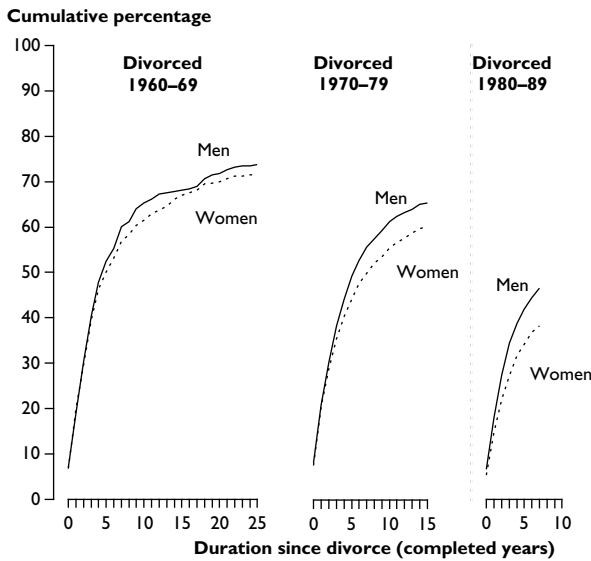
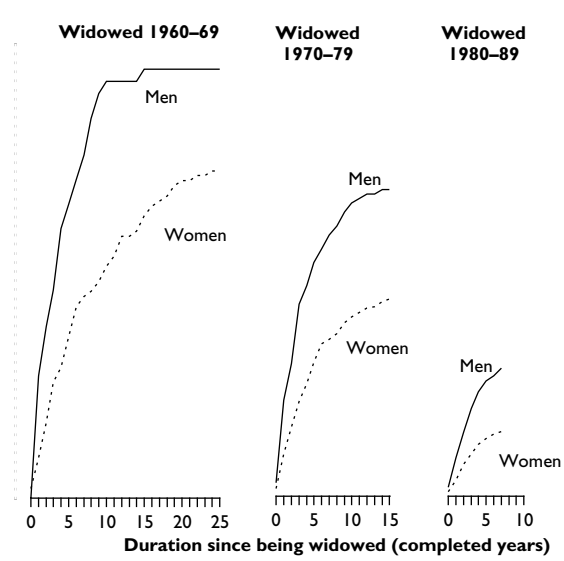


Figure 6 Cumulative percentages* of men and women, divorced in their first marriage, who remarried, by year of divorce and duration since divorce, Great Britain



* estimated from respondents aged 16 to 59 in the 1989-96 GHSs note - comparisons are only valid between the graphs for men and women divorced in the same years - see text

Figure 7 Cumulative percentages* of men and women, widowed in their first marriage, who remarried, by year of being widowed and duration since being widowed, Great Britain



* estimated from respondents aged 16 to 59 in the 1989-96 GHSs note - comparisons are only valid between the graphs for men and women widowed in the same years - see text

Amongst men and women widowed from their first marriage, the proportions of widowers who remarried within a given time of their bereavement were much larger than those of widows - at least 1½ times larger (Figure 7). Of course, the chance of remarriage is associated with the age at widowhood or widowerhood, just as it is with divorce; in general, the younger the age, the greater the likelihood of remarriage⁷. From earlier remarks, those widowed during the 1960s shown in Figure 6 would have been younger than those widowed during the 1970s, so that, on this consideration, the proportions remarrying within, say, ten years of being widowed might be expected to be higher amongst the former than the latter group. In addition, given that being widowed generally occurs at an older age than being divorced, it is probably unwise to make comparisons between divorce and widow(er)hood cohorts of the same decade. However, it is safe to conclude that the differential in the proportions of men and women who remarry after being widowed is wider than the corresponding differential for those who remarry after being divorced.

THE FUTURE

Table 1 summarises the projection results^{5,8} for divorced men and women in 2021, distinguishing those cohabiting from those not cohabiting. Overall, it may be seen that the ratio of the numbers of divorced women to divorced men is projected to increase slightly between 1996 and 2021, so that there will be 119 divorced women for every 100 divorced men. The same ratio is also projected to increase for non-cohabiting divorced women and divorced men, so that there will be 130 non-cohabiting divorced women for every 100 non-cohabiting divorced men in 2021. In contrast, it is projected that there will be relatively fewer divorced women who are cohabiting compared with divorced men - 94 cohabiting divorced women for every 100 cohabiting divorced men in 1996, reducing to 81 for every 100 cohabiting divorced men in 2021. All these trends are consistent with earlier results.

Table 1 Estimates and projections of the population aged 16 and over*, England and Wales

Thousands

Year	Men	Women	Ratio†	Not cohabiting			Cohabiting		
				Men	Women	Ratio†	Men	Women	Ratio†
Divorced									
1996	1,543	1,819	1.18	1,096	1,401	1.28	447	418	0.94
2021	2,318	2,762	1.19	1,804	2,348	1.30	514	414	0.81
% increase	50	52		65	68		15	-1	
All legal marital statuses									
1996	20,091	21,265	1.06	18,531	19,705	1.06	1,560	1,560	1.00
2021	22,543	23,106	1.02	19,617	20,180	1.03	2,926	2,926	1.00
% increase	12	9		6	2		88	88	

* From articles 5,8 in this issue.

† Ratios are calculated from the number of women: number of men.

CONCLUSIONS

The divorced population has been growing steadily, with divorced women outnumbering divorced men, and this trend is projected to continue. In addition, because the divorced population has grown older, and is projected to become even older in profile, the differential in remarriage after divorce between men and women is likely to widen, resulting in proportionately more women than men remaining divorced.

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