

PREMARITAL PREGNANCY, PROLONGED COHABITATION AND RELIGIOUS RULES AS PREDICTORS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION AMONG DIVORCEES IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules as marriage entry motives predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. The sample comprised 753 divorcees selected through convenience sampling from an online divorce support group in Nigeria. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire, the Marriage Entry Motives and Marital Dissolution Questionnaire (MEMMDQ), which demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha: premarital pregnancy = .74, prolonged cohabitation = .79, religious rules = .87, marital dissolution = .88). Simple linear regression analysis was employed to test the three hypotheses at .05 significance level. The findings revealed that premarital pregnancy significantly predicted marital dissolution ($R^2 = .231$, $\beta = .480$, $F = 225.100$, $p < .005$), explaining 23.1% of the variance; prolonged cohabitation significantly predicted marital dissolution ($R^2 = .317$, $\beta = .563$, $F = 349.143$, $p < .005$), explaining 31.7% of the variance; and religious rules significantly predicted marital dissolution ($R^2 = .355$, $\beta = .596$, $F = 413.329$, $p < .005$), explaining 35.5% of the variance. All three null hypotheses were rejected. It was concluded that premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules as marriage entry motives significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria. Marriages entered due to unplanned pregnancy, extended cohabitation without intentional commitment, or compliance with religious obligations rather than genuine personal readiness are substantially predisposed to eventual breakdown. The findings underscore the necessity of addressing these high-risk entry circumstances in premarital counselling and preventive intervention strategies.

Keywords: Premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, religious rules, marital dissolution, divorcees, Nigeria, cross-sectional survey

Introduction

Marriage constitutes one of the most fundamental and enduring social institutions across human societies. It serves as the primary mechanism for regulating intimate relationships, legitimising procreation, establishing kinship networks, and providing a framework for emotional and economic cooperation between partners. In virtually all cultures, marriage carries profound social, religious, and legal significance, marking a critical transition in the life course of individuals (Ushie et al., 2022). In traditional African societies, including Nigeria, marriage is not merely a private arrangement between two consenting adults but a communal affair that brings together families, clans, and entire communities.

The significance of marriage in Nigerian society cannot be overstated. It represents a rite of passage into adulthood, a source of social recognition and respect, a context for the legitimate bearing and rearing of children, and a framework for economic partnership and mutual support. Religious institutions, particularly Christianity and Islam, actively promote marriage as a divine ordinance and a moral safeguard against sexual immorality. Cultural norms reinforce these religious teachings, creating a powerful convergence of expectations that makes marriage virtually compulsory for adults, especially women (Alao, 2025).

However, despite—or perhaps because of—the intense pressure to marry, contemporary Nigerian society is experiencing a troubling increase in marital instability. Divorce, once a rare and heavily stigmatised outcome, is becoming increasingly common across both urban and rural settings. The proliferation of broken homes, court-processed divorces, and informal separations has created a climate of doubt and disillusionment, particularly among young adults who observe the marital failures of their parents, peers, and older siblings (Chinweuba, 2022). This trend raises fundamental questions about the nature of contemporary marriage in Nigeria and the factors that predispose unions to dissolution.

Marital dissolution refers to the formal or informal termination of a marital union between two partners (Fincham & Beach, 2020). It encompasses not only the legal act of divorce but also the emotional, psychological, social, and economic processes that precede and follow the breakdown of the marital relationship. While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the factors that contribute to marital failure—such as communication breakdown, infidelity, financial stress, domestic violence, and substance abuse—relatively little research has examined the circumstances and motivations that lead individuals into marriage in the first place (Hawkins & Booth, 2020).

This gap in the literature is significant because the foundation upon which a marriage is built may be as important as the challenges encountered during the marriage. Fincham and Beach (2020) have argued that there is good reason to begin paying closer attention to the motivations people have when they first enter marriage, as these may play a critical role in determining whether the union will last. If individuals enter marriage for shallow, coerced, or externally driven reasons, they may lack the emotional commitment, mutual understanding, and shared vision necessary to weather the inevitable challenges of married life.

Marriage entry motives refer to the underlying reasons, desires, circumstances, and psychological drivers that lead individuals to enter into a marital union (Chigbu, 2020). These motives can be broadly classified into intrinsic and extrinsic categories. Intrinsic motives are those that arise from within the individual and focus on the partner and the relationship itself, such as love, companionship, mutual respect, and a genuine desire for partnership. Extrinsic motives, by contrast, are external to the relationship and include factors such as family pressure, economic necessity, religious obligation, unplanned pregnancy, or the desire to conform to social expectations (Ajayi & Omolayo, 2019). This study focuses on three specific marriage entry circumstances: premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules. These three motives were selected because they represent distinct but common pathways to marriage in the Nigerian context, each with unique psychological dynamics and potential implications for marital stability.

Premarital pregnancy refers to conception that occurs before a couple has entered into a formal or culturally recognised marital union (Isiugo-Abanihe & Ezech, 2021). In many societies, particularly those with strong religious and traditional values, premarital pregnancy is heavily stigmatised. It is often viewed as evidence of moral failure, sexual promiscuity, or lack of self-control, particularly on the part of the woman. The shame associated with premarital pregnancy extends

beyond the individual to the entire family, who may experience social embarrassment, loss of reputation, and diminished marriage prospects for other children (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2016).

The problem with pregnancy-motivated marriages is that they are typically entered into under duress, with a compressed timeline, and without deliberate consideration of compatibility. The natural sequence of relationship development—courtship, engagement, marriage, and then childbearing—is inverted. The child arrives first, and the marriage is constructed hastily around this new reality. The couple may barely know each other at the time of the wedding, having had little opportunity to explore their values, goals, communication styles, or conflict resolution strategies (Iwuoha & Ekwe, 2021).

Moreover, the early years of a pregnancy-motivated marriage are often dominated by the demands of infant care, leaving little time or emotional energy for the couple to build a foundation of intimacy and mutual understanding. Financial pressures associated with providing for a new child may exacerbate stress and conflict. If the couple discovers fundamental incompatibilities—as they often do—they may feel trapped by their sense of obligation to the child and fear of the social consequences of divorce (Hall et al., 2022).

Research has consistently demonstrated that pregnancy-motivated marriages are associated with elevated risks of marital dissatisfaction, conflict, and dissolution. Oladeji and Adebayo (2017) found that marriages initiated due to premarital pregnancy exhibited significantly higher rates of early conflict and lower emotional intimacy. Essien and Umoetuk (2021) reported that pregnancy-motivated marriages had nearly double the odds of dissolution compared to marriages entered for other reasons. Gómez and Castro (2022) found that 48% of couples who married due to pregnancy separated within four years, a rate nearly three times higher than that observed among couples who married without pregnancy.

Furthermore, cohabitation is another variable of interest. Cohabitation refers to a living arrangement in which an unmarried couple resides together in an intimate relationship, sharing financial, emotional, and domestic responsibilities without formalising the union through marriage (Manning & Smock, 2017). In many Western societies, cohabitation has become a normative stage in the courtship process, with the majority of couples living together before marriage. In Nigeria, cohabitation is less socially accepted, particularly in traditional and religious communities, but it has become increasingly common among urban youth, university students, and young professionals (Adewuyi & Ogunbanwo, 2020).

Prolonged cohabitation—defined as living together for an extended period, typically two years or more, before marriage—has been the subject of considerable research in Western countries, where a phenomenon known as the "cohabitation effect" has been documented. The cohabitation effect refers to the finding that couples who cohabit before marriage tend to have higher rates of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution than couples who do not cohabit, even after controlling for other factors (Stanley et al., 2020). This finding is counterintuitive, as many couples assume that living together provides an opportunity to "test" compatibility and thereby reduce the risk of divorce.

In the Nigerian context, prolonged cohabitation may be particularly problematic because it often occurs outside the knowledge or approval of families and religious communities. Couples who cohabit may feel pressure to marry in order to regularise their situation, avoid further scrutiny, or legitimise children born during the cohabitation. However, the transition from cohabitation to marriage may be driven more by these external pressures than by a genuine desire for lifelong commitment. When expectations surrounding formal marriage differ sharply from the experience of cohabitation, tension and disappointment may arise (Ibrahim & Okonkwo, 2022).

Research in Nigeria has begun to document the negative consequences of prolonged cohabitation for marital outcomes. Ibrahim and Agbo (2019) found that individuals who cohabited longer than two years before marriage reported significantly lower marital satisfaction and higher intentions to separate. Clark and Miller (2019) reported that cohabiting couples who transitioned into marriage without clear commitment exhibited higher relational instability, with 27% experiencing separation within three years compared to 12% among those who married without cohabiting.

Another variable that could predict marital dissolution among divorcees is religion. Religion plays a central role in Nigerian society, influencing virtually every aspect of life, including marriage. Nigeria is a deeply religious country, with the majority of the population identifying as either Christian (primarily in the south) or Muslim (primarily in the north). Traditional African religions also continue to influence beliefs and practices, particularly in rural areas. Religious institutions exercise considerable authority over marriage, prescribing who may marry, when they may marry, and under what conditions (Obasola, 2015).

Religious rules regarding marriage take many forms. Doctrinally, both Christianity and Islam present marriage as a sacred institution ordained by God. In Christian theology, marriage is portrayed as a covenant reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). In Islam, marriage is described as completing half of one's faith (Hadith). These teachings create a strong moral imperative to marry, particularly for those who are sexually active, as marriage is presented as the only legitimate context for sexual relations (Eze, 2021).

Beyond doctrinal teachings, religious communities also enforce rules through institutional mechanisms. Many churches require that members be married before being appointed to leadership positions such as Deacon, Elder, or Pastor. Some churches actively discourage or prohibit marriage outside the faith, threatening members who marry non-believers with excommunication or loss of privileges. In Muslim communities, women are generally expected to marry within the faith, and marriage to a non-Muslim is strongly discouraged (Achebe, 2022).

These religious rules create powerful incentives for individuals to marry, even when they may not be personally ready or have found a compatible partner. An individual who wishes to serve in church leadership may feel compelled to marry quickly in order to be eligible. A young person who has engaged in premarital sexual activity may rush into marriage to avoid the guilt and shame associated with sin. A Muslim woman may marry a partner chosen by her family because the alternative—remaining unmarried or marrying outside the faith—is unthinkable (Suleiman, 2022).

The problem with religiously-motivated marriage is that the driving force is often obedience to doctrine or fear of social and spiritual consequences rather than a genuine desire to build a life with a specific person. The individual may marry someone they do not truly love or barely know, believing that their faith requires it or that marriage will automatically sanctify the relationship. When the initial motivation is purely rule-following, the couple may lack the emotional connection, mutual respect, and communication skills necessary for a healthy marriage (Okon & Iwok, 2022).

Research has documented the negative consequences of religiously-motivated marriage for marital outcomes. Muriithi and Ochieng (2018) found that marriages entered primarily due to compliance with religious expectations were negatively correlated with marital satisfaction. Almeida et al. (2022) reported a 30% higher incidence of separation among Catholic couples who married under strong religious prompting compared to those who married more autonomously. In the Nigerian context, Okon and Iwok (2022) found that marrying primarily due to fear of spiritual condemnation significantly correlated with lower satisfaction and higher reports of marital strain.

This study is anchored on two theoretical perspectives that collectively explain the relationship between marriage entry circumstances and marital dissolution: Filter Theory of Mate Selection (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962) and Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Theory (Amato, 2000).

The Filter Theory of Mate Selection, propounded by Kerckhoff and Davis in 1962, explains how individuals choose their marital partners by applying a series of filters that progressively narrow down potential mates from a broad pool to a select few. The theory suggests that individuals do not randomly select their spouses but instead "filter" them based on various criteria, some of which are surface-level and others more profound. These filters include social background, values, personality traits, and emotional compatibility, and they are applied over time as the relationship matures.

The Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Theory, propounded by Amato in 2000, explains why some individuals and families cope successfully with divorce while others experience long-term decline. Unlike earlier models that treated divorce as a single discrete event with predictable stages, this theory conceptualises divorce as a process unfolding over time, where outcomes depend on the balance between stressors and resources.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing body of research on marital dissolution in Nigeria, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how foundational entry circumstances contribute to marital outcomes. Most studies focus on problems that arise during the course of marriage—communication breakdown, infidelity, financial stress—with little attention to the conditions under which the marriage began. This is a critical omission because a marriage may be predisposed to failure from its inception if it was entered for the wrong reasons.

This problem is particularly evident among divorcees, who often report in retrospect that they had doubts about the marriage from the beginning but felt unable to act on them due to pressure from family, religious expectations, or circumstantial factors such as pregnancy. These retrospective accounts suggest that premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules may be significant predictors of eventual marital dissolution, yet no study has systematically examined these relationships using a large sample of divorcees in Nigeria.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the extent to which premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules as marriage entry motives predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria. The findings are expected to inform the development of premarital counselling programmes, marital education initiatives, and public awareness campaigns aimed at promoting healthier, more intentional marital decisions.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules as marriage entry motives predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria. Specifically, this study sought to determine the extent to which:

1. premarital pregnancy predicts marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria.
2. prolonged cohabitation predicts marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria.
3. religious rules predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does premarital pregnancy predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria?
2. To what extent does prolonged cohabitation predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria?
3. To what extent do religious rules predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at .05 level of significance:

H₀₁: Premarital pregnancy does not significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria.

H₀₂: Prolonged cohabitation does not significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria.

H₀₃: Religious rules do not significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria.

Method

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted in this study. Creswell and Poth, (2018) opined that a cross-sectional survey design allows the collection of quantitative data at a single point in time to examine predictive relationships without variable manipulation. The population comprised all 1,836 members of an online divorce support group in Nigeria. A sample of 757 participants was selected using convenience sampling due to the online nature of the population. Following introduction and explanation, members were invited to participate voluntarily via a Google Forms questionnaire left open for two weeks.

Data were collected using the researcher-developed Marriage Entry Motives and Marital Dissolution Questionnaire (MEMMDQ). This questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A measured the three independent variables with seven items each on a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Section B measured marital dissolution with 20 items. Reliability using Cronbach's alpha yielded: premarital pregnancy (.74), prolonged cohabitation (.79), religious rules (.87), and marital dissolution (.88) (Tavakol & Dennick, 2021). Simple linear regression analysis was employed using SPSS. The R-value indicated degree of association, R² indicated variance explained, and p-values at .05 alpha level determined significance

Results

Research Question 1: Premarital Pregnancy and Marital Dissolution

Table 1: Summary of Simple Linear Regression for Premarital Pregnancy (n=753)

Variables	R	R ²	Extent of Prediction	Remark
Premarital pregnancy	.480	.231	23.1%	Moderate Extent
Marital dissolution				

The R-value of 0.480 indicates a positive and moderate extent of prediction. The R² value of 0.231 shows that 23.1% of the variance in marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria is accounted for by premarital pregnancy as a marriage entry motive.

Research Question 2: Prolonged Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution

Table 2: Summary of Simple Linear Regression for Prolonged Cohabitation (n=753)

Variables	R	R ²	Extent of Prediction	Remark
Prolonged cohabitation	.563	.317	31.7%	Moderate Extent
Marital dissolution				

The R-value of 0.563 indicates a positive and moderate extent of prediction. The R² value of 0.317 shows that 31.7% of the variance in marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria is accounted for by prolonged cohabitation as a marriage entry motive.

Research Question 3: Religious Rules and Marital Dissolution

Table 3: Summary of Simple Linear Regression for Religious Rules (n=753)

Variables	R	R ²	Extent of Prediction	Remark
Religious rules	.596	.355	35.5%	Moderate Extent
Marital dissolution				

The R-value of 0.596 indicates a positive and moderate extent of prediction. The R² value of 0.355 shows that 35.5% of the variance in marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria is accounted for by religious rules as a marriage entry motive.

Hypothesis 1:

Table 4: Summary of Simple Regression Coefficient for Premarital Pregnancy

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Regression	181.002	1	181.002	225.100*	.000
Residual	603.877	751	.804		
Total	784.879	752			

*Significant at .05 alpha level

The information in Table 4 shows that premarital pregnancy as the entry motive for marriage significantly predicts marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria (F = 225.100, p = .000). Hence, the null hypothesis that premarital pregnancy does not significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria is rejected at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis 2:

Table 5: Summary of Simple Regression Coefficient for Prolonged Cohabitation

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Regression	249.090	1	249.090	349.143*	.000
Residual	535.789	751	.713		
Total	784.879	752			

*Significant at .05 alpha level

The information in Table 5 shows that prolonged cohabitation as the entry motive for marriage significantly predicts marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria ($F = 349.143$, $p = .000$). Hence, the null hypothesis that prolonged cohabitation does not significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria is rejected at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis 3:

Table 6: Summary of Simple Regression Coefficient for Religious Rules

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Regression	278.627	1	278.627	413.329*	.000
Residual	506.252	751	.674		
Total	784.879	752			

*Significant at .05 alpha level

The information in Table 6 shows that religious rules as the entry motive for marriage significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria ($F = 413.329$, $p = .000$). Hence, the null hypothesis that religious rules do not significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria is rejected at 0.05 level of significance.

Table 7: Summary of Regression Coefficients for All Three Predictors

Predictor Variable	R	R ²	Beta (β)	F	p-value	Decision
Premarital pregnancy	.480	.231	.480	225.100	.000	Reject H ₀
Prolonged cohabitation	.563	.317	.563	349.143	.000	Reject H ₀
Religious rules	.596	.355	.596	413.329	.000	Reject H ₀

Discussion

Premarital Pregnancy as a Predictor of Marital Dissolution

The finding that premarital pregnancy significantly predicted marital dissolution ($R^2 = .231$) aligns with previous research. Oladeji and Adebayo (2017) found pregnancy-motivated marriages exhibited higher rates of early conflict and lower emotional intimacy. Essien and Umoetuk (2021) reported such marriages had nearly double the odds of dissolution. Gómez and Castro (2022) found 48% of couples who married due to pregnancy separated within four years.

The explanation lies in the circumstances of such marriages. A marriage entered due to unplanned pregnancy is a decision made under pressure with a compressed timeline. The natural sequence of relationship development is inverted—the child arrives first, and marriage is constructed hastily around this new reality. The couple may barely know each other when planning a wedding and preparing for parenthood simultaneously. Divorcees in this study reported they never had a chance to discover if they actually liked their partner. The presence of a child complicates every aspect of the relationship; disagreements that might end a childless relationship become impossible to resolve cleanly. The couple feels trapped not only by vows but by shared responsibility for a human being, breeding resentment. Many divorcees described staying in unhappy marriages for years because of children, feeling they had no right to leave. Eventually, the unhappiness becomes too great.

Prolonged Cohabitation as a Predictor of Marital Dissolution

The finding that prolonged cohabitation significantly predicted marital dissolution ($R^2 = .317$) aligns with previous research. Clark and Miller (2019) found cohabiting couples who transitioned into marriage without clear commitment exhibited higher relational instability, with 27% experiencing separation within three years compared to 12% among those who married without cohabiting. Ibrahim and Agbo (2019) found individuals who cohabited longer than two years before marriage reported significantly lower marital satisfaction. García-Herreros et al. (2022) observed couples entering marriage after long-term cohabitation without shared future planning were 1.8 times more likely to separate.

The explanation lies in relational inertia. Prolonged cohabitation creates a situation where marriage feels like the next logical step—not chosen because of renewed passion, but because it seems natural after sharing a life for so many years. The relationship may have settled into a comfortable but stagnant rhythm. Divorcees in this study reported they stayed together out of habit, not love. They married because it was easier than breaking up, which would have meant dividing possessions, finding new housing, and explaining the decision. Such a marriage lacks genuine sense of renewal or choice. The dissatisfaction stems from feeling they sleepwalked into a major commitment. Additionally, prolonged cohabitation means the couple has established patterns of relating that are difficult to change.

Religious Rules as a Predictor of Marital Dissolution

The finding that religious rules significantly predicted marital dissolution ($R^2 = .355$) aligns with previous research. Muriithi and Ochieng (2018) found marriages entered primarily due to compliance with religious expectations were negatively correlated with marital satisfaction. Almeida et al. (2022) found a 30% higher incidence of separation among Catholic couples who married under strong religious prompting. Okon and Iwok (2022) found marrying primarily due to fear of spiritual condemnation correlated with lower satisfaction.

The explanation lies in the nature of the motivation—obedience to doctrine rather than genuine desire to build a life with a specific person. Divorcees in this study reported they married someone they did not truly love or barely knew, believing it was what their faith required. Over time, the emptiness of this arrangement became impossible to ignore. Marriage requires emotional connection, mutual respect, and the messy work of building a shared life. When motivation is purely rule-following, couples may lack skills for this deeper work. Furthermore, divorcees struggled with feelings of having missed something essential, watching friends marry for love. The obedience that seemed virtuous became a source of sorrow. For many, leaving a marriage entered for religious reasons felt like a spiritual crisis.

Conclusion

This study established that premarital pregnancy, prolonged cohabitation, and religious rules significantly predict marital dissolution among divorcees in Nigeria. Marriages do not fail merely because of challenges encountered during the relationship; rather, many unions are predisposed to dissolution due to the foundational circumstances that informed their formation. When individuals marry due to unplanned pregnancy, extended cohabitation without intentional commitment, or compliance with religious obligations rather than genuine personal readiness, they often do so without adequate emotional preparedness, compatibility assessment, or long-term vision. As marital realities unfold—financial responsibilities, child-rearing, role negotiation—the initial motive proves insufficient to sustain commitment, leading to dissatisfaction and eventual dissolution.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Churches, mosques, and marriage registries should incorporate mandatory psychological assessment addressing pregnancy status, cohabitation history, and religious motivation before marriage approval. This assessment should include structured interviews and standardised questionnaires to evaluate relationship readiness, compatibility, and the presence of high-risk entry circumstances.
2. Guidance counsellors and marriage therapists should be equipped with specialised training to identify high-risk entry circumstances—pregnancy-driven, cohabitation-inertia, and religiously-compelled marriages—and provide targeted preventive interventions. This training should include skills in motive assessment, premarital education, and conflict resolution.
3. Community leaders, religious organisations, and non-governmental organisations should organise forums to educate families about the psychological risks associated with forcing marriage due to pregnancy or religious obligation. These programmes should emphasise that while marriage is valued, forced or coerced marriage is counterproductive and may lead to greater harm in the long run.
4. Couples considering cohabitation should be educated about the "cohabitation effect" and encouraged to establish clear intentions and timelines before transitioning to marriage. Counsellors should help cohabiting couples assess whether they are "sliding" into marriage through inertia or making a deliberate, conscious decision to commit.

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