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Chapter 6

Family Formation and Dissolution



Abstract The question of the unity of the family models in the Mediterranean has been the subject of much debate in the field of generations history. Some researchers have put forward the much disputed hypothesis of a past unity in the Mediterranean area in relation to marriage and the family. In modern times, however, we are dealing with very heterogeneous situations in this area. *A priori*, the populations on the different shores of the Mediterranean do not have much in common, with diversified Western family models on one side, and a very specific Arab-Muslim family model on the other. Although different on both sides of the Mediterranean, family models have nevertheless undergone profound changes over the last 70 years: some discuss a “marriage revolution” for the populations of the Southern and Eastern shores, others a second demographic transition in the European countries. In the same way that researchers envisage a convergence of family models in the world towards the Western family model could there be a convergence of Mediterranean family models due to these contemporary family changes? Without directly answering this question, this chapter will attempt to provide some food for thought. Therefore, among the many possible elements for analysing family models, we decided to focus on the formation and dissolution of marriages. We will present the evolution of demographic indicators relating to these two phenomena, starting with marriage and divorce rates, followed by indicators relating to age at marriage and the significance of permanent celibacy. Unlike, the other demographic phenomena, we were unable to use the large international databases to study all the Mediterranean countries since 1950 for these family formation and dissolution related topics. We had to instead collate data from different data providers to create long series.

Keywords Marriage · Divorce · Family formation · Family dissolution · Age at marriage · Permanent celibacy · Family model · Mediterranean

6.1 Introduction

The question of the unity of the family models in the Mediterranean has been the subject of much debate in the field of generations history (Sacchi and Viazzo, 2014). Some researchers have put forward the much disputed hypothesis of a past unity in the Mediterranean area in relation to marriage and the family (Goody, 1983). In modern times, however, we are dealing with very heterogeneous situations in this area. *A priori*, the populations on the different shores of the Mediterranean do not have much in common, with diversified Western family models on one side, and a very specific Arab-Muslim family model on the other.

Although different on both sides of the Mediterranean, family models have nevertheless undergone profound changes over the last 70 years: some discuss a “marriage revolution” for the populations of the Southern and Eastern shores (Tabutin and Schoumaker, 2005), others a second demographic transition in the European countries (Lesthaeghe, 2014). In the same way that researchers envisage a convergence of family models in the world towards the Western family model (Goode, 1963; Thornton, 2001) could there be a convergence of Mediterranean family models due to these contemporary family changes? Without directly answering this question, this chapter will attempt to provide some food for thought. Therefore, among the many possible elements for analysing family models, we decided to focus on the formation and dissolution of marriages. We will present the evolution of demographic indicators relating to these two phenomena, starting with marriage and divorce rates, followed by indicators relating to age at marriage and the significance of permanent celibacy. Unlike, the other demographic phenomena, we were unable to use the large international databases to study all the Mediterranean countries since 1950 for these family formation and dissolution related topics. We had to instead collate data from different data providers to create long series.

6.2 Major Marriage and Divorce Trends

6.2.1 Marriage

Historically, marriage is an important institution, but it does not necessarily occupy the same place in every society. It is therefore interesting to first analyse the frequency of marriages in Mediterranean countries, which has undergone major changes since 1950. We are using a nuptiality rate which relates the number of marriages in a time period to the population aged 15 years or older.¹

¹ Usually, the crude nuptiality rate relates the number of marriages to the average total population in the same year. However, we prefer to relate it to the population of marriageable age (15 years or older). This makes it possible to control somewhat for the effect of the age structure and to compare more easily the nuptiality rate intensity in the Mediterranean countries.

First, nuptiality rates are heterogeneous in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the observation period, no real difference between the Northern shore and the Southern and Eastern shores (Fig. 6.1). Indeed, they range from 9% (Malta) to 28% (Jordan) in the early 1960s. The lowest values (around 10%) are found in Southern Europe (Malta, France, Spain, Italy), and also in Cyprus and Libya. For higher values, countries from different shores are mixed. For example, the highest values (above 14%) are Jordan, Egypt, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. During this period, many European countries experienced a “golden age” of marriage. The nuptiality rate experienced a strong post-war increase, which lasted until the mid-1960s in Northern Europe and the 1970s for Southern Europe. In Spain, for example, in the 1956–1975 period, the nuptiality rate was almost at its highest for the twentieth century (Muñoz-Pérez & Recaño-Valverde, 2011). It is interesting to note that the vast majority of Mediterranean countries exceeded the nuptiality rate levels reached during the “golden age” of marriage by Southern European countries. This is because marriage is a religious duty in Islam, and it is universal (Locoh & Ouadah-Bedidi, 2014), meaning that the vast majority of adults are married.

The evolution of the nuptiality rate, up to the present day, has varied from region to region, but there has been a general downward trend. Southern Europe shows the simplest pattern, since from the 1970s onwards, the nuptiality rate has been decreasing continuously, until stabilising eventually at a low level (with the exception of Malta). In most cases, the nuptiality rate in Southern European countries has reduced by more than a factor of 2 and is now among the lowest in the European Union.

The Balkan countries generally follow the same trend, but with some exceptions. In terms of timing, the decline in the nuptiality rate does not begin in the 1970s everywhere: sometimes earlier (Slovenia as early as the 1950s) and sometimes later (Albania in the early 2000s). Moreover, the nuptiality rate achieved at present is highly variable from one country to another, with sometimes very low levels (Slovenia, Bulgaria) similar to those in Southern Europe, and sometimes rather high levels (>10%); such as in Albania and especially in Kosovo; the other Balkan countries showing intermediate levels (between 5 and 8%). Over the entire period, the nuptiality rate has strongly decreased, as it has been divided by 2 (or more) in the majority of Balkan countries, and by more than 3 in Slovenia.

In North Africa, the evolution of the nuptiality rate has generally taken place in three distinct phases. First, rates increased (except in Egypt and Algeria where they decreased) until the 1970s; then they decreased until reaching levels below 10%. In contrast to previous trajectories, however, there has been a significant increase in the nuptiality rate towards high levels during the 2000s. This last phase coincides with the recent increase in fertility in these countries (see Chap. 4). Egypt stands out, over the entire period, for having a higher nuptiality rate than the other North African countries.

Finally, the trajectories of the Near Eastern countries are on the decline over the period, with sometimes uneven developments (Jordan, Lebanon, Cyprus). However, the declines in these countries are generally smaller than those observed elsewhere



Fig. 6.1 Nuptiality rate in the Mediterranean (1950–2019) (*Sources* Demographic Statistics Database, National Office of Statistics, Eurostat, Demographic Yearbook [UN], World Population Prospect 2022. Calculations made by the authors. *N. B. 1* The number of marriages is related to the population aged 15 years and over [not to the total population]. *N.B. 2* Jordan’s values between 1950 and 1970 are off graph. *N.B. 3* The evolution of the indicator is using averages calculated for 5-year periods)

in the Mediterranean. Only Palestine and Syria are exceptions, with the former experiencing an increase since the mid-2000s in line with North African countries, and the latter having a higher nuptiality rate today than in the 1950s.

These analyses show differentiated developments. They have finally led to a divergence since the 1980s, as the relative disparities are now higher. In 2015–2019, the nuptiality rate in the Mediterranean was spread over a wide range of values, from single to triple. This means that the frequency of marriages in societies is significantly different on either side of the Mediterranean. Moreover, unlike at the beginning of the period, the three Mediterranean shores are visibly different today. Indeed, the countries on the Northern Shore have the lowest values, and those on the Southern and Eastern shores the highest (despite the decrease in their nuptiality rate since the 1950s–1960s). There are some exceptions, with high values for Albania and Kosovo, and intermediate values for Israel and Cyprus.

This geographical contrast is partly explained by the age structure. For the same population, the age groups with the highest probability of marrying (20–40 years) will account for a larger share in the young population, resulting in a higher number of marriages, and thus a higher nuptiality rate than the older population. Thus, as the countries on the Southern and Eastern shores (but also Albania and Kosovo) are on average younger than the countries on the Northern Shore (including Israel and Cyprus) (see Chap. 2), it is not surprising that their nuptiality rates are higher. However, this difference in nuptiality rates between these two groups of countries can also be explained by other factors that we will discuss later in the chapter, such as the rate of remarriage.

6.2.2 *Divorce*

Divorce analysis measures the frequency of divorces in a population. We use divorce rates to conduct a comparison.²

The evolution of the divorce rate in the Mediterranean highlights several interesting elements (Fig. 6.2). The first is the higher level of divorce in Muslim-majority countries compared to Catholic-majority (or traditional) countries, especially before the 1980s. This is not surprising, as divorce/repudiation is a regulatory mechanism in the Arab-Muslim matrimonial system (Fargues, 1986). Unlike Catholicism, Islam allows a marriage to be broken via a mechanism other than by death. Divorce/repudiation is therefore a very common practice in Islam, although in reality it is an indicator of male dominance. Indeed, before the introduction of modern family law in some countries, divorce (repudiation) was initiated by the man (Locoh & Ouadah-Bedidi, 2014). However, this high divorce rate does not lead to an over-representation of divorced people in the population. On the contrary, there are few divorced people,

² As with marriage, we relate the number of divorces to the population aged 15 or over, and to the total population.

as remarriages are very common and quick. In Egypt, for example, divorcees represent less than 2% of the 15–59 year olds in 2017, for both men and women. By way of comparison, in France, in 2016, they represent about 6% for men and 8.5% for women, while the divorce rate is lower. This link between divorce and remarriage also helps to explain the higher nuptiality rate in the countries of the Southern and Eastern shores and is observed in the previous sub-section, a significant part of which is due to remarriage.

Despite this characteristic of the Arab-Muslim matrimonial system, disparities exist within the countries concerned from the beginning of the observation period. Even if divorce has been declining since the beginning of the twentieth century (Fargues, 1986), some countries still had very high levels (more than 4%³) in the 1950s, for example Egypt and Jordan, or Libya in the early 1970s. Others have lower levels (less than 2%), such as Tunisia, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon. In general, these levels contrast with the divorce rates of the Northern shore countries, which generally did not exceed 1% in the 1950s, with the exception of Serbia and Albania.

In terms of divorce rate changes, what is important now is the heterogeneity of trajectories. In Southern Europe, the divorce rate was rather low in the 1950s. It then gradually increased, starting in the late 1960s in France, in the mid-1970s in Portugal, and in the early 2000s in Spain. A maximum of around 2.7% was reached by these three countries, before experiencing a decline in the 2010s. Italy has only recently experienced an increase in its divorce rate. Malta only allowed divorce in 2011, the last European country to do so, and has low levels at present. In the Balkans, the divorce rate is on the whole increasing over the whole period (though sometimes alternating between increasing and decreasing). However, the Balkan countries do not reach Southern European levels, as their divorce rates are generally between 1 and 2%. Serbia and Kosovo are the only countries to see a decrease in divortiality over the study period.

The trajectories are quite different on the Southern and Eastern shores. The evolution generally takes place in two stages, with varying timing: a decrease and then an increase in the divorce rate. Some of the declines are impressive: Egypt's divorce rate, for example, fell by a factor of 3 during a 50-year period before doubling in the 10 years that followed. Cyprus and Lebanon are exceptions to this general pattern, as their divorce rates only increase throughout the period, a trajectory similar to those in Southern Europe. Tunisia also shows a different trajectory, as its divorce rate has essentially stagnated since the 1960s. Today, the countries of the Southern and Eastern shores reach rather high levels of divorce since the vast majority exceed 2%. In other words, divorces are more frequent today in Egyptian, Palestinian or Jordanian societies than in France, Spain or Portugal, which have nevertheless experienced an unprecedented increase in their divorce rate since 1970.

³ A level of 4% may seem low compared to other crude rates, such as crude birth or death rates. This is due to the choice of denominator for the indicator, in this case the population aged 15 years or over. If we had chosen 15–60 year olds, the indicator would have been even higher. In addition, the number of divorces, or marriages, is generally lower than the number of births or deaths.

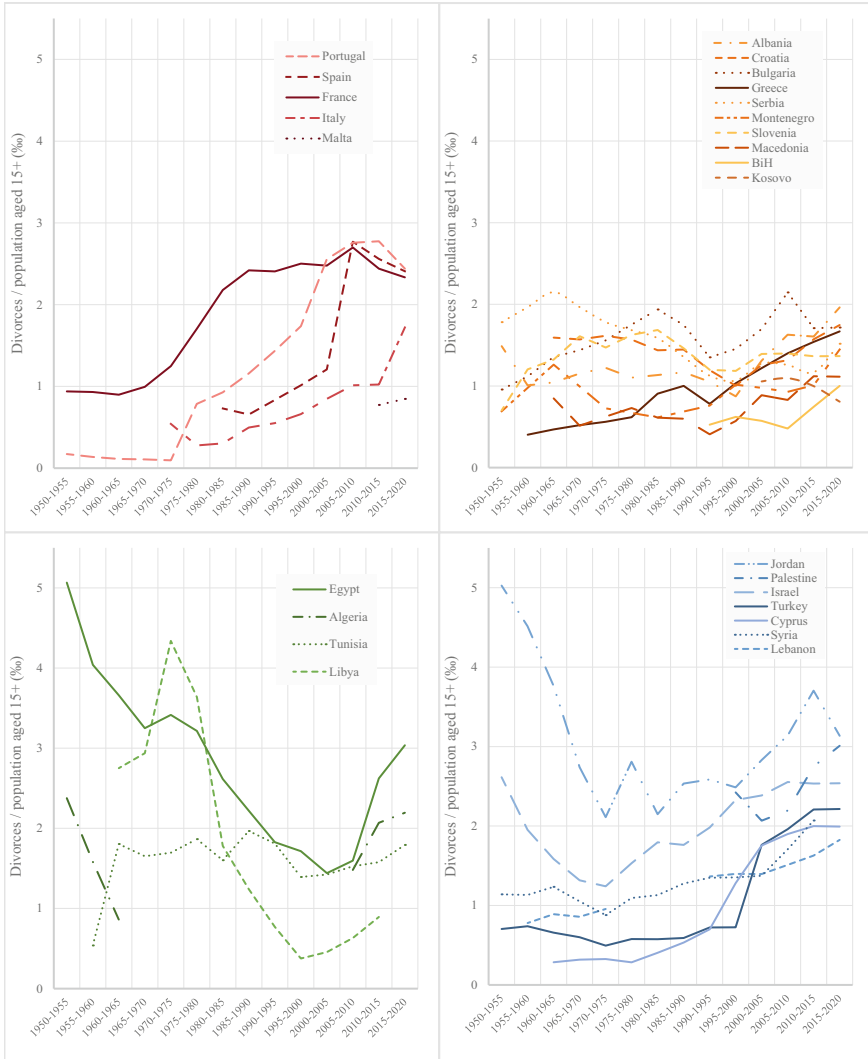


Fig. 6.2 Divorce rates in the Mediterranean (1950–2019) (*Sources* Demographic Statistics Database, National Office of Statistics, Eurostat, Demographic Yearbook [UN], World Population Prospect 2022. Calculations made by the authors. *N.B. 1* The number of divorces is related to the population aged 15 years or more (and not to the total population). *N.B. 2* The evolution of the indicator is based on averages calculated for periods of 5 years. *N.B. 3* The sharp increase in Turkey in the late 1990s is due to a break in the series)

These different trajectories lead to a convergence of the divorce rate in the Mediterranean, but in a different way from that observed for the total fertility rate (Chap. 4) or life expectancy at birth (in this chapter). For the latter, it is a convergence by catching up that is observed. Here, on the contrary, there is a convergence caused by the decline in high divortiality of the Southern and Eastern shores and the growing low divortiality of the Northern shore. Divorce rates in the Mediterranean today are mainly between 1 and 2.5%. The current relative disparities, although not negligible, are less significant than in the 1950s–1960s. Thus, at the end of the 2010s, there is still a contrast between the shores of the Mediterranean, even though some Southern European countries (France, Spain, Portugal), and to a lesser extent Albania, have similar (or even higher) levels of divorce than several Muslim countries.

These major trends point to far-reaching social changes in the Mediterranean. Generally speaking, and despite the variety of marriage trajectories, marriages are less frequent today than 60–70 years ago. In the 1960s, the vast majority of Mediterranean countries had a nuptiality rate of over 10%, today it is less than a third. At the same time, the frequency of divorce has increased in countries where it was low, and decreased in countries where it was high.

6.3 Changes in Marriage

In order to appreciate the changes in marriage in the Mediterranean, we will examine two important dimensions, namely the evolution of the age at marriage and permanent celibacy.

6.3.1 *An Increase in Age at Marriage*

One of the most dramatic changes is the increase in age upon first marriage for both men and women (Fig. 6.3). In this chapter, we use the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM⁴) indicator to estimate the age upon first marriage.

In the 1950s–1960s, there were only four countries with an age upon first marriage for women⁵ above 24. This age has increased everywhere in the Mediterranean, so much so that at present only Palestine and Egypt are below the age of 24.⁶

Before the 1970s, women could sometimes marry very young. This was particularly the case in North Africa where the age upon first marriage for women was

⁴ The SMAM is an indirect method for estimating age upon first marriage from age-specific marital status.

⁵ Only the age upon first marriage of women is shown here, as the age at first marriage of men shows a broadly similar trend.

⁶ Turkey also has an age upon first marriage for women below 24 years, but following a recent decrease.

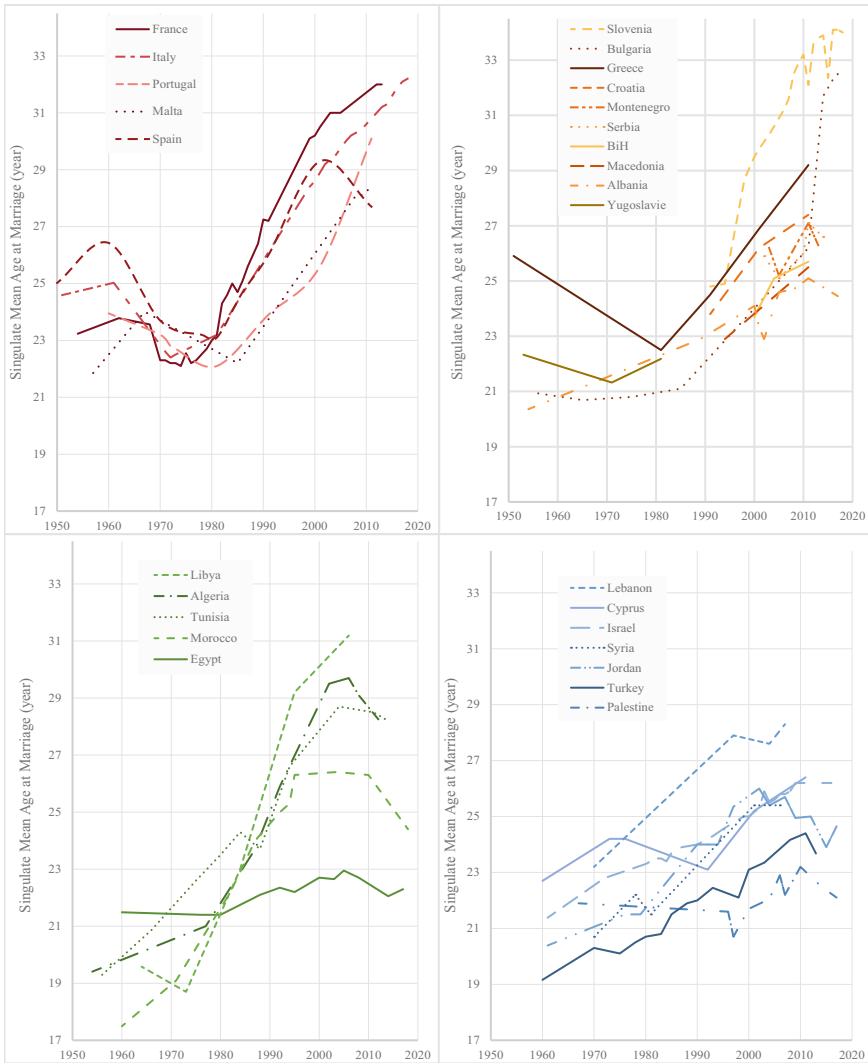


Fig. 6.3 Age upon first marriage of women in the Mediterranean (1950–2019) (Sources World Marriage Database [2019], Demographic Statistics Database, Demographic Yearbook [UN]. Calculations made by the authors. *N. B.* age upon first marriage is estimated with the singulate mean age at marriage [SMAM])

below 20 in the 1950s (except in Egypt), in the Near East (Turkey, Jordan), and in some Balkan countries (Albania, Bulgaria). Conversely, the countries where women married later (over the age of 22) were mainly in Southern Europe, but also in the Balkans (Yugoslavia, Greece) and the Near East (Cyprus, Palestine).

The age upon first marriage of women has therefore gradually increased to sometimes very high levels. In Southern Europe, there was first a decline in the age of marriage in the 1960s, which represented the “golden age” of marriage. It was not until the late 1970s or early 1980s that women’s age at marriage began to increase; now, it is generally above 30 years. The trends are similar in the Balkans. The difference with Southern Europe lies in the levels reached in the 2010s. They are much lower in the Balkans, where they generally do not exceed the age of 27 years. The only exceptions are Slovenia, Bulgaria and Greece, the first two of which reach ages above 32.

In the Near East and North Africa, the age upon first marriage of women is increasing significantly, sometimes reaching very high levels today. This is the case, for example, in Algeria, Libya, Lebanon and Tunisia where the age is 28. Only Egypt and Palestine have had a moderate increase or even a stagnation in their age upon first marriage for women at around 22 years. From the 2000s onwards, the indicator starts to decrease in some countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco), generally those with a recent increase in fertility. Finally, the dichotomy between the Mediterranean shores of the 1950s and 1960s no longer exists today. In fact, it is now conceivable that the age upon first marriage for women is similar across different countries of the Mediterranean shores.

This increase in age at marriage can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the progression in education is decisive in this area, since by spending more time at school (primary, then secondary and increasingly university), individuals postpone the age at which they get married. Secondly, economic crises lead to uncertain and precarious living conditions, encouraging the postponement of marriage. In a neo-local system,⁷ young couples form their own household upon marriage, and do not move in with the husband’s parents. To do so, they must have sufficient resources to move out of the parental home and form a new household. Worsening socio-economic conditions (high youth unemployment, declining living standards, etc.) can hamper household formation for young couples, who have to wait longer to gather the necessary resources to establish their own household. Similarly, the rising cost of housing in large cities, and the increasing cost of marriage (dowry, festivities, etc.) in Arab-Muslim societies, also delay the union formation among young couples, and by extension the age at which they marry.

This increase in the age upon first marriage has two direct effects. The first is the decrease in the age gap between spouses, which is the result of a more rapid increase in the age upon first marriage for women than for men. In the 1950s, Arab-Muslim countries could have age gaps between spouses of more than 6 years,⁸ while in other countries they were less than 4 years. However, despite this decrease, the age gaps

⁷ A neo-local system implies that newlyweds form a new household, separate from of the husband’s or wife’s parents.

⁸ The age gaps between spouses presented here are calculated from the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM), which generally underestimates the actual gap compared to those calculated with micro-data (Ausubel et al., 2022).

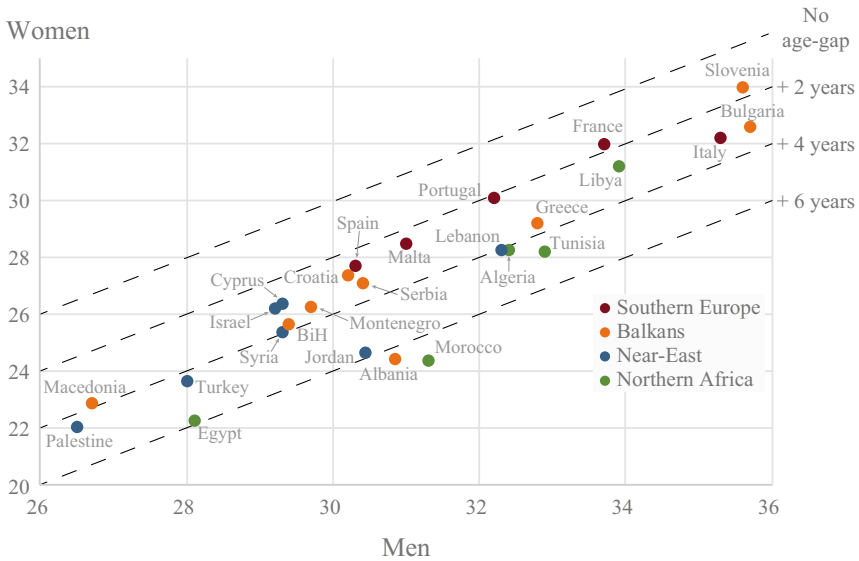


Fig. 6.4 Age difference of male and female singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) in the Mediterranean in the 2010s (*Sources* World Marriage Database [2019], Demographic Statistics Database, Demographic Yearbook [UN]. Calculations made by the authors. *Reading tip:* the dotted lines represent an age gap between spouses. For example, the points on the line “+2 years” are countries where men are on average 2 years older than their spouses. The colour of a dot represents the regional area to which a country belongs)

between spouses in Arab-Muslim countries and in Albania, remain the largest in the Mediterranean (Fig. 6.4).

This is not surprising since the large age gap between spouses is one of the important characteristics of Arab-Muslim marriage, which has some of the highest levels in the world (Weeks, 2020). The age gap in the Mediterranean is on average just under 4 years, with a minimum of about 1.6 years in France and Slovenia. Surprisingly, this gap has been increasing recently in some countries, for example in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, where it is again as high as 6 years (Ausubel et al., 2022).

The second consequence of the increase in the age upon first marriage concerns early marriage. An important feature of traditional Arab-Muslim marriage is the early marriage of girls (Rashad et al., 2005). In the 1960s in Morocco and Algeria, for example, more than half of all women were married before the age of 20. It was 40% in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and 30% in Turkey and Jordan. Early marriage also concerns countries on the Northern shore, as it was 30% in Albania and 20% in Bulgaria. With the increase in the age upon first marriage, and especially thanks to better education, fewer and fewer women are married before the age of 20. Early marriage has almost disappeared from the Mediterranean, since in the vast majority of countries the proportion of women married between the ages of 15 and 20 is less

than 10%. The only notable exceptions are Egypt and Palestine, where the proportion has recently increased to 27 and 15% respectively. These situations show that trend reversals are possible even in cases where that seemed like a given.

6.3.2 *Permanent Celibacy*

In demography, the notion of celibacy is linked to the legal marital status of individuals. A single person is a person who is not married, but who may well be in a relationship. A permanent celibate is generally defined as a person aged 45–49 who has never married. They may, however, have already been in a relationship, or be in a legal union other than marriage (e.g. civil union). We have seen previously that the age upon first marriage has increased everywhere in the Mediterranean, this however implies that the population is marrying later on average, and not necessarily that it is marrying less. In this context, permanent celibacy makes it possible to estimate the proportion of a generation that has lived a large part of adult life without marrying, and in turn to assess the extent to which marriage remains an important institution for family formation.

Permanent female celibacy has generally increased in the Mediterranean (Fig. 6.5). In the 1950s, the vast majority of countries had levels below 5%. In contrast, high levels of permanent female celibacy could be found in Southern Europe, where levels reach 15% in Italy, Spain and Portugal, and even almost 25% in Malta. The evolution of permanent female celibacy in Southern Europe is singular in the Mediterranean, since it decreased until the 1990s, and then increased very rapidly to exceed the levels of the 1950s. At the end of the 2010s, permanent female celibacy reached 20% in Portugal and Italy, and over 30% in France. Only Malta has seen a continuous decline in its proportion of permanent single women. Spain, on the other hand, has experienced a very moderate increase in comparison with other Southern European countries: permanent female celibacy barely exceeded 10% in the 2010s.

In the other Mediterranean countries, there is also a clear trend towards an increase in permanent female celibacy. This increase is often moderate, but sometimes significant. In the majority of countries, the current level of permanent female celibacy does not exceed 8%. However, several countries on both sides of the Mediterranean exceed 10%. In a number of countries, permanent celibacy is also at a high level: about 15% in Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon and Bulgaria, and even 28% in Slovenia. These levels should be compared with those reached by Western European countries at the beginning of the twentieth century. A characteristic of the family model in this region was late marriage and a high proportion of permanent celibacy. In 1900, it was generally above 10% for women, and reached 12% in France, 10% in Germany, 15% in Britain, and up to 20% in Portugal (Engelen & Puschmann, 2011). In this respect, the current levels reached by some Mediterranean countries are comparable and can be considered high, even unprecedented in the case of Arab-Muslim countries.

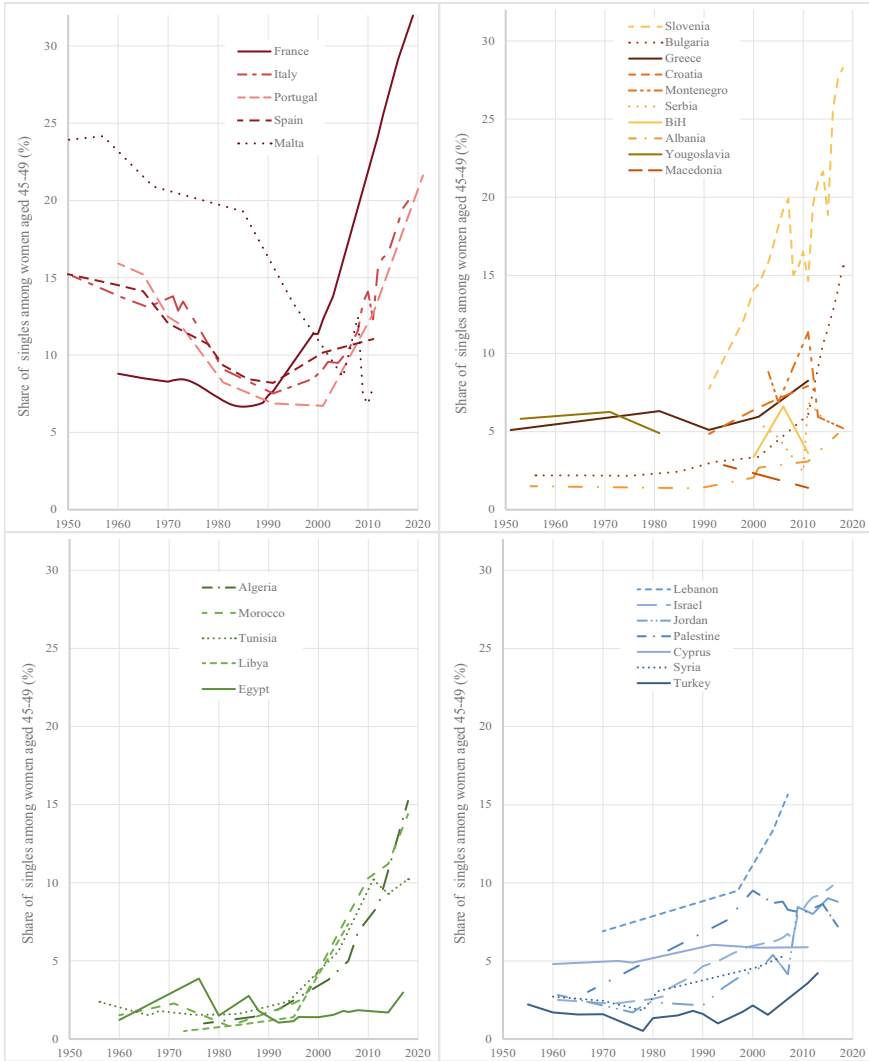


Fig. 6.5 Permanent female celibacy in the Mediterranean (1950–2019) (*Sources* World Marriage Database [2019], Demographic Statistics Database, Demographic Yearbook [UN], MICS. Calculations made by the authors)

We can see how there is no homogeneity within the Arab-Muslim countries, or even within each shore. Similar levels of permanent female celibacy can be found in countries on all shores.

With the increase in the age of marriage and the end of early marriage in most countries, we are witnessing the emergence of singlehood in society, and in particular among women. In many Mediterranean countries, people who have never married

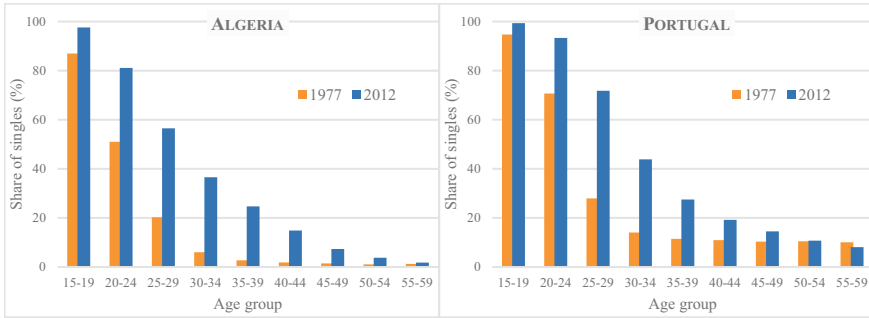


Fig. 6.6 Share of single people aged 15–59 (both sexes) in Portugal and Algeria (*Sources* World Marriage Database [2019], Demographic Statistics Database. Calculations made by the authors)

represent a larger share at each age group. The evolution is sometimes striking in some countries, for example in Algeria and Portugal (Fig. 6.6).

Whereas celibacy often only applied to a minority of age groups in the 1970s, it now concerns a much larger proportion, and sometimes a majority, of people in an age group. The 25–29 year olds in Algeria, for example, were only 20% single in 1977, but over 55% in 2012. We note that in this age group, but also in others, that the share of singles is higher in Algeria than in Portugal. These two countries illustrate how celibacy has become a mass phenomenon as it concerns a significant part of the population, in generally larger proportions than before.

6.3.3 Summary of Family Models

Finally, we propose a simple typology of current family models based on the following two characteristics: permanent female celibacy and female age at marriage (measured by the SMAM). Of course, a more complete typology of family models would take into account many other factors. The aim here however is to summarise the trends outlined above. The result is shown in Fig. 6.7.

There is a general difference between a matrimonial regime with rather low permanent female celibacy and where women marry relatively early, and a matrimonial regime with high permanent female celibacy and high age at marriage. Paradoxically, there is no distinction, either between the different shores of the Mediterranean, or between Arab-Muslim societies and Western societies. Rather, there is a difference between the Western Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean. On the Southern and Eastern shores, the “Petit Maghreb”⁹ differs from the Near East; and on the Northern shore, Southern Europe and Slovenia stand out from the Balkan countries.

⁹ This term refers to the western part of North Africa, i.e. Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

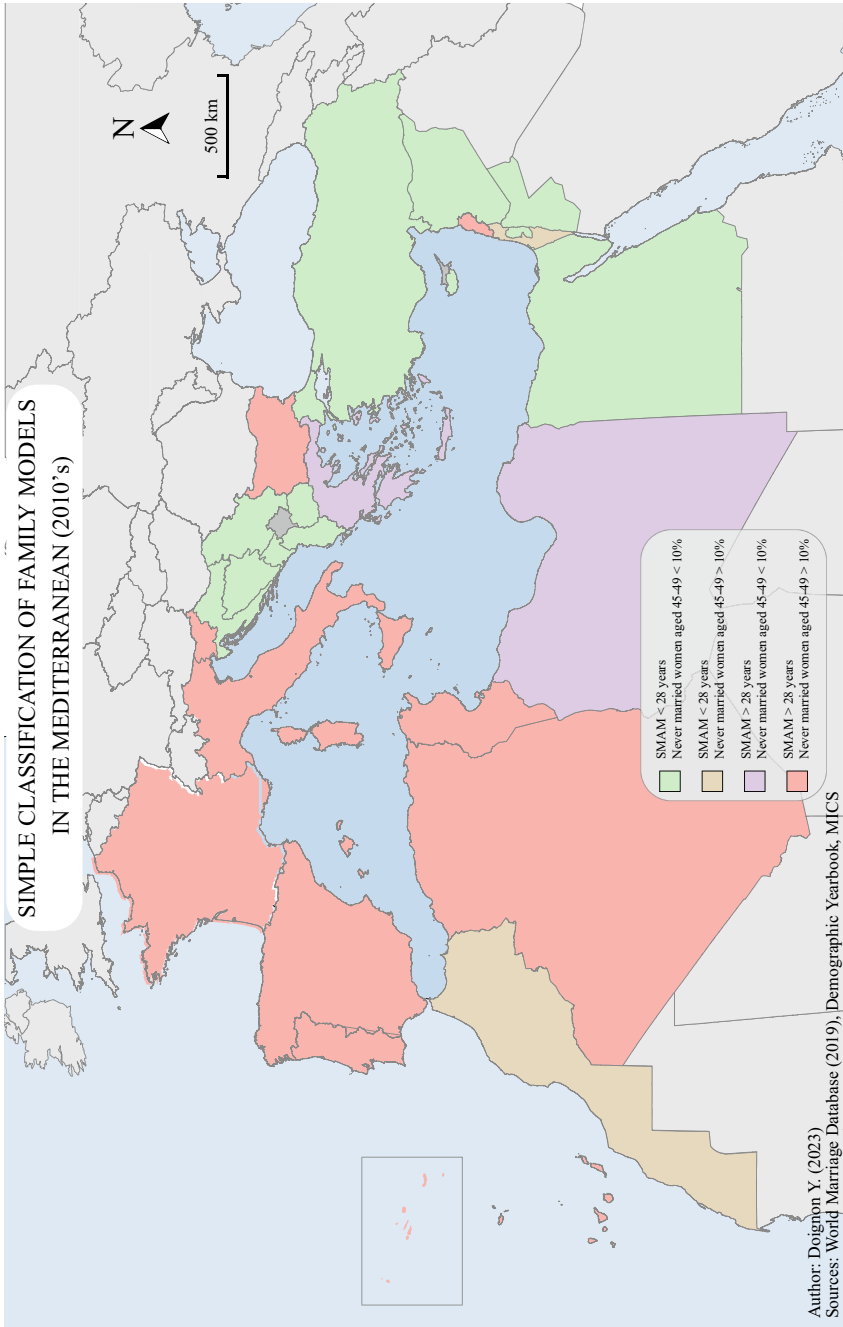


Fig. 6.7 Typology of current family models in the Mediterranean (Sources: World Marriage Database [2019], Demographic Statistics Database, MICS. Calculations made by the authors. *N.B.* The dates used in each country are those most recently)

Thus defined by these two dimensions, the current family model in the Balkan countries resembles that of the Near Eastern countries more than that of the Southern European countries.

This geography is reminiscent of the Hajnal line (Hajnal, 1965), which divides the European continent along a north-east/south-west axis, from St. Petersburg to Trieste. It distinguishes two historically persistent European family models. To the west of this demarcation, women marry at a rather late age, the age gap between spouses is rather small, and a large share of adults have never married. Conversely, to the east of this line, women marry much younger, the age gap between spouses is greater and marriage is almost universal, with little permanent celibacy. In our case, it is as if the Hajnal line was extended into the Mediterranean Sea to distinguish a western and an eastern basin. Of course, this general dichotomy is not so clear cut, as intermediate situations exist. Morocco and Israel's current family model is characterised by a low age of marriage for women and a high level of permanent celibacy for women. To contrast, Malta, Greece and Libya are in exactly the opposite situation.

This typology of family models in the Mediterranean is based on the current situation, but it would be a mistake to consider the resulting geography as destined to remain fixed. Indeed, as we have seen throughout this chapter, phenomena are still evolving in many countries, and trend reversals sometimes occur, for example the recent drop in the age at marriage in the Maghreb. Furthermore, we have deliberately constructed a typology with only two dimensions in order to identify types that are relatively simple to understand. Of course, it is not our intention to claim that countries in a given category have a family model that is similar in every respect, as a family model is much more complex than the two dimensions considered here. If we had included the age gap between spouses, for instance, the typology would have further distinguished Arab-Muslim populations from others.

6.4 Conclusion

If we take a step back, we can see that the Mediterranean countries are experiencing similar family changes, despite differences in timing or intensity. In a way, therefore, there is a convergence of the demographic indicators used. The evolution of the nuptiality rate shows a decrease in the frequency of marriages. The relative disparities in divorce rates are smaller today than they were in the 1950s. Age at marriage and permanent celibacy (and celibacy in general) have increased, sometimes significantly. And the age gap between spouses has generally narrowed.

We must measure the importance of these family changes, which constitute a real revolution in several respects. In the populations of the Southern and Eastern shores, the main characteristics that made Arab-Muslim marriage distinct have profoundly changed over the last 60 years: marriage has become less universal, early marriage has disappeared in most countries, the divorce rate has been decreasing, and the age gap between spouses has been reduced. A similar observation can be found in

the Balkan countries, which were traditionally characterised by universal and early marriage. With regard to the countries of Southern Europe, family changes since the 1970s are a break with the period of the “golden age” of marriage, which was ultimately a parenthesis in relation to past trends. These countries traditionally had a late marriage family model that was not universal.

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