

June 2, 2008 - 12:16 PM

Helping couples untie the knot



Higher divorce rates mean more hearts need to be mended (bullesdechampagne.ch)

Divorces have been steadily rising in Switzerland, and to help couples deal with their separation, the country's first divorce fair was held at the weekend.

The organisers say people need advice on how to untie the knot as painlessly as possible as society changes and traditional structures disappear.

In 2006 the Swiss divorce rate stood at 52.7 per cent, compared with 11 per cent in 1964. This roughly corresponds to the European Union average.

"In the future there will be fewer marriages for life; society is changing and we can't ignore the fact," says Véronique Lagorce. She is the driving force behind the divorce fair, which took place in Lausanne in western Switzerland.

According to Lagorce, many couples are ill prepared to deal with marriage problems or the trauma of separation.

"Lots of people just don't know who to turn to or where to start, whether they intend to separate or simply have partner problems," she told swissinfo. "It's not easy to find solutions but here you have everything at hand; you save a lot of time and it prevents a lot of problems."

The "Together for a new start" fair brought together services, advice and information – including lawyers – for those facing separation and its various stages. Therapy services and beauty treatments were also showcased.

"Separation is a difficult thing to go through but you have to get on with life. You shouldn't be discouraged or ashamed. You shouldn't be afraid of rebuilding yourself personally and it's important not to cling to the idea of failure," said Lagorce.

A couple of hundred curious visitors – young and old - plucked up courage to find out more over the two days.

"It's a great idea for people wondering what they should do with their lives and those of their children," said Rudi from Lausanne. "There are more and more divorces and people don't know what to do with themselves."

Not a taboo

Corinne, who visited with her mother, said the fair had been "very useful".

"It's a good idea, as society is evolving," she said. "Divorce is not a taboo subject and I think nowadays we have different ways of looking at the issue than our parents."

Apart from the personal advice, visitors could also attend a series of lectures on subjects like infidelity, children and separation and rebuilding self-esteem.

"People's experience of divorce is generally negative, but from a psychological point of view certain divorces are positive, allowing people to free themselves from a mistake they've made," Willy Pasini, a psychiatrist at Geneva University, told swissinfo.

He felt the Swiss were becoming more willing to talk about divorce and the issues tearing couples apart.

"There are lots of mediation and advisory centres for couples in Switzerland, and psychiatrists, especially sexologists, have a great deal of work. In the past advice was always available from Protestant, Catholic and atheist circles, but not for questions of sexuality," he explained.

Lagorce agreed: "The Swiss are reserved people... but they're becoming more aware that in a short space of time there is real problem with the rising divorce rate."

Why divorce?

But the jury was out on the real reasons behind Switzerland's fast-rising divorce rate.

Marriage guidance counsellor Anne Vachoux felt young couples suffered from a "lack of family solidarity".

"Families are left too alone and have too many responsibilities; some don't have the strength or resources and the only solution is to break up," she commented.

A female visitor argued that women had become much more financially independent and less prepared to accept the failings of their partners.

"Modern society is made up of friendly egotists; this doesn't help people remain faithful," said Pasini.

Others reckon Switzerland's simplified divorce process could well have an impact on figures.

At www.divorce.ch, Switzerland's biggest online divorce site, a couple wanting to get divorced by mutual consent can register its own petition for divorce online without going through a lawyer for SFr999 and receive final judgement in four months.

The successful Geneva-based site, which has some 250 visitors a day and registers 15 online divorces per month, has just launched a German-language version.

But lawyer Douglas Hornung, in charge of the site, is not sure the fast-track process is to blame.

"It's fairly easy technically, but emotionally is another question," he said.

swissinfo, Simon Bradley in Lausanne

DIVORCE RATES

Switzerland:

2.4 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants (2004).

European Union:

2.0 (2002)

Britain:

2.7 (2002)

Finland:

2.6 (2003)

France:

2.1 (2002)

Spain:

1.0 (2002)

Italy:

0.7 (2002)

CONTEXT

In 2007 there were 40,100 marriages in Switzerland, 300 more than in 2006. This figure has remained more or less stable for the past decade.

There were 19,700 divorces concluded in 2007 compared with 21,000 in 2006, a decrease of 6%. But 2006 was a divorce high point: 18% more than in 2005.

Under Swiss law a person wanting to file for divorce has to wait two years from the time of separation.

In Switzerland 44% marriages end in divorce.

LINK

- Divorce fair organisers (<http://www.bullesdechampagne.ch/>)

URL of this story:<http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swissinfo.html?siteSect=105&sid=9163574&ty=st>