

## **THE NEED FOR MARITAL EDUCATION IN MACEDONIA**

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### **Abstract**

In the past decades, the way marriage, marital life and intimate relationships function have considerably changed. Couples often choose to live in a non-marital community, delaying marriage and childbearing, and an increasing number of marriages are ending in divorce. Also, many relationships and marriages do not meet the needs and expectations of partners and tend to end up unhappylye.

Numerous personal and social consequences arise from stress in relationships, conflicts, dissatisfaction, and divorce and they influence partners, their children and ultimately the whole family and society on multiple levels.

Hence, the growing interest of researchers on topics related to marriage, divorce and intimate relationships and on the way to prevent the abovementioned consequences. In order to preserve relationships and marriages, partners need to learn how to be happy in that community, and the challengesto raise healthy and happy children. A possible strategy could be premarital and/or marital education, which as educational programs are increasingly introduced worldwide.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the advantages of this kind of education and to consider possibilities for its introduction in the Republic of Macedonia.

**Key-words:** marriage, marital education, intimate relationships, intimate partners.

## **1.Introduction notes**

Marriage corresponds to a high value, both for the development of personal happiness and for the society. Marriage is important at many intertwined levels: emotionally, socially, and economically. As one of the oldest social institutions, the marriage has undergone various stages in its development, but it has always served to regulate gender relations between men and women and to promote offspring. Lately, there have been rapid and radical changes in married life globally. According to many authors, the most significant changes that lead to the rearrangement of marital and intimate life are the emergence and broad acceptance of individualism and giving priority to the individual and his desires, needs and interests. Unlike the previous period when marriage and family were fundamental to social life, they are now no longer a feature of modern society.

Changes are inevitable. Every social category, even marriage and marriage relations are subject to change, however, nowadays, marriage has become a breakable institution. Static data is the main indicator of its vulnerability.

The statistical data for the Republic of Macedonia provides us with the following picture: The number of divorces that occurred increases, and the number of concluded marriages is reduced. That being said, from 710 divorces that took place in 1995, the number grew to 2045 divorces in 2013. The number of marriages concluded in 2013 is 13982, 15 490 in 2007, while in 1994 -15736 concluded marriages. Also, the average age when people conclude marriages is increasing, indicating that couples later get in marriage. Thus, the age at which couples marry is 25.8 for women and 28.6 for men, while in 2004 the average age for women was 24 and for men 27, while in 1994, 23 for women and 25 for men.

The birth and the reproduction rates are also affected by the negative tendencies in the marriage itself. After the Republic of Macedonia declared its independence, it has seen a continuous decline in the birth rates. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia in 2005 were born 32 154 children, in 2005 26,083 children were born and in 2013 23,334. The birthrate rate ranged from 17% in the early 1990s, to 11 current percentages (below 15% was considered low birth rate). This would mean that in the last twenty years, that is, since the beginning of the transition, the numbers reflect that 9,000 children less were born than before. Reducing birthrate led to a decrease in the vital index, i.e. a decrease in the number of

live births compared to the deaths, which in the period from 2007 to 2011 was 121 live births per 100 deaths and has fallen by two-thirds compared to the data in the past five decades. The rate of natural increase (difference between live births and deaths) from 8.1 in 1994 declined to 1.9 in 2013. The rate of total fertility (cumulative fertility rate) reached the limit of 1.46 children per woman average in the fertile period (15-49 years). The minimum for simple reproduction, not for population increase, is 2.1 children per woman, a percentage typical of the total fertility rate in 1994.

Delaying marriage, postpones giving birth as well. Women get their first child later in their life, so if the average age for giving birth of the first child was 23 in 1994, today giving birth of the first child is postponed until the age of 28. Women are increasingly choosing to give birth to a child without marriage. Almost 12% of the total number of children born comes from a non-marital community. This parameter also increased by 4 percent compared to 1994 when it counted to 8 percent.

The crisis of marriage also confirmed the opinion that marriage is not something that must be fulfilled as a life goal, and divorce does not constitute a moral condemnation for the divorced ones, but rather a "happy exit" from an unhappy marriage. The conducted research that was done recently among first and second year students at the Faculty of Philosophy, shows that while young people in the Republic of Macedonia generally still believe in marriage as an institution, they do not accept marriage "at all costs", they openly see modern forms of marriage, and the divorce is accepted as an integral part of the relationship. Half of them believe that they do not have to marry, for most of the respondent's marriage is not a permanent community, i.e. "it is not forever". Half of them believe that most of marriages end up unhappy. Individuality is increasingly expressed as a characteristic. Young people consider that the most important reason to get married is love and personal satisfaction. Young people are not willing to sacrifice and compromise when love fades, and disagreements arise. Most of them would not accept to live in a community (with the parents of the spouse after getting married), they would not place marriage before the career, and the majority would never forgive unfaithfulness. Also, half of them would have accepted a relationship with divorced partners and would live in an extramarital community. Half agree that it is acceptable for a woman to give birth outside wedlock. Most of the respondents approved same-sex communities (Radulovic, Avirovic 2016).

Such acknowledgements present a sufficient alarm and a fact that, although the Macedonian society is more conservative, when it comes to marriage and marital relations, in relation to the Western and Northern Europe, we present negative changes and tendencies for marriage itself.

The reasons for this situation are found at different levels:

- Economic situation;
- The effects of globalization;
- Empowerment of women and change of gender roles;
- Strengthening the individual for the community account, etc.

If problems are seen as a reason for action, it is logical to ask the question, what can be done to improve this situation, restore faith in marriage, and reduce the number of divorces. That is the reason why there is a growing interest of researchers to find a way in which such situations can be prevented. Keeping relationships and marriage, teaching partners how to be happy in their unity and to raise healthy and happy children is a real challenge. As one of the possible strategies, is the premarital and marital education, which as an educational program, is increasingly being introduced in the world.

What is marital education?

Marital education corresponds to education of marriage of young people, marital values and relationships, then acquiring the communication and emotional skills needed in the relationship with the partner and the children, as well as training for coping in crisis situations.

The main goal of marital education is to create and maintain a happy marriage. The individual objectives consist of the following:

- individuals and couples have to acquire theoretical preconceived notions of marriage, coexistence, intimate relationships, and parenthood;
- get acquainted with the actual conditions and preferences for marriage and divorce, in their own society and beyond;
- learn the underlying reasons for marriage and its functions;

- to understand the consequences of not concluding a marriage and getting a divorce. All of that aiming to gain realistic expectations of getting married;
- to acquire emotional skills that will help them cope with problems (issues).

Marital education in a wider framework, apart from education, it includes counseling, therapy and state strategy.

Therapy or marital counseling is usually conducted when partners are married and are facing specific problems. It can be carried out as individual therapy or therapy in couples dealing with the problems that the particular marriage is facing. Therapy is used in cases of acute marital anxiety, but also for chronic problems that stress the marriage and involves the need for intensive, personalized and professional help. The issues in the counseling are very different and can include problems such as: infidelity, domestic violence, addiction, jealousy, sexual dysfunctions, child problems, financial problems, and more. Family therapy is performed by psychologists, psychiatrists and family therapists. Due to the complexity of the problems and the high level of anxiety of the partners who need counseling, therapy often involves multiple sessions over a longer period of time. Very often married couples have a need for psychiatric support due to high levels of stress and depression. Research done in the United States (where family / marital therapy has been practiced for a long time) shows that marriages with frequent conflicts face an increased risk of psychological disorders and psychopathological phenomena. Studies conducted in the United States show that despite the negative effects of the stress, only a low number of marriage partners who are experiencing problems require professional help. It is estimated that only 22 percent of couples with conflicts in the marriage asked for help. The rest of them, discuss their problems with friends, family members and representatives of their religious organization. (Cathryn Hunter and Jo Commerford, CFCA PAPER NO.33 2015, Relationship Education and Counseling Recent research findings). In any case, this form is an intervention rather than a prevention of marital problems and is intended for couples who are already married.

The State strategies, in turn, involve mechanisms by which the state itself can make an influence to the future situations with marriage and divorce. Government policies can affect marriage in various indirect ways, as well as to the overall indirect effect of the number of marriages and divorces. For example, starting from the laws relating to the definition and

redefinition of marriage and divorce, through the envisaged social and health protection, and to the economic situation and employment policies .... the state can affect the status of the family and its well-being and harmony. A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education, Alan J. Hawkins Visiting Scholar, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and School of Family Life, Brigham Young University. Direct state influence could be achieved if the state includes marital education in educational programs and integrates it into the education system. However, it should be taken into consideration that this form implies the inclusion of the entire social system, and it depends on the financial, administrative and democratic capabilities of the state and of course it should be accomplished in the long turn.

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In terms of education, it represents a starting point in the overall marital education. For the last decade, marital education has been widespread in the United States, Canada and Australia and in some European countries. It can be found either as part of a formal education or in the form of a secondary education course or as a separate curriculum in some studies as a compulsory course before concluding marriage or as part of a religious education that is held within religious organizations. Marital education may be segregated for secondary school students, students, couples before concluding marriage, and for young couples who are already married. The purpose of this paper emphasizes the importance of marital education for high school students. That is, the focus is on marital education for adolescents.

The range of issues that encompasses marital education for students is large and includes: marriage, extramarital union, parenting, partnership, healthy sex life, family violence. Apart from the theoretical approach, it is necessary to study practical skills and tasks for better communication skills and dealing with problems.

According to Alexandra Solomon, a professor at Northwestern University's Family Institute (she includes marital education as a separate curriculum for students), the most important topics that marital education should offer to young people are:

- Communication and miscommunication (To help students learn about themselves, get them to think about who they are, what they want and what they expect from their partner and the relationship);
- Students get acquainted with possible marital conflicts. To say that they are inevitable, but they can learn how to deal better;
- Students should strengthen their communication skills guided by the idea that they are not alone in the relationship and that they should always be taken into consideration by the other party and problems should be resolved side by side with the partner;
- To learn that marriage is not just a romantic story, but to turn the expectations for a perfect marriage into a perfect marriage plan.

Solomon claims that after working with students on these topics, they themselves conclude that the idea of a perfect marriage as love at first glance is just a myth. Also, they believe that marriage requires a lot of work, but if you invest, it's worth a lot. Thus, their unrealistic expectations of marriage are replaced by practical pre-knowledge that will help them become more prepared to get married. It is equal to a kind of pre-primary training. (<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/the-first-lesson-of-marriage-101-there-are-no-soul-mates/283712/>)

The positive effects of marital education are confirmed by the data of the "Marriage Educational Program", which as a service organization has been conducting marital education courses since 1980, according to which almost 79% of young people attending marital education course in marriage show better performance in relation to those who have not attended marital education. ([http://www.marriageeducation.com.au/Marriage\\_Education\\_-\\_Home.html](http://www.marriageeducation.com.au/Marriage_Education_-_Home.html))

### **Marital education in the Republic of Macedonia**

The state and its Constitution and laws provides special protection of the family, and the Centers for Social Work, through advisory and teamwork, perform matters related to special protection and assistance to the family. Awareness is rising regarding the significance of marriage for the society and the consequences of the lower number of concluded marriages and the declining birth rate. The Republic of Macedonia, following the examples of European

countries, is increasingly seeking to find measures for family protection, promotion of marriage and family values. As a result, a number of projects have been made in order to preserve family values, family expansion, the advantages of married life, etc. There is also continuous attempt to introduce and operate family and marriage counseling services. Twenty years ago there were such marriage and family counseling centers that operated within the Social Work Centers through two forms: pre-marital and marital counseling. A visit to premarital counseling was mandatory for anyone who get marry for the first time to get to know future spouses with the institute of marriage, its significance, rights and obligations. But other social challenges and vulnerable categories outweighed the need for marital counseling, which thus functioned as a proforma for young married couples, so their functioning was extinguished.

As a result of analyzes and comparative experiences from the more developed countries in this area, in 2011, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia came up with an initiative to open marriage and family counseling centers with certain adaptation in accordance with the specifics of Macedonia. Counseling centers were foreseen to focus on the possibilities of securing survival of marriage and provide advice on all aspects of family life in terms of social risk.

In 2013 and 2014, in order to provide professional and advisory assistance to the citizens, 21 counseling centers for marriage and family started to work in: Ohrid, Kicevo, Sveti Nikole, Bitola, Skopje, Kumanovo, Gostivar, Kavadarci, Prilep, Veles, Negotino, Kocani, Radovish, Resen, Gevgelija, Stip, Vinica, Tetovo, Berovo, Strumica, Kriva Palanka and Debar. By March 2015, counseling centers for marriage and family were opened in Probistip, Delcevo, Struga, Kratovo, Valandovo, Makedonski Brod, Krusevo and Demir Hisar.

The Regional Counseling Centers are intended to cover matters of the overall area of family occasions, with a particular focus on the possibilities of securing survival of the marriage in terms of social risk, but will not be limited to that, but will provide advice on all aspects of family life, among other things:

- Occurrence of challenges in parents' in practicing of parental rights in terms of meeting the developmental needs of children by strengthening parental capacities and building skills for raising and upbringing their children;
- supporting families who are already at a certain social risk, (broken partnership relationships, divorce, divorced families, conflicted families);



- Occurrence of challenge and development issues of children's, youth issues in adapting social and peer relations, overcoming conflicting relationships between children and parents (<http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/sovetuvalishte-za-brak-i-semejstvo.nspix>)

The idea of opening the counseling centers deserves salutation, but it must be noted that, first, they do not have a preventive character and, second, they do not mandate a specific population. That being said, the issues that are foreseen are dealing with the problems that are facing already married partners, have children or are dealing with the problems of dysfunctional families. Their non-binding nature implies the question of how many of the couples, who have problems, would visit these counseling centers and will ask for their help. Although the services are free, the fear of moral condemnation of Macedonian society is still present. And, despite the fact that counseling services offer, the possibility of pre-marital counseling on their own will, is almost unlikely that young people and adolescents would use it. The effect of introducing counseling on marriage and family remains unclear, as they include a small group of vulnerable categories of people.

However, marital education, which is more and more present in the last decade, has a much larger preventive dimension. In order to obtain marital knowledge before marriage and to include a larger social group, it would be appropriate to incorporate them as a course in the secondary education. It is conceived as a basic framework under which young people would build their attitudes, views and expectations about marriage and family, and then upgrade their knowledge through life. The need for centers and counseling centers to help when problems cannot be solved within the family circle is not excluded, but the assumption is that the introduction of marital education will prevent them from occurring, or at least have no fatal results.

The existence of marital education is certainly a benefit for the Republic of Macedonia. Taking into consideration the positive experiences of the countries that bring it into the education of young people, it should be introduced as a pilot project in all secondary schools in the fourth year. Lectures would take place once a week within a semester, and eventually at the end the knowledge of the students would be evaluated. Positive effects could be determined by comparing the attitudes of students related to marriage before and after completing marital education.

The education would be carried out by family educators, as educated staff from the Institute for Family Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje. Family educators own:

- General and specific knowledge in the field of family and basic concepts (household, family, marriage, childhood, parenthood);
- They have methodological skills for family analysis, factors of influence, different family forms;
- Ability to organize training and teaching for adolescents in institutional and non-institutional conditions, also to perform intuition-consultative work with students;
- They are able to recognize the problems of modern families and can determine the needs of pre-marital and marital counseling I so on.

That is why they represent the appropriate staff who would do the marital education. The interaction of family pedagogues and psychologists would add to the significance of the overall effect.

## **Conclusion**

Studies show that happiness in life of adult people is significantly conditioned by the quality of their marriage, while divorce is the second most sacrificial life event anyone can experience. Conflicts in marriage lead to various deviations such as alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, rape, and other. Misunderstandings, crises, conflicts and dissatisfaction in the partner / marital relationship also negatively reflects on the parental role, resulting in mutual parental misunderstanding and disqualification, inconsistent parental education attitudes, etc. which confuses and terrifies children. The assumption brings out concern that half of married couples are likely to divorce, and many couples feel unhappy in their relationships. The damage is great not only for the individual, but for the whole society.

On the other hand, the aspiration of most young people is to have meaningful and fulfilled relationships and relations, and a happy marriage in their life as adults, remains visible. Marital education offers the opportunity to help young people to have relationships that would have the foundation to a happy and satisfying marriage. Even if marital education represents only

a baby step in the whole plea of social, economic, cultural and other factors that affect marriage, we still think it should be introduced.

Regarding the target group, the assumption is that the last year of high school is the ideal time for students to get to know the basics of marital education. Then they mature as individuals and begin to think about relationships, partners, marriage, and parenting. Until then, they are identified with their parents and the family they grew up in. If we take in a consideration that the research mentioned above confirmed that young people receive information related to marriage mainly from their parents, the clear need is for marital education to be included in the school.

Students learn about marriage within subjects such as history, sociology, economics, but do not know anything about the marriage they need to conclude. Often quick and uneasy get married, blinded by the initial love and passion and then when faced with reality they are disappointed and frustrated. They get out of that marriage as quickly as the unconscious have entered, which are the reasons for their dissatisfaction. On the other hand, adolescents grow more in an environment in which tolerance for divorce and out-of-wedlock children grows. They are exposed to the daily influence of the media and the Internet which often send confusing and wrong messages about the nature of marriage and a healthy intimate relationship. Under these circumstances, it is logical to assume that many adolescents lack a solid knowledge of what marriage means, what are the benefits of marriage to society, and how to build and maintain a healthy and stable marriage. Therefore, it is justified and necessary to introduce marital education into some form in secondary education, whereby students will acquire basic knowledge about marriage, marriage myths, gain constructive attitudes about marriage and divorce, and will receive basic guidelines and recommendations for successful relationships and marriages.

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