

Cohabitation - An Increasing Phenomenon: Is it an Emerging New Norm? People's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Botswana youth lived with their parents or close relatives and were to adhere to the rules and regulations of their societies. Apparently, under such conditions cohabitation was unheard of as it was shunned openly. In recent times cohabitation has been increasing yet it is neither socially respected nor legally recognized. Consequently, we aimed to investigate whether this phenomenon is being accepted as a new norm or not. In this paper we present the findings of a study conducted on perceptions of Botswana towards cohabitation. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 people from Gaborone and Tswapong region to participate in the study and interviews were employed to gather information for the study. The study revealed that though cohabitation is publicly practiced by many people, it is not yet accepted as a new norm. The study also revealed several challenges emanating from arrangements of such relationships. This paper therefore concludes that in order to encourage the spirit of accountability and respect, cohabitation could or should be discouraged among Botswana. It further recommends that cohabitation as a topic could be included in the Moral Education syllabus to enable learners to explore the moral implications of this emergent phenomenon.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Marriage, Bride price

INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation refers to an unmarried couple living together in a stable, exclusive relationship for a sustained period of time (Waite, 2000). It is worth noting that cohabitation does not differ much with marriage; the main difference is that while marriage is socially and legally recognized and publicly celebrated, cohabitation is more often not. Among Botswana, marriage traditionally was respected, recognized and highly valued. Individuals who remained single were ostracized and stigmatized. Such people were referred to as *mafetwa* (those who have been passed by). In addition to this negative labelling, unmarried people were seen as immature irrespective of their age (Nkomazana, 2005). Similarly, if one is cohabiting, regardless of the length of that relationship and age, that person will not be allowed to enter marital negotiations as it is believed that he or she is immature to discuss marital issues.

While cohabitation has been minimally practiced in the past, it seems to be on the increase nowadays. Since the 1970s, many countries, particularly those in North America and Europe have experienced rapid growth in their cohabitation rates (Ponzetti, 2003). This is a possibility that this growth has somehow contributed to the proliferation of divorce and remarriage-Botswana is not an exception. For instance, over the past years, Botswana has experienced increasing divorce and declining marriage rate; hence many people now opt for cohabitation arrangements or remain unmarried (Thobega 2012; Otlhogile 1994; Mookodi 2004).

People engage in cohabitation for various reasons such as desire for independence and companionship, financial security, confirmation of marriage compatibility (Seltzer, 2000; Smock, 2000). However, though the practice of cohabitation is on the increase in Botswana and elsewhere, it does not mean that it is without challenges (Axinn and Thornton, 1993; Bulanda and Mmanning, 2008; Hertz, 2012; Hohmann-Marriott, 2006, Mokomane, 2004; Otlhogile 1994). For example, if the couple decides to go separate ways, one may lose everything regardless of whether they had devoted many years of their lives in the relationship (Mokomane, 2004). Furthermore, children of cohabiters can be adversely affected by this practice with anecdotal evidence of children being ill-treated and scorned by the community.

Cohabitation is practiced by people of all ages and of different backgrounds. The question now is; is cohabitation being accepted as a new norm? And what really compels people to engage in it? This is the concern this study sought to investigate and establish.

Purpose Of The Study

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of Batswana towards cohabitation. It specifically investigated and established the main reasons for cohabitation and the main challenges associated with this practice.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the most contributing factors to cohabitation in Botswana?
2. Is cohabitation being accepted as a new norm nowadays?
3. What are the main challenges associated with cohabitation?
4. What are the possible strategies to curb the increase of cohabitation among Batswana?

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs and perceptions the study adopted a qualitative approach, where interview data were first coded, interpreted and analyzed to understand perspectives of the participants. This approach was deemed most suitable as it is capable of allowing the researcher to enter the participants' life whilst still enabling participants to freely express their feelings and attitudes.

The purposive sampling method was used to select respondents as it was found to be most appropriate for the nature of this study. 11 female (6 rural and 5 urban) and 13 males (6 rural and 7 urban) who have an understanding or experience of cohabitation were recruited from Gaborone (urban) and Tswapong region (rural). Participants were within the age range of 21-50 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study looked at the contributing factors to cohabitation in Botswana and whether cohabitation is being accepted as a new norm nowadays. It further examined effects of cohabitation and possible strategies to curb cohabitation.

The Most Contributing factors to cohabitation in Botswana

Firstly, the study sought to establish major contributing factors to cohabitation and the following themes emerged:

- Test of Compatibility in Marriage
- Financial constraints

- Convenience reasons
- Emancipation reasons

Test of Compatibility in Marriage

Majority of the participants pointed out that most people cohabit in order to test their compatibility in marriage; couples study each other before they make decisions to get married. When expressing this concern, one respondent said:

"It's wise to stay with your partner before getting married so that you know him better. This gives one the chance to study him more closely. If o bona le tsamaisana sentle you can now go on and prepare for marriage but if le sa tshubisane, o a mo togela before o ipofa ka lenyalo!" (If you realize that you are compatible, you can go on and prepare for marriage but if you do not go along well you can leave him before you commit yourself to marriage!)"

Another respondent echoed this:

"Marriage is not a cup of tea; it has its own difficulties so it will be best to stay together before actually getting marriage. Moo go go fa tshono ya gore o mo tsebe hantle before o ikgolega ka nyalo." (This would then give one chance to know your partner fully before you commit yourself to marriage)

These responses highlight that cohabitation is at times practised as a trial for compatibility in marriage. In other words, in such instances, cohabitation would be perceived as an important precondition for marriage. This concurs with the observation made by Haralambos et al (1995) that some people see the period of cohabitation simply as a trial marriage and intend to get married if it proves satisfactorily. Viewed from this context, perhaps it is acceptable to establish if one would be compatible in marriage as this inevitably offers partners an opportunity to decide whether to live together for the rest of their life or not. Arguably, discovering the couple's incompatibility in marriage is unbearable; this has become the root cause of divorce cases experienced in this country.

Financial constraints

It emerged from these findings that majority of participants believe that some people cohabit because life is expensive; one has to pay rent, buy food, use transport daily buy clothes, etc., hence the need to share such expenses, as illustrated by such verbatim quotes:

"Life is very expensive in Gaborone so some stay with their boyfriends to cut unnecessary expenses like buying food, transport costs and rental fees."

"Though we are cohabiting now, we will eventually get married. It is only that things are expensive nowadays. We are still preparing for our big day."

Still related to financial constraints, it was also argued that some resort to cohabitation due to the high charges of bride price. One respondent who justified cohabitation by blaming some parents argued that:

"Batho kana ba bata go huma ka go rekisa bana ba bone". (People want to get rich by selling their children)

Evidently, besides the high cost of living being the most contributing factor to the increase of cohabitation, apparently high charges of bride price also compels people to resort to

cohabitation. Still related to this argument, monetary bride price charge is not standardised among Batswana; it varies from P800-00 up to P3, 500-00 per head of cattle. On the basis that some tribes in Botswana do not highly charge bride price while others do, we have noted that this is an important finding of this study. Perhaps such argument on this issue could be a wakeup call for Batswana to consider standardising monetary bride price charges. We will return to this issue in subsequent discussion of the findings.

It also emerged from these findings that some respondents are of the view that some people practice cohabitation hoping that it could somehow assist in elevating some of their social and financial constraints. In the first place it was pointed out that cohabitation gives both partners financial security; in most cases the bread winner in the relationship maintains the unemployed partner. It was emphasised that once separated, the working partner's financial contribution is seldom constant and consistent.

Secondly, issues related to child maintenance were also identified as being addressed by cohabitation. This concern was mostly voiced by men in comparison to their female counterparts. For example, one man lamented that:

"Dithwathwa tsa kgodiso ya ngwana di a tura kwa ga mmakaseterata so it is better you stay with your kids otherwise o ta a chajiwa madi a a gakgamatsang." (The expenses of raising a child are high, especially if you have been summoned at the magistrate court, so it's better if you stay with your kids).

Convenience reasons

Convenience also emerged as another reason for cohabitation, with emphasis on the issue of sex and companionship. In this context, cohabitation is comparable to marriage since it accords partners almost similar rights as their married counterparts. It was pointed out that while one partner would feel convenient to have somebody who cooks, cleans and irons his clothes, another partner would on the other hand gain financial security especially if he or she is not working or earns a small salary. Such conveniences, it was emphasised, greatly contribute to the increase of cohabitation. This observation is confirmed by Goodman (1993:85):

---this form tends to follow traditional gender role lines, with the man gaining sexual access and domestic support while the woman acquires companionship.

Emancipation reasons

While in the minority, some participants stated that some people cohabit for emancipation reasons. This, as pointed out, is mainly done by certain individuals who feel they cannot be controlled by their parents for the rest of their lives, as illustrated by this verbatim extracts:

"Hee ija! Kana batsadi ba bangwe ba rata go laola mo eleng gore lefa o le motona o laolelwa metsamao hela ka gore o santse o nna mo lapeng la bone. Mosadi o ta go bolelela gore 'thako golela sa gagwe fela mojarateng!" (Hey! some parents like controlling their kids despite the fact that they are grown-ups. They are told when to be in the house and when to go. A woman would literally tell you that she is the one who makes rules in that family) this would then drive some people to cohabit so as to get out of that family.)

"One needs to show maturity and move out of his parents' house. You can't be dependent on them for the rest of your life. If o na le mokapelo yoo berekang the better as he will now take care of you fa o sa ntse o bata-bata tiro." (If you have a partner who is working the better as he will fend for you while still searching for employment.)

These statements illustrate that individuals can make use of cohabitation to suit their needs and interest for independence from external family influence. In this case, if some people resort to cohabitation having realised that they are mature enough to be controlled by their parents, perhaps society should respect their decisions and accept cohabitation as a new norm.

Is Cohabitation being accepted as a New Norm Nowadays?

We were also interested in establishing whether cohabitation has been accepted as a new norm or not. Interestingly, if it is not accepted, one wonders as to why such an increase, on the one hand and how the society perceive those who practice it, on the other hand. We believe this is pertinent issue, regarding the increase of cohabitation among Batswana.

It emerged from these findings that two thirds of the participants seem to believe that cohabitation is not accepted as a new norm despite the fact that many people are practicing it openly and publicly. In support of their point of view, participants strongly argued that cohabiters are not normally accorded the respect given to married couples. Individuals who cohabit have reduced social influence especially in context of discussions pertinent to marriage and are viewed as immature members of society.

Cohabitors are fully aware of their low social status, hence their aspiration to get married, as explained below:

"Kana society e sa ntse e tseela nyalo ko godimo thata, even those who are cohabiting, know that they would have to marry one day. That is why re bona bomagogo ba nyalana ba thuswa ke bana ba bone." (Our society still highly regards marriage so much that those who are cohabiting know that they have to marry. That is why we even see old people getting married being helped by their children.)

This low status was further confirmed by those who are married as illustrated by this quote:

"Owai hare le bone ba a itse go re fa gotwe go laiwa ngwetsi bone gaba tsene gope. Tota ba ta raya ngwetsi bareng? Ka jalo ba boela morago ka situ." (Hey the cohabiters know very well that counseling a newlywed bride is for married people only. If that takes place they silently excuse themselves. After all what would they tell the newly-wed bride?)

The above quotes reveal that while cohabitation is on the increase, it continues to be undermined by the society. Another issue raised was that when people cohabit, they usually do not tell their parents as they know that parents will disapprove of their relationship. As pointed out, parents' involvement is very vital for the stability of any relationship as they may guide, counsel and help in solving relational conflicts. In this way, if cohabiting couples encounter any relational problems, they are deprived of this privilege since may be hesitant to involve their parents. We should note however as aforementioned, that some parental influence may be detrimental to relationships.

Some participants indicated that when couples stay together they end up having children. It could be argued that cohabitation is not approved as it increases the number of children born outside wedlock which carries social stigma and reduced legal right due to the relationship not being recognized.

The most important finding of this study is that financial constraints and the high bride prices force most people to cohabit. This being the case, our view is that perhaps these issues could be addressed as an attempt to curb the increase of cohabitation in Botswana. We will return to this issue in subsequent sections of this paper, after exploring challenges of this practice.

It should be stressed however that most people indicated that cohabitation is not yet accepted as a new norm despite the fact that it is publicly and openly practiced. However, on the contrary, though in the minority, some participants indicated that cohabitation is accepted as a new norm. It is the view of respondents along this line of argument that child rearing needs the involvement of both parents, hence some parents end up cohabiting so that they look after their children. Based on these findings, it can be argued that apparently, having children out of wedlock could compel some people to cohabit in order to assist each other in taking care of the children. As it was indicated, in the process such people tend to believe that cohabitation is accepted as a new norm.

It is also the view of the advocates of cohabitation that there is no offence in practicing cohabitation, as argues one participant that 'there is no law prohibiting it, it is not a crime. . . ' As can be realised, lack of any criminal law related to cohabitation can somehow encourage the practice of this relationship; hence it appears to be accepted as a new norm.

At this point of our discussion, we would like to point out that perhaps a consideration of both financial and social constraints indicated by those involved in cohabitation would assist us in understanding why cohabitation is in the increase nowadays, despite the negative attitude of the society towards it. In the following discussion we develop our argument by exploring the challenges of this practice.

The Main Challenges of Cohabitation

Besides the society's negative attitude towards cohabitation, this practice appears to be having various challenges. It emerged from these findings that while cohabitation appears to be a norm nowadays, it is without challenges, as illustrated by these extracts:

"Kana ga ba itsewe ke botsadi. Fa ba na le bothata ba ya kae? Ba ta a letanngwa ke mang? Bangwe ba felela ba bolaana." (They are not known by parents so when they experience problems in their relationships, where do they go for help? Who will help in settling their disputes? Some end up resorting to passion killing.)

"When the relationship is sour, they do not know where to report as they are not known by parents. Some even fear to seek for help as they think they will be asked why they married themselves. So they suffer in silence."

"When one partner dies, the remaining one may be left with nothing as parents/relatives may come and get everything, especially if the one who is dead was the one who was working."

The above extracts reveal some of the challenges experienced by cohabiting couples. It also emerged from the findings on this topic that while in the majority of cases most of such

challenges are experienced within cohabitation, conflicts are inevitable during the couple's separation. For instance, it was stated that:

"One may be denied the right to see their children by parents citing that they did not pay for them especially if the parents have separated."

We are of the view that in most cases the law and parents play a very vital role in promoting and upholding stability within relationships by solving disputes. It is evident from these findings that while most relationships experience challenges, those associated with cohabitation appear to be particularly graver due to discernment of the society towards this type of relationship. With this understanding, we wonder why such a practice seems to be more prevalent nowadays especially when it is surrounded by such challenges. The argument of the advocates of this practice may help in discerning the answer to this.

It emerged from these findings that advocates of cohabitation strongly believe that cohabiting and married couples experience same problems. In support of their argument, they pointed out that even though people seem to disregard cohabitation, it has some benefits. For example, they strongly argued that due to lack of obligatory social and legal commitment, couples may easily opt to spilt-up without any involvement of parents or the law. They further emphasised that since couples do not sign for in-community of property, they can easily take their personal property when they end the relationship, unlike in marriage where couples have to undergo tedious divorce proceedings.

On a different issue, it also emerged from these findings that whilst cohabiting families believe that their children are happy, in the contrary in most cases cohabitation affects the moral development of children due to the nature of such relationships. It was pointed out that since such children are brought up in unfaithfulness and unstable families, they may end up despising marriage. Besides despising marriage, it was further pointed out that since such children observe inappropriate behaviour, they may end up copying it, as argued one participant:

"Mma, ha batho ba nna hela ba sa nyalana, gantsi ga ba totane thata, mme seo se dire gore ba tsietsane, jalo go tise dintwa mo lapeng leo. Jalo bana ba ka gola ba ithaya ba re seo ke sone botshelo." (Madam, if people stay together without being married to each other, they do not give each other the respect, hence they can end up being unfaithful to each other, if such happens it can lead to fights in that family. Kids would then follow suit thinking that that is the way to live.)

As gathered from this quote, it is likely for a child to lack respect for others or value fighting because he or she saw the parents fighting. We hasten to point out that the family is the first agent of socialisation responsible for enhancing moral development of children before they interact with the wider community. Now if cohabitation is likely to have negative implications for the moral development of children, we would argue that this practice can only be morally acceptable if it is capable of contributing towards a moral nation.

Besides being an impediment to moral development of children, it is also evident from these findings that the social ills experienced and observed by such children is likely to destroy their emotional wellbeing. In such cases where the other partner dies, relatives may claim property, leaving the remaining partner and the children with limited financial and emotional support, especially if the deceased was the main earner of income. Arguably, such children may have low self-esteem and be predisposed to mental health difficulties including depression and may have their school attendance severely affected. The use of surnames may also affect the

mental state of the children since children in cohabiting relationships usually use their mother's surname. This may traumatize such children through bullying and lack of self-identity as they may wonder why they are not using their father's surname like the rest of the children in their class, school or church.

Possible Strategies to curb the increase of Cohabitation

Having established the major reasons why people cohabit and some of the major challenges of this practice, the researchers were then interested in establishing possible strategies in curbing this practice. In the first place respondents pointed out that there is need to standardise bride price. Secondly, it is the few of some respondents that Batswana should give priority to marriage rather than opting for cohabitation. Let us further explore these two views.

Majority of respondents indicated that the increase of cohabitation can be curbed only if the bride price can be standardized. High charges of bride price are exclusively associated to the rapid increase of cohabitation amongst Batswana. Now, it is imperative to establish who should address this issue of standardization. Interestingly, some participants pointed out that parents should play a significant role, as illustrated by these extracts, amongst others:

"Heela, a ba hokotse go gweba ka bana. Kana dilo di a tura." (Hey, they should minimize using their children as business commodities. Things are expensive nowadays).

"A batsadi ba hokotse dilo tse ba di batang fa bana ba re ba a nyalana. Kana ba bangwe ba bata go rekelwa masika dilwana, ba bo ba ntse ba bata dikgomo fa godimo." (Let parents reduce items that they wish for when their children get married. Some want certain items for relatives and would also want cattle on top).

It follows that parents can play a crucial part in reducing the increase of cohabitation by reducing the bride price. Hopefully, their decision and action on this issue may encourage people to get married especially that the cost of living is perceived as very high, as gathered from the findings on this topic.

Still on this issue, these findings reveal the increase of cohabitation can be curbed by the government through policies geared towards the standardization of bride price across the country, as argues one participant:

"Kana (mind you) govi... (Government) has the power to change anything. Heela (Hey) do you remember how he increased the price for alcohol! Govi can make a law to standardize the bride price payment across the country. That will be fair to everyone concerned."

What can be gathered from these findings is that some respondents associate the increase of cohabitation with high charges of bride price, with great emphasis on lack of standardization. We therefore argue that perhaps Batswana need policies geared towards the standardization of this practice in order to curb the increase of cohabitation.

Finally, though in the minority, some respondents pointed out that Batswana should fully commit themselves to marriage, rather than giving priority to cohabitation. It was emphasized that this could curb instances where the in-laws get all the property if one partner dies as this

traumatizes children. As argued, if partners are married, social ills such as cheating, unfaithfulness, fights and even passion killings will possibly be reduced.

However, while some participants do not deny that bride price could be a contributing factor to cohabitation, they at the same time blame Batswana for aspiring expensive weddings and their lack of preference for customary law weddings. These attitudes, as argued, become a great impediment to many partners' decision and plans to get married, as illustrated by these verbatim quotes:

"Kana ke gore Batswana re rata dilo tse di turang,(its only that Batswana like expensive things) a person can just opt to go to the magistrate court and get married without having to spend money on expensive tents and wedding gowns. Having done that one would then have full protection of the law if that affair does not work out. Ga gona yoo ka tang a ikgagapelela dithoto tsa bana ba gago" (No one would then come and claim your children's property.)

"Kana lenyalo ga se go rentisa tante ya mabaibai which is common nowadays." (marriage is not about hiring an expensive tents which is common nowadays). The magistrate officer does not even ask you if you have paid the bride price or not. So it would be wise to just get married using the customary law."

It becomes evident from the above quotes that high wedding costs seem to be another contributing factor to the increase of cohabitation. This being the case, while we are not undermining the high charges of bride price as an impediment to marriage, we argue that perhaps cohabitation could also be reduced if people value marriage rather than using lack of affordability of expensive weddings as an escape goat.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Following the Kantian school of thought, one may ask why someone should engage in an act that is more likely to harm or hurt him/her and his/her children. As these findings have revealed, children in cohabiting families may be traumatized by a lot of factors. Here we argue that such a child is more likely to have low self-esteem, withdrawn and at times being violent to other children and even to the teachers. If this happens, arguably, the academic performance of the child is likely to deteriorate.

Furthermore, according to MacNiven (1993) the Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right only if they tend to promote happiness for the greatest number of people, wrong if they tend to produce unhappiness and pain for the greatest number of people. The findings have revealed that cohabitation has negative consequences for those involved. It may be argued that cohabitation is morally unjustified as it brings more harm than good to the parties involved.

However, the advocates of cohabitation have given multifaceted reasons to justify the increase of this practice among Batswana. Based on these justifications, the major conclusion of this study is that whilst cohabitation may not be socially and legally acceptable, it has become a norm nowadays. This being the case, this study recommends that:

- The government should seriously consider the issue of standardizing the bride price so as to encourage people to get married.
- Since one of the aims of Moral Education is to equip learners with tools of judgment in various situations, perhaps cohabitation could be included in the Moral Education syllabus to enlighten learners of both the advantages and challenges of this practice.

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