

Is Cohabitation an Alternative to Marriage?

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ABSTRACT

Cohabitation is an important phenomenon which is on the rise in the hectic and fast paced modern life, however, it exists on the sidelines of Indian society due to taboos attached to it. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, three focus group discussions were conducted with 24 female college students (18-21 years) from Delhi-NCR. The results revealed that the participants were aware of the concept of cohabitation and its legal status in India. There was a lot of parental opposition and social stigma attached to cohabitation. Social media and cinema were considered to be the most important source of influence in understanding and actualizing such relationships. Partners also dealt with many problems like insecurity, harassment and lack of trust. Another unresolved issue was whether the couple should have children or not and the anxiety related to their future. But overall, cohabitation was perceived as a consensual arrangement with perks of a marriage without too many legal implications. In the future, a transformed scenario of marriage, as well as the choice of partners in terms of online dating and cohabitation may become popular.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cohabitation and its relevance in contemporary society.
- Cohabitation as a viable alternate to marriage but with socio-cultural constraints in the Indian context.
- Role of global forces and social media in shaping attitudes toward cohabitation.

Keywords: Cohabitation, live-in relationship, social stigma, sexual and companionship needs

Institution of marriage has changed significantly in meaning and manifestation, in the contemporary scenario. From arranged marriages, to love marriages and now, the concept of live-in relationships, or cohabitation. Shifting priorities of young people in terms of their personal, social and professional lives, people have gradually opened themselves to alternatives to the original sacramental and sacred institution of marriage.

Cohabitation or, "live-in" relationship can be simply defined as an arrangement of living together of couples,

and even though they are unmarried, this whole arrangement closely resembles a marriage. Technically, cohabitation is defined as an intimate sexual union between two unmarried partners who share the same living quarter for a sustained period of time (Bachrach *et al.* 2000, p.4). Cohabitation is different in terms of legal rights and obligations, from its counterpart, marriage,

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that is a socially and ritually accepted, normative way of living together of couples as a union.

The number of adults in the United States who have ever lived with an unmarried partner has increased as marriage rates have dropped. According to Pew Research Center, most Americans believe it is appropriate for unmarried couples to live together, even if they do not intend to marry. The study also revealed that married persons have higher levels of relationship satisfaction and confidence in their partners than cohabiting adults (Horowitz *et al.* 2019).

The concept of cohabitation is not new to India, however accepting it as a socially and traditionally appropriate way of living together as a couple has always been the real challenge. In the Vedas, we find a mention of Gandharva marriage, in which a man and a woman mutually consent to get married. It is just a word-of-mouth commitment which neither involves the family nor any ritual to solemnize the marriage. In addition to this, Vātsyāyana's Kama Sutra that dates back to 4th century CE, elaborates on the "art of love" and includes various excerpts on eroticism, romance and emotional attachments. Thus, ancient India hasn't always been conservative, and closed up when it came to premarital relationships (Ravikumar, 2015). The indigenous Garasia tribe from Rajasthan has been practicing a live-in arrangement, traditionally for thousands of years now. In 1991, the District Collectorate in Gujarat registered a friendship agreement ("Maitri Karar") in order to provide the woman with a sense of security (Sharma, 2016).

There can be several reasons for people who choose cohabiting relationships. Some people could be dating and have a strong sexual connection to move in together casually. Heikel (2014) described that some couples may be more committed and cohabit in order to explore the possibility of their compatibility. They might use this arrangement as a premarital agreement. There are some individuals who do not believe in the institution of marriage, and might therefore choose cohabitation. Some couples may move in and out of a cohabitation arrangement.

The estimates of cohabitation status rely on respondents' subjective judgements (Casper & Cohen, 2000). People may disagree whether they live together or not (Nock, 1995). Ross (1995) also reported that couple relationships fall into a continuum rather than in binary categories.

Marriage can be viewed as a socially constructed concept, an institution that is considered as the normative, and culturally accepted way for two people of the opposite sex to live together, through matrimony. The legal aspects of marriage are more well defined, rights for both men and women are clearly stated. On the other hand, we have cohabitation, that is more natural, and "free flowing", in the sense that there are no complications associated with marriage, there is no restriction with respect to "permanency of relationship" and there is a sense of freedom and individuality for the people involved even when they can seek physical (sexual), social and emotional companionship.

Marriage has been the most basic institution in the world—it is not only a celebration or expression of love, but also lays the foundation upon which families are created and society flourishes. Thus, procreation and parenting coexist within the broader definition of marriage. However, if the institution of marriage is observed using an individualistic approach, it may bring about a lot of changes in the individuals, especially for the females in some of the significantly patrilineal societies in India, since traditionally they need to leave behind their house and be a part of their husband's household. Marriage involves not only the union of two individuals, but also that of their families. The sense of individuality and control over one's life decisions may decrease. Societal and familial pressures, loss of freedom and the physical, mental and emotional constraints typically add up to make the situation worse.

In 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled that an adult couple has a right to live together without marriage. Under section 114 of the Indian Evidence Act, if a man and a woman live under the same roof and cohabit for a number of years, there is a presumption that they live as husband and wife, and their children are not illegitimate (Mahawar, 2021).

Owing to increase in cohabitation in the family life course, a substantial literature has emerged, especially on young adults. At this age, decisions regarding starting a family and reproduction are of salient importance. The distinctions between marriages and cohabitations have been highlighted by research over the last decade. On a range of demographic and economic characteristics, cohabiting unions are more varied than marriages (Schwartz, 2013; Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

Janicka and Szymczak (2019) suggested that marriages have a better prognosis than cohabitations. Marriage's long-term viability is built on two factors: dedication, which reflects the importance of the relationship, and constraint commitment, which reflects concern for the partner's well-being. The latter may make it difficult for parties, particularly men, to leave the relationship.

Blekesaune (2018) conducted a longitudinal study between 1997 and 2009 to look at changes in happiness and life satisfaction related with transitions into cohabitation and marriage. Both cohabitation and marriage are equivalent in terms of happiness after adjusting for time-invariant variance in subjective well-being. Marriage may be more satisfying than cohabitation, but only for those who have never been married before. This holds true for both men and women, as well as all ages and cohorts.

Wedding ceremonies in India have become very elaborate and expensive affairs, and sometimes represent a status symbol for the family to show off their wealth. Cohabitation, on the other hand, can be an economically feasible alternative. It is also a stopgap measure until there is consistency in employment and earnings (Schneider, 2011, Vespa & Painter, 2011).

In a study based on in-depth interviews of 18 couples in China, Song and Lai (2020) explored whether cohabitation leads to more egalitarian gender roles. Men were more divided in their gender role ideologies and women were predominantly favorable toward egalitarian beliefs.

Some partners supported egalitarian ideals and reported sharing housework equally. But in discordant couples, where there was a combination of "traditional man and egalitarian woman" the men were more defensive.

Although the majority of births take place in marriage, the rise in cohabitation has confounded the relationship between union formation and fertility (Guzzo & Hayford, 2020). Children are increasingly exposed to disadvantaged weak households, temporary coresidential relationships, and household members who are not their caregivers nor biological relatives.

Rosenfeld and Roesler (2018) analyzed National Surveys of Family Growth in the United States from 1970 to 2015. Couples who cohabit before marriage, have a lower chance of break-up in the first year of marriage, compared to partners who did not cohabit before marriage. However, in the long-term risk of divorce increases for premarital cohabitators.

Bollywood movies have played a significant role in trying to portray live-in relationships as something normal and acceptable in the society. The release of the film '*Salaam Namaste*' in 2005 was a turning point in Bollywood history as the film boldly featured a couple living together not out of love, but out of convenience and eventually falling in love. '*Cocktail*' (2012) discusses the dynamics of how three people fall in and out of love while living together. There are many others like '*Luka Chuppi*' (2019) and '*Gehraiyaan*' (2022), which is the latest to join the bandwagon. However, such an arrangement can be humiliating and often lead to violence in conservative sections of India, as can be depicted in the film.

In real life, despite the orthodox and conservative Indian society, Amrita Pritam, a famous Punjabi poet of international fame was a bold and legendary lady who dared to live life on her own terms and indulged in cohabiting relationships.

Prior work based on cohabitation in India was more or less non-existent and was usually limited to non-representative surveys and heavily opinionated articles. Cohabitants who are unwilling to openly communicate about this, might count as one probable reason for such restricted views. Even the introduction of domestic violence and property rights laws did not serve much purpose in bringing about a change in the attitudes of people towards cohabitation.

In view of the above discussion, it was observed there are few studies in the Indian context on the phenomenon of cohabitation. Thus, the present study was conceptualized to gain a deeper understanding of cohabitation as a possible alternative to the institution of marriage, in heterosexual couples. Hence, the following objectives were proposed for the above study:

1. To evaluate cohabitation as an alternative to marriage.
2. To assess the attitudes and opinions of female young adults regarding cohabitation.

METHOD

Participants

18 female undergraduate students (18-21 years) residing in Delhi-NCR were divided into three groups for focus group discussions (FGD). They were selected using purposive and convenience sampling. The FGDs were conducted in English and it was ensured that they were proficient in the language.

Tools Used

A questionnaire was constructed by the researchers for the focus group discussion (FGD) after review of literature and a number of brainstorming sessions. Out of all the suggestions, the most relevant were compiled.

Procedure

Participants were contacted and given flyers briefly describing the purpose of the research and their consent was sought in accordance with APA ethical guidelines. The willing participants were informed about the date, time and venue of FGD conduction. There were six participants in each focused group. Before the commencement of the FGD they were welcomed and briefed about the general purpose of the study. Questions were asked about their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinion or ideas. They were free to talk with other group members.

One moderator and assistant moderator were chosen to stimulate the entire discussion, and five observers /

transcribers were present to transcribe the FGD as soon as the conversation was completed, so the nuances of the dialogue are not lost in the annals of time. APA ethical guidelines were followed. Finally, the data gathered was subjected to thematic analysis. The transcriptions were read repeatedly to get the relevant 'codes.' They were organized and reorganized to get broad themes and related sub themes.

RESULTS

In the results and discussion section the terms 'cohabitation' and 'live-in relationships' have been used interchangeably as many participants were more familiar with the latter term.

The three focus group discussions generated various themes. The salient themes that emerged from first FGD were understanding of live-in relationship, views about live-in relationship, views on marriage, media influence, pros and cons of live-in relationship and attitude change. The themes from second FGD were consensual arrangement, sources of information, barriers to social acceptance, positive aspects of cohabitation, issues with cohabitation, uncertainty about having/parenting a child, and future orientation. Themes from third FGD revealed physical and emotional needs, attitude change, misleading information through media, and legal repercussions. There were commonalities observed in themes, within and across the three focus group discussions. Thus, for parsimony and convenience, the overlapping themes as well as the corresponding verbatim evidence were merged together as depicted in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The following discussion is based on Table 1 which is a summarized version of themes generated from three focus group discussions.

Understanding of Cohabitation

There was an active exchange of information, both factual and subjective as far as understanding of cohabitation was concerned in all the FGDs. The two sub-themes that emerged were 'facts' and 'general views.'

Table 1: Summary of the themes from three focus group discussions

Themes and Sub-themes	Verbatim
Understanding of cohabitation	
Facts	<p>P2: "Live-in relationships are now legal in India."</p> <p>P8: "It's an arrangement where two people live together on a long-term basis in an emotionally and sexually intimate relationship."</p> <p>P3: "The Supreme Court of India has given certain guidelines based on which cohabitation can be treated akin to a marriage..."</p> <p>P4: "The Supreme Court has ruled that any couple living together for a long term will be presumed as legally married."</p>
General views	<p>P4: "Not married but live together."</p> <p>P1: "Enjoy sexual life without marriage."</p> <p>P10: "Give emotional support to each other"</p> <p>P11: "Has all perks of marriage and no restrictions and responsibilities."</p> <p>P12: "Chosen substitute for marriage."</p>
Views on marriage	
Negative consequence	<p>P6: "Homemakers are financially dependent on their spouses (in marital arrangement)."</p> <p>P4: "There's a possibility that a marriage may or may not work. Divorce affects the future of women more, due to social taboos against it."</p> <p>P2: "Some may experience domestic violence, or sexual and emotional exploitation."</p>
Women's identity	<p>P3: "Women often lose their identity in the union of marriage."</p> <p>P4: "Women's life changes because sometimes women tend to deviate from their goals after marriage."</p> <p>P5: "The girl gets to keep her surname."</p>
Perception of Cohabitation	
Individual perceptions	<p>P3: "Personal preferences should be taken care of in cohabitation."</p> <p>P4: "Live-in relationship may offer greater freedom to the individual to pursue work/profession of interest to them."</p> <p>P5: "There is no harm in live-in-relationships. They are the most natural form of existence and reject attempts by organizations and religions to regulate and rule over what should be the private domain of an individual."</p>
Parental constraints	<p>P7: "If you tell your parents that you want to live-in with a boy, I don't think they'll allow."</p> <p>P11: "Many people don't even tell their parents that they are in a live-in relationship."</p> <p>P3: "High parental expectations in the Indian context lead to sanctions and taboos against cohabitation."</p>
Social stigma	<p>P8: "Live-in relationship has a lot of social stigma and people are looked down upon."</p> <p>P13: "But there is greater acceptance of living-in relationships among Bollywood celebrities"</p> <p>P2: "Society doesn't accept live-in-relationship and very few have the guts to go against the societal norms."</p> <p>P3: "We all are social beings and are answerable to the social groups we exist in."</p>

P4: "Socio-cultural stereotypes are deeply ingrained in our psyches."

P16: "Indian mindset may not be ready though gradually things are changing."

P18: "Living in India, I think it's a bit conservative. You can't come out, about being in a relationship with somebody in a romantic way."

P4: "Acceptance depends on past experience and family's understandings. Perceptions will differ in rural and urban set-up being more orthodox."

Exposure through modelling and observation

Media influence

P2: "Celebrities influence public opinions and media glorifies live-in relationship."

P2: "All charges against South Indian actress Khushboo, who had openly talked about pre-marital sex and live-in relationships were dropped by Court."

P4: "Cinema popularizes live-in relationship. John Abraham and Bipasha Basu were also seen to be cohabiting."

P10: "I got to know about live-in relationship through a movie named Salaam Namaste"

P13: "I think there is a lot of information related to romantic relationships without any concrete research evidence for example, '10 best things to do with a guy on a date', 'How to make relationship better' or '10 signs he is madly in love with you', I think all of this affects the relationships because it's not real, gives false hopes to individuals."

"People fantasize about being in a romantic relationship after reading or watching all the love stories and end up hurting themselves if the partner does not fulfill any of the things that they imagined about."

P17: "Media is like a dream world. It doesn't let us differentiate between the expectations and reality."

Peers

P9: "I got to know this from my friends."

P12: "May be in 11th or 12th class"

Positive aspects of cohabitation

Freedom from restrictions

P11: "It gives couples the freedom to live the way they want. Women are also more independent in such relationships."

P12: "They don't have any responsibilities or restrictions that usually come along with marriage"

Compatibility

P7: "It provides an opportunity to check compatibility before marriage."

Fulfillment of physical and emotional needs

P3: "Mutual understanding between partner's increases, decision making improves and they often get plenty of time to know each other in relationship."

P10: "Partners give emotional support to each other"

P13: "It's human nature to want companionship, right? Romantic relationships and cohabitation fulfill this need very well."

P14: "Relationship is like when two people are really in love with each other, they feel comfortable with each other and they feel like being with each other"

"So they kind of want to start something that might lead to a long-term relationship in future"

P17: "Relationship is an emotional bond. You are physically or emotionally connected with the other individual."

Darker side of cohabitation

Trust issues	P5: "Live-in relationship does not guarantee the safety and commitment of marriage." P9: "But what if the person isn't trustworthy and would leave" P8: "A person might or might not feel as secure as in a marriage" P9: "There is a greater threat of infidelity in a living-in relationship as compared to marriage."
Harassment cases	P7: "There is no protection from harassment like in a conventional marriage where family members may intervene." "There is a danger of getting exploited by sadists and perverted potential partners."
Insecurity	P12: "People can leave each other as they have no tag like a marriage."
Financial misuse	P14: "In the beginning couple may agree to share financial burden and couples decide to make a joint account but after a breakup money distribution maybe unfair." P15: "Live-in relationship is uncertain, if it is governed by laws then the very purpose is defeated. Legal marriages are much better."
Legal repercussions	P3: "The decision to have a child is very problematic." P6: "Children born out of such relationships may experience social discrimination and abuse."
Future of the child	P4: "Unwed mothers are a social outcast. They may be deserted by their parents or partners. In turn, the unwed mother is also likely to desert their new born." P1: "The child born out of a live-in relationship may be allowed to succeed inheritance in the property of the parents, although they do not have any claim in Hindu ancestral property. The apex court has clarified that the children born of parents in a live-in relationship could not be called illegitimate." P10: "If a daughter is born, but fathers wants son, he can walk out of living-in relationship easily." P8: "The child may be given to an orphanage."

Future orientation

Attitude change	P3: "Society needs to be patient; mindsets need to be changed." P4: "Outlook are slowly and gradually changing." P6: "Youth plays a major role in shaping and changing the society." P2: "Live-in relationship are still considered beyond the pale in India. But in a country where parents sometimes murder their children for marrying out of caste, many brave couples do live together without getting married."
Open mindedness	P12: "But now society is becoming more open minded." P8: "People need to be more mature."
Viable alternative for the bereaved spouses	P9: "Cohabitation though a tabooed phenomenon can be a viable alternative for a person who has lost their spouses. Re-marriages can be fairly complicated especially where legal and property issues may arise with older children."

Note: P = Participant; FGD 1 included P1 to P6; FGD 2 included P7 to P12; and FGD 3 included P13 to P18.

As per law, a man and a woman can live together even without getting married. There are rights, duties and liabilities associated with cohabitation. The participants were very well aware of the concept of cohabitation and its legal status as shown by the verbatim of some participants. As pointed out by P3, “the Supreme Court of India has given certain guidelines based on which cohabitation can be treated akin to a marriage...” It entails pooling of resources and financial arrangements, domestic arrangements, sexual relationship and bearing children, and sharing the responsibility for bringing up and supporting children. Although the legal status of cohabitation in India is unclear, P4 stated that, “the Supreme Court has ruled that any couple living together for a long term will be presumed as legally married”. Two adults can live together after attaining the age of 18 years, although the legal age for marriage in men is 21 years.

A number of participants defined cohabitation as a relationship in which two people live together and share sexual intimacy, perks and responsibilities without any legal obligation as reflected through verbatims of P4, P1, P10 and P11.

Views about Marriage

The participants were acquainted with the pros and cons of the institution of marriage in the Indian context. As P6 said, “Homemakers are financially dependent on their spouses (in marital arrangement).” Moreover, P4 stated that, “There’s a possibility that a marriage may or may not work. Divorce affects the future of women more, due to social taboos against it.” In case, the marriage doesn’t work, the costs are very high in terms of legal, financial, and social implications. And if children are involved, it further complicates the separation and divorce process. P2 also referred to the domestic abuse that may happen in marriage.

P5 highlighted another advantage for female cohabitators who can retain their surname and hence, maintain their independent identity. Further, P3 mentioned, “Women often lose their identity in the union of marriage.” In a marriage due to the patriarchal value system, a woman typically moves into the household of her husband or

his relatives, adopts his surname, and so on. Hence, she may lose her identity.

Perception of Cohabitation

It was very clear from the FGDs that the understanding of the concept of cohabitation may be subjective. What was ‘right’ for one individual may be ‘wrong’ for another. The theme of ‘Perception of Cohabitation’ was further divided into three subthemes, namely ‘individual perception’, ‘parental constraints’ and ‘social stigmas.’

From an individual perspective, cohabitation allowed the freedom to choose the lifestyle a person wishes to adopt. It is all about acceptance of one’s preferences and choices, especially career and finance related. This was clearly depicted through the verbatim of P3 and P4. Another very important aspect pointed out by P5 was that cohabitation is the most natural form of existence breaking the constraints of religions and societies. Parents’ perceptions played a pivotal role in the phenomenon of cohabitation. Education level of the parents was perceived to be an important factor in determining their acceptance of cohabitation. It was also observed that the past experiences, familial, social and cultural background (for example, rural and urban) played a crucial role. In the Indian context, parental roles are very demanding and have a sacrificial quality about them and thus, often parents may expect their children to take their approval for their lifestyle choices, like cohabitation. Supporting verbatim of P11 was, “Many people don’t even tell their parents that they are in a live-in relationship.” The role of society and culture also plays a significant role in the lived experience of cohabitation. The group felt that all individuals were answerable to the society and defying societal norms was a huge challenge. Verbatim evidence from P8, P2 and P3 indicated the same.

Exposure through Modelling and Observation

‘Media influence’ and ‘peer interactions’ are two major sub themes under this theme. Indian cinema plays a pivotal role in understanding and experiencing cohabitation. Many young people adopt the idea of cohabitation in their lives by learning from celebrity’s

sensational accounts of their living-in relationships, for example, female Bollywood actor Neena Gupta and World famous West Indian Cricketer Viv Richards. According to P4, "... John Abraham and Bipasha Basu were also seen to be cohabiting". P2 shared that, "all charges against South Indian actress Khushboo, who had openly talked about pre-marital sex and live-in relationships were dropped by Court." Social media may also propagate false expectations and distorted stereotypes regarding cohabitation. False claims regarding romantic relationships are authenticated by dubious research resources. Participants urged that one should be cautious of such media propaganda. According to P13, "I think there is a lot of information related to romantic relationships without any concrete research evidence for example, '10 best things to do with a guy on a date', 'How to make relationship better' or '10 signs he is madly in love with you', ..."

Peer interactions also facilitate one's exposure to cohabitation. P9 said that, "I got to know this from my friends". Thus, peer groups may also provide validation to young people who are considering cohabitation unlike parents and relatives who generally have reservations against the concept.

Positive Aspects of Cohabitation

In all the FGDs, positive aspects of cohabitation were emphasized. Three sub themes emerged, namely: 'Freedom from restrictions'; 'compatibility'; and 'fulfillment of physical and emotional needs.'

Freedom from restrictions denoted fewer responsibilities and restrictions as compared to marriage. It gives a couple the freedom to live the way they desire, as mentioned by P11 and P12. Cohabitation also provides an opportunity to explore compatibility with a partner before marriage, as mentioned by P7.

Cohabitation may meet the physical and emotional needs of the cohabiting couples. Emotional support, individuality, mutual understanding, companionship, comfort, romance and physical intimacy are integral parts of the lived experience of cohabiting couples. P3 said that, "Mutual understanding between partner's increases, decision making improves and they often get

plenty of time to know each other in relationship." P17 emphasized, "Relationship is an emotional bond. You are physically or emotionally connected with the other individual." P13 also mentioned, "It's human nature to want companionship ... Romantic relationships and cohabitation fulfill this need very well."

Darker Side of Cohabitation

Cohabitation does not come without its pitfalls. 'Trust issues'; 'harassment cases'; 'insecurity'; 'financial misuse'; 'legal repercussions'; and 'future of the child', were considered as some of the main issues, or problems being faced by cohabiting couples.

P9 questioned the trustworthiness of the partner when she said, "But what if the person isn't trustworthy and would leave." Cohabitants may be exposed to harassment and abuse and the social support of the family may also be absent as mentioned by P7, "There is no protection from harassment like in a conventional marriage where family members may intervene ... There is a danger of getting exploited by sadists and perverted potential partners." P12 mentioned "People can leave each other as they have no tag like a marriage", and highlighted a possible cause of insecurity in cohabiting couples. P14 highlighted the potential for financial abuse and misuse in a live-in relationship stating, "In the beginning, couple may agree to share financial burden and couples decide to make a joint account but after a breakup money distribution may be unfair.", Another issue that surfaced during the FGD was the uncertainty of the legal position of cohabitation in India. Verbatim evidence for the same by P15: "Live-in relationship is uncertain, if it is governed by laws then the very purpose is defeated. Legal marriages are much better."

A very contentious issue in cohabitation is whether to have a child or not. Moreover, the children born out of such relationships may face multiple challenges. As P4 stated, "unwed mothers are a social outcast. They may be deserted by their parents or partners. In turn, the unwed mother is also likely to desert their newborn." P1 clarified some legal aspects regarding the future of the child as depicted in the verbatim, "the child born out of a live-in relationship may be allowed to succeed

inheritance in the property of the parents, although they do not have any claim in Hindu ancestral property. The apex court has clarified that the children born of parents in a live-in relationship could not be called illegitimate."

Future Orientation

Cohabitation has important future implications, such as 'attitude change'; 'open mindedness'; and 'viable alternative for the bereaved spouses'. There was a sense of hope, when it came to society's changing attitudes and its openness towards cohabitation. While few like P6 believed that, "Youth plays a major role in shaping and changing the society." P3 said that, "Society needs to be patient, mindsets need to be changed."

P8 mentioned "People need to be more mature" and thus emphasizing the need to perceive cohabitation in a more mature and practical way. In FGD 2, cohabitation came out to be a viable alternative for bereaved spouses to meet their physical, emotional and social needs without getting into legal complications of marriage especially where the property rights of adult children are involved. P2 advocated living-in relationships as the future course in spite of social and parental opposition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that cohabitation may be the future popular choice as a plausible alternative to marriage by the young people. It is likely to become a common pattern of living rather than a sidelined tabooed one. The phenomena of cohabitation will get more and more destigmatized with passing time. As pointed out by one participant cohabitation was the most natural form of existence which was successfully breaking the constraints of religions and societies. The researchers found young people supporting this lifestyle choice in an overwhelming way in spite of the innumerable problems it accompanies like parental opposition, trust issues, exploitation, future of the child born out of such relationships etc. The participants were very well informed about the legal implications of cohabitation for the couple and as well as the children born out of such relationships. Another important trend noted by the researchers was that global forces and

social media are shaping the values and attitudes of younger generations in general and specifically about marriage and cohabitation, in comparison to familial forces and parental influence. They also came out with a unique solution like cohabitation being a natural and hassle-free lifestyle choice for bereaved spouses to avoid complications and legal hassles of a remarriage.

Limitations and Future Studies

The present study had its own share of limitations. It did not include couples in living in relationships due to hesitation on part of the couples to volunteer to take a part in the study thus depriving the study of first hand and authentic information on the topic. The Focus group discussions took only female college students from Delhi-NCR thus the findings of the study cannot be generalized to the population at large. The study did not use any quantitative scale. The three FGDs could cover only the view of 18 participants.

Further research on cohabitation can be multi-method with larger sample sizes, it should include viewpoints of males, middle aged and old age people. Even more importantly, it should include couples living in such an arrangement. Future studies should also include cohabitating LGBTQIA couples which the present study did not cover. Experts like lawyers, judiciary, relationship counsellors, marital counsellors should be involved in future research.

Expanding theoretical and application-oriented knowledge generation on family and marriage with a greater focus on alternate union formations should be the focus of future research endeavors. Marital and cohabiting relationships globally are on the rise, coupled with instability of such unions and breaking of conventional marriage and childbearing practices are a contemporary reality and are likely to continue. Cohabitation is gradually becoming the new normal prior to marriage.

Due to these changes, children's familial environment has altered for the worst. Children are increasingly exposed to disadvantaged households, temporary coresidential relationships, and household members who are neither caregivers nor biologically related to them, particularly

in India's metropolitan setting (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

Conventional research themes on union formation will give way to novel research that reflect the altered scenario of marriage and cohabitation, as well as the choice of partners in future, such as online dating. Egalitarian relationships are becoming increasingly popular among youth in which couples share work and family responsibilities in an equitable manner (Pampel, 2011). Thus, exploring such couple relationships should also be the focus of future research.

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