Understanding the Decision-Making Process of Women to Engage in Cohabiting Relationships

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Abstract: Despite the extensive literature on cohabitation, there is scant literature that explores women's decisions to engage in cohabitation. Drawing on the theory of planned behaviour and a qualitative research approach, this article explores the decision-making processes among women to engage in cohabitation. For some women, cohabitation was preceded by a clear conversation about the intention to marry. The second group of women described cohabitation as an expression of autonomy and independence by rejecting traditionally prescribed conventions such as marriage. When the promise of marriage fails to materialise, some women become increasingly disillusioned and opt to terminate their co-residence relationships in order to negotiate marriage as an option with their partners. This article utilised purposively and snowball sampling to gather data and this was through semi-structured interviews. This data was analysed thematically, and the results show a preponderance of a desire for autonomy that is checked by the harsh persistence of disempowering narratives. Further research is needed to establish patterns of autonomy in cohabiting partners.

Keywords: Cohabitation, marriage, termination, social work, women empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

This article operationalises the conventional understanding of cohabitation as meaning a man and woman living together as though they were husband and wife (Chinwuba, 2010:624). Cohabitation is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring significant in-depth assessment. First, it is important to understand how and why women cohabit. This comes from the recognition that women's decision-making autonomy is a complex and often elusive notion (Agadjanian & Hayford, 2018:1240). Traditionally, women are perceived as the powerless gender in major household affairs, including decisions on important relationship progression (Wang, Lou & Zhou, 2020:1).

There is some recognition that cohabitees often enter into cohabitation before making a mutual commitment, and the transition occurs before individuals fully comprehend the consequences of their decisions (Reid & Golub, 2015:1235). Hence, Guizzardi (2011:495) contends that cohabitation is a "fortuitous and occasional event rather than a conscious and reflective choice made by the couples." Most cohabitees do not seem to make a conscious decision to live together (Smith, 2014:6); instead, they slide into cohabitation without interrogating the ultimate decision to do so (Roberson, Norona, Fish, Olmstead & Fincham, 2016:3). This study therefore strongly contends that dating couples ought to make deliberate decisions to engage in a cohabitation relationship.

Studies on cohabitation suggest that women come to live together with their partners in several ways and for diverse reasons (Harris, 2020:2). Although studies argue that women cohabit due to pragmatic concerns external to the relationship such as convenience, practicality, financial necessity, or accommodation (Posel & Rudwick, 2014; Zito, 2015; Lailulo, Susuman & Blignaut, 2016:2), this paper argues that women make informed decisions to enter into cohabitation. Although cohabitation is frequently conceptualised as the next step toward marriage, there are other types of cohabitation that are not frequently mentioned. The literature generally distinguishes between two forms: first, cohabitation with marriage intentions and as a precursor to the institution; and second, cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (Posel & Rudwick, 2014:282).

The focus of this article is threefold. First, it explores the category of women who cohabit with the clear intention of getting married. Smith (2020:3) uses the term *intentional precursors to marriage* to describe cohabitation where a couple intends to marry in the future, unlike extensions to dating, alternatives to marriage, and trial marriages. Secondly, the article examines women who opted to cohabit because they rejected the patriarchal nature of marriage. Within this prototype of cohabitation, couples prefer to cohabit without marriage because they reject marriage as a patriarchal institution (Cho, Cui & Claridge, 2018:141; Smith, 2014:4). For these cohabitees, cohabitation "speaks toward emancipation" and it "serves as a statement of liberation and independence" (Gold, 2012:317). Thirdly, previous studies have established that women who cohabit on the understanding that

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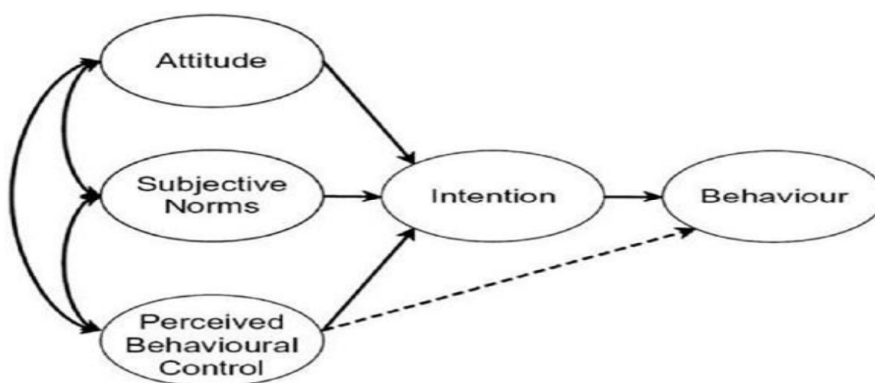
Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour (Adopted from Tornikoski & Maalaoui, 2019:537).

marriage will eventually happen become increasingly disillusioned when the relationship does not transition to marriage (Brown, Manning & Payne, 2015:18). Scholars have also established that women are more likely than men to decide in terminate the cohabiting relationship (Cho *et al*., 2018:141). Therefore, this article investigates the women's decisions to move out of their cohabitation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of planned behaviour, which is an extension of the [1]theory of reasoned action (Hsu & Huang, 2012:391), is a useful framework in understanding a wide variety of human behaviours (Eddosary, Ko, Sagas, & Kim,2015:89; Andersson, 2016:52; He, Wan, Luo, 2019:4483). Scholars find it relevant to explain human behaviour in decision-making processes (Ries, Hein, Pihu & Armenta, 2012). Consequently, it has been used to predict behavioural intentions and behaviours within relationships (Kasearu, 2010).

This theory is premised on three hypotheses (See also Figure **1**. Theory of Planned Behaviour for illustration):

- The belief is that human beings are usually quite rational and make systematic use of the information available to them. This theory derives its name from the assertion that people consider the implications of their actions before they decide to perform or not to perform a given

behaviour. In this respect, action is normally reasoned beforehand (Isaid & Faisal, 2015:597).

- Most human behaviours are predictable, based on intention. He *et al*. (2019:4483) contend that people's behaviour is mostly controlled by their own volition and rationale. Therefore, f, whether a person engages in behavior directly, depends on their intention to act (Isaid & Faisal, 2015:597).

- Individuals are motivated by attitude to engage in a particular behaviour (Han & Kim, 2010:660). As such, attitude becomes the personal evaluation of the various aspects of performing the behavior (Wong, & Chow, 2017:286).

According to Stoddard and Pierce (2018:759), individuals are likely to hold more favourable attitudes towards a specific type of behaviour if they attribute positive outcomes to it. Similarly, before individuals cohabit they consider the advantages and disadvantages, in tandem with their perceptions of the norms governing cohabitation, and their own (non)compliance to those norms (Guzzo, 2009). Furthermore, the proponents of the theory of planned behaviour are consistent with key assumptions of self-determination which purport that individuals have moved away from traditional norms and expectations in respect of romantic relationships (He *et al*., 2019:4483). People therefore enter into a romantic relationship for its own sake without any obligation (Smith, 2014:3). Rather than relying on prescribed social norms, individuals have inherent choices on how to construct their lives and identities (Hughes, 2015:707). The article adopts the theory of planned behaviour in light of the recognition that not all women slide into cohabitation. Additionally, such women must not be seen as lacking the power to make informed decisions within a cohabitation relationship. Central to

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[1]The theory of reasoned action (TRA) was developed in 1967 and was revised and expanded by Ajzen and Fishbein in early 1970s. By 1980, the theory was used to study human behaviour and develop appropriate interventions. In 1988, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) was added to the existing model of reasoned action to address the inadequacies that Ajzen and Fishbein had identified through their research using the TRA (He *et al*, 2019:4483; Isaid & Faisal, 2015:596).

this article is that women's decisions are carefully considered, with the women as active agents in this process. Women are born with the inherent ability to make logical decisions about many aspects that affect their lives. When reaching such decisions, they must be applauded for taking a brave step whether the condition is favourable or unfavourable. The intention to engage in a complex relationship like cohabitation should be linked with the strength of the intention to engage in the relationship.

METHODOLOGY

This article sought to explore women's decisions to engage in cohabitation using the exploratory-descriptive designs of the qualitative approach. The qualitative approach allowed for the identification and elaboration of the breadth and depth of the participants' subjective experiences (Funk & Kobayashi, 2014). An exploratory design was employed since the topic has not been robustly investigated while the descriptive design was appropriate in providing an accurate account of the participants' lived experiences (Grove, Burns & Gray, 2013:632).

Customarily, a qualitative inquiry calls for the formulation of the research questions from the onset, and not rely on hypotheses (Creswell, 2016:34). Therefore, the article aimed to respond to the following central question: How do women decide to engage in cohabiting relationships?

Data was gathered from 15 Black African women through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Participants were between the ages of 25 and 35 in cohabitation for a minimum of a year and a maximum of a decade. All the interviews were largely conducted in English for 30-45 minutes. To draw a sample from the population, non-probability, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques were employed. The snowball sampling was the most effective way of identifying participants in the current study, considering that some cohabitees were discreet in divulging their living arrangements. The data was analysed thematically using Tesch's approach as outlined in Creswell (2014:186). The credibility of the findings was achieved by triangulation through consulting with various knowledgeable sources on cohabitation. Confirmability was achieved through documenting ideas during data collection and analysis in the form of a journal. To ensure dependability, the findings were validated through the use of an independent coder in the data analysis. In this study, the element of transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the findings with appropriate quotations.

Ethical clearance was provided by the University of South Africa (UNISA), Social Work Departmental Research and Ethics Committee. The following ethical considerations were observed: obtaining written informed consent, assuring confidentiality, protecting participants from harm, and management of the research data.

Table 1: Biographical Profile of the Participants

Participant	Age	Racial and ethnic affiliation		Duration of the cohabiting relationship	Employment
A	35	African	Motswana	3 years	Unemployed
B	35	African	Motswana	3 years	General Assistant
C	34	African	Motswana	7 years	General Assistant
D	33	African	Motswana	3 years	General Assistant
E	32	African	Mopedi	5 years	Artisan
F	32	African	Motswana	6 years	Social Worker
G	31	African	Motswana	1year	Social Worker
H	30	African	UmXhosa	4 years	Lecturer
I	30	African	Motswana	5 years	Volunteer
J	29	African	Mopedi	7 years	Social Worker
K	29	African	UmZulu	3 years	Social Worker
L	28	African	Motswana	3 years	General Worker
M	27	African	Motswana	4 years	Social Worker
N	26	African	Motswana	4 years	General Assistant
O	25	African	Mopedi	4years	Auditor

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table **1** depicts the biographical data of the participants.

Some of the notable observations from the biographical profile are that all the participants were Black African women. These Black African women proffered several reasons for their cohabitation. First, for some African women, marriage remains an unattainable dream because their partners had not paid [2]*magadi* (Chaney & Fairfax, 2012:24). Second, women are more likely to cohabit as they perceive such an arrangement as one way of prioritising their career ambitions without being hampered by the traditional prescriptions of being a wife (Miller & Sassler, 2012:427). Third, Black African women are more likely to enter into cohabitation as an economic survival strategy. Due to their limited economic opportunities, Black African women continue to face significant challenges (Bowie & Kenney, 2013:6). The research findings in this article are presented under three themes that emerged from the interviews, namely plans to eventually get married, cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, and terminating a cohabiting relationship.

Theme 1: Plans to Eventually Get Married

The theory of planned behaviour postulates that expectations are an important pathway linking beliefs and values to behaviour (Stoddard & Pierce, 2018:759). Therefore, individuals generate expectations about their behaviour, and these expectations, in turn, influence whether or not they engage in the behaviour (Allendorf, Thornton, Mitchell & Young-DeMarco, 2019:2363).

In many instances where partners choose to enter into cohabitation, men traditionally control the progression from cohabitation to marriage as it is the men who ultimately propose marriage while the women have to patiently wait for such a proposal (Stavrova, Fetchenhauer & Schlösser, 2012:1063). However, in certain instances, women make deliberate decisions regarding the timing of moving in together, with the clear intention of eventually getting married, as illustrated in the extract below:

> *It was a conscious decision. I made a conscious decision. It was a*

[2]In South Africa, bride price is referred to as *magadi* or *mahadi* in the Sesotho languages, and *ilobola* in the Nguni languages (Bogopa, 2010:2). In other African countries such as Zimbabwe, the payment of *lobola* is referred to as *roora* among the Shona people (Mawere & Mawere, 2010:224).

> *progression…a well-communicated progression with objectives and the end goal in mind. The backbone of me moving in with him [cohabiting] was because we were going to get married. For me, part of the motivation to move in together was the genuine desire to want to live with him. I wouldn't have been comfortable moving in with someone who was not going to marry me. We always knew the end…you know I am not saying it was smooth. My decision was built upon the fact that my partner's intention has always been clear that one day we will get married.* (Participant O)

Consistent with the basic assumption of the theory of planned behaviour, the vignette here demonstrates that individuals who believe in marriage are more likely to cohabit if such a decision ultimately culminates in marriage (Maniotes, Ogolsky & Hardesty, 2020:3104). These individuals do not want to waste time in a relationship that has no future; hence, they often report that they would not cohabit if they were not certain of marriage (Roberson *et al.*, 2016).

Some women are wary of committing to marriage before taking the time to get to know each other more intimately (Reid & Golub, 2015). In this study, two participants regarded cohabitation as a preferred step toward marriage. The first of these participants specifically mentioned 'getting to know each other':

> *For me, it was a big step in our relationship before we eventually get married. It provides me with an opportunity to know him better. We agreed that if we stayed together we will have time to know each better* (Participant G).

The second of these participants stressed the need to sift personality from a probable 'abuser' as more significant:

> *For me, the benefit of being in a cohabiting relationship is that it allows me to know him better before we get married. The plan is to get married eventually. You get to learn about the next person, for example, if he is an abuser. I don't want to make the mistake of getting married before I get to know him better* (Participant I).

The excerpts suggest that some women may choose cohabitation to assess compatibility with a

partner or to find out if their partner would change for the worse or exhibit a different personality than estimated before cohabitation. This is derived from the observation that dating couples tend to behave differently when leading separate lives than they do in cohabitation (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). During cohabitation, couples learn about each other's personalities and qualities more closely than they would in a casual relationship (Reinhold, 2010).

One participant mentioned that cohabitation enabled her to investigate possibilities of a career by delaying marriage, instead opting for cohabitation.

> *I have decided to cohabit because I am not ready to get married now but I need to be at a stage where I should be ready to get married. I am currently focusing on other personal aspirations like my career and exploring the world. To be honest, I want to get married but I am not in a rush and I am very happy with the structure of our current arrangement*. (Participant M).

The participant in this vignette sees cohabitation as a litmus test when couples do not entirely reject the notion of marriage, but it is chosen for its flexibility to permit the pursuit of a personal domain such as a career (Smock & Kroeger, 2015). Similarly, studies that have investigated the power dynamics in intimate relationships demonstrate that women's autonomy and their capacity to effect changes in relationships may be influenced by their schooling (Agadjanian & Hayford, 2018:1240; Salem, 2018:2616).

Theme 2: Cohabitation as an Alternative to Marriage

Consistent with one of the key assumptions of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, researchers postulate that a woman's intention to engage in behaviour depends on her attitude towards the behaviour (Jozkowskia & Geshnizjanic, 2016:16). Attitude towards the behaviour refers to the degree to which an individual has a favourable or unfavourable appraisal of the behaviour in question (Tornikoski & Maalaoui, 2019:537). Other scholars have also argued that intention toward the behaviour is shaped by subjective norms, which are defined as the social pressures felt by an individual to perform the behaviour (Eddosary *et al*., 2015,89). Although marriage is often supposed to be a more significant event in a woman's life (Stavrova *et al*., 2012: 1065), it has also been noted that some

women reject marriage due to its perceived rigidity (Murrow & Shi, 2010:400). The alternative perception is that cohabitation affords women some degree of freedom of choice (Martignani, 2011:566). Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage exclusively describes those who intend to cohabit permanently without marrying (Smith, 2014:4).

Autonomy and personal identity appear critical for the majority of cohabitees who reject the institution of marriage (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). For this category, cohabitation represents freedom whereas marriage implies the loss of personal freedom (Gold, 2012).

Some women opt for cohabitation which affords them the freedom of choice (Martignani, 2011). Martínez and Khalil (2012:239) argue that women have the right to make autonomous decisions on matters about family formation. They reject marriage on ideological grounds and instead opt for cohabitation as an ideal alternative family formation, as espoused in the extracts below:

> *I don't want to get married. I believe that marriage is a social construct and it does not do anything to our relationship. I am committed to my partner and that for me is important.* (Participant L)

> *There is a very big stigma and cliché and I think people underestimate the importance of living together to know the person and commit and spend the rest of their lives together. People here ask why we are not married and why we have been staying together for so long without getting married. I would normally tell them that we both don't believe in marriage and that we don't think we need to get married to live together. We don't want to get married. We don't see the need. We don't know what will change.* (Participant J)

Cohabitation, in this context, represents a "lifestyle that best expresses the relationship of a couple based on dialogue" (Martignani, 2011). Cohabitation emerges in these conversations as symbolising a new family practice deliberately framed against traditional normative structures of family life. It challenges the legal and social constructedness of the family structure which is largely defined by marriage (Smith, 2014:5; Hatch, 2015:2). Therefore, these female cohabitees prefer to maintain a sense of independence without

being constrained by expectations of how and when they should conduct themselves as married women (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015; Díaz, 2018:749).

Theme 3: Terminating the Cohabiting Relationship

Notwithstanding the woman's preference for marriage, it is still the man's prerogative to propose after assessing the progression of the cohabitation (Kasearu, 2010:7). Therefore, women who cohabited on the understanding that marriage would eventually happen become increasingly disillusioned when the relationship does not culminate in a marriage (Brown *et al.*, 2015:18), as evident in the narratives below:

> *He is aware that I am planning to move out, but he thinks that I am threatening him when I tell him that I am moving out. The flat is currently in his name, but we have moved in together. I just feel it is the best decision for our relationship. I am not ending the relationship. I am just moving out so that he can feel my absence and act as a man and marry me. If I leave now I can only come back if we are married. I told myself that I am moving out because we have been trying to resolve our problem with his mother. I want to feel free in this relationship [silence].* (Participant E)

> *I should move out. Although he feels that I am moving out to threaten him I told him that maybe he would have time to think about his marital intentions when he is alone.* (Participant B)

> *I just told myself that the best way to deal with this was to move out and we would visit each other. Maybe he will come to his senses and propose. I did not ask him about that [marriage]. I am afraid of asking him because he told me that my family and I are putting him under pressure. I told him that I am planning to move back to my parents' house and when he asked me about my reason, I just told him that there are things that I need to sort out at home. He just felt that I am doing it to put him under pressure to marry me. Honestly, I don't know his intentions about us and this relationship.* (Participant A)

In the context where women's social position is primarily determined by marriage (Agadjaniann &

Hayford, 2018:1240), some women may decide to terminate their cohabiting relationships to compel their partners to transform their relationships into marriage rather than terminate the relationship (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009:227). This practice is called *ukutheleka* among the Shixini community in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, where cohabiting women return to their parental homes to prompt men to initiate the *magadi* negotiations (Van der Vliet, 2007:223).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Family structure is fluid, often changing over a person's life course, rather than a static condition that can be assessed at a single point in time (Zito, 2015: 301). Equally, social workers understand the dynamics and possibilities of change (Hung, 2020:11). Given the varying accounts of the participants' transition into cohabitation, social workers need to understand the complexity of trends and dynamics in the evolution of cohabitation, specifically relating to the women's decision to cohabit (Murrow & Shi, 2010). Most importantly, social workers should understand women's intentions in cohabitation and the sociocultural context in which decisions on a relationship are made (Saul, Diarra, Melnikas & Amin, 2021:2) because the context affects attitude and behaviour (Stoddard & Pierce,2018:761). Within many African societies, the individuals' attitudes towards family formation are shaped by their culture, and they are prepared to set aside their well-being for the common good (Church, 2015:796). For instance, Posel and Rudwick (2014) explored disapproval of *ukukipita* (literally translated as 'to keep it') or *ukuhlalisana* (literally staying together) among isiZulu-speakers in the Durban municipality. The study found that cohabitation is widely perceived as depriving a woman of her value and dignity. Many female participants maintained that the payment of *magadi* is indeed an acknowledgement and recognition of their value. However, in contemporary South African society, trends have changed. Most couples cohabit despite the stigma and discrimination directed at women. The article demonstrates that adopting a paradigm shift in thinking and cultural beliefs in current times is needed, especially in African communities that have certain prescripts and endorsed ways of living.

Women who subscribe to a less traditional view are also entitled to make their own decisions regarding their cohabitation relationships (Rodriguez, Palencia, & Lagunas, 2018:200). In this regard, women's empowerment becomes specifically important for social

work intervention. Issues that concern women's empowerment and gender have, historically, raised numerous arguments and generated debate regarding how best to empower women (Nkomo & Muberekwa, 2016:1). The term "women's empowerment" which has become a buzzword in the literature regarding gender issues, primarily refers to enhancing women in the structural hierarchies of power in society (Mishra, 2015:395). In the context of this article, empowerment should be understood as the ability and capacity of women to make choices regarding their relationship intentions (Adjei, 2015:62; Rowan, Mumford & Clark, 2018:1521). Empowerment should afford women the freedom to make informed decisions that free them from the tentacles of patriarchal and sociocultural domination (Kim, Atteraya & Yoo, 2019:1088).

The most important form of empowerment is educating women about the importance of taking decisions on issues that affect their lives, especially within intimate relationships. In addition, women must be educated regarding accountability for such decisions. Women should also evaluate and understand the nature and dynamics of cohabitation before entering into it. Social media platforms can be useful in this regard. It would also benefit women if they received education from a legal point of view. In this regard, social workers could collaborate with legal practitioners to provide training sessions to cohabitating couples reading their rights, protection of assets. It is essential to appreciate and encourage women's assertiveness in entering such a complex relationship if only this spurs the women as agents in reviving and recalibrating their self-worth.

Literature amplifies that women's decision-making capacity is crucial for promoting their well-being (Rodriguez *et al*,2018:200). In this context, therefore empowerment means social workers should enhance the women's ability to make choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them (Kim, *et al*., 2019:1089; Saul *et al*., 2021:2). Moreover, social workers should play a meaningful role in liberating women from cultural stereotypes and promoting egalitarian values in society (Rodriguez *et al*,2018:204). Some researchers describe cohabitation as a domestic arrangement in which women are particularly vulnerable (Posel & Rudwick, 2014:286). In cohabitation, there is often a loyal and faithful woman and a man who can easily walk out of the relationship without any consequence (Chinwuba, 2010:626). The lack of legal regulation in cohabitation in many countries sets women in vulnerable positions if the relationship ends in the death of their partner or separation (Gassen & Perelli-Harris, 2015:2015:432). In their roles as social advocates, social workers could also assist reformulate family policies for the best of cohabitees, especially women. Making a decision to cohabit, therefore, remains an important niche for intervention for social workers. The objective is to help women challenge marginality, suffering and injustice in cohabiting relationships (Hung, 2020:11).

CONCLUSION

The data and discussion presented in this article are based on a relatively small sample, which largely reflects the subjective experiences of Black African women. The intention was to explore the women's decision-making process about their cohabitation rather than generalise the findings and present them as conclusive evidence. Crucially though, this article draws a conclusion which can serve as the basis for future intervention and research.

Using the theory of planned behaviour, this article showed that women's decision-making ability has a significant impact on whether they enter, stay or leave the relationship. Moreover, the data and discussion demonstrate that women can make rational and conscious decisions about their cohabiting relationship, either as precursor to marriage or as an alternative to marriage. With the former, the findings suggest that for some women cohabitation is a conscious and reflective choice.

The latter demonstrates that some women reject the normative authority of traditional household formation in favour of satisfying personal objectives. Among those who do not plan to consider marriage, the main reason is the rejection of marriage on an ideological basis. Hence, cohabitation represents the freedom to express individuality beyond the prescripts of marriage. In the penultimate, a very small percentage of women opted to terminate the cohabiting relationship to encourage their partners to transform the relationship into marriage. Future research endeavours should focus on the dynamics of cohabitation because there is a paucity of literature on this aspect. Further studies of the same topic with other ethnic groups are recommended.

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