

The increasing trend of living alone among Belgian elderly

The impact of the SDT (1991-2009)

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Abstract

The expected impact of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) to the elderly population is increasing proportions of persons living alone either by own choice or due to life circumstances. Considering the whole Belgian population (3.7 millions of persons aged 50+) observed through the continuous population registration system during the period from 1991 to 2009, we analyse trends in the proportion of those living alone. We consider distinctly never married, divorced and widowed persons and compared trends for men and women separately. The first conclusions show that in relation with the SDT the proportions of those living alone increased largely for both sexes and all ages. Nevertheless changes in the proportion of those living alone are more evident for men compared to women with a narrowing gender gap and that is particularly true for those never married. Further investigations are considering the transitions in living arrangement that could expect those increases.

Question addressed:

The expected impact of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) to the elderly population is increasing proportions of persons living alone either by own choice or due to life circumstances. The question addressed in this contribution is whether such trends are valid for the Belgian population in their older age within the period from 1991 to 2009, and if these trends vary by types of matrimonial situation: widowed, divorced, still married but separated and never married.

Data used:

The population studied is men and women aged 50 years and older who according to Belgian National Population Register were living in Belgium on 1st January of every year from 1991 till 2009, including almost 4 million persons (Table 1). The continuous population registration system records all demographic events and so changes due to marriage, death and widowhood, as well as change of residence allowing yearly updates of living arrangements are available.

Analysis:

The share of men and women living alone in the population certain age is partly related to the marital status of this population, and more precisely the share of never-married and ever-married as the risk to live alone varies between these population groups, and in the latter group, between still married, widowed or divorced persons.

Accordingly the changes observed in the share of persons living alone in Belgium during the period 1991-2010 are influenced by:

- (i) changes in the behaviour concerning to marriage that are responsible for changes in the structure of the population by marital status.
- (ii) changes in the behaviour concerning co-residence and more specifically the increasing risk of living alone for never-married, divorced and widowed persons, as well as for (legally) married due to a de facto separation.

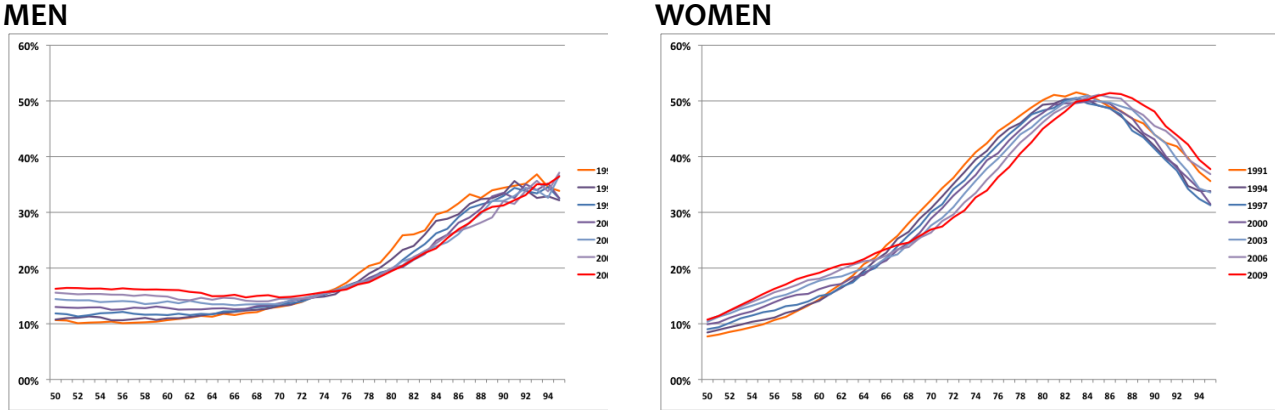
For understanding the processes underlying the trends in living alone it is not sufficient to analyse only trends in ever-married and never-married populations, but also to distinct the ever-married alone living persons by their current marital status. The three following groups of persons will be considered in our analysis: (i) never-married living alone (ii) divorced or still married but living alone (iii) widowed living alone. We identify that only few married persons are living alone separately with their spouse on older ages.

Table 1. Number persons by selected living arrangements and sex, 1991-2009. Source: Belgian National Population Register

	Men					Women				
	Living alone			Living with others	TOTAL	Living alone			Living with others	TOTAL
	Never married	Divorced	Widowed			Never married	Divorced	Widowed		
1991	49369	60052	81454	1227045	1417920	53201	62057	362186	1300061	1777505
1992	49284	61273	80997	1225244	1416798	51957	63939	360295	1298736	1774927
1993	49402	63305	80910	1227669	1421286	50851	66290	359208	1300832	1777181
1994	49688	65087	80496	1235397	1430668	50440	68203	357638	1307693	1783974
1995	49876	67421	80190	1246868	1444355	49737	71238	355375	1318554	1794904
1996	50489	70372	80358	1255073	1456292	49424	74698	356654	1324265	1805041
1997	51587	74764	80320	1273448	1480119	49539	79354	356971	1339403	1825267
1998	52748	79492	80255	1290784	1503279	49924	84087	357243	1353361	1844615
1999	53963	84467	80825	1306460	1525715	50201	89724	358459	1365417	1863801
2000	55174	89205	81262	1321818	1547459	50470	94874	358982	1377273	1881599
2001	56705	94899	81508	1336154	1569266	51093	101177	359153	1388509	1899932
2002	58040	100201	82004	1351898	1592143	51852	107355	359323	1400910	1919440
2003	59841	105643	82730	1368753	1616967	52735	113646	358988	1414875	1940244
2004	61800	111472	83385	1384894	1641551	53532	120288	358610	1427907	1960337
2005	63804	117284	83921	1403459	1668468	54595	126778	358291	1445482	1985146
2006	65928	122940	84615	1422476	1695959	55989	133519	358407	1462573	2010488
2007	68452	128987	85217	1443286	1725942	57284	140306	358365	1481709	2037664
2008	71548	135642	86115	1465228	1758533	58938	147694	358464	1501467	2066563
2009	74846	141505	86739	1486626	1789716	60513	155611	357937	1520396	2094457

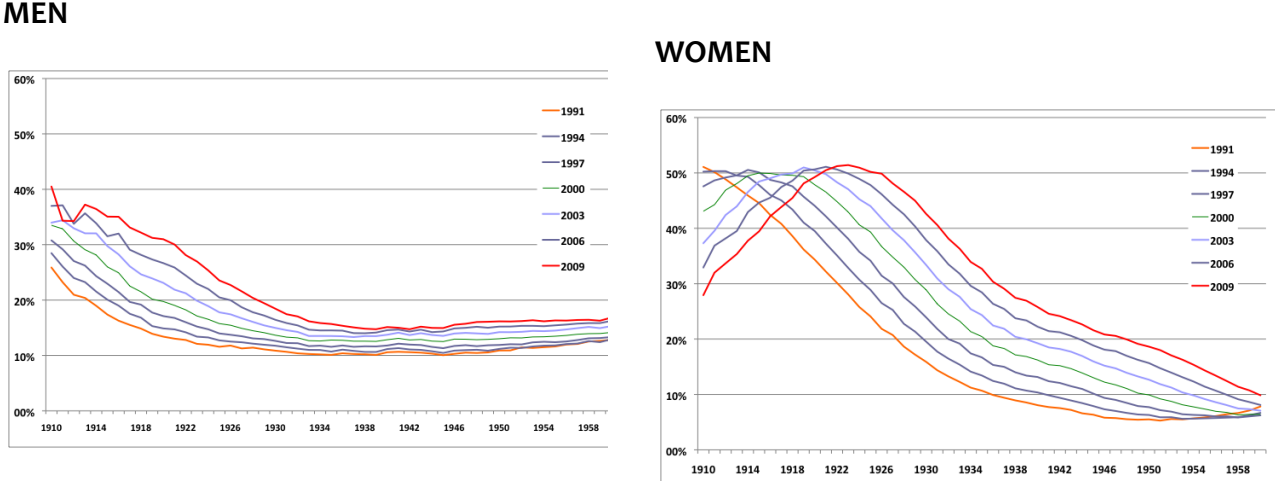
In **the first step** we describe the trends in the share of persons living alone by age and sex regardless their marital status (Figure 1a). The same investigation is made by birth cohorts (Figure 1b).

Figure 1a. Share of person aged 50+ living alone by age and sex, 1991-2009.



There is a clear tendency for increasing proportions of alone living men in age up to 70-75 within period 1991 to 2009. As opposite among men above age 75 the proportion of living alone is decreasing both in time and by age so that in 2009 the proportion of alone living men age 81 is the smallest.

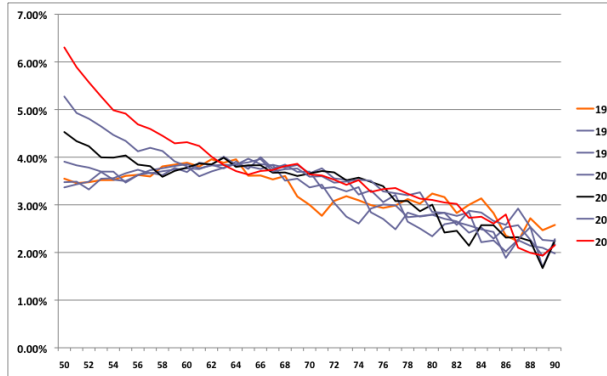
Figure 1b. Share of person aged 50+ living alone by birth cohort and sex, 1991-2009.



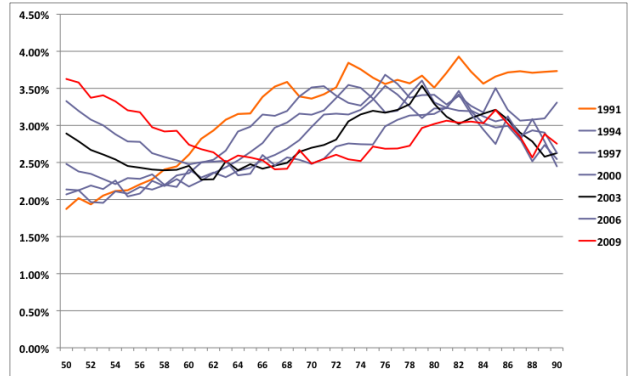
In **the second step** we describe the trends in the share of men and women living alone considering their current marital status, and age (Figure 2). In Figures 3 we compare that relative share for men and women between 1991 and 2009.

Figures 2. Share of persons living alone by marital status, age and sex, 1991-2009.

NEVER MARRIED MEN

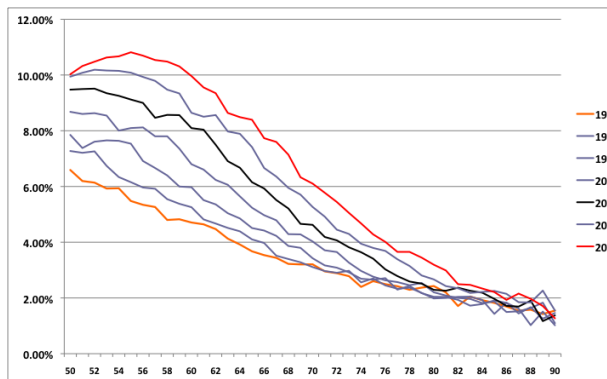


NEVER MARRIED WOMEN

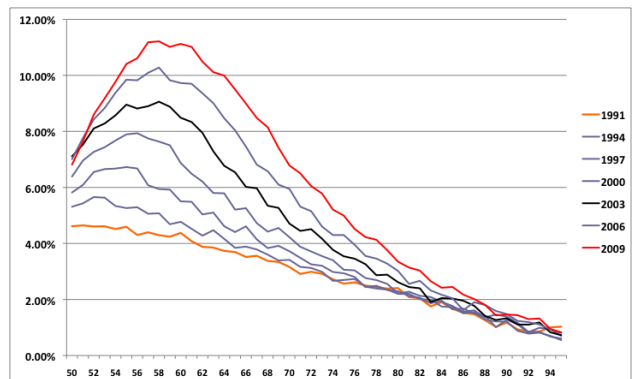


The proportion of never married men by age is smaller in older age and this tendency is deepening in time. As opposite in younger elderly ages, those between ages 50-70 proportion of never married is increasingly higher to the direction of younger ages.

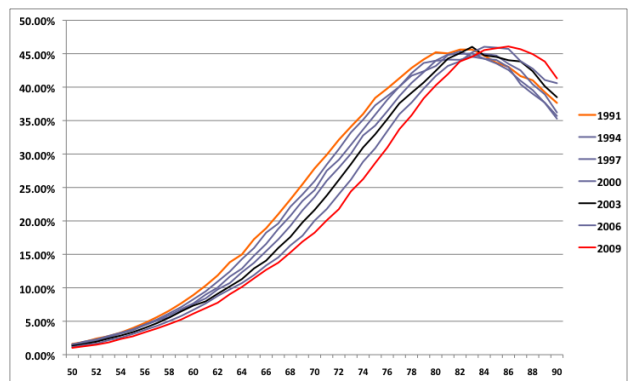
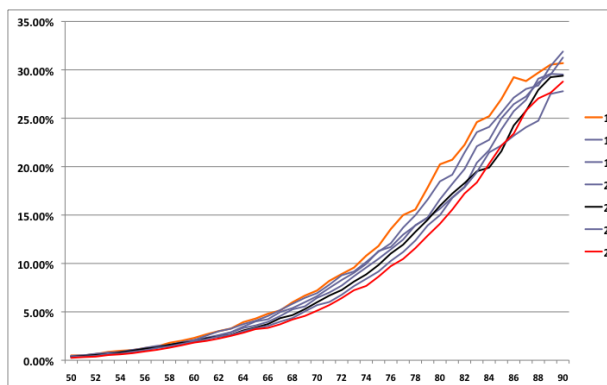
DIVORCED MEN



DIVORCED WOMEN



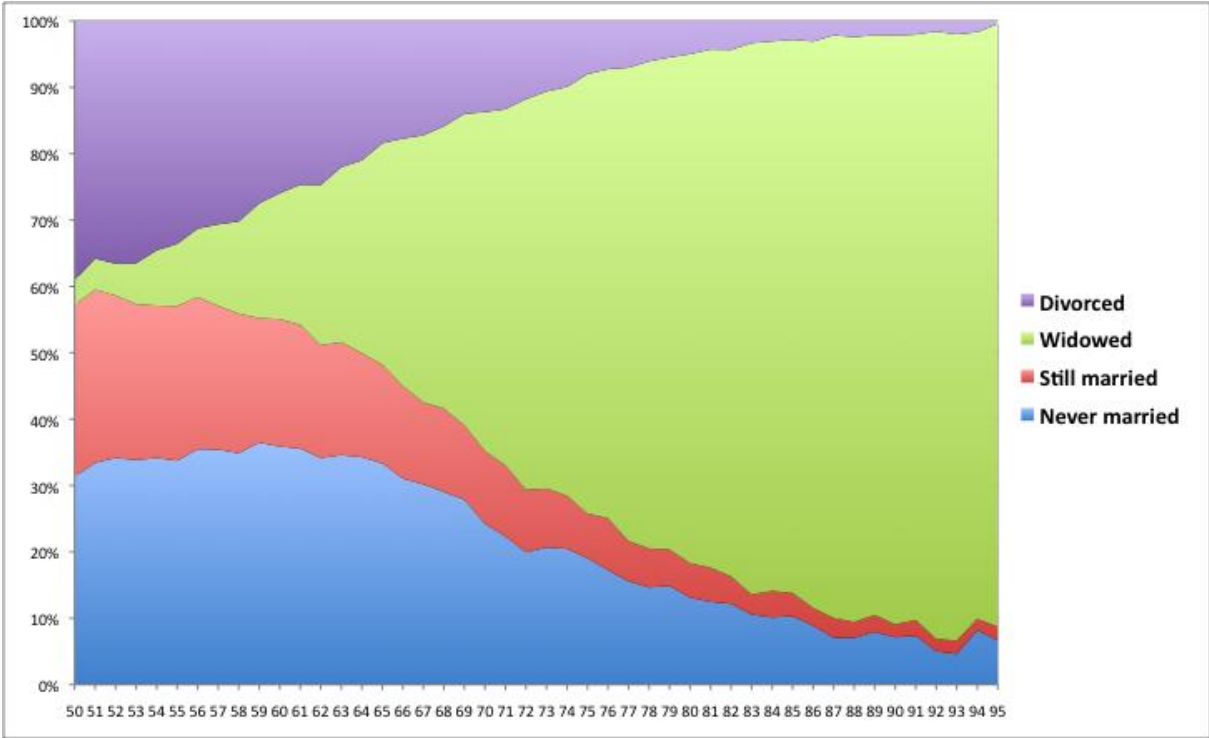
WIDOWED MEN



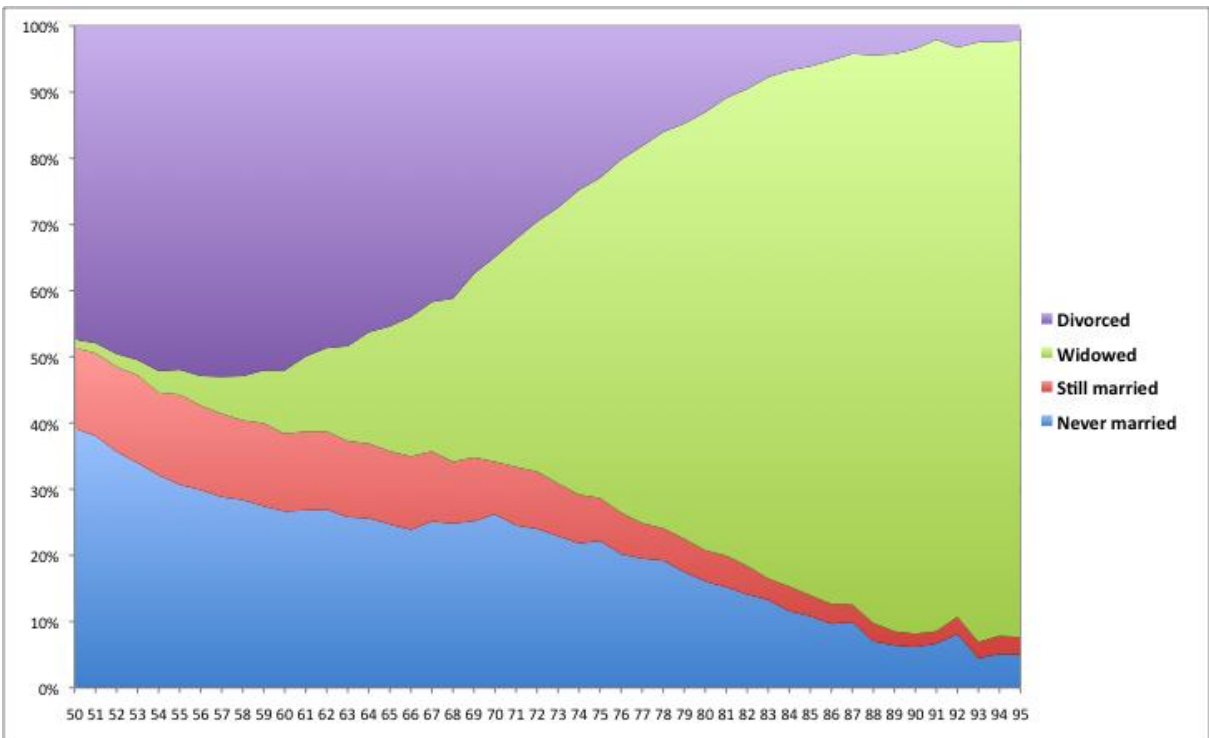
WIDOWED WOMEN

Figures 3. Share of persons living alone by marital status, age and sex, 1991 and 2009.

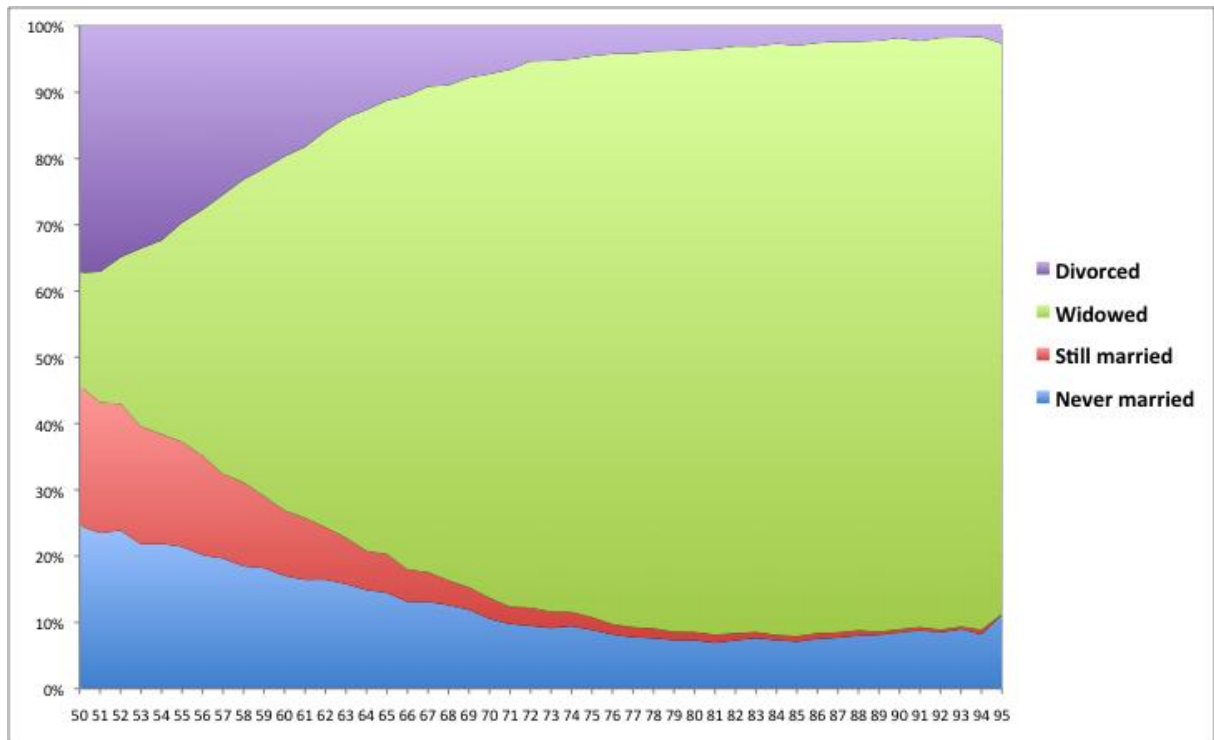
Men in 1991



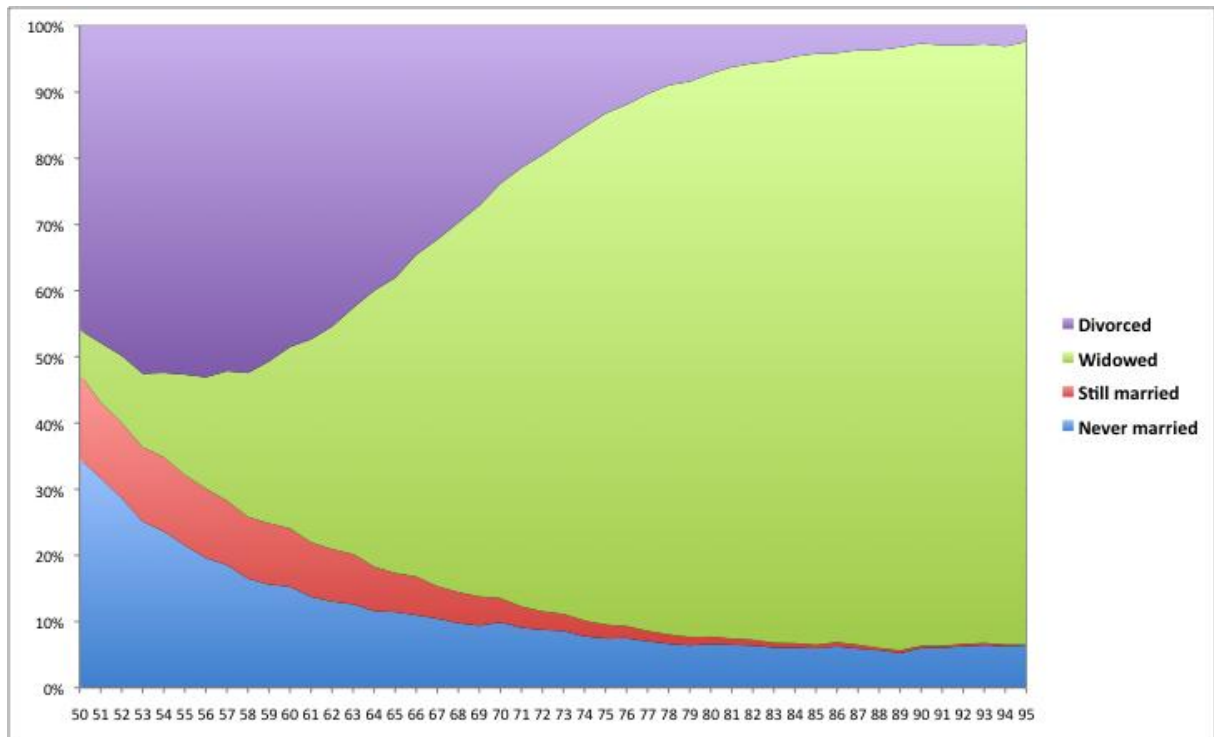
Men in 2009



Women in 1991



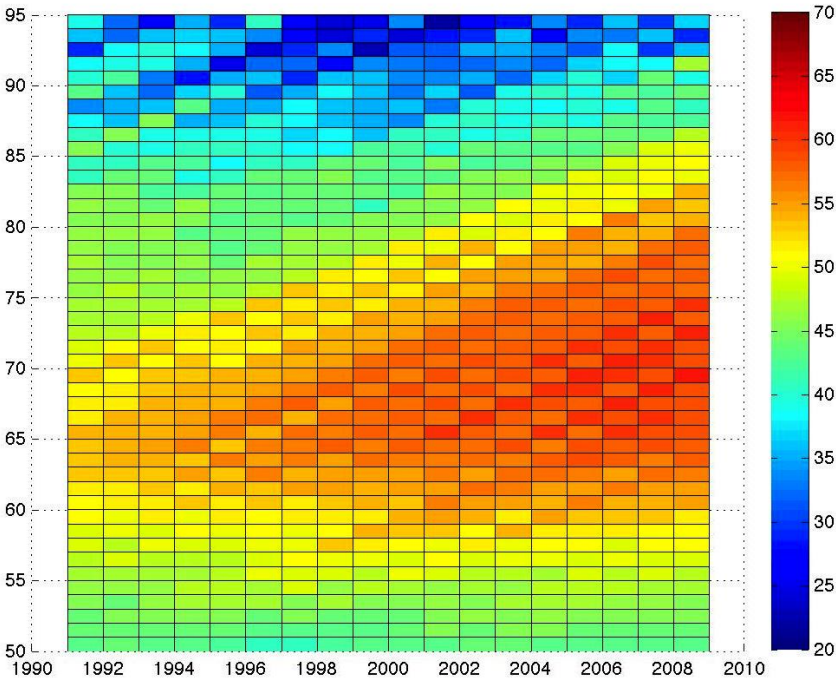
Women in 2009



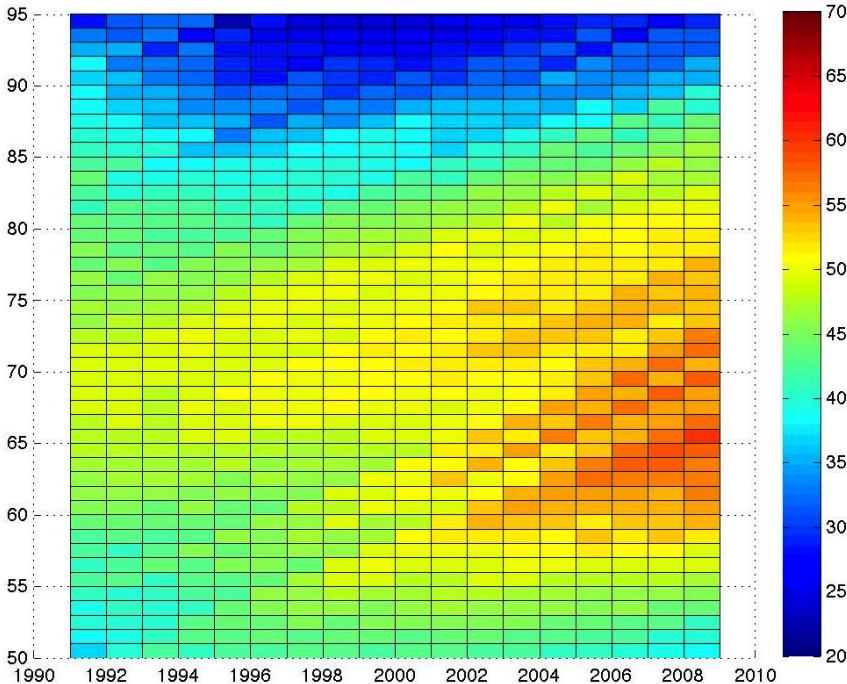
In **the third step** we use the Lexis diagram to show the change in the proportion of living alone among never married persons (Figures 4a and 4b), divorced persons (Figures 4c and 4d – not attached) and widowed persons (Figures 4e and 4f not attached).

Figures 4a and 4b. Proportion of never married persons living alone by sex from 1991 till 2009

NEVER MARRIED MEN



NEVER MARRIED WOMEN



FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS

The evolution of the proportion of persons living alone by age and sex during the last two decades shows large differences. For divorced persons the changes are quite limited and the larger proportion of divorced women living alone compared to men changed neither by year nor by cohort. For the never married persons the changes are clear with a strong increase of those living alone for the younger cohorts and this is more evident for men compared to women. For widowed person the situation is quite stable for women with a large proportion of widowed women living alone between ages 70 and 85 but the trends for men result in similar proportions at the end of the observation period showing that increases are driven both by cohorts and by years.

Our first investigation demonstrates that in relation with the SDT the proportion of persons living alone increased as expected but these changes are more evident for men compared to women resulting in a narrowing gender difference mostly observed for those never married or widowed.

In future investigations we will analyze the transitions between living arrangements to identify which ones changed by age and sex during the observation period and explained the increased number of those living alone.