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Hidden Harms: Abuse in live-in relationships among young couples

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Abstract
Live-in relationships are increasingly common among young couples, yet the abuse that can occur within these arrangements remains largely invisible. This research examines the multifaceted nature of abuse in live-in relationships, focusing on how societal stigma and the absence of legal recognition compound the vulnerability of victims-particularly young women. Drawing on recent survey data, the study finds that up to 75% of cohabiting couples experience some form of abuse, surpassing the already high rates among young couples in general. The paper explores how the intersection of gender, social expectations, and inadequate legal frameworks leaves victims isolated, often silenced by fears of judgment or exclusion. These hidden dynamics have profound implications for women's dignity, social justice, and mental health. The findings call for urgent reforms: greater public awareness, comprehensive education on healthy relationships, and legal protections that recognize and support individuals in non-marital cohabitations. By centering the lived experiences of women and highlighting the broader social impact, this research underscores the need for systemic change to address gender-based violence and uphold human dignity within evolving relationship norms.

Keywords: Live-in relationships, abuse, young couples, women dignity, social justice, gender-based violence, cohabitation, legal recognition, social stigma

1. Introduction
In today's society, one of the most prevalent sources of trauma, especially among the younger generation, is becoming trapped in toxic relationships. Many individuals enter these relationships believing they have found their soulmate, someone they intend to spend their lives with. However, despite this emotional attachment, they often find themselves unhappy and unfulfilled. This emotional turmoil is exacerbated in live-in relationships, where the lines between personal freedom and commitment blur, leading to various forms of conflict.

One of the alarming issues in live-in relationships is the prevalence of violence. This can range from verbal harassment and emotional manipulation to outright physical abuse. Sadly, this violence often goes unnoticed or unaddressed, largely due to societal stigmas. Since live-in relationships aren't always legally or socially accepted in many cultures, couples may hesitate to disclose their struggles to family or friends. The lack of legal recognition or support further silences these victims, leaving them trapped in a cycle of violence without intervention.

2. Nature and Forms of Abuse
Abuse in live-in relationships takes on a variety of forms. The most common types include:

- **Verbal Abuse:** Yelling, insults, gas lighting, and threats.
- **Emotional Abuse:** Isolation, manipulation, guilt-tripping, and control.
- **Physical Abuse:** Hitting, slapping, or using force in any manner.
- **Financial Abuse:** Controlling access to money, employment restrictions.
- **Psychological Abuse:** Undermining confidence, trauma bonding and blackmail.
- **Digital Abuse:** Monitoring phone calls, Social media, or using digital threats.

These abuses often occur concurrently and become cyclical, especially in relationships without external support systems or legal oversight.

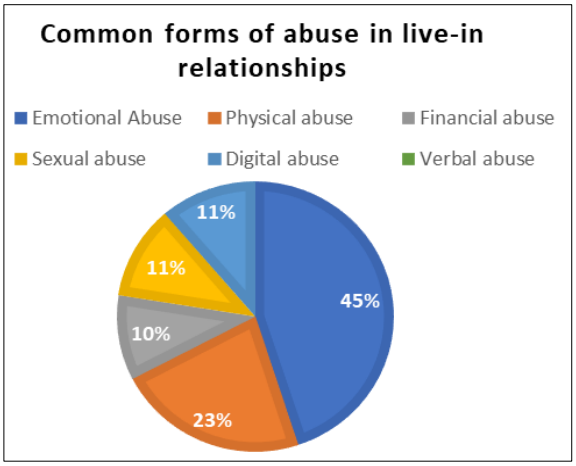

Fig 1: Types of abuse in live-in relationships

Table 1: Example breakdown based on surveys

Types of Abuse	Percentage (%age)
Verbal Abuse	11%
Emotional Abuse	40%
Physical abuse	20%
Financial abuse	9%
Sexual abuse	10%
Digital abuse	10%

3. Prevalence and Impact

According to various studies and reports, 75% of individuals in live-in relationships report experiencing some form of abuse. In comparison, 70% of young non-cohabiting couples also report similar issues. Victims often endure prolonged emotional trauma, anxiety, and depression. These toxic patterns influence their future relationships, careers, and trust-building capacity.

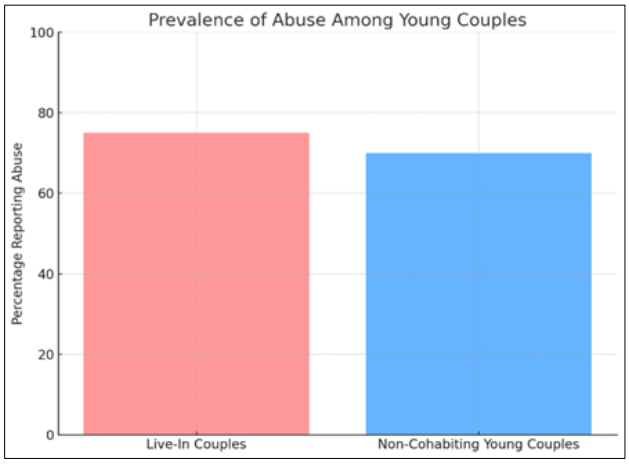

Fig 1: Prevalence of abuse among young couples

4. Statistical Overview and Recent Data Studies

31.4% of Indian women aged 18-49 reported physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from partners (Source: National Family Health Survey-5 & Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2019-2021). Over 25,743 complaints were received, of which 24% were related to domestic violence (NCW Data, 2024). A 2022 study in Tamil Nadu's urban slums revealed that 70.5% of women in informal partnerships experienced abuse (Journal of Family and Community Medicine). Surveys reveal 75% of cohabiting couples report some form of abuse, slightly higher than the 70% reported by young married couples.

5. Legal and Societal Gaps

Live-in relationships in India and many parts of the world are still not fully recognized by the legal system. While the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 includes provisions for women in "relationships in the nature of marriage," these are poorly enforced and rarely used due to societal shame and lack of awareness.

Barriers to justice include:

- Fear of social backlash
- Ambiguity in legal definitions
- Lack of protective shelters or helplines
- Untrained police and judiciary in handling such cases

6. Psychological and Social Consequences

Abuse in intimate relationships has profound consequences:

1. **Mental Health:** Victims often develop anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. A 2024 study found that 95% of abused women displayed symptoms of mental illness.
2. **Physical Health:** Chronic stress, bodily harm, reproductive issues, and sleep disorders.
3. **Social Effects:** Isolation from friends/family, fear of relationships, and reduced life opportunities.
4. **Economic Dependency:** Particularly for women who become financially reliant on their partner in a live-in setup.

7. Legal and Societal Frameworks

India's Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 recognizes relationships "in the nature of marriage," which includes live-in relationships

- **Judicial Interpretation:** The Supreme Court in Indra Sarma v. V.K.V. Sarma (2013) clarified the applicability of PWDVA to live-in relationships.
- **Gaps in Implementation:** Despite legal recognition, most victims remain unaware or hesitant to pursue legal action due to stigma.
- NGOs like Majlis, Breakthrough India and Snehi offer legal counselling, psychological support, and community training to address intimate partner violence, but more coordinated effort is required.

8. Solutions and Recommendations

To address abuse in live-in relationships, a multi-layered strategy is necessary:

- **Legal Reform:** Clear laws recognizing and protecting individuals in live-in relationships and expand the recognition of live-in relationships in family and criminal law.
- **Education:** Integrate relationship education in schools and colleges, School and college-level programs on healthy relationships and emotional regulation
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Media and community-level programs to break the stigma. National campaigns targeting youth, explaining rights and identifying signs of abuse.
- **Support Systems:** Helplines, counselling centres, and safe housing should be made accessible.
- **Community Involvement:** Local organizations and NGOs should step in to support and rehabilitate survivors.

- **Mental Health Access:** Affordable therapy, trauma healing, and community support centres.

9. Conclusion

Abuse in live-in relationships remains a hidden but growing issue. While society is gradually accepting non-traditional partnerships, it has yet to provide the necessary support systems to protect those who suffer in silence. The high percentage of abuse among young couples, regardless of marital status, is a clear indicator of the urgent need for action. By enhancing legal protections, promoting healthy relationship education, and encouraging societal acceptance, we can begin to heal this wound and create a safer environment for all individuals, regardless of how they choose to love.

Live-in relationships reflect evolving social norms, but without legal and emotional safeguards, they risk becoming spaces where abuse thrives. The hidden trauma of emotional and physical abuse in such arrangements calls for stronger public awareness, legal recognition, and support mechanisms. A multidisciplinary approach involving legal reform, mental health awareness, and community support can significantly improve the lives of those silently suffering in such relationships.

Society must shed its prejudices and work toward building environments where victims feel safe to report abuse regardless of marital status.

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11. About the Author

Jaspreet Kaur completed her Masters of Sociology and Social Anthropology from Punjabi University, India. Her research interests include Women's dignity, Social justice and Gender-based violence, Intersections of society, Human behaviour and Domestic violence.

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