

The changing face of conjugal relationships

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The vast majority of Canadian women form conjugal relationships at some point in their lives. Whether born in the 1920s, the mid-1960s or any decade in between, nearly all women have been in a marriage or common-law relationship at least once; in 1995, over 94% of women ranging in age from 30 to 69 reported that they had entered at least one such union. Although the proportion was somewhat lower for the 20- to 29-year-old group (87%), it is likely to rise for these women as they grow older.

While the tendency for women to form unions has remained consistently high over the years, the nature of these unions has changed fundamentally. Although marriage still accounts for the majority of relationships, its one-time near-universal appeal has given way to ever more popular common-law unions. Using data from the 1995 General Social Survey (GSS), this article examines how the types of conjugal unions women enter have changed over time. It also asks if starting life together in a common-law union as

CST What you should know about this study

Data in this article come from the 1995 General Social Survey (GSS), which interviewed nearly 11,000 respondents aged 15 years and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. The survey collected data on all marital and common-law unions, on separation, divorce and the death of a partner, along with a broad range of background characteristics. This study uses a sample of 4,656 female respondents aged 20 to 69 years.

Life tables were used to analyze the probability of transitions in and out of unions. All women were assumed to be single at age 15; after that, they were assumed to be exposed to the possibility of entering a union, either marital or common-law. Each transition (first marriage, first common-law arrangement, first separation, second marriage, etc.) was analyzed according to the past conjugal history of each woman. For example, the likelihood of experiencing a separation for the first time was measured separately for women who married directly and for those who started their conjugal life through common-law. This method acknowledged that a woman's propensity to part from her partner may be affected by her previous conjugal experience.

Separation: in this article the word separation has no legal standing. It is used simply to define the end of a relationship resulting from causes other than death.

Common-law union: all common-law relationships are self-reported and could refer to unions of any duration.



While almost all women once started their conjugal life in a marriage, just over one-third choose marriage now

Proportion of all women experiencing	Age in 1995				
	60-69	50-59	40-49	30-39	20-29
	Born in				
	1926-1935	1936-1945	1946-1955	1956-1965	1966-1975
At least one union	96	97	96	94	87
At least one marriage	96	95	92	84	66
First union starts with marriage	95	91	78	56	35
At least one common-law union	8	22	35	49	59
First union starts with common-law union	1	6	18	38	52
At least one separation	25	32	40	43	--
At least two unions	14	27	34	39	--
At least two separations	8	13	16	--	--

-- Sample too small to produce reliable estimate.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

opposed to a marriage influences the chances of the relationship breaking up or predicts the types of relationships that may follow. Although this article focuses on women, its results generally apply to men as well.

Increasingly, women choose to live common-law

The proportion of women who started their first conjugal union in a marriage fell from 95% of those in their 60s to 56% of women in their 30s and to a still lower 35% of those in their 20s. Clearly, common-law has become younger people’s favoured arrangement for a first conjugal relationship. While only 1% of women aged 60 to 69 lived common-law in their first union, 38% of 30- to 39-year-olds and 52% of 20- to 29-year-olds started conjugal life with this option.

Of course, having chosen one type of arrangement for a first union does not preclude the even-

tual possibility of the other. Many women who started their relationship through common-law have subsequently married, while those who married first and then separated are increasingly deciding to live in a common-law relationship in their subsequent unions. However, compared with their older counterparts, young women are less inclined to marry their first partner and, instead, are more likely to continue living common-law, thus increasing the average duration of these common-law unions.

Women enter common-law arrangements at different stages in their lives, depending on the generation they belong to. The vast majority of women aged 20 to 29 who lived common-law did so in their first conjugal union. These women grew up in times when living together without marriage had been accepted by most people as a legitimate way of settling into a relationship. In contrast, women in

the 50- to 59-year-old group — most of whom came of age in an era when common-law relationships were frowned upon — were nearly three times as likely to enter a common-law relationship after their first marriage ended than for their first conjugal union. For younger generations, then, common-law serves mostly as a prelude or an alternative to marriage, while for older women it is a prelude or an alternative to remarriage.

Starting conjugal life through common-law nearly doubles likelihood of separation

Over the years, the likelihood of a first relationship ending in divorce or separation has increased significantly. Whereas 25% of women aged 60 to 69 had experienced a break-up at some point in their lives, over 40% of those in their 30s and 40s had already gone through one. The fact that the percentage of women in their 30s who separated (43%) is higher than the percentage in their 40s (40%) suggests that break-downs of first unions are happening earlier in life. Furthermore, their frequency is also on the rise: the percentage of women who have gone through at least two separations has increased from 8% of 60- to 69-year-olds to 16% of those in their 40s.

Starting conjugal life in a common-law relationship, as opposed to a marriage, sharply increases the probability of this first union ending in separation. And whether the common-law partners eventually marry or not makes little difference: the risk of separation is just as high. In the 30- to 39-year group, for example, almost two-thirds (63%) of those whose first relationship was common-law had separated by 1995, compared with one-third (33%) of women who had married first. A similar pattern appears

among women in their 40s: those who lived common-law at first were much more likely to separate than those who married first (60% versus 36%).

Second relationships very common

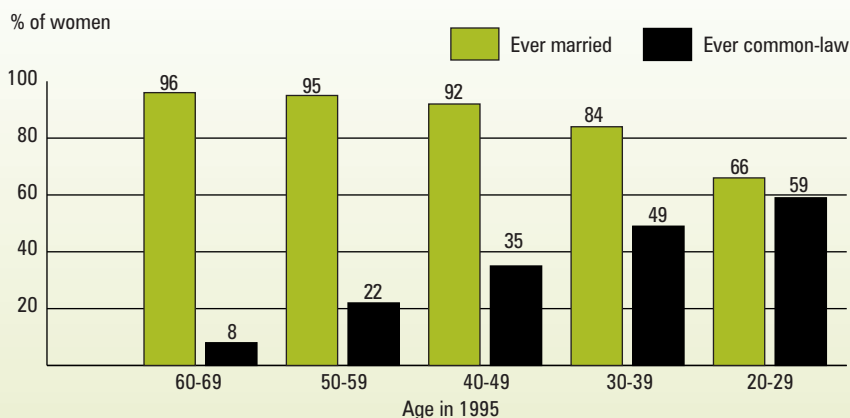
The increase in the break-up of couples has resulted in more women being potentially available to enter a second relationship. Indeed, the proportion of women who had experienced at least two unions (marital or common-law) nearly tripled from the older to the younger generations, rising from 14% among those in their 60s to 39% among those in their 30s. It appears that separation, followed by subsequent conjugal relationships, has become a common experience for many women in the last three decades of the 20th century.

Women whose first marriage had dissolved were very likely to form another union: in the 30- to 39-year age group, for example, nearly nine in 10 women entered a new relationship after their first had ended. Women in the oldest generation were least likely to form a new union after the collapse of their first marriage, but more than half still did so. In all age groups, previously-married women were more likely to choose to live common-law in their second relationship than to remarry. And if they were in their 30s or 40s, they were twice as likely to do so.

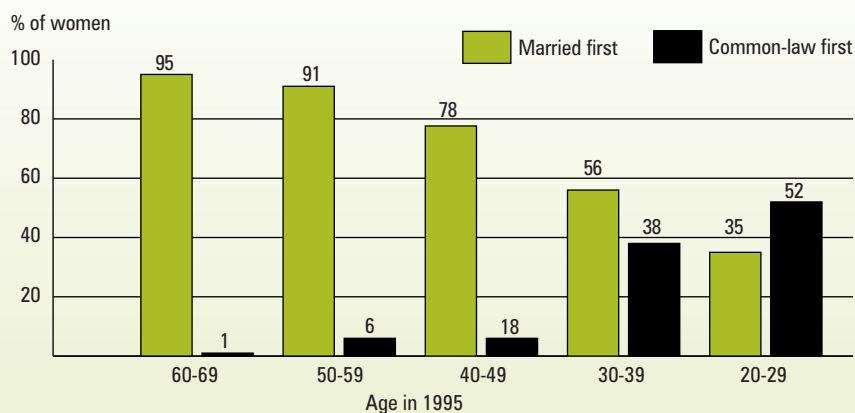
Women who had started their conjugal life in a common-law relationship were just as likely to form new relationships if their union collapsed as those who had married first. However, they were substantially more likely to prefer common-law for their second relationship than were married-first women. While married-first women in their 30s were twice as likely to choose common-law as marriage for



While a common-law union is increasingly common among women in all age groups ...



... twenty-something women are most likely to start off common-law



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995



Women whose first conjugal union was common-law were nearly twice as likely to separate

	Age in 1995			
	60-69	50-59	40-49	30-39
Proportion of women separating if	Born in			
	1926-1935	1936-1945	1946-1955	1956-1965
Married first	25	30	36	33
Common-law first (including those separated after marrying their partner)	--	77	60	63

-- Sample too small to produce reliable estimate.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

Recent research into the nature of common-law relationships and the role that economic circumstances play in their dissolution — whether through marriage or separation — reveal some interesting results. In general, these studies show that common-law relationships tend to be temporary and transitory, that more often than not they transform into marriage, and that men are more likely than women to end them through separation.

More specifically, researchers have found a strong association between the economic circumstances of the couple and the chance that their union will end or transform into marriage. They have also discovered that men and women react in different ways in similar situations.

The better a woman's economic position is, the less likely she is to marry her common-law partner and the more likely she is to leave the union. Greater financial independence may reduce women's dependence on men and hence the desirability of marriage. Indeed, data show that the common-law unions of semi-professional and skilled women are more likely to end in separation than in marriage. In contrast, professional and semi-professional men are more likely to marry their common-law partners.

- For more information, see W. Zheng and M. Pollard. July 1998. *Economic Circumstances and the Stability of Nonmarital Cohabitation*. The Income and Labour Dynamics Working Paper Series (Statistics Canada Catalogue 98-10).

their second union, women whose first relationship was common-law were six times more likely to do so.

Summary

In Canada, the last few decades have seen a decrease in marriages, a rise in common-law relationships, and an increase in the break-up of all unions. People today have more options in choosing the types of conjugal relationships they wish to have. While women born in the 1920s and 1930s had little choice but to marry, common-law unions are now accepted and they have become increasingly popular with young Canadians. However, the instability of many common-law arrangements, and the rising rate of dissolution of all unions, suggest

that more people may spend more time living alone or, alternatively, may be involved in more short-term relationships.

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