

# Non-Marital Cohabitors in Korea: Their Experiences and Values

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## Introduction

Over recent years, Korea has seen the rise of families that are different in formation from the ones with which we as Koreans have been well-acquainted in our culture. Prominent among these emerging families are unmarried cohabitation unions. Accordingly, the Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Aging Society in its third phase (2016–2020) rightly attaches considerable weight to “increasing the inclusiveness for diverse families,” indicating a policy move toward the cultivation of a social environment in which diverse families—including non-marital cohabitation families—are treated without prejudice and provided with the social support they need to raise their children well. However, the current circumstances are such that, due to the dearth of relevant data and research, the characteristics of unmarried cohabitation families remain only thinly understood. This makes it difficult to establish evidence-based policy measures that will feed through into making Korea’s social environment more conducive for non-marital cohabitation families to settle down as firmly and with as much security as any legally-married family can.

This study is intended to contribute to the understanding of Korean cohabiters’ experiences in their lives as unmarried cohabiters and of the values they hold about family.

## Unmarried cohabiters and their motives for choosing cohabitation over marriage

Given the absence of a population from which a representative sample could be drawn, I used an online panel survey (“Survey of Unmarried Cohabitation Families”), which, in an attempt to select eligible participants, was preceded by a series of screening questions. The participants, numbering 253 in total, were men and women aged 18–49 who either were living in unmarried heterosexual cohabitation at the point of the survey or had ever been in such a relationship since 2000. Among them, 46.2 percent were in current cohabitation relationships, while the rest (53.8 percent) said they had been in cohabitation relationships in the past (of whom 36 percentage points were no longer in relationship with their partner and the remaining 17.8 percentage points were those married after cohabitation.) The men-to-women ratio was 6 to 4, with the average age at first unmarried cohabitation being 29.3 years.

When asked why they opted for cohabitation, some of the respondents cited “economic reasons,” others mentioned that they “wanted to be with someone to rely on,” and still others indicated that their choice was a way to “become certain about their partner,” “save on housing costs and other living expenses,” or “live freely without being fettered by the convention of marriage.”

[Table 1] Motives of cohabiters for choosing unmarried cohabitation over marriage

	Percentage	Number	
All	100.0	253	
Because I (or my partner) got pregnant	4.0	10	Cohabitation as a phase preceding marriage (49.4 percent, N=125), with intention for marriage
Because I (or/and my partner) had economic barriers to marriage (costs associated with wedding, etc.)	24.1	61	
Because of parental disapproval of marriage	4.0	10	
Because I wanted to be certain about whether my partner is a suitable potential spouse	17.4	44	
Because I wanted to live freely unfettered by the convention of marriage	13.0	33	Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, without intention for marriage (50.6 percent, N=128)
Because my partner and I wanted to live together leaning on each other	19.0	48	
Because I wanted to save on, and share with my dating partner, housing costs and other living expenses	18.6	47	

Some previous studies—such as “Understanding diversity in the meaning of cohabitation across Europe” (Hiekel et al., 2014) and “Cohabitation: A precursor to marriage or an alternative to being single?” (Rindfuss et al., 1990)—saw various unmarried cohabitation relationships as “prelude to marriage,” (“trial marriage,” “cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process,” “cohabitation as an alternative to marriage,” etc.)

Almost half of the survey participants (49.4 percent) said that although they had intentions to get married, they chose unmarried cohabitation. The rest saw cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or considered marriage irrelevant. These cohabiters chose cohabitation for they wanted to “live freely, uninhibited by the normative institution of marriage,” “share room and living expenses with their dating partner,” or “live together leaning on each other.”

### Disclosing cohabitation

Among the surveyed, 26.9 percent said they had never disclosed their cohabitation to anyone, while 66.8 percent had let their cohabitation status be known to their significant others, including parents, close friends, and some coworkers. As few as 6.3 percent said they had made their cohabitation public to everyone.

[Table 2] Respondents’ level of disclosure of their cohabitation to others, in %

Never disclosed to anyone	Disclosed only to some	Disclosed to everyone	Total	(N)
26.9	66.8	6.3	100.0	(253)

The reason most often cited by the respondents for not disclosing their unmarried cohabitation was fear of discrimination and prejudice.

[Table 3] Why respondents didn’t disclose their cohabitation to everyone?

	Percentage	(N)
Total	100.0	(237)
Because it’s not something I feel I should be proud of	13.9	(33)
Because I don’t want to be nagged at by parents, siblings, etc.	35.4	(84)
Because I fear I will be seen with prejudice by others once they know of my cohabitation	48.5	(115)
Other reasons	2.1	(5)

In response to the question whether they had ever been discriminated against by others for their unmarried cohabitation, 51 percent of the surveyed said ‘yes.’ Also, 45.1 percent indicated

having been discriminated against in public service and benefit provision.

[Table 4] Experience of discrimination

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Total (%)	(N)
Experienced perceived discrimination	51.0	49.0	100.0	(253)
Experienced discrimination in public service provision	45.1	54.9	100.0	(253)

Those who said they had experienced perceived discrimination on grounds of their cohabitation (51 percent, N=129) indicated that they had felt branded as sexually too liberal and immoral or looked at as irresponsible or in an illicit relationship.

When asked the question “How favorable do you think our society is toward unmarried cohabitation?”, 88.6 percent responded negatively, with 37.2 percent saying “not at all favorable” and 51.4 percent “a little unfavorable,” versus 11.5 percent who said “favorable” (9.9 percent saying “a little favorable” and 1.6 percent “very favorable”).

[Table 5] How favorable is Korean society toward unmarried cohabitation families?

Not at all favorable	A little unfavorable	A little favorable	Very favorable	Total	(N)
37.2	51.4	9.9	1.6	100.0	(253)

### What do Korean cohabiters think of marriage and family?

Among the surveyed, 43.5 percent viewed two people living together with the intention of getting married as husband and wife; 62.1 percent thought two people in unmarried cohabitation as husband and wife even if they lack a marriage certificate.

[Table 6] When do a man and a woman become husband and wife?

As soon as they start living together, even without intention to get married	As soon as they start living together with intention to get married	Right after wedding ceremony, not necessarily marriage registration	After marriage registration, not necessarily wedding ceremony	After both wedding ceremony and marriage registration
10.7	43.5	7.9	20.9	17.0

Of those among the survey participants who had never been legally married before (N=117), 77.4 percent said they had the intention of getting married at some future point in time. Among those in the respondents who never had a marriage certificate (207 respondents), 44.4 percent said they had felt at some point the need for marriage registration.

[Table 7] Have you ever felt the need for marriage registration?

Yes	No	Total	(N)
55.6	44.4	100.0	(207)

Among a total of 117 respondents who were in non-marital cohabitation at the time of the survey, 77.4 percent (N=87) said they were considering filing a marriage petition at some time in the future. When these 87 respondents with marriage intentions were asked about the “when” of converting their cohabitation relationship into a formal marriage, the answers they gave, in order of frequency, were: “When I become financially more capable,” “when my partner and I have a baby on its way”, and “when I become sure about my partner,” and “after wedding.”

[Table 8] When do you intend to apply for a marriage certificate?

Total	100	(N)
When I become financially more capable	49.4	(43)
When my partner and I have a baby on its way	29.9	(26)
When I become sure about my partner	17.2	(15)
After wedding	3.5	(3)

To the question asking what they thought of the demanding features of Korean familial culture—where a daughter-in-law, or a son-in-law for that matter, for example, is expected to be present at family get-togethers on traditional Korean holidays like *chuseok* (Korean Thanksgiving) and special occasions like *jesa* (memorial ceremony for the dead in the family)—43.9 percent of the surveyed (N=253) said that, inconvenient though they may be, they should still be kept and practiced.

[Table 9] What do you think of Korean familial culture?

Should be preserved no matter what	Inconvenient, but should be kept	Inconvenient, therefore should change	Total	(N)
27.7	43.9	28.5	100.0	(253)

### Cohabitation contract (or agreement)

More than a half (58.5 percent) of the respondents considered a written agreement necessary for their cohabitation relationships; less than one-third (30.4 percent) of the survey participants said that they had drafted some written contracts or agreements for their cohabitation relationships.

[Table 10] Do you think you and your cohabiting partner need a cohabitation contract?

No		Yes		Total	(N)
No do need at all	Do not need that much	Need a little	Need very much		
13.0	28.5	46.6	11.9	100.0	(253)

When the participants were asked if they thought there was a need for rendering unmarried cohabitation legally registered and recognized, 72.0 percent responded said “yes.” The rest—28 percent—indicated a “no” to the idea of granting unmarried cohabitation a legal status.

[Table 11] Do you think cohabitation should be institutionalized legally?

No		Yes		Total	(N)
Strongly against	Somewhat against	Somewhat support	Strongly support		
5.5	22.5	52.2	19.8	100.0	(253)

### Concluding remarks

This study found that when Koreans choose cohabitation over marriage, they do so for economic reasons, to make sure that their partner is “the one” for them, or to live freely without the constraints that traditional marriage can impose. A majority of the respondents indicated that they had experienced perceived discrimination on grounds of cohabitation. For many of the survey participants, fear of discrimination and prejudice was what kept them from revealing to others the fact that they were cohabiting. This highlights the need for expanding awareness campaigns and education programs that are designed to promote positive social perceptions of diverse families, especially ones grounded on non-marital cohabitation.

While many unmarried Korean cohabiters admit the necessity of a written agreement (or a

contract) in their cohabitation relationship, they are found to be less than willing of their own accord to take action to draw up and enter into one. This suggests the need for taking a long-term approach to implementing basic legal protection for cohabiters. For starters, the current voids in the understanding of cohabiters' needs require more detailed research and data-gathering.