



## Cohabitation: Conceptual Significance and Practical Inconsistency

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### Abstract

Non-marital cohabitation is a rapidly rising universal phenomenon in this modern era. The post-modern or capitalist society, the concepts of relationships between man and woman particularly the way of thinking towards cohabitation or living relationship has seen a drastic change. The issue of cohabitation from a sociological perspective to comprehend the nature of such a shifting structure of marriage. In this context, to know the rise in rates of cohabitation and its different meanings and implications in related to the way of life in terms of personal and social relationships and consequences. It is more rational to rethink in these types of meanings and implications particularly in marriage systems. There is different social meaning and cultural significance between traditional marriage system and newly emerged cohabitation practice. This paper tries to analyze the conceptual debate and practical contradiction of cohabitation and conventional marriage system. Likewise, this study provides an analysis of causes and consequences of cohabitation in existing societies.

**Keywords:** *Marriage, Cohabitation, Family, Freedom, Gender.*

### Concept and Context

Globally, there is diversity in the meaning and significance of cohabitation and its comprehensive explanations in the practical circumstances. Cohabitation has different meanings in different countries (Perelli-Harris et al, 2014 and Hiekel et al, 2014). Cohabitation, when a man and woman live together with all activities without being married. In Western societies, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are various contexts of social and cultural changes regarding marriage and marriage symbols, marital status and sexual ethics, marriage rules and religion, marriage and family structure etc. It is noted that cohabitation was relatively rare prior to the late 1980s (Murrow and Shi, 2010). The meaning and practice of cohabitation varies according to the cultural context in which it occurs (Kiernan, 2002; Le Bourdais & Lapiere Adamcyk, 2004). Cohabitation can be an alternative to marriage in situations where marriage is not possible for financial or family reasons such as same-sex, interracial or interreligious marriages (Murrow and Shi, 2010). It is assumed that cohabitation is an alternative to marriage, a trial marriage, another stage in the process of partner selection (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Ross, 1995; Rindfuss & Vanden Heuvel, 1990). In this relationship, they are involved in a social and private relationship without any difficulties.

According to Thornton (1989), normative attitudes on family formation have been changing rapidly in the United States since at least the 1960s. From the late 1960s beyond, cohabitation began to increase rapidly in western countries, and is still on the rising stage and it is more popular in Western societies compare to non-Western contexts. Cohabitation in Western is predominantly closely related to the history of marriage. It is explored that cohabitation as an acceptable institution in western societies can be broken down into a number of conventional discourses and theoretical perspectives (Kiernan, 2001, 2002). Similarly, Asian contexts, it is less clear whether delayed marriage has been similarly offset by increases in cohabitation- mostly due to limited facts on the prevalence of cohabitation (Jones 2007)).

It is argued that “cohabitation has become a relatively permanent and recognizable family structure” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002: 207). Despite the substantial increase in the

incidence of cohabiting relationships, relatively little is known about the beliefs, motivations and meanings underlying cohabitation (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011). Huang et al (2011), where cohabitation is more common among those who are socially and economically advantaged, found that the primary motives for cohabiting included spending time together, sharing expenses and evaluating compatibility. While cohabitation has been heralded as a more gender-egalitarian arrangement than marriage, it displays traditional gendered norms and assumptions on the roles of men and women that remain strong in the social consciousness (Huang, et al., 2011:899). Commonly, cohabiters tend to assign more value to egalitarian individualism, personal autonomy, equity (Lesthaeghe & Surkin, 1988; Thomson & Colella, 1992; Bjornberg, 2001) as well as cohabiters share households, usually resulting in economies of scale, and may present themselves socially as a couple (Smock, 2000). Correspondingly, cohabitation has considered an ‘alternative to being single’ (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004), with more similarities between couples who are just dating or “going steady” with a boyfriend or girlfriend than those who are married (Manning and Smock, 2005; Carmichael and Whittaker 2007). However, cohabiting relationships are “incompletely institutionalized” (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC, 2007, p. 4).

### Marriage vs. Cohabitation

Marriage is a social institution and it is a socially and legally union of a couple as a spouse that helps to create the basic unit of social structure. Coontz (2005) argues that marriage has traditionally and socially accepted method of consensual partnering which legally recognized relationship between a man and woman which defining and regulating sexuality, reproduction, role and responsibility with perspectives concerning marriage have changed substantially (Paetsch et al., 2004) and because of revolutionary changing in norms and values of the society, which are enforced to change in all social phenomenon. Cohabitation or living together in an intimate sexual relationship outside of marriage (Kroeger and Smock 2014) which is a more popular discourse and rising trends all around the world, It is argued that cohabitation as a trial period

before marriage and it as a substitute to marriage (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez-Gassen 2012) and marriage is ideal and cohabitation should be a prelude to marriage. In this context, cohabitation has contextualized with marriage to know its extensive roles in family formation and individual freedom. Coontz (2004) has explained that “the very values that we have come to think of as traditional, the very values that invested marriage with such emotional weight in people’s lives, had an inherent tendency to undermine the stability of marriage as an institution even as they increased the satisfactions of marriage as a relationship” Coontz, 2004:978).

The rising acceptability and availability of contraception is believed to have had radical implications, as sex and sexuality become separated from pregnancy and childbirth (Giddens, 1992:27). Cohabiting relationships and marriages that are preceded by cohabitation, in comparison to marriages, have in past research often been found to have poorer outcomes on a range of factors (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Smock, 2000). According to social, cultural and historical message, marriage is a socially, culturally and legally accepted union between two people who are involved in conventionally based on a sexual relationship, social division of labor as well as rationality and significance of the union. The meaning of marriage includes spouses are of opposite sexes (some cases includes same sex), furthermore long-established social expectations of marriage have associated to produce children, to get sexual legitimacy, to continue family lineage, which is understood in our day.

### **Types of Cohabitation**

Cohabitation is easier to enter in relationships than marriage. In the present context, increases in cohabitation, same-sex partners, and singlehood are changing the conventional meanings and ideas of marriage. Cohabitation, when a man and woman live together with all activities without being married. This type of transformation of marriage and family life has led to a growing multiplicity of personal and social thinking as well as judgment capacity particularly in today’s generation. More or less, they are capable to make choices in a way that was not possible in the previous generations.

Commonly, there are three types of cohabitation such as ‘alternative to marriage’, ‘precursor to marriage’ and ‘alternative to being single’. According to Casper and Bianchi (2002), proposed four cohabitation types, essentially introducing one more distinction within the prelude to marriage type: firstly, alternative to marriage, secondly, precursor to marriage, thirdly, trial marriage, and finally, co-residential dating (Casper and Bianchi, 2002). Studies have argued that alternative to marriage and indistinguishable from marriage have developed into familiar with cohabitation that last longer new possible to be understood alternative to marriage (Manning, 1993; Kiernan, 2001; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). It is claimed that by providing an alternative to marriage, the increase in cohabitation has fundamentally challenged the institution of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). Conceptually, there are different types of cohabiters such as premarital cohabiters, non-marital cohabiters, post-marital cohabiters as well as remarriage cohabiters. Cohabitation has multiple social implications and cultural propositions, and that it is impossible to easy differentiate cohabitation as a prelude to marriage.

Cohabitation is only an alternative form of marriage and its enhanced occurrence concerning marriage would less meaning and implication in the society. It is argued that cohabitation as a distinct occurrence not just because it has displaced marriage, but also because it symbolizes a social, cultural and structural change and modification in marriage systems and family relationships and interactions. In this changing circumstance, there are various fundamental limitations of cohabitation or living together relationship such as age, sexuality, fertility, constancy, cultural assumption, social acceptance and social recognition.

### **Reasons of Cohabitation**

Non-marital cohabitation is a rapidly growing universal phenomenon in this modern era. The post-modern or capitalist society, the concepts of relationships between man and woman particularly the way of thinking towards cohabitation or living relationship has seen a drastic change. The issue of cohabitation from a sociological perspective to comprehend the nature of such a shifting structure of marriage. It is observed that increasing ratio of cohabitation is forced to change in family arrangements as well as fundamental components of marriage and its implications over the past few decades in overall societies.

Cherlin (2004) has explained that marriage has been “deinstitutionalized” over the last few decades and marriage have weakened. The meaning of marriage has changed and evolved over the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to changes in long-term cultural and material trends. In the second half of the century the ideal of expressive individualism gained prominence, and led to what Cherlin (2004:852) calls the individualized marriage. Cherlin (2004:855) argues that while the practical importance of the marriage certificate has declined, the symbolic importance has remained high, evolving from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige. Marriage was once the foundation of adult life, today it is something of a capstone, “people marry now less for the social benefits that marriage provides than for the personal achievements it represents” (Cherlin, 2004:857).

According to Cherlin (2004), while the practical importance of marriage has declined, its symbolic importance has remained high, having developed from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige. People today are believed to marry for the personal achievement marriage represents, rather than the social benefits it provides (Cherlin, 2004). It is argued that when the marriage rate has declined, the cohabitation rate has risen in contemporary societies. Various studies demonstrates that the postponement of marriage and recent declines in marriage rates, and the comparatively recent rise in cohabitation (Fitch and Ruggles, 2000; Cherlin, 1992; Bumpass, 1990 The institution of marriage remains deeply embedded in many forms of social life, from structural systems such as the law, social security and welfare systems, or taxation regulations, to cultural norms and expectations (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Giddens (1992) has explained that the emergence and rise of the ‘pure relationship’ which “refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it” Giddens (1992:58). Giddens argues that the pure relationship

is part of a wider restructuring of intimacy within society, and that marriage has veered increasingly toward this form of relationship. The rise in cohabitation coincides with the rise of the 'pure relationship' and it is arguably the quintessential form of this type of relationship. Giddens (1992) argues that by delaying the first birth and allowing family size to be limited, greater intimacy between husband and wife was facilitated, further emphasising the romantic love bond and personal satisfaction.

Cohabitation is increasingly becoming the first co-residential union formed among young adults (Goodwin et al., 2010). Cherlin (2004) has argued that in this type of marriage the roles of husband and wife were more flexible and open to negotiation, and self-fulfillment and self-development became as important as, if not more important, than playing the role of spouse and parent. Cherlin argues that this transition started in the late 1960s and accelerated in the 1970s, as indicated by the increasing numbers of young people delaying marriage to complete education and establish a career, the increase in cohabitation and acceptability of non-marital childbearing, heightened divorce rates, and the increase in the number of dual earner families (Cherlin, 2004).

According to Taylor (2005), there are various social norms have changed, such beliefs have become less widely held by the population and some social denominations today view cohabitation as a precursor to marriage. The research argues that the reasons why they cohabit, most couples listed reasons such as spending more time together, convenience based reasons, and testing their relationships, while few gave the reason that they do not believe in marriage (Rhoades et al., 2009). Thus, cohabitation has developed an ideal thinking to safeguard and support for lifelong commitment and emotional closeness. It permits couples situation to confirm that they would like to be jointly in the future life partner. In this contemporary society, there are various reasons for deciding to enter into a cohabitation agreement such as economic, political, social, cultural, religious, racial, sexual as well as unending and meandering marriage complexities.

### **Cohabitation and Gender Equity**

The rise in the rate of cohabitation is associated with new shifts in family and marriage pattern as well as spouse explanation in both private and public life. It is observed that the huge pressure of modernization and industrialization, nowadays, in many Asian societies including Nepal, there are various shifting explanations of marriage practices and gender relationships, despite the persistence of strong patriarchal thinking, influential family ties, rigid and orthodox meaning of sexuality, stereotyping gender roles and the legitimacy of family lineage.

Beck (1992) argues that while modernization led to the division of the domestic sphere and wage labor, dominated by women and men respectively, today the strict division of male and female roles has blurred, leading to a struggle for new forms of reunification (Beck, 1992). Despite substantial steps forward in gender equality in many areas of society, the family remains one of the places where equality between men and women lags far behind developments elsewhere (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004:940). It is argued that cohabiting relationships are more egalitarian than marital relationships (Baxter, 2005; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Brines & Joyner, 1999; Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994), a substantial amount of

research has also found that cohabiting relationships follow gender patterns similar to marital relationships (Baxter, Haynes, & Hewitt, 2010; Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008; Gupta, 1999). Much of this research focuses on the division of household labour, with some research examining paid work, income and gender attitudes. Married women do significantly more housework than cohabiting women, and that this difference remains despite taking the socio-demographic differences of married and cohabiting women into account (Shelton and John (1993).

### **Challenging Impacts of Cohabitation**

Marriage may or may not be an antiquated institution, but it is undeniable that non-marital cohabitation has increased dramatically (Harry et al., 1998). It is widely understood that couples have been delaying marriage but not delaying living together (Galston, 2008). It is asserted that cohabitation is a less permanent relationship could lead to greater union instability (Berrington and Diamond, 1999; Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006) and cohabitation is particularly common and institutionalized (Hansen, Moum, & Shapiro, 2007). It is argued that the stable relationship union type (marriage) with a less stable union (cohabitation) in the early to mid-20s (Bumpass et al., 1991), excluding implications for additional risks to children who are born to unstable, less committed unions (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Similarly, it is not selective of divorce prone individuals, and no difference in couples that have cohabited before and after marriage is observed (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Svarer, 2004)), effects on marriage and family life, sometimes, a greater risk of divorce in the long run (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2018). It is argued that cohabitants tend to be less established in terms of the status and role of partner in family rather than married couples. Nock (1995) has argued that the lower level of well-being and the relationship instability might come from a lack of institutionalization of the cohabiting unions (Nock, 1995). Similarly, Judith and Deirdre (2000) argued that cohabiting couples are twice as likely to experience infidelity within the relationship as married couples.

Cohabiting relationships tend to be short lived, and are often converted into marriages or dissolved rather than continuing long-term (de Vaus, 2004). The association between cohabitation and outcomes such as well-being or the likelihood of subsequent marital dissolution varies by the characteristics of cohabiters (Brown & Booth, 1996; Hansen, et al., 2007), the cultural context (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Ryan, Hugites, & Hawdon, 1998; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009) and time period (de Vaus, Qu, & Weston, 2005; Hewitt & De Vaus, 2009; Musick & Bumpass, 2012). It is argued that married men who cohabited with their partners before marriage demonstrated less commitment and dedication than men who did not cohabit premaritally (Stanley et al., 2004). Similarly, among married couples who had cohabited before engagement, husbands were less dedicated than their wives (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). According to Brown and Booth (1996), the relationship quality of cohabiting couples with plans for marriage was similar to married couples' relationship quality. In the other hand, it is claimed that married couples who lived together before engagement had more negative interactions, lower relationship quality, and lower relationship confidence than those who did not cohabit until after engagement or marriage (Kline et al. (2004). Married men who cohabited with their partners before marriage reported lower levels of dedication

than men who did not cohabit premaritally (Stanley et al., 2004). I think, commonly, there are various challenging impacts in living relationship or cohabitation such as less social acceptance, economic insecurity, cultural rejection, more advocacy for personal freedom rather than social concern, risk of conflict and violence, effect on children, violence on women, insecure for stable settlement, risk of isolation and negative thoughts, hazardous break up and administrative and legal barriers.

### **Rise of Cohabitation in Nepal**

In Nepal, marriage is an eternally considered as a compulsory phenomenon and it is imagined that the husband and wife are considered as an embedded life partner which has increased their level of happiness and largely supported to livelihoods. Similarly, marriage legalizes both the persons to cohabit and to legitimate their children and sexuality. In general, there are various benefits of marriage in different sides such as personal, social, economic, cultural etc. On the other hand, the settlement of marriage is coupled with a lot of household tasks, social responsibilities, economic burdens as well as socially established marital complications. These marital complications have created various confusions and conflicting situations between or among the familial and societal relationships such as social responsibility, spouse duty, financial matter, family composition, children education, cultural restriction etc. which are an inseparable part of traditional marriage system in Nepalese societies.

In this context, it is argued that cohabitation provides freedom from these types of complex relationships and interactions which is associated with marriage. It is noted that rapidly shifting social norms and values of the societies have been significant for the increase in cohabitation with its connected changing of standpoints and experiences concerning marriage and its complicating gender roles and gender hierarchy, could have enforced to rise in cohabitation in Nepalese societies. In Nepalese context, cohabitation is becoming a popular living agreement among young partners particularly in urban areas. Cohabitation is increasingly ratio in Nepalese societies, with the majority of couples now living together before marriage. Cohabitation is an agreement where two people are not married but lived together. It indicates a new form of relationship which is less acceptance type of relationship when compared to marriage. In the present day, the option for cohabiting rather than getting marital life is assumed to be interrelated to either traditional marriage practices or new form of innovative relationships. It is argued that the 'innovative' type of cohabitation is different from the 'traditional' type in form and meaning which is totally different between or among the socially and culturally rooted 'traditional marriage systems' and new and innovative formation of 'union relationships'. The significance and idea of 'marriage' has historically justified discourses than the significance and idea of 'cohabitation'. The reading of Nepalese cases, cohabitation is unclear and vague relationships compare to marriage. There are various complications and risk factors in this relationship such as social acceptance, legal recognition, consistency and other personal and social dynamics.

### **Thinking Cohabitation: Need and Risk**

The phrase 'cohabitation' may be recently coined in Nepal compare to marriage. Cohabitation means a couple living

together in the same house without married. Normally, cohabitation promotes freedom and private choices for persons rather than social meaning, cultural expectation and societal discourse. In this changing context, cohabitation is increasingly presents in Nepali societies, particularly in urban areas with some couples living together before marriage. Non-marital cohabitation has increasing ratio and rethinking about the conventional marital life, nevertheless there are various reservations and fears concerning its input to social acceptance and cultural cohesion in Nepalese societies.

In Nepal, the rates of cohabitation have increased considerably in the past three decades. I think, many young adults believe cohabitation is a better conduct to experiment their relationships and interactions prior to marital status. It is a practical way of manipulate and inspire individuals' choices in their life-partner relationships. This reason for cohabiting develops particularly significant to review various aspects in their future existing, given that many adults or other people consider cohabiting offers a better learning and supports one's chances in wedding and further relationships. Similarly, the reasons for cohabitation magnitude would yield many aspects such as time together, convenience, rational, testing and upcoming determination.

Cohabitation is not a completely acceptable subject in Nepali societies. It is not a socially and culturally or legally supportable issue in orthodox thinking. For this reason, many cohabiting couples or partners have compelled to damage their relationships. Likewise, some cohabiting couples are not managing their relation in proper way because of numerous personal and social obstacles and cultural restrictions compared to non-cohabiting couples. Many couples with insecurity concerning their perceived progress to marriage are at threat for depressing results compared to other socially and culturally accepted couples. It is observed that some occupied cohabiting couples who have a coincided path to wedding seem to perform better.

### **Conclusion**

Cohabitation represents two people living together or coexists without being married. Cohabitation and premarital relationships are new practices which pressurized the changing meaning of marriage, marital role and gender division of labor. Currently, cohabitation has developed as a crucial social institution, particularly in industrial or capitalist societies in the name of "alternative to marriage" or "precursor to marriage" or "alternative to being single". This type of living relationship or cohabitation creates various coherent questions and queries in different aspects of society such as stability and continuity of family formation, household and kinship politics, status of legal provision and social sanction, implication and meaning of conventional marriage, ethical consideration of sexuality and deep-rooted social and cultural dynamics.

Correspondingly, the increase in the rates of cohabitation has produced various personal and social consequences for partners who work with couples about the issue of upcoming relationship, care of children, career and life chances, education and financial matter, social responsibility as well as cultural restriction and rejection. There are various challenging impacts in living relationship or cohabitation such as less social acceptance, economic insecurity, cultural rejection, more advocacy for personal freedom rather than social concern, risk of conflict and violence, effect on children, violence on women,

insecure for stable settlement, risk of isolation and negative thoughts, hazardous break up and administrative and legal barriers. Similarly, in recent trends in globally including Nepal, increasing social acceptance of cohabitation or non-marital relationships which is enforced to change the concept and rationality of marriage.

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