

# Happiness in Cohabitation Relationships: A Phenomenological Study on Catholic Women Who Have Experienced Cohabitation

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**Abstract.** Cohabitation in Indonesia is considered a violation of eastern morals and religious morals. Cohabitation is considered inappropriate, immoral and living in sin. This study aims to describe (1) the role of religion in happiness in committing cohabitation; (2) happiness in committing cohabitation relationships. This research is qualitative research, using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The method used purposive sampling by selecting 3 Catholic women who had undergone cohabitation, at least 2 year of cohabitation relationship. All the interview were recorded, poured into verbatim and analyzed. There are 4 main themes (couple's attitude, level of happiness, guilt towards God and the desire to get back together). The results of this study are (1) cohabiter women who are still actively participating in religious activities find it difficult to feel fully happy because they are squeezed by the moral burden as religious people who must obey the religious regulations they believe in. (2) Cohabiter women find it difficult to feel fully happy, one of the reason is because of the bad attitude of the partner, and the pressure of social norms that prevailing in society. (3) the desire to get back together after experiencing separation, that happen to women who tend to be happy living with their cohabiting partners and women who have children from their cohabiting partners. Another interesting finding, women who undergo cohabitation relationships also have the potential to be treated badly by their cohabitation partners. The future of the child is also greatly disadvantaged because it bears the stamp of the environment because it was born out of wedlock.

**Keywords:** commitment; happiness; cohabitation; catholic women; qualitative study

## INTRODUCTION

Women who are cohabiting have the option to see themselves through a different perspective. Different because in eastern customs that uphold relationships tied through marriage. Cohabitors from collectivist countries such as Indonesia are much unhappy than married or single (Carr, 2011). Cohabitation can actually increase the risk of experiencing relationship distress such as problems in arguments, inability to resolve conflict, low commitment, anxiety, and disagreements in values and future goals (Hsueh, Morrison & Doss, 2009). A narrative literature review study on unmarried women in Indonesia conducted by Himawan, Bambling and Edirippulige in 2018 showed findings that cohabitation, although illegal in Indonesia, is still seen as a desirable alternative choice because it provides sexual and fulfilment emotional. The fulfilment emotional obtained from cohabiting relationships needs to be researched further in order to describe the kind of happiness that cohabiting relationships provide. Given the higher commitment and legal safety of marriage over cohabitation, it might be that those married will be happier with their relationship than those cohabiting (Ciritel, 2022). Marriage is considered a normative choice taken as a validation of the

relationship, doubting the essence of happiness in it, because there is violence, the potential for divorce that triggers a person's trust issue in a marriage. Individualism gives sickness to marriage, much domestic violence happens inside and even ends by divorce (Azizah, 2016). With the existing phenomenon of unhappiness in marriage, it creates a dilemma in unmarried women. This dilemma leads modern society to seek for happiness outside marriage by choosing alternatives to marriage; staying single (celibacy), even doing cohabitation (Azizah, 2016). Cohabitors have low stress coping and relationship quality (Marcussen, 2005). This is certainly likely to contribute to happiness in cohabitation. Although it is like a married couple relationship, cohabitation brings its own dilemma due to feelings of sin, guilt, if they have sexual intercourse with their partner. Cohabiting women who take care of household chores and serve their partners sexually are considered foolish, lose their morality, and definitely do not get praise and are considered to be living in sin (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002). Cohabitation makes it easier to live together, without the need for legal legalities that would make it difficult when deciding to separate. Cohabitation is often chosen as a simulation of a marriage relationship, to weigh the compatibility of each other before finally

stepping into marriage. The risk of quick separation was higher for newly married couples who never cohabited than for couples who did cohabit before marriage. In the multivariable analyses, there was a significant effect of cohabitation in reducing marital breakup in the very early stages of marriage (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2018). For some people, who still want to test compatibility or simulate a family before deciding to marry their cohabiting partner, this may be a flexible option to pursue. According to Thornton, Axinn and Xie (2007) cohabitation is often considered a relationship similar to marriage, only de facto not recognized because it is not accompanied by marriage papers. This research aims to describe (1) the role of religion in happiness while undergoing cohabitation: (2) Happiness when undergoing a cohabitation relationship. The benefits of this research for the science of family psychology and positive psychology contribute to the knowledge of exploring the deep meaning of cohabitation and happiness in cohabitation in women in Indonesia.

## METHODS

The method used in this research is a qualitative method. This research uses a descriptive phenomenological approach. The theme revealed by the researcher is about the subject's level of happiness which includes positive and negative feelings felt by the subject while undergoing cohabitation with his cohabiting partner. The subjects of this study were 3 Catholic women domiciled in Jakarta who had undergone cohabitation for 3 years, 3 years and 2 years and were no longer with their cohabiting partners. The data collection technique is in-depth interviews. The reliability of the data in this study includes (1) detailed description, the researcher conducted a detailed description as clearly as possible regarding the themes that emerged, important themes were deliberately not ignored because they were unique to the personal experience of each subject. (2) auditing recordings, researchers recorded conversations using a cell phone recorder. The verbatim process was carried out by repeatedly listening to conversations that were unclear until they were sure and then poured into verbatim. (3) Auditing themes, researchers audited themes about 3 times. The sequence of the data analysis process carried out is collecting data, presenting data, reducing data, and drawing conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the interview data was transcribed and analysed, the themes that emerged from happiness in cohabiting relationships were the partner's attitude, level of happiness, guilt towards God and desire to get back together.

### Reasons for cohabitation

The background to the decision to cohabit varied. For Female Cohabiter 1 (WK1), the reason for cohabiting with her cohabiting partner who was much older than her was due to financial needs and protection. WK1 cohabited pregnant with the child of her love from her previous cohabiting partner. The absence of love in her current cohabiting relationship caused her to have an affair with another man, and J (WK1's cohabiting partner) could not do anything about it because there was no legal relationship status. WK1 cohabited with her partner for 3 years.

*Initially in 2010, when I was 6 months pregnant, I lived with K, 60 years old. He said he just wanted to help, help for baby expenses. It was bland. He is actually my shield to protect me from people who disturb my life. So what's the point, there he is, I'm at peace.*

(In-depth Interview/WK1)

WK1's partner, the biological father of the unborn baby, was also in a cohabiting relationship with WK1. If serial cohabitation continues to be a form of "intensive dating," then we could expect their relationship quality to vary even further from one-time cohabitators and married individuals (Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018).

The reasons for cohabiting for Female Cohabiter 2 (WK2) were falling in love with a caring partner, and a relationship that was built in a short time, living together within 1 week after getting acquainted. WK2 is a widow, having been married before, which was preceded by a previous cohabiting relationship. For WK1 and WK2, the current cohabiting relationship was their second cohabiting relationship experience. WK2 has been cohabiting for 3 years with her partner.

*Well, the attention is really like dating people. The incident also did not take long. From the incident it passed two days, he confessed his feeling. Engaged. After a week I was contracted by him first. Contracted to the court for up to six months.*

(In-depth Interview/WK2)

For Female Cohabitant 3 (WK3), the reason for cohabitation because her partner was the first sexual partner for WK3. WK3 felt that her partner needed to take responsibility for having sex with her. WK3 cohabited for 2 years with her partner.

*Because of my position, it's like this. You're already did, you just want to leave like that. It's my loss, what if something happens. I don't know what it is or not. I don't know what it is or what it's not. As much as he likes it, I'm recycled trash, so I can be recycled by others. Hahaha. Most people are like that V, if you're done with one person, you can't go anywhere else. Unless they're both released, both destroyed. If not, it's like this, I'm afraid of what will happen.*

(In-depth Interview/WK3)

The decision to cohabit is an experience that is consciously taken by the cohabiter with various accompanying reasons. This study revealed various reasons underlying the cohabitation decision, including financial needs, protection, falling in love and the need for accountability for having taken virginity.

### Partner attitudes

In WK1, the partner's attitude was neutral; the partner had good and bad points. The good that couples have is to protect. The bad thing that the partner has is temperament, high emotions and when talking tends to hurt WK1's heart.

*He is my shield, he bears my life, he bears the burden of my life, if this J's mouth once comes out, it hurts my heart. if this J's mouth once comes out, it hurts my heart. he has high tension. So once there is a problem, what is the problem, he gets angry*

(In-depth Interview/WK1)

The partner's attitude that emerged when cohabiting was felt by WK2, overall the partner's attitude was very good towards WK2. WK2's partner is a mature person, who is able to lead WK2 in a good and responsible direction. WK2's partner pays attention, provides, is patient and keeps promises. The only drawback of her partner in WK2's eyes is his attitude of being generous to friends. At the time of cohabitation together, WK2 was pregnant and decided to abort the pregnancy due to religious differences and the blessing of her parents.

*His maturity, there is. He always does. The guy's habit is to keep his word, and*

*sometimes he makes excuses. He's not there, he keeps his promises. A-a, b-b. Already, that's it. Much different, not like my ex-boyfriend.*

(In-depth Interview/WK2)

In WK3, her partner's attitude towards her was very bad. They often threatened to hurt themselves and were rude. The good attitude of the partner was to obey WK and be patient.

*Because he threatened me, I just died then. It's annoying, it's scary too. Because I knew he was rude. Because he submits to me. Hahahha. If I tell her what to do, she obeys. If he says what I say, I don't obey. He is patient.*

(In-depth Interview/WK3)

The attitude of the partner when cohabiting in both subjects (WK1 and WK3) has similarities found in both cases, i.e. violent behaviour, temperament. The attitude of a good partner is very good experienced by WK2.

### Happiness level

The level of happiness is influenced by several factors such as the attitude of the partner, guilt to God, the same life value.

WK1 felt unhappy with his partner, the reason was due to the absence of love felt by WK1 and when serving sexual intercourse felt sad and forced. Guilt towards God and her partner's temperament contributed to her unhappiness in this cohabiting relationship.

*ya emang sih bisa kebutuhan terpenuhi, tapi kan orang ga bisa dipaksa juga dong perasaan. Ga bisa dipaksa. Kalo pas itu, gak nyalain lampu, itu trick aku. Matiin lampu, hambar aja disitu ga ada rasa, rada aneh juga sih. Aku pura-pura tidur kadang-kadang, aku berasa sedih nangis, setiap kali pasti. Mungkin Tuhan kasihan juga sama aku, udah berasa parah gitu udah, hancur.*

(In-depth Interview/WK1)

WK2 feels very happy together with her partner, both physically and mentally, her partner's good attitude and quality sexual relations greatly affect the happiness felt by WK2. In addition, the same values, in terms of gambling for example, also increase the feeling of happiness and comfort in WK2.

*Inner and outer, inner and outer. Both sexually and in the household, it's really full service for A. I feel really happy... it's like I'm living my life, other people are living with me. Yeah, if there's a problem,*

*what's wrong. But when I'm close to him, it's like I'm free, I don't have any thoughts. His name is Batak. Gambling. But he can still control his gambling. like because I also like gambling.*

(In-depth Interview/WK2)

WK3 felt that his cohabiting relationship was unhappy, full of compulsion and regret. Feelings of unhappiness in cohabitation are also influenced by guilt towards God for being in a cohabiting relationship.

*Actually, I don't want to. Forced. Sometimes it's annoying too, he's hard to tell. I have a lot of considerations. I'm irritated, annoyed, disappointed, devastated.*

(In-depth Interview/WK3)

### **Guilt to God**

WK1 expressed feelings of guilt to God for being in a cohabiting relationship and giving unlawful money to children and parents obtained from serving her partner's sexual relations. In addition, guilt was also felt for hurting God's heart and not being able to reciprocate the feelings given to her.

*I feel guilty with God too, really guilty. Even though it's not halal either, because it's not the result of my hard work, my sweat. Yes, I worked hard by serving him the most. That's really a sin, so it's like I'm giving non-halal money to my own parents to my own children. I feel guilty too if I hurt his heart, let alone his heart, the most important thing is God..*

(In-depth Interview/WK1)

The expression of guilt to God because of this cohabiting relationship was not seen in WK2. Religious differences were the only thing that prevented WK2 from moving on to the next level, and religion was the only issue that bothered WK2.

*I could have gotten married, but there was still the issue of religion. It's different now. If you marry differently, you can't stay in Indonesia. Because I still want to get married, I'm confused about religion. In our religion, Catholicism is strong, difficult. Right? That's why that was my plan before I broke up with A. That was my plan to solve the religion problem.*

(In-depth Interview/WK2)

WK3 expressed feeling very guilty to God for being in a cohabiting relationship and having

children in a cohabiting relationship.

*I was stressed. I thought I was sinning again. I want to give birth too, I know myself. I had no mental preparation, no financial preparation, and then he was like that again. The more I see (my stomach) I see her stress.*

(In-depth Interview/WK3)

Guilt towards God directly influenced the desire to separate in both subjects (WK1 and WK3). WK1 and WK3, who come from Catholic families and each still actively participates in church activities, have a moral responsibility to act as believers by following the religious rules they believe in. For WK3 in particular, guilt towards God is also associated with having children in this cohabiting relationship and brings its own stress associated with insufficient mental and financial readiness.

### **Desire to be together again**

WK1 showed minimal desire to get back together with her cohabiting partner, the desire to get back arose when she felt she wanted protection. After the departure of her partner, WK1 was not valued and respected by her family.

*Yes, because after separating from him. I'm not like I used to be, I'm not valued or respected, I was beaten by my brother. He wouldn't have dared, when I called him, he immediately got angry, how come P is insolent, like this, like this, like this, how come P is such a jerk, like all kinds of things came out of his mouth, even though he was old, he shifted a little, he fell down. Yes, it's just him, he hit me. I said regret too, kind of regret too.*

(In-depth Interview/WK1)

WK2 expressed a great desire to get back together with her cohabiting partner. WK2 begged her partner to come back to her and reconnect.

*There is definitely regret, until I also talked to A, I said "please, please, please let's turn over a new leaf again.". When I sleep, my lights go out. I cry there. Sometimes, once I was caught. I call out, I call out his name. I'm sure he can't forget me either. He can, he can. Maybe it takes a long time, right?*

(In-depth Interview/WK2)

WK3 expressed a considerable desire to get back together for the child's future, so that the child's status is clear and to ask for accountability because she felt that no good person would want to marry her with her bad background.

*There is a desire. I want it just because of E. Because it was already with him. I regret it for sure. Regret because yesterday I didn't just get married and then divorced. I just want E's status to be clear. I just need this actually. If it's me, I'm just with a destroyed background, you want something good right. Now where would a good person want to be with someone who is destroyed, right? Now he has to finish it right. Because if he wants to take responsibility, let's go.*

(In-depth Interview/WK3)

The desire to be together again is due to (1) Happiness, while the desire to get back together due to the high level of happiness experienced by WK2 can be in the context of returning to cohabitation with the previous partner. (2) Children, the desire to get back together in addition to a high level of happiness can also be caused by the presence of children, as experienced by WK3.

#### **Partner's attitude, Level of happiness, Guilt to God, Desire to get back together**

For WK1 and WK2, cohabitation was their second experience, while for WK3 it was their first. WK1 and WK2 also cheated on their partners or had other men while cohabiting with their partners. For WK1, his mistress was the best version of a man compared to his cohabiting partner. For WK2, her affair helped her get drugs for her to use. WK3 showed feelings of being down, broken, bad, and a desire for accountability from her cohabiting partner. WK1 and WK3 showed a huge sense of guilt towards God which affected their level of happiness which tended to be lacking. In WK2, who did not reveal any guilt towards God, the level of happiness tended to be very high during cohabitation.

The sexual experiences of WK1, WK2 and WK3 varied, with WK1's motivation for having sex with her partner being as a job to make money for children and family. For WK2, sexual intercourse is interpreted as the satisfaction of sexual needs that are enjoyed and accompanied by love in it. For WK3, sexual intercourse was not enjoyed and was full of pressure because she had given up her virginity to her cohabiting partner. When it comes to sex, partners have plenty of room to pursue both kinds of motives (Bradbury & Karney, 2019). The desire to be together again is due to (1) Happiness, while the desire to get back together because of the high level of happiness experienced by WK2 can be in the context of

getting back together with the previous partner (2) Children, the desire to get back together besides being due to a high level of happiness can also be due to the presence of children, as experienced by WK3. The poor attitude of the partner perceived by WK3 had an impact on WK3's unhappiness in his cohabiting relationship. Although the partner's attitude was bad, the desire to get back together continued to be felt due to the desire to get clarity on the status of the child and want the partner to be responsible for being the first sexual partner and biological father of the child they had. Cohabitors who separate or live apart from their partners also have rates of getting back together again that are only about one-third as high as among the married who separate or live apart (Thornton, Axinn & Xie, 2014). WK3 felt bad and that no good man would marry her, except a foreigner who was likely to accept her background. The experience that WK3 felt was related to the unhappiness she felt, contributed by the bad attitude of her partner, when someone feels unhappy, they will focus on limitations, imperfections, and failures (Chang, Downey, Yang, Zettler & Muyan-Yilik M, 2022). WK3 revealed that if there is a next partner who is able to accept her as she is, then she will tend to choose that next partner. Cohabiting relationships show earlier sexual activity than those who are single and married at an early age (Alhassan, Abdulai & Alhassan, 2021). So the potential for having children in cohabiting relationships is very possible. The desire to get back together because of the presence of children, thinking about the future of children, is not in a state of cohabitation again but stepping into marriage. WK2 also wanted to legalize her relationship to the level of marriage even when they were still together because she felt happiness when cohabiting with her partner. Researchers have found that cohabitors with intentions or expectations to marry have higher relationship quality than cohabitors without these intentions (Perelli-Harris & Blom, 2022). Happiness is also felt by WK2 because of her partner's good attitude towards her. WK2 also felt happiness because of her partner's good attitude towards her during cohabitation and her value compatibility with her partner.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study are (1) cohabiter women who are still actively participating in religious activities find it difficult to feel fully

happy because they are crushed by the moral burden as religious people who must obey the religious rules they believe in. (2) cohabiter women find it difficult to feel fully happy partly because of their partner's bad attitude and the pressure of social norms prevailing in society. (3) the desire to get back together after experiencing separation is found in women who tend to be happy living with their cohabiting partners and women who have children from their cohabiting partners. Women who have children in their cohabiting relationships without further clarity for marriage will be at a great disadvantage. Women in cohabiting relationships also have the potential to be mistreated by their cohabiting partners. The future

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