

# Creating our own ceremonies [Commitment ceremonies]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It was a sunny afternoon with a warm breeze blowing when Sartai Kaur and David Barnard gathered their friends together on Toronto's Centre Island to witness their vows to each other. As the time for the ceremony approached, guests met outside at the chosen site -- a secluded patch of grass surrounded by trees and a view of Lake Ontario. However, there was no religious or state representative present to bless the union or deem it legal. None was necessary because Sartaj and David had chosen to affirm their bond by having a commitment ceremony instead of a legal marriage.

Just the acknowledgement that long-term relationships aren't all sun, flowers and domestic bliss is a testament to feminism's success in wiping the deceptive romantic gloss off the marriage ideal. It may also be that women like [Kaur] and [Joanna Wedge] are using their commitment ceremonies as a means of building an alternative to the isolated nuclear family unit, long-identified by feminists as one of the main vehicles of women's oppression. Of course, discriminatory laws and policies mean that lesbians' decisions to have commitment ceremonies are influenced by very different circumstances. Denied the option to legally marry, lesbians and gay men have, nonetheless, invented ways to validate and celebrate their relationships. The fact that some heterosexual feminists have commitment ceremonies is at least partially explained by the overlap between lesbian and feminist organizing and culture.

## FULL TEXT

It was a sunny afternoon with a warm breeze blowing when Sartai Kaur and David Barnard gathered their friends together on Toronto's Centre Island to witness their vows to each other. As the time for the ceremony approached, guests met outside at the chosen site -- a secluded patch of grass surrounded by trees and a view of Lake Ontario. However, there was no religious or state representative present to bless the union or deem it legal. None was necessary because Sartaj and David had chosen to affirm their bond by having a commitment ceremony instead of a legal marriage.

A commitment ceremony is a way of affirming the decision to make a life together and it often includes adaptations of traditional marriage elements such as vows, an exchange of gifts and sharing of food. The difference is that it's born of anti-authoritarian, feminist ideals, rather than the history of ownership that traditional marriage carries.

Given the oppressive history of the institution of marriage, it's not surprising that some heterosexual feminists are striving to create different ways of celebrating their choice of a life partner. The new partnership rituals aren't something any government agency collects information about, so it's hard to say if they're growing in popularity. What has been documented is that fewer Canadian women are choosing to get legally-married.

According to the 1996 census, the number of common-law couples (defined as a woman and man, not legally married, living together as husband and wife in the same dwelling) has increased by 28 per cent since 1991. The number of married couples increased by only 1.7 per cent during the same period.

While it may not be accurate to attribute the trend away from legal marriage solely to feminism's influence, many elements of feminism's analysis of the institution have been accepted by a generation of women, even if the debt isn't always acknowledged.

"Undoubtedly," says Roderick Phillips, marriage historian at Carleton University, "the feminist critique of marriage has

got to be a factor in the decline of marriage as such."

However "just living together" has its problems too. For one thing, it leaves an intimate relationship open to what can feel like an unsettling lack of definition. The casualness with which many couples begin cohabitation can lead to doubts about the seriousness of the relationship. If left unspoken, questions about the durability of the union and the intentions of each partner may eventually undermine the health of the relationship and exacerbate sexist power imbalances.

Feminists like Sartaj are resolving that ambiguity by choosing to have commitment ceremonies. She had already been married (in a Sikh ceremony) and she didn't like the assumptions about gender roles that were attached to a legal marriage.

"When I was married before, there were all these expectations of how a wife is supposed to act. It wasn't about being equal partners," Sartaj says. Another reason women want to have commitment ceremonies is to make their commitments public and shared.

Two years ago, Joanna Wedge had a commitment ceremony and she says it was crucial for her to have her community there and to know that she and her partner could count on friends when their relationship has problems. "I knew that I had something to celebrate and that I needed the support of my loved ones if this relationship was going to survive through difficult times," says Joanna. "It was very important to us that all the people present be part of the long-term community that would help us live by our vows. We wanted them to know that this night was about their roles in our lives and how we would be calling on them in future."

Sartaj and David felt a similar need to integrate their relationship with their friendships.

"David and I have consciously created a community around us. We said to our friends that we expected them to be there for us and to help us through our relationship, because having been through a relationship before, you know you need help, you need support," Kaur says.

Just the acknowledgement that long-term relationships aren't all sun, flowers and domestic bliss is a testament to feminism's success in wiping the deceptive romantic gloss off the marriage ideal. It may also be that women like Kaur and Wedge are using their commitment ceremonies as a means of building an alternative to the isolated nuclear family unit, long-identified by feminists as one of the main vehicles of women's oppression.

The desire to see their values reflected in such an important personal-political moment is a common theme among women who choose commitment ceremonies. One of the big opportunities to act on those values is in the writing of vows. Kaur wanted hers to be true to the principles she and her partner use as guidance in their lives together.

"To challenge each other, to help each other grow, we very clearly said that's what we wanted from the relationship," explains Kaur. "We thought a lot about our vows. We talk about them all the time."

Now that the couple have committed, they still refrain from using the default terms 'husband' and 'wife' when referring to one another. Instead, they call each other 'partner'.

Janisse Browning and Wreford Miller share that preference, only using the conventional terms as a tease or when trying to avoid lengthy explanations. Their commitment ceremony took place in the back yard garden of their next-door neighbours in Vancouver. There was no expensive wedding dress, no hired caterers and no three-tiered wedding cake, just a bunch of close friends with potluck dishes and an eagerness to honour a happy, yet serious decision.

Although Joanna's commitment celebration was a more elaborate, week-long affair, she says she and her partner, Mike Crawley, "hate the wedding industry," and made sure their ritual didn't turn into an excuse for a shopping binge. Friends and family helped with the preparation and billeting, and the couple asked their guests, in lieu of gifts, to contribute to a fund which would enable their less well-off friends to travel to the gathering.

As well as acting on anti-consumerist values by having more personal and home-made celebrations, couples who choose commitment ceremonies do so because they're opposed to what they see as illegitimate state and religious interference in their personal lives.

"Neither of us really places any authority in the church or the state as institutions in our lives so it would be kind of like we were trying to fool ourselves if we had that kind of authoritative intervention in our love-life," Janisse says.

Everyone gathered in a circle for their ceremony, and each person was invited to offer their thoughts on commitment

and the relationship. One guest, an Ojibway man, suggested that a stone be passed from hand to hand as people took their turns speaking and the couple have kept the rock as a memento. Janisse and Wreford jumped over a broomstick held by friends to signify their official entry into a domestic union because that's a tradition that both Browning, with her African-Canadian heritage, and Miller, with his European roots, have in common. Afterwards, there was a salmon barbecue. The couple shares a conviction about the need to protect the environment by supporting organic agriculture and eating locally produced food, so even the serving of salmon was a conscious political choice.

Janisse has a history of involvement with feminist and other social justice causes and says that part of what prompted her to consider having a ritual was a story a friend told her about a commitment ceremony between two women.

"I thought it was a really beautiful thing to involve your friends in," she recalls.

Of course, discriminatory laws and policies mean that lesbians' decisions to have commitment ceremonies are influenced by very different circumstances. Denied the option to legally marry, lesbians and gay men have, nonetheless, invented ways to validate and celebrate their relationships. The fact that some heterosexual feminists have commitment ceremonies is at least partially explained by the overlap between lesbian and feminist organizing and culture.

Cathy Vigneron and Pat Curtie have been living together for more than a year. They are out to their immediate families, and hope to start one of their own in the medium-term future. They plan to lay the foundation for that family by having a commitment ceremony. The couple hasn't nailed down many of the details yet, because they won't be officially committing until next summer, but they're already having fun discussing possibilities. Right now they're still debating whether or not to get matching tattoos instead of rings and discussing whether to have a variety show at the reception.

Whatever they decide to do, they agree that one of their main motivations for having a commitment ceremony is the desire to share their lives with their families. Since both of their families live in Ontario, far from Vigneron and Currie in BC, the couple wants to use the ceremony to show them what their lives together are really about.

"People don't know what to expect of an alternative family," Currie says.

"We want our families to be involved in our lives, so we have to set out expectations and outline the type of life we have. One way to do that is to have a commitment ceremony."

Vigneron agrees.

"For me, this is a welcoming of making life decisions together. I want there to be a day put aside to celebrate my relationship with both family and friends, and to have them have a good time."

Having a good time, or even "the most special day of your life," is what marketers set up women to expect from their weddings. In reality many are too stressed out by an alienating ceremony and a boatload of expensive paraphernalia to find meaning in the event. By choosing commitment ceremonies women may be forging a feminist alternative that promotes equality. Kaur certainly thinks so.

"It makes us very happy to think about that day," she says. "We draw a lot of strength from it."

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