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Cross-cultural marriages

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Of about 13 percent of all married couples in the Netherlands at least one partner was born outside the Netherlands. The divorce rates of these couples are higher than those of couples in which both partners were born in the Netherlands.

Married foreigners

On 1 January 1999 the Netherlands was home to 453 thousand married couples with at least one partner born in a foreign country (*table 1*). Less than half of these couples consist of partners who were both born in a foreign country. 108 thousand foreign-born males have a Dutch-born wife and 133 thousand foreign-born females have a Dutch-born husband. Since 1992 the number of these mixed couples has increased by 5 percent, against a decrease of 1 percent for Dutch-born married couples. The largest increase although has taken place in the case of married couples of which both husband and wife are foreign-born, about 20%.

Nine out of ten married persons born in Turkey or Morocco have a partner born in the same country. About ten percent of the married males do not live at the same address as their wives. Some of them may still live in Turkey or Morocco, awaiting family reunification. The proportion for females not living with their husband is lower: about six percent. Most of them are lone parents. On average Turkish and Moroccan females settle in the Netherlands about 3 resp. 5 years after their husband.

A majority of married Surinamese also has a partner born in their country of birth (60 percent). Among Antillians and Arubans, on the other hand, mixed/cross-cultural marriages are more common. Among those born in Indonesia or the former Dutch East Indies this proportion is even higher. It concerns mainly Dutchmen who spent part of their youth in the Dutch East Indies and migrated to the Netherlands when Indonesia became independent in 1949. Twelve to fifteen percent of both married males and married females from the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname are living alone.

As with married couples from Turkey and Morocco, couples from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia consist largely of two partners born in the same country. These are all countries from which the Netherlands received refugees in the past ten years. Within these refugee groups the proportion of married persons not living together with their

partner is high. For instance, almost half of all married males and females from Somalia do not live together with their partner.

In the population born in the Mediterranean countries Greece, Italy, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia the number of males exceeds the number of females. This is reflected in the data on the married population. Most couples with one Italian-born partner consist of an Italian husband and a Dutch wife. In the 1960s and early 70s these men came to the Netherlands looking for work. Once they had found a job, they often found a Dutch wife as well.

Migration from Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia is of more recent date. Quite a few men from these countries are married to Dutch women. However, the possibility to get a residence permit after having been married to a Dutch woman for a period of three years might well be the main reason behind a number of these marriages. This assumption is based on the fact that a relatively large percentage of married males do not live together with their wife and that many of these marriages are dissolved shortly after three years.

In about two thirds of the couples with one partner born in Belgium or Germany, the wife originates from these countries. Women born in countries that are culturally and economically comparable with the Netherlands (for example, the Northern European countries) mostly settle in the country of their husband.

Married persons from Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand seldom have a partner born in the same country. In the majority of cases the husband was born in the Netherlands. It concerns mostly children of emigrants who left the Netherlands in the 1950s. In those years about 300 thousand Dutchmen emigrated in search of new opportunities outside the Netherlands.

The number of married women born in Poland, Russia, Thailand, the Philippines, Brazil, Colombia and the Dominican Republic living together with a Dutch husband is much higher than the number of men from these countries living with a Dutch wife. These countries are known as donor countries of brides.

Year of arrival

About a quarter of all couples in which both husband and wife are born outside the Netherlands arrived together or in the same year. In general men arrive first and their (prospective) wife follows. The number of males arriving first is double the number of females arriving first (*figure 1*).

There are marked differences between countries of origin. Turkish and Moroccan couples show a general pattern in which the man has arrived first, found a job and settled, followed by his prospective wife (*figure 2*). A large number of couples from Suriname or the Netherlands Antilles on the other hand arrived together or in the same year: 30 percent of all couples from Suriname and half of all couples from the Netherlands Antilles. In the case of couples from refugee countries more than half of all couples arrived together or in the same year.

Year of arrival and marriage

Partly due to the increase in immigration for the purpose of family formation of Turks and Moroccans in the 1980s, marriage and arrival in the Netherlands of foreigners have become more closely related. For the 1960s the data show almost no link between marriage and arrival of foreign-born males in the Netherlands, but already some correlation in the case of females (*figures 3 and 4*). In general, females show a stronger tendency to settle in the home country of their husbands. In the course of time a similar pattern has developed among married foreign-born males. More than half of the foreign-born married population

settling in the Netherlands in the past ten years, married within two years before or after arrival in the Netherlands.

The degree of correlation between year of marriage and year of arrival in the Netherlands can be partly explained by the migration history of foreign citizens. Married persons originating from one of the EU member states, for instance, show a concentration of marriages around the year of arrival in the Netherlands. These are mostly marriages to Dutch-born partners. Married Turkish and Moroccan males, who came to the Netherlands for the purpose of labour, only show such a pattern since the 1980s. Since 1973 successive laws made labour immigration to the Netherlands more and more difficult for non-European citizens. Nowadays, marriage to a Dutch resident is one of the few ways to obtain a residence permit as a non-European Union citizen (Hooghiemstra and Manting, 1997).

Marriage: age and age difference

Rather surprisingly the average age at marriage of the foreign-born married population residing in the Netherlands is almost equal to that of the total population of the Netherlands. The age pattern, however, differs strongly. Foreign-born males and females marry at both younger and older ages (*figures 5 and 6*). There are two main reasons for this: firstly in the 1970s the average age at marriage of the Dutch population was considerably lower than today, bringing down the average at marriage of the total married population. Secondly, not all foreign-born people married young. The married population originating from member states of the European Union, for instance, mostly married at higher ages.

Of the married population born in Turkey both males and females married young. Women from Morocco also married young on average at age 21, whereas their male counterparts married on average at age 27. Other countries from which women originate who have married relatively young are Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. With some exceptions males originating from Africa married at a relatively high age. It is further notable that both males and females from North and South America have married at a relatively high age, on average around age 30.

In the Netherlands husbands are on average 2.5 years older than their wife. In couples born in Islamic countries and countries bordering on the Mediterranean, for example Morocco, Italy, Greece, Tunisia and Pakistan, the husband is on average more than four years older than his wife (*figure 7*). In case of couples in which the husband was born in the Netherlands and the wife elsewhere, the average number of years the male is older is high for countries like Poland, the Philippines, Thailand and the Dominican Republic. In couples consisting of a foreign-born male and a Dutch-born female the husband is, as a general rule, between two and three years older. Indonesia and Italy are the only major countries that deviate from this rule, the Indonesian and Italian males being on average four years older.

Divorce rates

Of all marriages of two Dutch-born partners about one in every seven ends in a divorce within ten years (*table 2*). Of all marriages between two foreigners about one in three breaks up in that period. Almost one third of all marriages between a Dutch husband and a foreign-born wife ends in a divorce. The least stable are marriages between a Dutch wife and foreign-born husband. Almost half of these marriages are dissolved within ten years. The breaking-up of mixed marriages is not only influenced by cultural differences. A number of marriages have probably been closed for the purpose of obtaining a residence permit. Under Dutch law foreigners can apply for Dutch citizenship after having been married to a Dutch citizen for three years. In this manner it is possible to obtain a

permanent residence permit. The pattern in the number of divorces by duration of marriage suggests that such marriages of convenience did indeed occur (*figure 8*).

In 1998 the total number of divorces was 3.8 percent lower than in 1997, a drop from 33.7 thousand to 32.5 thousand. This decrease in the number of divorces is fully caused by fewer divorces of cross-cultural couples. The number of divorces of couples consisting of a foreign-born male and a Dutch-born female dropped fastest, from 3.2 thousand to 2.7 thousand (-17%); divorces of couples consisting of two foreign-born persons dropped from 4.6 thousand to 4.1 thousand (-12%). The number of divorces of couples consisting of a foreign-born wife and a Dutch-born husband went down relatively slowly from 2.45 thousand to 2.35 thousand (-4%) .

However, a possible long-term downward trend in the breaking-up of cross-cultural marriages, as is recorded by Hondius (1999), is obscured by the effects of a law which was passed in 1994 aimed at halting marriages of convenience. Because of this law the number of marriages with at least one foreign-born partner dropped by almost a quarter, from 18.8 thousand in 1993 to 14.3 thousand and 14.2 thousand in 1994 resp. 1995. As a result, 4 years later the number of divorces among these couples dropped as well. In the following years the number of marriages, with the exception of couples consisting of foreign-born males and Dutch-born females, rose to the original level again.

Large differences in divorce rates appear when considering countries of birth. Marriages between two persons born in Turkey or member states of the European Union are relatively stable. The divorce rate is about one and a half times as high as the Dutch average. Of the countries presented here, Suriname is the exception. More than half of all marriages ended in a divorce within ten years.

Three quarters of all marriages between males born in Turkey or Morocco and females born in the Netherlands are broken up within ten years. This figure is considerably higher than the corresponding figure for all marriages between foreign-born males and Dutch-born females.

Married couples consisting of a Surinamese or Antillian partner and a Dutch-born partner are more stable than marriages in which both partners were born in Suriname or the Netherlands Antilles/Aruba.

A high divorce rate is also recorded in the case of marriages between males from Egypt, Tunisia or Ghana and Dutch-born females and in case of women born in Ghana or Morocco married to Dutch-born men.

Method

This analysis is based on data obtained from the Municipal Population Registers. Once a year demographic variables, one record for every resident of the Netherlands on 1 January, are made available to Statistics Netherlands. Data concerning residents experiencing a demographic event are communicated on a continuous basis.

Data on the number of marriage dissolutions in 1997 by year of marriage were linked to standing marriages on 1 January 1997. In this manner a divorce rate could be computed for each sub-group and year of marriage. Following this, a divorce rate table was drawn up. The rates are based on cross-sectional data (Harmsen, 1998).

An earlier analysis of divorce rates among mixed couples was published in 1996 (Van der Heijdt, 1996). This earlier analysis linked the number of dissolved marriages to the number of marriages contracted in the Netherlands during the preceding eight years.

Although the method differed, the results were similar.

A limitation of both methods is the fact that, due to international migration, marrying and divorcing persons who entered or left the Netherlands during the period of observation

influence the calculated divorce rates. Considering the numbers involved one may expect the effect on the figures to be rather small. Another limitation is the cross-sectional character of the divorce rates.

References

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Table 1
Married couples by country of birth of husband and wife,
1 January 1999

	Total	Husband and wife foreign-born (same country)	Foreign-born husband, dutch-born wife	Dutch-born husband, foreign-born wife	Husband and wife forein-born (different countries) 1)
	x 1,000				
Total	453,0	189,7	108,3	132,8	22,2
Austria	2,6	0,1	1,0	1,4	0,2
Belgium	18,2	1,5	6,1	10,1	0,5
France	5,5	0,4	1,7	3,1	0,3
Germany	48,4	4,8	16,5	25,6	1,5
Greece	2,4	0,7	1,1	0,3	0,1
Ireland	1,3	0,1	0,3	0,8	0,1
Italy	6,7	0,8	4,2	1,2	0,5
Portugal	2,9	1,4	0,6	0,7	0,2
Spain	6,5	1,9	2,1	2,2	0,3
United Kingdom	14,0	2,1	5,1	5,6	1,1
Other EU-countries	2,8	0,3	0,6	1,8	0,2
14 EU-countries	111,5	14,2	39,4	52,8	5,1
Czech Republic	1,7	0,3	0,3	1,1	0,1
Hungary	2,0	0,4	0,7	0,8	0,1
Poland	6,5	0,7	0,9	4,8	0,1
Romania	1,2	0,3	0,3	0,6	0,1
Former Soviet Union	2,9	0,2	0,2	1,7	0,8
Switzerland	1,8	0,1	0,5	1,1	0,1
Former Yugoslavia	11,7	7,9	1,5	2,0	0,3
Turkey	64,3	56,4	4,9	2,1	0,9
Other countries in Europe	1,6	0,2	0,4	0,9	0,1
Brazil	1,9	0,1	0,4	1,3	0,1
Canada	3,2	0,1	1,3	1,7	0,1
Colombia	1,0	0,1	0,1	0,8	0,0
Netherlands Antilles	11,7	2,5	3,9	4,3	1,0
Suriname	33,7	20,1	5,2	6,8	1,6
United States of America	5,4	0,9	1,7	2,3	0,5

Other countries in America	5,9	0,6	1,3	3,4	0,6
Afghanistan	1,9	1,7	0,0	0,0	0,1
China	5,0	3,6	0,1	0,4	0,9
Hong Kong	3,6	2,0	0,2	0,3	1,1
India	2,4	1,1	0,3	0,3	0,6
Indonesia	78,2	16,2	30,7	28,8	2,5
Iran	3,2	2,4	0,4	0,2	0,2
Iraq	4,2	3,6	0,2	0,1	0,4
Israel	1,2	0,1	0,5	0,4	0,1
Japan	1,6	1,1	0,1	0,4	0,0
Pakistan	2,6	1,8	0,3	0,1	0,4
Philippines	2,6	0,2	0,1	2,3	0,0
Sri Lanka	1,1	0,9	0,1	0,1	0,0
Thailand	1,7	0,0	0,1	1,5	0,0
Vietnam	2,7	2,3	0,1	0,2	0,1
Other countries in Asia	4,8	1,7	0,9	1,4	0,8
Algeria	1,1	0,2	0,4	0,1	0,3
Cape Verde	2,1	1,5	0,2	0,3	0,1
Egypt	3,0	0,9	1,4	0,1	0,5
Ghana	1,1	0,5	0,3	0,2	0,1
Morocco	44,5	39,3	3,4	1,1	0,8
Republic of South Africa	3,0	0,3	1,0	1,5	0,2
Somalia	1,5	1,4	0,0	0,0	0,0
Tunisia	1,3	0,5	0,6	0,1	0,1
Other countries in Africa	5,6	1,3	1,7	1,8	0,8
Australia	3,7	0,1	1,5	1,9	0,2
New Zealand	1,2	0,0	0,5	0,6	0,1
Other countries in Oceania	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0

1) Classified by country of birth of the husband.

Table 2

Probability of divorce within a period of 10 years after marriage, 1997

Country of birth	Both partners born in the same country %	Dutch-born male and foreign-born female	Foreign-born male and Dutch-born female
The Netherlands	14		
Foreign countries	31	30	49
Suriname	54	33	34
Neth. Antilles + Aruba	35	26	33
Turkey	21	28	73
Morocco	30	77	84
European Union	21	23	29







