

## **Emotional Autonomy, Legal Insecurity: Gendered Experiences of Live-in Relationships among Working Women in Delhi–NCR**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, live-in relationships have emerged as an alternative form of intimate partnership among urban working populations in India, particularly among women seeking greater personal autonomy and freedom from traditional marital expectations. While cohabitation is often interpreted as a sign of social modernisation and individual choice, limited sociological attention has been given to the structural vulnerabilities women face within such arrangements. This paper examines the gendered experiences of working women in live-in relationships in the Delhi–NCR region, focusing on the tension between emotional autonomy and legal as well as institutional insecurity.

Drawing on qualitative narrative case studies across diverse socio-economic, caste, and religious backgrounds, the study explores how women experience emotional companionship, shared domestic life, and decision-making independence within cohabiting partnerships, while simultaneously encountering social stigma, family opposition, and bureaucratic exclusion. The findings reveal that despite judicial recognition of live-in relationships in India, everyday institutions such as hospitals, housing societies, banks, schools, and municipal authorities continue to operate within marriage-centric frameworks that deny practical recognition to non-marital families.

The study further highlights how moments of crisis—such as pregnancy, abandonment, partner death, and child-rearing—intensify women’s vulnerability, often resulting in financial insecurity,

contested parentage, and social isolation. Class and community identities shape the severity of these experiences, yet gendered risk remains a constant across social categories. The paper argues that live-in relationships in urban India represent a form of “precarious autonomy,” where personal freedom exists without corresponding structural protection. It concludes by emphasising the need for administrative reform, child-centred legal safeguards, and institutional sensitisation to address the growing realities of non-marital family formations.

*Keywords:* Live-in relationships; Working women; Gendered vulnerability; Emotional autonomy; Legal insecurity; Urban family change; Institutional discrimination; Intimate citizenship; Delhi–NCR; Non-marital families

## **Introduction**

Urban India has undergone profound social, economic, and cultural transformations over the past few decades. The expansion of higher education, increasing female participation in the workforce, growing urban migration, and exposure to global cultural influences have altered traditional patterns of courtship, marriage, and family formation. Within this changing landscape, live-in relationships—cohabitation without formal marriage—have gained visibility and social relevance, particularly among working women in metropolitan regions such as Delhi–NCR.

Historically, Indian society has positioned marriage as the foundational institution

governing sexuality, reproduction, inheritance, and social legitimacy. Marriage has been treated not merely as a personal union but as a social contract linking families, castes, and communities. Any deviation from this norm has traditionally been met with suspicion, stigma, or hostility. However, with urbanisation, the rise of nuclear households, and changing aspirations of young professionals, the monopoly of marriage as the sole legitimate framework for intimacy has begun to weaken—especially among the educated middle class.

For many working women, live-in relationships represent an alternative to arranged marriage, patriarchal control, and restrictive gender norms. Cohabitation allows them to test compatibility before

commitment, maintain career independence, and experience emotional companionship without the legal and social obligations attached to marriage. In this sense, live-in relationships can be seen as an expression of personal autonomy, reflexive intimacy, and modern subjectivity [5].

Yet this shift has not been accompanied by a parallel transformation in social attitudes or institutional practices. Despite progressive judicial recognition of live-in relationships by Indian courts [4,14], everyday institutions continue to operate within marriage-centric frameworks. Hospitals, banks, schools, housing societies, and municipal authorities frequently treat marriage as the only legitimate basis of family, thereby excluding cohabiting partners from legal and administrative recognition.

This contradiction lies at the heart of this paper. While live-in relationships offer emotional autonomy and freedom from traditional marital expectations, they simultaneously expose women to legal uncertainty, social stigma, and institutional discrimination. Working women occupy a particularly complex position: they are economically independent and personally

assertive, yet socially vulnerable due to entrenched patriarchal norms [3,8]. Delhi–NCR provides a critical context for examining these dynamics. As one of India’s most urbanised and economically vibrant regions, it embodies both progressive aspirations and conservative social values. The coexistence of corporate professionals, migrant workers, traditional families, and liberal youth cultures makes it an ideal site for studying the lived realities of live-in relationships.

This paper therefore seeks to explore how working women in Delhi–NCR navigate the tension between emotional autonomy and legal insecurity within live-in relationships. It examines how their experiences are shaped by gender, class, caste, religion, and institutional frameworks, and what these experiences reveal about broader processes of social change in contemporary India.

### Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with live-in relationships in India has expanded over the last two decades, yet remains fragmented across sociology, gender studies, law, and urban studies. Early sociological discussions

framed cohabitation largely as a Western phenomenon linked to secularisation and individualism. However, contemporary Indian scholarship increasingly recognises that live-in relationships in India are shaped by distinct cultural, legal, and social contexts rather than being simple replicas of Western models.

Anthropological and sociological studies of family and intimacy in India provide an important foundation for understanding changing relationship patterns. Uberoi's work on gender, family, and popular culture documents how modernity has reconfigured domestic relations while retaining deep patriarchal structures [1]. Fuller and Narasimhan's study of companionate marriage among middle-class Brahmins shows that even within arranged marriage, ideals of emotional intimacy and partnership are gaining prominence, suggesting a gradual shift in marital expectations [2].

Recent empirical research on youth and urban relationships highlights generational change in attitudes toward cohabitation. Vasan's survey-based analysis of urban middle-class populations demonstrates increasing acceptance of live-in

relationships, particularly among educated youth, while also noting persistent gendered double standards that continue to stigmatise women more than men [9]. These findings align with broader research on delayed marriage, career prioritisation, and changing timelines of family formation among Indian professionals.

Feminist scholarship offers a critical lens on these developments. Chakravarti's work on caste and patriarchy emphasises that women's bodies and choices remain tightly regulated through social norms, even in ostensibly modern contexts [3]. Intersectional analyses inspired by Crenshaw underscore that gender does not operate in isolation but intersects with caste, religion, and class to produce differentiated vulnerabilities [8]. In the Indian context, Mitra and Kumar have specifically examined how women in live-in relationships navigate legal uncertainty and social stigma, highlighting the precarious position of children born outside marriage [10,11]. Singh's comparative analysis of personal laws shows how different religious legal regimes produce uneven outcomes for women and children in non-marital unions

[12]. Mukherjee's work on property and family structures documents how inheritance disputes in urban India disproportionately affect women in informal partnerships [13].

Legal and socio-legal scholarship forms another significant body of literature. Landmark Supreme Court judgments such as *S.P.S. Balasubramanyam v. Suruttayan* and *Indra Sarma v. V.K.V. Sarma* have recognised certain rights of cohabiting partners and clarified the legitimacy of children born from such unions [4,14]. However, law reform scholars and reports from the Law Commission of India and the National Commission for Women consistently point to a wide gap between judicial pronouncements and ground-level administrative practices [15,16]. These reports show that municipal offices, hospitals, and welfare agencies often continue to demand marriage certificates, thereby undermining court rulings.

Urban studies research highlights the role of housing markets and residential governance in regulating intimacy. Landlords and housing societies frequently act as informal moral gatekeepers, refusing to rent to unmarried couples or imposing restrictive

conditions [17]. Studies of migrant settlements in Delhi–NCR show that while cohabitation may be socially tolerated as a pragmatic survival strategy, institutional barriers in accessing documentation and welfare remain severe, particularly for women and children [18,19].

A growing body of literature focuses specifically on children born in live-in relationships. Scholars advocate a child-centred rights framework that separates children's entitlements from parental marital status; however, empirical studies document persistent hurdles in birth registration, school admissions, identity documentation, and inheritance claims, placing disproportionate burdens on women as primary caregivers [10,11,19]. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) also indicates rising diversity in household forms and non-traditional family arrangements in urban India [19].

Policy-oriented research, including reports by the Law Commission of India and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, calls for administrative reforms to reduce marriage-centric biases in documentation, healthcare, and welfare provision [15,16,20].

Recent articles in *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Sociological Bulletin* argue that legal recognition alone is insufficient without corresponding changes in bureaucratic procedures and social attitudes [9,13].

Despite this growing scholarship, significant gaps remain. Few studies provide in-depth qualitative accounts of how working women in live-in relationships navigate everyday life in Delhi–NCR, particularly at the intersection of emotional autonomy and institutional insecurity. This paper builds on existing literature by integrating feminist theory, socio-legal analysis, and urban sociology with rich narrative case studies to foreground women’s lived experiences.

### Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this study is to examine the gendered experiences of working women in live-in relationships in Delhi–NCR, with particular attention to the tension between emotional autonomy and legal insecurity.

Specific objectives are to analyse how working women perceive and experience emotional autonomy within live-in relationships; to examine the forms of social

stigma, moral policing, and family opposition they encounter; to explore institutional barriers in healthcare, housing, banking, and education; to investigate how crisis moments such as pregnancy or partner death affect women’s legal and economic security; and to assess how class, caste, and religion shape these experiences.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do working women experience emotional autonomy in live-in relationships?
- What kinds of social and institutional challenges do they face?
- In what ways do gender, class, caste, and religion intersect to shape their vulnerabilities?
- How do crisis events expose the limits of cohabitation as a form of family?
- What policy and administrative reforms are necessary to protect women and children in non-marital families?

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach, which is particularly suited to

capturing the emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions of live-in relationships. A total of 25 detailed narrative case studies were developed, representing diverse socio-economic, caste, religious, and occupational backgrounds within Delhi–NCR, including professionals, migrant workers, inter-caste couples, interfaith couples, LGBTQ+ partners, and elderly cohabitants.

The narratives were constructed using triangulated secondary sources, including academic literature, credible media reports, court judgments, NGO publications, and established sociological findings on urban intimacy in India. Although fictionalised to protect anonymity, the cases are grounded in empirically documented patterns.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process. Narratives were coded for recurring themes such as emotional autonomy, social surveillance, institutional exclusion, financial precarity, and child welfare. This enabled comparative analysis across cases to identify common patterns and significant variations.

Ethical considerations included strict anonymisation, avoidance of sensationalism,

and respectful representation of women’s experiences. The study does not claim statistical generalisability but aims to provide analytically robust insights into the sociological dynamics of live-in relationships in Delhi–NCR.

### Data Interpretation and Discussion

The case studies reveal that live-in relationships often create meaningful spaces for emotional autonomy. Many women described greater decision-making power, shared domestic responsibilities, and emotional support compared to experiences in patriarchal natal homes or arranged marriages. The domestic sphere frequently emerged as a site of negotiated equality and mutual respect.

However, this autonomy remained largely confined to the private realm. In public and institutional domains, women encountered persistent moral policing and social surveillance from neighbours, landlords, housing societies, workplaces, and extended families. Landlords often refused to rent to unmarried couples, while housing societies imposed intrusive documentation

requirements, treating cohabiting partners with suspicion [17].

Institutional exclusion was a consistent theme across cases. Hospitals frequently denied consent rights to live-in partners during medical emergencies, and municipal authorities hesitated to include fathers' names on birth certificates without marriage documentation. Banks and insurance companies commonly refused partner nominations, and schools demanded proof of marital status for admissions, thereby penalising children of non-marital unions [10,11,18].

Crisis moments magnified vulnerability. In cases of abandonment or partner death, women often lost access to shared property, savings, or benefits, and were sometimes excluded from funeral rituals. Several women faced prolonged legal battles over paternity, maintenance, or inheritance, exposing the fragility of their legal position [13].

Class differences shaped the intensity of these experiences. Middle- and upper-class women could access legal resources and private healthcare, yet they were not immune to stigma or familial repudiation. Working-

class and migrant women faced far greater material insecurity due to lack of documentation, legal literacy, and financial resources [18,19]. Caste and religion further compounded risks. Inter-caste and interfaith couples experienced heightened hostility, community ostracism, and, in some cases, threats of violence. In certain instances, religious norms were invoked to deny rights to women and children born outside formal marriage [12].

Overall, the findings support the concept of “precarious autonomy,” where emotional freedom exists alongside structural vulnerability, particularly for women.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that live-in relationships in Delhi–NCR embody a paradoxical form of modern intimacy. They provide genuine spaces of companionship, autonomy, and negotiated equality, yet expose women to systemic risks rooted in marriage-centric institutions and patriarchal social norms. The persistence of marriage as the dominant framework for recognising families continues to marginalise non-marital

partnerships, despite progressive judicial rulings [4,14].

Women bear the disproportionate burden of this mismatch between private freedom and public insecurity, facing social judgement, bureaucratic hurdles, and financial vulnerability during crises. Children born in live-in relationships also experience institutional exclusion, reinforcing the need for child-centred legal protections that do not depend on parental marital status [10,11,19].

Ultimately, live-in relationships in urban India reflect incomplete modernity: personal freedoms have expanded, but social and legal structures have not evolved at the same pace. Addressing this gap requires both legal reform and broader cultural and institutional change.

### Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the findings, the following measures are proposed. Birth registration processes should be simplified to ensure children's rights are not contingent on parental marital status. Hospitals should recognise live-in partners as legitimate caregivers and decision-makers in medical emergencies. Banks, employers, and

insurance providers should allow partner nominations based on joint documentation or affidavits.

Housing policies should explicitly prohibit discrimination against unmarried couples, and municipal authorities should sensitise landlords and housing societies. Schools should adopt inclusive admission policies that do not penalise children of non-marital families. Legal aid services should be strengthened to support women in paternity, maintenance, and inheritance disputes.

Public awareness campaigns should promote acceptance of diverse family forms and challenge stigma against live-in relationships. Training programmes for government officials and hospital staff should reduce bureaucratic bias and ensure decisions prioritise children's best interests.

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