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Live-In Relationships: Will They Work In India?

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Written by [Savia Rajagopal](#)
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That the Indian government has recently recognised live-in relationships on par with marriage, in a new law on domestic violence proves that this is a growing social reality. While living-in may be liberating to some women, social research proves otherwise. Women need to be very clear about why they choose to cohabit with a partner, reports Savia Rajagopal.

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When live-in relationships first came out into the open in India, it created an uproar, with accusations of it being against Indian morality and culture. As the decades have gone by, the number of couples opting for cohabitation, without the strings of marriage, has increased significantly.

It is a trend that is more evident in the last decade. That the Indian government has recently recognised live-in relationships on par with marriage, in a new law on domestic violence proves that this is a growing social reality. Live-in relationships may have attained legal recognition, despite the controversies surrounding it but whether it has social acceptance is another issue altogether.

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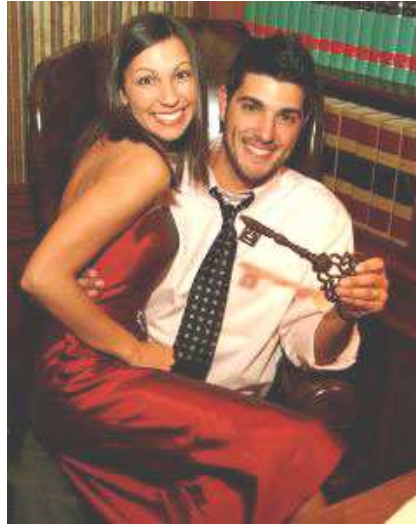
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As Dr Sharita Shah, Consultant Woman & Child Psychiatrist at Bhatia Hospital, and Dr. L. H. Hiranandani Hospital, notes, "Although we are global in our outlook in many ways, our society does frown upon live-in relationships. Most Indians believe that a man and woman can only live under the same roof and share a bed if their relationship has been solemnised by marriage. The taboo does exist in the older generation. But for the younger lot, who are more influenced by the west and those who have lived abroad, it is more acceptable."

Undeterred by social opinion, many couples prefer to live together before marriage, as they believe it is a precursor to any lifelong commitment. A case in point would be Vaidehi Naik, an IT professional, who recently married after living in for a while.

Sharing her insight, she says, "We were going out for two years before we decided to move in together. It definitely gave me a chance to know what I was getting into. It's different when you are dating and stay over at each other's place compared to when you are living together where you share everything from chores to bills."

She goes on to add that living together isn't commitment with an escape hatch, as often noted by detractors. It is merely about questioning whether one can live and respect her partner for the rest of her life, instead of living a marriage that is purely perfunctory and meets social standards, something she refers to as 'sham marriages'.



Despite her positive real-life experience, there is some research suggesting that couples who cohabit are not as happy as married couples (Source: USA Today).

Does Living In Harm Your Marriage?

Social scientists have found that:

People who lived together before marriage had a higher rate of divorce than those who did not live together.

People who lived together before marriage had more negative communication in their marriages than those who did not live together.

People who lived together before marriage had lower levels of marital satisfaction than those who did not live together.

It is believed that married couples make an attempt to compromise and accommodate to each other's life because the marriage is supposed to last for life. Cohabiting couples don't do this because they don't have a life-long commitment.

Research found that men who had lived with a woman before deciding to marry her were less dedicated to their wives after four years of marriage, than were men who got engaged before moving in with their fiancées.



Single women enjoy the benefits of freedom, financial independence and the ability to prioritise their career above family. Staying single is a choice that Indian women are choosing in increasing numbers, as they refuse to settle for less than satisfying relationships. Pallavi Bhattacharya analyses why, like all other choices in life, choosing to staying single has its pros and cons.

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Dr Shah states that, although this may true to an extent, ultimately, "It is important to know the reasons for choosing a live in relationship as opposed to marriage. Is it a prelude to marriage, or purely for one's convenience? The attitude of the two individuals plays a significant role too."

Do Women Misinterpret Men's Motives?

Men and women are simply not on the same page regarding their motives for living-in, say experts. Studies have shown that women consistently misinterpret the meaning of living together, according to Stanley, co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. (Source: [A Test Of Marriage](#), Cox News Service)

"She's thinking, 'We're on the right track, this is going somewhere' and he's thinking, 'I get to sleep with you every night and I get a clean place to live. Hey, it's working for me.', states Stanley.

Andrew Rusbatch, co-author of *Save My Marriage Today!*, recommends that a woman ask herself whether cohabitation a way of minimizing the risk of divorce, or is it seen as a cheap and easy alternative to marriage?

In his article, "[Cohabitation - Relationship Checker or Relationship Wrecker?](#)", he writes

Well you need to start by going into it with your eyes wide open. Before shifting in with a man, consider why you are doing it. Is it because you want it, is it because it will make it more convenient, or is it the all-crucial "moving it to the next level"? Is this really marriage with trainer wheels?

Women will analyze a situation and examine possible interpretations of what this move may mean and what implications this is going to have on the state of the relationship, both now and in the future. Most guys simply see it as somewhere pretty to stick your stuff and to be nurtured and don't think too much into the future.

The Advantages Of Living In

Despite criticism, Dr. Shah points out that there are some advantages of the live-in arrangement. "The pros are many - it gives a couple who may be very seriously thinking of spending the rest of their lives together and having a family, an opportunity to get to know the other at various levels, and in different situations."

"One gets to know the day-to-day habits and working of the other and then is able to decide if they will be able to deal with those issues for a lifetime. Issues of money, running a house, waking and sleeping habits, bathroom etiquette, are all examined. It may sound trivial but many marriages do end due to the most basic differences including sleeping snoring, bathroom habits, etc."

A sentiment echoed by Vaidehi, who confides, "They say the first year of marriage is the hardest and if you survive that, then you are in for a long haul. We already lived that. I never feel trapped that we have to be together now that we are married, but felt that I was given a chance to know him before I took the decision of living with him for the rest of my life."

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The liberty to choose how you want to live, and with whom, is a liberating factor, feel many women who are in live-in relationships. So does the increase in cohabitation directly relate to the lessening importance attached to the institution of marriage or are they independent scenarios?

Dr. Shah maintains that marriage is still considered sacred as it is in-built into our upbringing and couples who are in long-term relationships want to be married before conception.

Cohabitation Can Be Liberating

Increasingly women are now choosing to live in with a man, and experts believe that one of the main reasons could be the stigma attached to a failed marriage.

Experts believe that given the high rates of divorce in the country, even if a woman is financially independent, the social price she pays for the failure of her marriage is devastating. Many families still refuse to support their daughter should her marriage dissolve.

Another aspect highlighted by Dr. Shah is the lack of prenuptial arrangements in India, which adds to a woman's insecurities towards marriage. Given the Indian scenario, live-in relationships are not treated the same as marriages, so it is easier to cut all cords without having to face serious legal or societal backlash.

Whether live-in relationships truly benefit a woman is a debatable issue. Even if one approaches it pragmatically, it ultimately boils down to personal choice. The option to live with someone without the label of being married, or to tread the conventional path of marriage, is now a real choice that women can exercise.

After decades of being told what is right and wrong, Indian women are lapping up this opportunity to test waters, before settling in for something that their mothers and grandmothers would have willingly accepted as their fate. If having choice is power, then the scales are certainly tipping in their favour.

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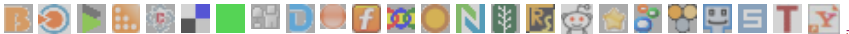
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