

THE MARITAL STATUS AND FAMILY LIFE OF ELDERLY BLIND PEOPLE IN CROATIA

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This paper is a study of the main characteristics of the marital status and family life of old blind people in Croatia, as well as the perception of their position in the family. Another aim is to establish whether segments of the elderly blind population differ significantly in their marital and family status with reference to the following variables: sex, age, place of residence, age at which the person became blind. For this purpose, the study was conducted on a sample of 174 respondents from all parts of Croatia. The sample was selected among the old blind persons who were members of the Croatian Association of the Visually Impaired and had legally defined impairments. At the family level, old blind people are faced with the same problems as the elderly are in general. An important problem for this group is loss of spouse and living alone. Life in marriage appears to be a privilege for older (blind) people. With aging, the number of respondents living in complete families (meaning with spouses and children) is rapidly decreasing. Moving a blind person from his/her domicile has more serious consequences than moving a person who is not blind, as the blind use nonvisual techniques in daily life. Most old blind people by far have positive attitudes towards their families, but in general they are not satisfied with their roles in family decision-making. By one-way variance analysis, it was ascertained that respondents differ most with respect to sex and age. The position of old people has been influenced mostly by changes in family structure. The degree of independence of an old blind person will depend on family relationships and the strength of the "supporting network" between generations. Living apart from their children, however, does not have to mean alienation from their family.

Key words: old blind people, marital status, family life

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there have been dramatic changes in demographic structure of many societies. Population aging, the rise of life expectancy, and decreasing fertility rates are all processes that are evident at the world level, particularly in the most developed countries (World Bank, 1994). By 2030, it is assumed that there will be about 1.4 billion people older than 60 in the world. The permanent increase in the number of old people creates great difficulties for both the society and this age group itself. Due to social and economic changes, the immediate social milieu of aged generations has changed to a great degree. Traditional family and community networks, providing old people with security, have nearly been destroyed. On the other hand, because of escalating spending, some formal systems for supporting old people have run into difficulties and are no longer able to provide old people with proper

protection. Studies in the advanced countries have shown that expenditures for old people's basic social schemes are on the average three times higher than expenditures for those of the young (Akrap, 1995:316).

Although Croatia doesn't belong to the world of the advanced countries, it is on its way to reaching them in terms of demographic trends. Figures from the 1991 census indicate that 13.1% of Croatia's inhabitants are older than 65 (Statistički ljetopis, 1993:58). Demographic aging has had important implications for the position of the elderly in our society. In general, their quality of life has been worsening (the decline of material status, as well as the deterioration of the quality of social, health, and other services).

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