



Women's Lived Experiences of Cohabitation: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Introduction: The phenomenon of cohabitation or what is known in Iran as “white marriage” has presented women with new psychological and social challenges. The present study aimed to address the lived experience of cohabiting women.

Methods: This qualitative and descriptive study was conducted using a phenomenological approach. The participants were 17 women who were selected through purposive sampling from among those who referred to health centers in District 22 of Tehran in 2018. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the participants and were saturated after 17 interviews. The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method.

Results: The women's psychological and emotional needs were classified into three main themes including “experiencing a relationship with a partner with fear and hope”, “satisfaction of emotional, psychological, and sexual needs” and “concerns about an uncertain future”.

Conclusion: The main motivation for the women to be involved in this relationship was their disinterest in accepting responsibility. They also considered this relationship as a way to satisfy their sexual needs. Following these results, family and marriage counselors should take into account the serious harm that such relationships will have on the lives of future women.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Lived experience, Women, Qualitative research

Introduction

In the 21st century, human culture has undergone a revolution in the field of family relationships and developments. Fear of forming a family life, escaping from responsibility, and living without commitment are the characteristics of life in the century of communication and cyberspace (1). The formation of and changes in families have even led to the emergence of partners who refuse to have children (2). One of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the composition of the relationship between opposite sexes in recent decades is the increase in the number of people who engage in cohabitation or white marriage before marrying formally. Iran has not been immune to the socio-cultural changes that

have taken place in the world so that during the past one hundred years, Iranian families have been experiencing a transition period under the influence of modernization and cultural conflict between traditional and modern patterns. These developments have affected many aspects of Iranian people's life including relations between individuals of opposite sexes. The Iranian community has retained some of its traditional elements and also received some characteristics of modern society (3). One of these features is the emergence of new Western models, including cohabitation without formal marriage. Cohabitation or white marriage is an emerging phenomenon that is especially observed in



metropolitan cities and immigration-friendly areas, and possibly among the younger generation, the emerging classes, and the more affluent urban areas (4).

It seems that the reasons for the adoption of cohabitation in Western countries are completely different from the reasons for Iranians. This ideology emerged in Western societies against religious domination and strict traditions, which led to changes in social norms that increased individualism and intellectual changes. The consequences of these changes are economic, especially for financially independent women (2). However, in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, when patriarchal religious systems emerged, the emergence of cohabitation among the younger generation was not based on political or religious opposition. Rather, it was a response to a sexually restricting community that was founded based on ancient traditions and customs (5).

Different people react differently to the pressures of sexual maturity and the increased age of marriage, as well as the widening gap between the two in different ways. Some people turn to temporary and romantic relationships to fill this gap. However, romantic relationships, in their advanced patterns, lead to cohabiting relationships. This new model encompasses all the features of an emotional friendship model, with the difference that cohabitation is an arrangement whereby two people are not married but live together and are often involved in a romantic or sexually intimate relationship (6). Marriage reduces the sense of individuality in people and contributes to the social development of individuals and their self-confidence, but cohabitation only contributes to individual independence and defines individualistic identity and avoidance of the community (7).

Cohabitation or white marriage also found a place in Iranian metropolises such as Tehran. Some young girls, most of whom are educated, accept cohabitation with men, regardless of the consequences of this type of relationship, and sometimes even suggest this lifestyle, and perhaps this phenomenon can be considered a kind of emerging subculture in the current Iranian community (8).

Cohabitation is a complex social phenomenon and a multifunctional path. This lifestyle has different meanings for two people living together. It is a transient relationship with uncertainty about the future that encourages men not to accept a permanent life and leaves women with doubts about whether to continue the relationship. Although the two cohabiting people may have positive experiences early

in their relationship, such as intimacy, financial support, and happiness, this relationship also faces serious threats and challenges. For example, they experience infidelity, unwanted pregnancy, uncertainty and mistrust, cultural problems, lack of recognition of legal rights in sexual relations, and finally feelings of doubt, hesitation, and confusion in the relationship (9).

Various studies have addressed the causes of the increase in cohabitation and the tendency of people to this lifestyle and they have stated different factors according to the studied society and its culture and values. In many European countries, divorce seems to be a necessary but insufficient cause for cohabitation. Besides, there is considerable evidence that the correlation between divorce and cohabitation may be due to changes in intergenerational behavior (10). Gravningen et al. examined the reasons for the breakdown of marriage and the desire for cohabitation and sexual attitudes in the UK. The results showed that men have sexually positive attitudes toward cohabitation and that the partner can be replaced in this type of relationship after the emergence of sexual problems. However, this is not the case in legal marriage, and marital problems can lead to sexual imbalance and coldness between the couples. Moreover, because men tend to be less committed than women, they prefer such relationships, and usually, a small percentage of these relationships will lead to marriage, and men always have a kind of insecurity about their sexual partners. Self-centeredness, high expectations, low emotional engagement with the sexual partner, lack of mutual respect, and uncertainty of many issues cause many problems and conflicts in cohabiting relationships (11).

For reasons such as unwillingness to commit, unwillingness to have children, seeking diversity, and continuing education, marriage is either postponed or not done at all, and this has increased cohabiting relationships. When an acute problem does not arise, the partners will continue the relationship and if there is a problem, they will separate. However, in marriage, due to restrictions, rights, and laws, the parties must seek a solution to solve the problem and thus they have more specific rights, and this in itself gives the parties a sense of security that is nonexistent in white marriage (12).

Nosratinejad and Bahrami studied the factors affecting the tendency of young people to cohabitation and showed that cohabitation has been increasing due to the economic and social changes of countries and the expansion of economic functions in the family.

Therefore, the formation of an institution called the formal family does not make sense for young people given the reduced functioning of this institution (13). Consequently, given a decline in family functions, people in the community are more likely to turn to creating new forms of the family to satisfy their needs, with cohabitation or white marriage being one of these new forms. Economic rationality, ease in establishing and ending relationships, accumulation of wealth through joint ventures, and the use of shared housing are some of the reasons for people's interest in cohabitation. Studies have highlighted different reasons for cohabitation in different populations (3,13). For instance, Karimiyan and Zarei found six main reasons for people to engage in cohabiting relationships including preparation for marriage and worrying about its consequences, economic benefits, satisfying sexual and emotional needs, worrying about the consequences of divorce, diminishing the supervisory and supportive role of the family, and probationary marriage and testing adjustment (14).

White marriage, referred to in articles as cohabitation, is creeping into the lives of young Iranian women and girls, posing a serious threat to the institution of the family and the stability of marriage. Unfortunately, the distance from the family and the reduction of social control in metropolitan cities, along with open-minded attitudes towards marriage and pre-marriage sex and the trend and prevalence of seeking diversity have created a context for young people to experience this type of relationship. (8). High rates of divorce and marital conflicts, the rising age of marriage among youth, especially educated people, migration and residence in large cities for vocational and educational purposes, lack of family control, lack of financial means to form a family, and the prevalence of new premarital sexual relationships are just some of the threats to the foundation of the family in Iran today (6). Svodziwa and Kurete conducted a qualitative study on cohabitation among graduate students in Bolivia and found that the choice of cohabitation was mainly influenced by reasons such as lack of housing and the need to have an intimate relationship with a person. In contrast, it had negative consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases especially for women (15).

Cohabitation somehow satisfies some human needs because any action that is done or continues can satisfy some physical, emotional, and psychological needs, but it is also associated with harmful consequences. An issue of interest is to find out the place of cohabitation in the lives of Iranian women

and girls. Given that this phenomenon has emerged in Iran just for a couple of years, there are not many studies on cohabitation and the existing studies have addressed the underlying factors and motivations for engaging in cohabiting relationships and their adverse effects. Thus, to bridge this research gap, the present study aims to explore Iranian women's lived experiences of cohabitation.

Methods

This qualitative study was an applied one in terms of its objectives and a descriptive phenomenological study in terms of the method used for data collection. In this research method, participants describe their experiences of a phenomenon (16). The participants in this study were women who referred to the health centers in District 22 of Tehran Municipality in 2018 who had the experience of engaging in cohabiting relationships. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants and this procedure continued until the data were theoretically saturated after interviewing 17 persons who were selected using purposive sampling. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews that were conducted to explore and identify the emotional and psychological needs of women who were engaged in cohabiting relationships. Before starting the interviews, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants, informed consent was obtained from them, and they were ensured that their identities would remain confidential and their recorded data would be deleted after performing data analysis. Furthermore, the researchers did not insist on knowing the real identities of the participants so that they could provide more authentic information. The interview process began with a general question about cohabitation among women: As a person who has experienced white marriage, what are some of your psychological or emotional needs met by this type of marriage? To clarify the answers provided by the participants, other questions were asked. Afterward, at the end of each interview session, the interviewees were asked to add additional comments (if any).

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method of data analysis. The interviews were conducted in person on the days and hours that were more convenient for the participants in the counseling office at health centers, which had good transportation and welfare facilities. The interviews continued until the data were theoretically saturated and no new information was observed upon additional interviews with new participants. Each

interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and the interviews were conducted from February to June 2018. The data collected through the interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method of data analysis (17) and in compliance with ethical considerations. In the first step, the participants' statements and their descriptions were transcribed word for word and the transcripts were reviewed several times to understand the participants' feelings and experiences. In the second step, significant statements were highlighted and extracted. In the third step, the themes reflecting the main ideas of the participants concerning the phenomenon in question were extracted from the significant statements. The identified themes were also checked to ensure their relevance with the participants' statements and the related codes were extracted. In the fourth step, the extracted codes were reviewed and categorized into clusters of themes based on their similarities. In the fifth step, the resulting clusters were merged into broader categories. In the sixth step, an exhaustive description of the phenomenon in question was developed by synthesizing all theme clusters. Finally, in the seventh step, the validity of the data was ensured by discussing the findings with the participants. Moreover, the credibility and dependability of the findings were checked using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (18). To bring the findings into the relevant context, the collected data were triangulated by comparing them with previous studies in the literature on white marriage, cohabitation, and the reasons for young people's interest in these relationships. Besides, the participants were asked to review the results and their opinions were taken into account when interpreting the results. Furthermore, all steps taken to

perform this study were documented and reported to enhance the clarity and transferability of the findings.

Before conducting the interviews, written consent was obtained from the participants and they were ensured that their personal information including names, phone numbers, and addresses would not be disclosed. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then the participants' recorded voices were deleted.

Results

Table 1 shows the participants' demographic data including age, education, field of study, occupation, income level, and length of cohabitation.

The analysis of the data revealed the participants' psychological and emotional needs in the form of main themes and subthemes. Accordingly, 16 primary subthemes and 3 main themes were identified as shown in Table 2.

The first theme: Experiencing a relationship with a partner with fear and hope

Having no sense of obligation to engage in a lasting relationship: The participants believed that cohabitation is an arrangement whereby two people enter into a relationship based on their own free will and can end this relationship whenever they want: *"I think that the two partners have no sense of coercion to be in this relationship, and they are only together out of love and affection, and whenever they get into trouble, they can separate without any trouble and the need for referring to a court of law. This type of marriage gives you a sense of freedom and you have a choice"* (Participant 3).

Table 1. The participants' demographic data

Row	Age	Education	Field of study	Occupation	Income level	Mode of interview	Length of cohabitation (year)
1	32	Master's degree	Graphics	Graphical designer	Good	Face to face	4
2	36	Bachelor's degree	Accounting	Accountant	Moderate	Face to face	3
3	34	Master's degree	Graphics	Graphical designer	Good	Face to face	10
4	33	Master's degree	Financial management	Sales manager	Good	Phone	5
5	35	Associate's degree	Surveying	Beauty salon manager	Good	Face to face	2
6	36	Bachelor's degree	Economics	Dental assistant	Poor	Phone	2
7	29	Bachelor's degree	Midwifery	Midwife	Good	Phone	3
8	28	Master's degree	Business administration	Math teacher	Moderate	Phone	2
9	34	Bachelor's degree	Business administration	Marketer	Moderate	Face to face	5
10	31	Bachelor's degree	Surveying	Computer Surveyor	Good	Face to face	4
11	30	Master's degree	Graphics	Graphical designer	Good	Phone	4
12	32	Bachelor's degree	Psychology	Secretary	Poor	Face to face	2
13	32	Master's degree	Graphics	Painting teacher	Moderate	Face to face	3
14	35	Master's degree	Psychology	School counselor	Moderate	Phone	3
15	36	Bachelor's degree	Economics	Hairdresser	Good	Phone	2
16	29	Master's degree	Psychology	Counselor	Moderate	Phone	1
17	32	Highschool diploma	Experimental sciences	Secretary	Poor	Face to face	2

Table 2. Themes and subthemes identified in the data

Core category	Main themes	Subthemes
Living without hope in future	Experiencing a relationship with a partner with fear and hope	Having no sense of obligation to engage in a lasting relationship Encountering economic problems and having to cut down on expenses Feeling insecure Feeling broken at the end of the relationship An opportunity for a probationary marriage and liberation from loneliness An opportunity to know each other better
	Satisfaction of emotional, psychological, and sexual needs	Freedom and independence Experiencing equal power in life Engaging in free sexual relations A sense of mutual commitment and loyalty Expressing emotions freely to each other and feeling intimacy Receiving psychological support from the partner
	Concerns about an uncertain future	Feeling uncertain in the relationship Worrying about ending the relationship Concerns about family members and others knowing about the relationship Fear of losing the opportunity to have children due to an unknown future

Encountering economic problems and having to cut down on expenses: The participants believed that cohabitation could be a good alternative to legal marriage due to the unfavorable economic conditions of the country and the enormous costs of legal marriage. “Currently, the costs of living have risen considerably and there are many economic problems in our country so that young people cannot afford substantial costs of marriage. On the other hand, each person has some needs and he/she wants to have a partner in their life. Well, cohabitation in this economically terrible situation of our society can be a good alternative to legal marriage, and the two parties live together and the man does not have to put up with the burden of economic problems and the woman no longer expects the man to pay for all the living expenses” (Participant 2).

Feeling insecure: The participants stated that women who are engaged in cohabitation do not feel secure enough and are worried about the end of the relationship by their partner at any time. “In cohabitation, you don’t feel secure because your partner may leave you at any moment without any reason, and I, as a girl who accepted to engage in this relationship, have no right to protest and I cannot help it. I just have to accept it, that’s why I was always worried about the end of my relationship, which eventually happened” (Participant 10).

Feeling broken at the end of the relationship: According to the participants, since cohabitation is not accepted in Iranian culture and people typically have a negative view of such relationships, if this relationship ends, women who generally have a vulnerable position in Iranian society will be more

harmful. “A girl who engages in a cohabiting relation will be harmed a lot if this relationship ends. On the one hand, her family will no longer accept her and people will look down on such a girl, and maybe this girl will never have a successful and good marriage again. Well, no Iranian man would accept to marry a girl who has experienced such a relationship. And after the end of this relationship, the girl may feel lonely, broken, and regret and become depressed” (Participant 5).

An opportunity for a probationary marriage and liberation from loneliness: The participants believed that cohabitation could provide an opportunity to practice a real marriage and liberation from loneliness caused by not having a family or being away from family. “Cohabitation is a great opportunity for both parties to experience a real marriage, to live together, to find out if they suit each other, they can have a good life together for the rest of their lives, and also assess each other in different situations. When I came to Tehran to do my studies, I lived alone and met a boy and I loved him very much. To escape from the feeling of loneliness due to being away from my family, I decided to live with my boyfriend” (Participant 7).

An opportunity to know each other better: The analysis of the participants’ experience showed cohabitation provided a good opportunity for the two people to better understand each other’s personality and characteristics. “I think cohabitation is a great opportunity for two people to get to know each other and live together without a legal contract. It also helps them get to know each other’s character, needs, interests, and goals, and to see if they can get

along with each other or not" (Participant 10).

The second theme: Satisfaction of emotional, psychological, and sexual needs

Freedom and independence: The women who experienced cohabiting with a man stated that this relationship satisfied their need for their freedom and independence and both parties would respect each other's privacy and in neither situation would anyone dominate the other. Moreover, this freedom doesn't mean that the parties are unbound to moral standards. *"In my opinion, cohabitation is generally a completely free relationship and the two parties live together solely based on their own desires, and neither party is forced to do something according to the other party's wishes. They also respect each other's privacy, interests, and wishes. They are committed and loyal to each other, but some people think that cohabitation means having unrestrained sexual relations and that everyone can do whatever they want"* (Participant 15).

Experiencing equal power in life: The participants stated that they had equal power to choose and decide on various issues of cohabitation. *"My partner and I exchange ideas and talk about all the personal and common issues in our lives, and we both play an equal role in decisions. Whenever a partner suggests something that makes sense and seems reasonable, we both follow it. Generally, all our decisions are made jointly"* (Participant 13).

Engaging in free sexual relations: The participants believed that they had good sexual relations qualitatively and quantitatively, and both enjoyed having sex to the same extent without any restrictions and constraints: *"Our sexual relations are very good both in terms of quality and quantity, we are both completely satisfied, and we love having sex without any limitation"* (Participant 17).

A sense of mutual commitment and loyalty: The participants stated that both partners were committed and loyal to each other and that the lack of a legal contract was not a reason for non-commitment and disloyalty. *"I think since we live together without any coercion, there is no reason for infidelity. We really think we are like a real couple and we are very loyal to each other. If one day we are tired of this relationship, we will decide to end it instead of wanting to have a secret relationship with another person"* (Participant 16).

Expressing emotions freely to each other and feeling intimacy: The participants in this study stated that

both partners easily expressed their feelings and emotions, could express non-verbal love to each other, had common interests and fun together, and spent a lot of time together and with their friends. *"We used to express our feelings, both positive and negative, very easily. We used to love each other and say lovely things but there were times when we used to fight a lot. We were friends, we were very close, we had a lot of fun and common interests, we went to the theater together, we had weekly appointments with our friends, we shared all our issues and problems, and we had nothing to hide from each other"* (Participant 11).

Receiving psychological support from the partner: According to the participants, they enjoyed the support and empathy of their partner in different life situations and in times of difficulties and problems. *"My partner has always supported me emotionally, psychologically, and financially. Whenever I have a problem, he has empathized with me as much as possible. He has guided and sympathized with me as much as he could. He never let me feel lonely and I have always felt secure to have a strong supporter"* (Participant 16).

The third theme: Concerns about an uncertain future

Feeling uncertain in the relationship: The participants believed that they constantly felt indecisive and uncertain and did not have a specific goal for their relationship. Besides, the direction and future of the relationship was unclear to them and they were very confused and worried about this. *"I always feel uncertain about the future of our relationship. I really do not know what is going to happen and I am very worried about it. Our relationship will end very suddenly and I am not ready for this at all and I think I will be hurt badly"* (Participant 14).

Worrying about ending the relationship: The participants stated that they were constantly concerned about the time when their relationship could come to an end because they were very dependent on their partners and were interested in them. They were also worried about the harms and consequences of ending the relationship, and this feeling was associated with a high level of anxiety. *"I was always very scared that our relationship would end, even though my partner was bothering me a lot, I was still very dependent on him and I was worried that one day the relationship would end and eventually it happened and I still feel terrible"* (Participant 5).

Concerns about family members and others knowing about the relationship: The women who

secretly lived with their partner were worried about their family members getting aware of this relationship and were very anxious about being rejected by their family and people around them. *"Well, my biggest fear has always been that if my family, especially my father, understands what is happening, maybe my family will never forgive me and break up with me. Now that my relationship is over and I am no longer a virgin girl, I do not know what to do and from whom to ask for help. I am very stressed and I am afraid that this story will be disclosed"* (Participant 8).

Fear of losing the opportunity to have children due to an unknown future: The participants believed that they could not have children in a relationship where their future was still unknown. Thus, they had no desire to have children at all and believed the children born through these relationships would definitely face many problems. *"Because of the unknown future of this relationship, we do not want to have children at all, and we talked about this and agreed not to have children, because the child will have many problems due to the unknown nature of our relationship, and our relationship may end one day and it's not clear what will happen to the child"* (Participant 2).

Discussion

The present study showed the contradictory needs and expectations of women from white marriage. They were not sure if cohabitation could meet their needs. The need for experiencing freedom and the psychological need to be supported by a partner due to economic problems and having to cut down on expenses were some reasons that motivated some women to choose to cohabit with a man. Following these findings, previous studies have shown different reasons motivating women to get interested in white marriage (4,6,11,13,14). These studies have shown that women may opt for white marriage or cohabitation for a variety of reasons such as the decline in the function and importance of family, immigration, lack of family control in big cities such as Tehran, negative attitudes about traditional marriage, lack or weakness of religious beliefs, having an open-ended relationship, satisfaction with a diversity-seeking lifestyle, unrestricted relationships, meeting financial and emotional needs, and release from values and parental influence. Following a different perspective, Gravningen et al. highlighted high expectations, low emotional attachment to the sexual partner, mutual disrespect, the uncertainty of many issues, and the occurrence of

many problems and conflicts as disadvantages of this type of relationship (11).

The feeling of loneliness and not having a certain future were also two significant issues frequently highlighted by the participants in the present study. Similarly, Golchin and Safari (4), Karimiyan and Zarei (14), and Azadarmaki et al. (8) suggested that satisfying emotional needs, affection, sexual needs, and having a sense of support can be the reasons for the tendency to cohabitation. However, there is still a sense of doubt about the relationship and hesitation to continue it (12).

Some of the women who participated in this study were worried about losing childbearing opportunities due to the unknown future of their relationship. Accordingly, Khodaverdian et al. (6) and Kgadima (9) found that most families were opposed to the cohabitation of their children and most young people who agreed with this marriage were concerned about the awareness of families and people of this relationship.

Currently, cohabitation is a way to replace marriage or the beginning of marriage in the West. However, despite much data on the efficiency of cohabitation, there are many doubts about it (1,2). Research in the West has shown that abuse is more common in cohabitation (9). Furthermore, many studies have shown that physical assaults are much more common and severe among cohabiting couples than married couples (11, 12). Therefore, white marriage has not been approved and favored in Western countries due to its psychological consequences, especially for women, and is in conflict with the principle of family formation in Christianity (10). However, some people accept this relationship with all its problems to get rid of their loneliness (19). One of the limitations of the present study was that the research sample included only women who referred to health centers in District 22 of Tehran Municipality.

Conclusion

The present study revealed that cohabitation for women is associated with many uncertainties and problems. Although cohabitation meets some of their needs, it can lead to many doubts and uncertainties that can undermine legitimacy in life, expediency, foresight, morality, humanity, and freedom in women. Therefore, social scientists and mental health professionals should address threats and challenges caused by white marriage for families and young people.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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