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Journal of Family Issues
2022, Vol. 43(2) 283–305

DOI: 10.1177/0192513X21994155
journals.sagepub.com/home/jfi
SAGE

# Cohabitation and Its Consequences in Ghana

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**Abstract**

Although largely considered an unconventional form of domestic partnership, cohabitation is a growing phenomenon in Ghana. The lived experiences of cohabiting couples have, however, received little scholarly attention. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with cohabiting couples in Accra, Ghana, this study focuses on the implications of cohabitation on cohabitees. The data showed that cohabitees often face pressures from their families, churches, friends, and neighbors to either convert their unions to marriage or end the relationships. The relationships are also characterized by intimate partner violence and poor relationship quality. Women, more than men, tend to suffer these consequences of cohabitation. The study's general conclusion is that the implications of cohabitation are mostly negative, and the gendered nature of the experiences reflects the sociocultural landscape of the Ghanaian society and how men and women are viewed differently in terms of their marital status.

**Keywords**

cohabitation/informal marriages, domestic abuse/violence, gender and family, qualitative, intimate relationships

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Cohabitation as a form of domestic partnership is not an entirely new phenomenon in Ghana as the practice has always existed side by side with marriage (Adomako Ampofo, 1997; Allman & Tashjian, 2000; Fortes, 1950). However, in recent times, the phenomenon has been on the rise. Data from the demographic and health surveys in Ghana suggest that cohabitation has increased from 6% in 1988 to 14.4% in 2014 (GSS et al., 2015; Ghana Statistical Service & Institute for Resource Development/Macro Systems, Inc. [GSS & IRD], 1989GSS & MI, 1989). Several factors have been attributed by scholars to this growing trend. Key among these reasons include the freer choice of partners by young people, particularly those in urban spaces (Anderson, 2007; Cole & Thomas, 2009; Meekers, 1995; Nukunya, 2016; Takyi, 2003) and urban dwellers, especially migrants, who are often far from both their kin and the strict enforcement of traditional rules of marriage (Nukunya, 2016; Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi, 2007; Smith, 2010; Takyi, 2001). Also, the commercialization and monetization of marriage payments (Horne et al., 2013; Onyango, 2016; Posel & Rudwick, 2014) have contributed to the increase in cohabitation. For most societies in Ghana, getting married has traditionally not been an expensive venture. However, in recent times, the families of prospective brides impose high financial demands on young men who wish to marry their daughters (Okyere-Manu, 2015). This challenge faced by prospective grooms is further exacerbated by the modern practice of the individuation of bridewealth payment (Adams & Mburugu, 1994), where men receive almost no assistance from their fathers with marriage payments contrary to what pertained in traditional Ghanaian culture. These new developments have made it challenging for young men to marry. The practice of informal or private polygyny is also another reason for cohabitation. The contest between polygyny and monogamy, especially among monogamously married men, has resulted in some inconsistencies in the marital and family lives of many Africans (Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2007; Christiansen, 2013) as it has become common for mostly elite or educated Christian men to keep a "ring wife" and one or more "outside wives" for whom no marriage rites have been performed (Karanja, 1994, p. 251).

Cohabiting relationships have positive and negative implications. A few studies indicate that cohabitation has beneficial outcomes that include companionship, intimacy, and well-being for the couple, especially men (Manning et al., 2011; Perelli-Harris & Styrc, 2018); cohabiters having the opportunity to assess whether they are compatible before marriage (Manning et al., 2011) and thereby avoiding divorce in the future (Stanton, 2011); cohabiters sharing financial responsibilities (Manning et al., 2011); and cohabiters experiencing marital stability, particularly, in the early years of marriage (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019). On the contrary, the bulk of the literature on cohabitation

highlights the negative consequences of the phenomenon, which include its instability as a family type (Andersson et al., 2017; Dush et al., 2003); marriage delay of cohabiters and social disapproval of cohabiting relationships (Huang et al., 2011); greater risk of divorce among cohabiters (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006); poor life satisfaction outcomes of cohabiters (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009); and poor relationship quality of cohabiters (Wiik et al., 2012), which negatively impact on the physical, mental, and psychological well-being of especially women (Williams et al., 2008). Research further shows that there are often no clear laws that address the sharing of property between cohabiting couples when they dissolve their relationship (Stepien-Sporek & Ryznar, 2016) and, consequently, cohabiters, particularly women, experience declines in their economic standing (Avellar & Smock, 2005). It has been further pointed out that the children of cohabiters are less likely to be captured under child welfare policies (Manning, 2017), leading to disadvantages of childbearing within cohabitation (McLanahan, 2004). These aforementioned studies, which examine the positive and negative implications of cohabitation, are largely American and European; however, less is known about the consequences of cohabitation in the Ghanaian context. This article thus contributes to the literature by offering a Ghanaian perspective on the implications of cohabitation.

## Research Methods

### *Research Area*

The study was conducted in Ghana's capital city, Accra. The choice of the research site was informed by suggestions from the literature that cohabitation is more prevalent in urban spaces compared to rural areas (Anderson, 2007; Bishai & Grossbard, 2007; Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi, 2007; Onyango, 2016; Russell, 2003; Smith, 2010). Moreover, Accra, which is the most urbanized city in Ghana, is populated with a good blend of people belonging to different social classes, ethnic groups, and religious affiliations (GSS, 2013).

### *Sampling Procedure and Sample Characteristics*

All persons in cohabiting unions in the Accra metropolis constituted the target population for the study. The purposive sampling method was employed to draw a sample from the target population. Purposive sampling was used because the target population was not a socially visible section of society, and thus they were consciously and deliberately chosen

(Marvasti, 2004). This was done through initial contacts with people who were already known to the researchers who were willing to participate in the study. Snowballing was also used to increase and diversify the sample (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Through this process, a total of 14 cohabiting couples were sampled for the study. The sample comprised 4 and 10 couples from patrilineal and matrilineal societies, respectively. Participants were aged between 28 years and 45 years. Their educational attainments ranged from primary to tertiary levels and were employed in both the formal and informal sectors. Two female participants were unemployed. All the 28 participants professed to be Christians. With the exception of two couples, all the other couples had children together.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data collection and analysis were done concurrently. In-depth interviews were conducted with research participants after completing the processes of informed consent. The interviews were audiotaped alongside note-taking. Participants chose to be interviewed in either *Twi* (local Akan language) or English. The interviews were first transcribed verbatim, and those conducted in Twi were also translated to English. After this, the transcribed data were cleaned by eliminating unrelated information given by participants. The data were then taken through a thematic network analysis to generate the themes, which formed the basis of the findings and discussion. In order to conceal the identities of research participants, pseudonyms are used to represent them.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The Threefold Pressure Group Experience in Cohabiting Unions*

The data from the study revealed that because cohabiting unions are perceived as an unconventional route to family formation in Ghana, cohabiting couples come under the scrutiny of some groups or institutions in the society. Research participants reported that these groups persistently impressed upon them (couples) through various means to convert their unions into marriage, thus their designation by the researchers as "pressure groups." There are three major pressure groups that react in varying degrees to persons in cohabiting relationships, that is, the family, the church, and friends or neighbors. In most cases, research participants experienced pressures from all these three groups. Thus, we conceptualized this phenomenon as the "threefold pressure group experience in cohabiting unions."

## *Pressures from the Family*

The role of the family, both nuclear and extended, is very crucial in the lives of individuals in Ghanaian society when it comes to marriage. The importance of the family is reflected in the roles its members play in the marriage process in terms of the choice of marital partners, the marriage ceremony, as well as its dissolution. For instance, in Akan tradition, it is the responsibility of a father to marry a wife for his adult son (Allman, 1996). Furthermore, family members continue to remain relevant in the lives of the married couple as they may be called upon to adjudicate marital disputes. It is therefore almost impossible for individuals to exclude their family from their relationship or marital issues. In this study, participants' family members constituted a strong pressure group. The "pressure" was mainly for the participants in question to get married. Female participants reported receiving significantly more pressure than their male counterparts. This was often the case where the male partners were perceived as being unwilling to convert the unions into marriage. Akweley (a female participant) narrated:

> There's not a single day that when I talk to my mother she will not ask when the man is coming to perform the marriage rites. She has come to our house on several occasions to threaten him that should anything happen to me, he will see what the family members will do to him. . .sometimes my mother talks to me as if it's my fault that he hasn't performed the rites.

In Akweley's account, she revealed that after having her second child with her partner, her mother prevailed upon her partner to pay what is called *kwasiabuo* money to her family as stipulated by their tradition. *Kwasiabuo*, is an Akan word, which means taking somebody for a fool. Sexual relations outside the context of marriage are usually frowned upon. *Kwasiabuo*, therefore, is a penalty paid by a man who has a child with a woman without performing the necessary customary rites as compensation to both her and her family (Mwinituo & Mill, 2006). Even though the practice is very typical of the Akan, it also has parallels among other groups like the Krobo, the ethnic group to which Akweley belongs. The traditional rule for most Ghanaian societies is that a man has the right to enjoy the sexual and reproductive services of a woman only when he has traditionally married her (Nukunya, 2003). A man is therefore assumed to have taken a woman for granted and disrespected her and her family if she performs these services in the absence of bridewealth payment. In Akweley's case, as is the practice in many other instances, to satisfy the *kwasiabuo* penalty, her partner, Tetteh, paid some money and also provided a bottle of schnapps to her family. The charge did

not only serve as compensation but also made it possible for the family to acknowledge Tetteh as the biological father of the children.

Paradoxically, although some women also enjoy marital rights such as provisions for shelter and maintenance from men who are not their husbands, it is not the practice for such women to be also charged with taking the men for fools. This goes to show that in cohabitation, the woman is seen as the victim and therefore the need to compensate her. Interestingly, among the Akan, children born to a woman in or out of wedlock ultimately belong to their mother's lineage. However, in the case where the man fails to marry her, her value in the marriage market may reduce, as she might not be the first choice for men looking for prospective wives (Newell, 2005). This argument is consistent with the fact that most female participants tended to think of marriage as a necessary end to their unions, since, going by the *kwasiabuo* logic, they are being treated as fools by their partners. George, a male participant, also talked about being constantly pressured by his parents and older brothers to perform the marriage rites for his partner. He described this "pressure" as a thorn in his flesh because he had no plans of marrying Serwaa whom he had described as a lazy woman who did not want to work hard and earn a living. According to him, his family insisted that once he had had a child with the woman, he had to marry her. He intimated:

> It's a very big problem for me now, my parents don't want to hear anything about me leaving this woman, but I know how she is and I know I can't marry her. But when your parents speak, they have spoken.

Unlike participants such as Akweley and George whose family members wanted them to formalize their unions, Osei (a male participant) faced a different form of pressure. His mother did not approve of his relationship with his partner and insisted that he ended it. According to Osei, his mother's argument was that a woman who would be in a cohabiting union with a man was not virtuous and therefore would not make a good wife in future. He said:

> My mother passed by my house one morning and met her there. It was obvious she had slept over and from the look on my mother's face, I knew she wasn't happy with what she saw. . .so later when she complained about her, I wasn't surprised. She only knew her as my friend.

Although he was satisfied with his partner's qualities, he gave the indication that he was likely to follow his mother's wishes, not because he agreed with her but because he revered her and valued her opinion and advice. The literature on mate selection in Africa suggests that modernization has

brought about autonomy in mate selection, especially among urban dwellers and individuals with high levels of education (Meekers, 1995; Takyi, 2003). However, other scholars like Nukunya (2003) have indicated that although modernization has increased autonomy in mate selection, family or parental approval is still considered before a couple can get married. It is difficult to ignore one's parents' opinion about prospective marital partners, primarily because of the important role parents play in the marriage ceremony itself. For example, Nukunya (2003) explains that in most Ghanaian cultures, it is often a father who gives his daughter away in marriage and receives the traditional marriage payments. He further notes that a man who wishes to marry would require his father to accompany him to ask for the woman's hand in marriage and ultimately perform the marriage rites. Given these facts, a father's disapproval of his child's choice of a marriage partner can stall the possibility of the marriage altogether. Moreover, the relationship between parents and their children is not only considered biological but also spiritual (Nukunya, 2016). The blessing of one's parents for an important step like marriage is, therefore, of extreme importance to many people who wish for a successful married life. Thus, parents still play influential roles in their children's mate selection irrespective of the socioeconomic status of the latter. As such, it is not out of place that Osei, who is a medical doctor and enjoys a high degree of autonomy, indicated that he was likely to heed to his mother's advice. Thus, parental consent still remains crucial in the choice of marriage partners.

Family pressure, as narrated by participants, did not only manifest in the utterances of family members. Some participants also pointed out that they and their children were ill-treated whenever they visited family members in their hometowns. This kind of treatment could be interpreted as their relatives' way of registering their displeasure with their cohabiting status. Mama (a female participant) narrated:

> When I go home [her hometown], I don't need anybody to tell me that I'm annoying them. The one after me, her husband has performed the marriage rites. When there's a funeral or something and I go there, I see a difference between how my mother treats her and her children, and how she treats me and my children. Even if you are a stranger there, you can tell the difference. You can see that she likes them. . .. As for me, I know it's all because of the marriage issue.

Mama explained that she is sometimes reluctant to go to her hometown because of her experiences there, which make her feel like an outsider among her own people. More women reported experiencing pressures from their

families compared to men because women were often in contact with their families unlike their partners. For instance, they were more likely to attend family events like funerals in their hometowns. Also, upon having babies, they would either have family members visiting for a period or go to some family members for assistance in taking care of their newborn.

Family pressure on participants to convert their cohabiting relationships into marriage as it was against tradition or norms has been similarly observed by Moore et al. (2015) in the United States. and Vignoli and Salvini (2014) in Italy. These studies similarly indicated that family members, particularly parents, pressured their children who were in cohabiting relationships to marry their partners as it was against tradition and was also an unstable type of relationship, which did not guarantee the commitment of partners.

## *Pressures from the Church*

Religion is one of the prevailing influences in the lives of many Africans and is a pivot around which the social structure revolves (Assimeng, 2010). Omenyo (2006) describes the Ghanaian as *homo religiousus* since both his ontology and epistemology are religious. Religion, in many respects, provides the framework for family life in Ghana, and this extends to sexual socialization (Heaton & Darkwah, 2011). Sexual socialization of individuals in society had traditionally been the responsibility of one's kin group. Over the years, however, other agents like the state and religious groups have also assumed this role, defining for people what is acceptable sexual behavior and what is not (Addai, 2000; Takyi, 2003). For instance, Osafo et al. (2014) indicate that religion is much more influential than the state in regulating sexual behavior. Similarly, Anarfi and Owusu (2011) have observed that in Africa, religion is not only acknowledged as an essential part of people's lives but also crucial in the sexual socialization of members of society. They further intimated that the three major religious groups in Ghana—traditional, Islam, and Christianity—consider sexual relationships outside of marriage as sin. The extent to which these religious views are upheld is, however, difficult to ascertain. According to Osafo et al. (2014, pp. 964–965),

> Religion had both an inhibitive and facilitative role in regulating sexual behavior. The inhibitive role refers to the ways in which religious values deter people from indulging in sexual behaviours which are considered inappropriate. The facilitative role, on the other hand, refers to religious leaders acting as counsellors and assisting their members in making right choices pertaining to sexuality.

Although Osafo et al. (2014) focused on adolescents, these religious roles to a very large extent also extend to adult sexual behaviors as was proven to be the case in this study.

Women have been known to be more religious than men in most parts of the world (Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012), and, in this study, female participants appeared to be more religious than their male counterparts. Although all research participants professed to be Christians, most of the men admitted they were not as regular and active in church as their partners. It was, therefore, not surprising that it was female participants who mostly reported the church as being one of the pressure groups pressurizing them to formalize their unions. Mama indicated in the interviews that she had been a regular member of her church, of about 80 members, for a couple of years, and her pastor was interested in two major aspects of her life—that she stopped drinking alcoholic beverages and also get her partner (*Kwabena*) to perform her marriage rites. According to her, her pastor would consistently ask her if she and her partner were taking the necessary steps to formalize their union and "bring it before God." And this constant reminder constituted some form of pressure on her. She explained:

> When I go to church and we close and he [the pastor] calls me that he wants us to talk, I immediately know that he is going to talk ab out my "husband" and I. Sometimes it even makes me feel ashamed.

Since premarital sexual union is described in Christianity as a sinful practice, Naana and other participants interpreted their cohabiting status as being not right before God, for which reason they said, "I know I'm living in sin." This assertion also came with its consequences. Akweley, for instance, said: "Because of my situation, I'm not able to do so many things in church. I can't lead praises and worship, I can't lead prayers, oh! So many things." The interpretation for "so many things," which was revealed in the accounts of other female participants, included not being able to participate in the Holy Communion and being disqualified from assuming church leadership positions. Miescher (2005) described a similar case of polygynous Ghanaian men who converted to Christianity—became members of the Presbyterian Church—but could not function as full members of their church due to their marital status. The women further indicated that they did not receive many of God's blessings because of their cohabiting status. In their opinion, the sinful nature of their relationships blocked the blessings of God from reaching them and, in some cases, even hindered their prayers from being heard by God. All of these consequences, both spiritual and physical, constituted a form of pressure on them to get married.

The children of cohabiting couples also bore the consequences of their parents' status. Naming rituals in Ghana, and many other parts of Africa, have traditionally been performed at home by an elderly lineage member. However, as a result of Christianization in Africa, naming ceremonies have gradually been taken over by the church where pastors assume the role of family heads. Thus, many Ghanaian Christians prefer their children to be named in church by their pastors (Duncan, 2014; Okyerefo, 2010). However, female participants, who are Christians, could not perform this important ceremony for their children. They pointed out that this situation was due to their children being born out of wedlock. Rather, their children's naming ceremonies were held at home, and often the pastors did not attend or oversee the ceremonies.

The men, contrary to the women, indicated that they were not regular at church; however, this did not make them immune to the pressures from the church. Some male participants, such as Tetteh, reported that he was invited by his wife's pastor to discuss their cohabiting status. This invitation is not surprising, as in the Ghanaian culture it is the duty of a man to ask for a woman's hand in marriage and to perform the marriage rites (Nukunya, 2003). Where premarital unions have not been converted to marriage, it is common to find the women accusing the men of refusing to perform the marriage rites. The meetings between the pastors and their church members' partners were therefore held in an attempt to ascertain the reasons why the marriage rites had not been performed and consequently to encourage the men to marry the women. According to Tetteh, it was his wife's pastor who accompanied him to Akweley's relatives to pay the *kwasiabuo* penalty he had been asked to pay. He explained:

> Oh, her pastor has invited me a number of times to discuss the marriage issue. I just tell him that I'm putting things together. You know that if someone is a pastor, you have to show that person some respect. That is why I even asked him to accompany me to go and pay the *kwasiabuo* penalty.

Middle-class participants who were members of "big" churches with large membership did not face pressure from their churches due to their large membership. According to Assimeng (2010, p. 25), these churches are "respectable cathedrals" attended by "big men." For instance, Akosua who is a nurse explained:

> Oh, but that Presby-Methodist church, we are so many and we even have two services every Sunday. Nobody cares about anybody. You can miss church for a long time and nobody will even realize it.

From Akosua's comment, the size of a church affects the extent to which the lives of the individual members come under the scrutiny of the church leadership. It confirms Heaton and Darkwah's (2011) assertion that the differences in the organizational structures of orthodox and charismatic churches are such that in the former, the leading figures in the church do not often get to know about individual members' life issues. This is because structures at the lower levels are expected to deal with people's issues even before they come to the attention of the top hierarchy. This is not to suggest that churches with large memberships are unable to enforce their rules and sanctions. In some cases, whether or not the happenings in a person's life come to the attention of the leadership was also contingent on their level of involvement in church activities. More active members were subjected to greater scrutiny. For instance, Akosua further explained that her work as a nurse prevented her from regularly attending church service and be active in church. As a result, many people had no knowledge of her marital status.

The pastors' or church's disapproval of participants' cohabiting status from a religious perspective compares with other studies in the United States (Regnerus, 2007; Thornton et al., 2007) and Brazil (Ogland & Hinojosa, 2012) that indicate that Protestants, Evangelicals, Catholics, and Pentecostals consider cohabitation morally wrong. The pastor or church's pressure on participants to convert their relationships into marriage from a religious point of view also compares with studies that indicate that the church (Isupova, 2015) and Catholic parents (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014) pressure congregants and children, respectively, in cohabiting relationships to convert their relationships into marriages to keep with religious stipulations. Furthermore, female participants' view that their cohabiting status meant living in sin and, as such, it reduced their involvement in church activities is consistent with Uecker et al.'s (2016) assertion that cohabitation is viewed as a continuous sin, which discourages cohabitants' involvement in church activities or, at worst, cause them to completely drop their church affiliation.

## *Pressures from Friends and Neighbors*

Participants also encountered pressures from their friends and neighbors. Nana Akua recounted how she had once been referred to as an *ashawo* by her neighbor. *Ashawo* is a term of Nigerian origin, specifically Yoruba, which has been adopted in Ghana to refer to sex workers and sometimes a woman who engages in sexual relations with men to whom she is not married (Izugbara, 2005). She intimated:

> She called me that because she said I was sleeping with a man who had not married me. She knew I wasn't married because she doesn't see me wearing any ring, so as soon as she said that, I ended everything. Hmmm, that day. . .. (She shakes her head).

Nana Akua further explained that she narrated the aforementioned incident to her partner Stephen when he got back home from work that evening. According to her, her main aim was to impress upon Stephen to complete the customary marriage rites, which he had started a few years ago, by performing the "knocking" rite. She expressed how she found this married neighbor's comments very disrespectful for which reason she wished she was also married.

Other female participants also revealed that they also experienced some level of societal pressure. Unlike Nana Akua, theirs came in a more subtle way, which could be described as passive aggression and were evident in their conversations with friends who were married. One of these participants, Agyiewaa, expressed it this way:

> Whenever you have a problem in your relationship and you discuss it with your friend who is married, she will talk and talk and talk and all she will be saying is that your problems are because the man has not married you, as if as for married women they don't have any problems in their marriage. As for me, I call them the "Mrs. Women" (laughs). . .. But it also makes you feel that maybe if you were married things would be better.

These female participants were often of the view that in their circle of friends, the married ones whom Agyeiwaa labeled as the "Mrs. women" tended to think of themselves more highly than their unmarried friends. Perhaps, similar to the implications of the traditional payment of *kwasiabuo*, these "Mrs. women" considered their unmarried friends as fools, allowing men to engage in sexual relations with them and also have children with them without performing the necessary marriage rites. Indeed, many of the women in cohabiting unions themselves harbored such feelings. The reference to their marital status by their married friends as the cause of the problems in their relationships increased the pressure on them to get married. It was only Emma and Sheila, the two middle-class participants of this study, who indicated that their unions were an alternative to marriage as they had no intentions of entering marriage. Irrespective of their class position and decision to be in a cohabiting union, they reported that friends, both married and unmarried, persistently advised them against their decision to maintain their unions as an alternative to marriage. For both of them, however, their minds had already been made up about their chosen cohabiting status.

Female participants' view that their friends and neighbors did not respect them because the latter did not recognize their cohabiting relationships as legitimate is consistent with studies performed by Vignoli and Salvini (2014) and Huang et al. (2011) that also found that female cohabiters felt that they were not respected by their friends or within their social circles because their relationships were not the same as a proper marriage. The women in these studies, as similarly observed in this study, also indicated that this situation put pressure on them to convert their cohabiting relationships into marriages. Thus, the nature of cohabitation, that is, living together without performing the marriage rites, brings pressure to bear on cohabiting couples in Ghana from mainly family members, the church, and friends and neighbors, accordingly conceptualized as the "threefold pressure group experience of cohabitation" in this study. These pressures stem largely from the social disapproval of cohabitation (Huang et al., 2011) and its resultant societal expectation of marriage among cohabiters (Berrington et al., 2015).

## Intimate Partner Violence

Another phenomenon, which was reported by mostly female participants, was intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV is explained as any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors (Olayanju et al., 2013). A large body of work indicates that nonmarital intimate relationships like cohabiting or consensual unions compared with marriage are generally of poorer relationship quality, as they tend to be more violent than marriage (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2012; DeMaris, 2001; Kenney & McLanahan, 2006; Wiersma et al., 2010). In their study on why cohabiting relationships are more violent than marriages in the United States, Kenney and McLanahan (2006) found that the trend was basically due to the lack of social and institutional support systems for persons in such unions. A similar case can be made in the Ghanaian context, where there is very little social and legal recognition of such unions, making the individuals involved, especially the women, more vulnerable than their married counterparts.

In Ghana, victims of violence often do not discuss or report it (Amoakohene, 2004). This is particularly so when the victims are men since in a culture where masculinity is defined among other things, in terms of male dominance, a man discussing such experiences could expose himself to ridicule. Therefore, although both men and women in intimate relationships may experience some forms of violence, no male participant reported such an experience in their union. Five female participants, however, reported that

they experienced different kinds of intimate partner abuse—physical, sexual, and psychological. One of these female participants, Adjubi, who had a swollen jaw as well as a cut under her left eye, intimated that she experienced severe physical and sexual violence:

> Hmmm, as for beating if I say he doesn't beat me I will be lying. I'm speaking the truth before God. When he gets hold of me and starts beating me, he beats me until he sees blood. He's very quick tempered, that's the problem. . . sometimes too he forces me to sleep with him. . .. It's all because he has taken me for free. He hasn't gone to ask my hand in marriage from any family member that's why he is able to do all that.

Adjubi's facial expressions and the tone of her voice showed a deep sense of emotion. It was obvious that she was very unhappy about her predicament. Apparently, the swollen jaw and the cut under her eye had been the result of beatings she had received from Nana, her partner. Maabena also experienced physical violence as a consequence of complaining about the infidelity of her partner. According to her, her partner, Kudjo, beat her up with a chair, which resulted in her limping for some days. She described her ordeal as the worst form of abuse she had ever suffered from her partner, although there had been other instances of physical abuse against her. She revealed that the abuse was the result of her complaints about her partner cheating on her with another woman. Maabena shares some similarities with Lucy, another research participant, who also indicated that confronting her partner about his infidelity led him to physically abuse her. Lucy had a black eye, and she explained that it was as a result of being assaulted by her partner. Mama also reported that her partner, Kwabena, beat her with a belt on a number of occasions whenever she drank alcoholic beverages as he objected to this behavior. One of the female participants, Adwoa, unlike the other participants, reported that she suffered psychological abuse. She indicated that her partner had never physically or sexually abused her but rather he verbally insulted her almost every day, a situation which often left her disheartened. She said, "There's no sign of respect in the way he talks to me. He would shout at me and talk to me any how as if I'm a little girl. It's not nice at all."

IPV is prevalent in Ghana and raises both social and health concerns (Adinkrah, 2014; Adjei, 2016; Asiedu, 2016; Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999; Issahaku, 2015). It has been observed that in IPV, men are usually the perpetrators, while women are the victims in most societies, including Ghana. Yeboah and Batse (2009) indicate that one in three women experiences a form of IPV from their partner in Ghana. Issahaku (2017) also posits that 7 out of every 10 women in the Northern region of Ghana are abused by their

husbands in their marriages. Scholars offer multiple explanations for this occurrence. For instance, Bowman (2003) offers three possible explanations for this tendency in the African context. These are the rights-based, feminist, and cultural perspectives. The rights-based theory and the feminist perspective emphasize the patriarchal nature of African societies, and the cultural standpoint focuses on the traditional norms and practices that contribute to the incidence of IPV. According to Gyekye (2003), women in traditional Ghanaian society are viewed as precious gifts and are to be emotionally and economically dependent on their husbands who in turn are also expected to be fully responsible for their wives' welfare. Other scholars from the feminist perspective have argued this cultural arrangement of men as providers and protectors for women puts men and boys in the dominant position in society, a position which is central to the definition of masculinity in Ghana (Adomako Ampofo & Prah, 2009; Mann & Takyi, 2009; Takyi & Mann, 2006). Thus, Adjei (2015, p. 425) notes that "violence is, therefore, used by some men when they experience the masculine identity disappointment, that is, a feeling of dissatisfaction in men from unrealised cultural notions and expectations of masculinity." Jewkes (2002, p. 1615) also points out that "men construct women as legitimate vehicles for the reconfirmation of male powerfulness through beatings." One of the causes of this is when the women who are to be dependent on their husbands reverse the gender roles by becoming the breadwinners of the family, thus challenging the authority of men (Silberschmidt, 2001). With respect to the cases of IPV in this study, the women in question, like unemployed Adjubi, were largely economically dependent on their partners and had therefore not challenged the position of their partners in terms of their ability to provide for them. What was clear was that their economic dependence on their partners made them even more vulnerable to all kinds of treatments from the men. Women's economic positions in intimate relationships, therefore, do not trigger abuse only when they are better placed than their partners but also when they are almost totally dependent on their partners.

On the other hand, scholars like Amoakohene (2004) and Nukunya (2003) have argued that Ghanaian men generally tend to think that they have the right to discipline their wives. The study by Adomako Ampofo and Boateng (2007) on adolescents' views on intimate partner abuse revealed that adolescent males believe that bridewealth payment entitles a man to physically penalize a woman. These boys further indicated that they would not beat their girlfriends because they had not paid any bridewealth; however, if they paid it, then they would be able to beat the latter. Their standpoint stems from the notion that bridewealth payment implies the ownership of a woman by a man. In this study, the nonpayment of bridewealth did not prevent two male

participants (Nana and Kwabena) from beating their partners. Both of them intimated that it was their responsibility as men to bring their women, whether wives or girlfriends, to order through discipline when they went wrong. Nana, Adjubi's partner, put it this way:

> As a man, if you are with a woman, it is your responsibility to check her. A woman has to listen to the man. I've asked her to stop drinking but she doesn't listen. So if I come back from work to find her drunk and she hasn't prepared my food, what will I do? I'm the one who goes out to work and bring money home.

Nana's statement demonstrates how both the patriarchal nature of the Ghanaian family and his position as the one who "brings money home" convinces him that he has the right to discipline his partner. According to Adinkrah (2014), the tendency of Ghanaian men to think of themselves as disciplinarians of their intimate partners can also be attributed to the concept of "gerontogamy" whereby men are older than their partners. Using Adjubi and Nana as examples, Nana aged 45 years is 7 years older than Adjubi, who is 38 years. For a society that has traditionally been stratified by age and gender, an older man is more likely to think of himself as the authority figure and thus justified to mete out punishment to his younger female partner.

While the male perpetrators of IPV in this study admitted using their positions as men and breadwinners to justify their actions, the women victims, on the contrary, interpreted such actions because of their relationship status. Unlike her other colleagues, Lucy was not economically dependent on Johnson as she explained that both had contributed to the building of their "two bedroom self-contained" house in which they lived. Together, they had also constructed three "single-room self-contained" apartments, which they had rented out. But according to her, Johnson thought he could beat her because she was not his wife, and therefore, she had no right to complain about his infidelity. Maabena also similarly reported that her partner, Kudjo, abused her because of their cohabiting relationship because whenever he physically abused her, he reminded her that she could not report his conduct to his family members since she did not know most of them. Adomako Ampofo and Prah (2009) have posited that in a situation where couples live away from their respective family and kin, partner abuse is aggravated, since the likelihood of family intervention is waned. This assertion is confirmed in this study as the research participants were mostly migrants and had very few of their family members in Accra. For instance, Adjubi said that she was being abused because she had been taken for "free," meaning that she had not been properly married. She said, "even if I find one of his family members

and tell him about what he's doing to me, they will tell me they don't know me because their son has not married me."

IPV in partnerships like cohabitation has received little attention in the literature in Ghana as many studies on IPV in the country focus on wife beating in marital unions (Adjei, 2015, 2016; Asiedu, 2016; Issahaku, 2017; Mann & Takyi, 2009; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). Indeed, Takyi and Mann (2006) describe wife beating as the most common form of IPV in Ghana. This study, thus, contributes to the literature by demonstrating that cohabitation is also another type of partnership in which the phenomenon of IPV occurs. In fact, it compares with other studies that indicate that men in cohabiting relationships are more likely to perpetrate violence against their partners (Gass et al, 2011), while women in cohabiting relationships are also more likely to experience violence (Wong et al., 2016) as a consequence of disagreements that stem from the infidelity of male cohabiters (Johnson et al., 2015) due to the sexual freedoms in these types of relationships (Huang et al., 2011; Perelli-Harris & Bernardi, 2015) and the lower commitment of men in cohabiting unions (Treas & Giesen, 2000).

Apart from dealing with pressure groups and IPV, most of the participants also reported frequent quarrels in their relationships. The principal cause of these quarrels concerned the female participants urging their male partners to perform the customary marriage rites. As a consequence of these frequent quarrels, both male and female participants reported having poor relationship quality. This finding is consistent with studies that also conclude that cohabiters experience poor relationship quality and are less happy (Lee & Ono, 2012; Wiik et al., 2012). The accounts of the female participants showed that they were more troubled and unhappy by their cohabiting status than the men, as most of them were the targets of the "pressure groups" and victims of IPV. This finding is comparable to studies conducted by Huang et al. (2011) and Lee and Ono (2012) that found that women in cohabiting relationships were dissatisfied and unhappy due to the social disapproval of such relationships. As a result of their dissatisfaction and unhappiness, most female participants hoped that their unions will ultimately end in marriage.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that women more than men tend to bear the brunt of the implications of being in a cohabiting union, which are largely negative. The sociocultural landscape of the Ghanaian society is very strongly projected in the experiences of cohabitees. Marriage continues to be one of the most cherished institutions in Ghana and, as such, the family, the church, and society at large tend to put pressure on cohabitees to formalize their relationships.

Furthermore, women, more than men, in cohabiting relationships bear the most pressure, as marriage is normatively emphasized for women compared to men. Indeed, marriage is one of the most important defining factors of womanhood for the Ghanaian woman. The incidence of intimate partner abuse suffered by women in cohabiting unions is a reflection of the patriarchal nature of the Ghanaian society and the general assumption that men have the right to discipline their partners. Unfortunately for women in cohabiting unions, marriage rites are performed by men for women. In this sense, even where cohabiting women wish for their relationships to be converted to marriage, it ultimately depends on the men. Women in cohabiting unions can, therefore, be said to be in a disadvantaged position compared to their male counterparts.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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