

Polygamy and Its Effects on Wives, Children, and Husbands

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Polygamy (specifically, polygyny) has been practiced in most societies around the world for millennia, and continues to be practiced in many countries today.¹ Of the more than 1,260 societies in the Ethnographic Atlas originally compiled by George Peter Murdock, more than 85% condone polygyny (Gray, 1998, variable 9, Marital Composition: Monogamy and Polygamy; see also Scheidel, 2009, p. 281). Thus, from a historical perspective, monogamy as a legal requirement has been the exception rather than the rule. It is only in the modern period and in the wake of European overseas colonization that monogamy has become a social norm around the globe. In Japan, for example, monogamy was introduced as a result of the Civil Code of 1898. Other countries, like China and India, banned polygamy in the twentieth century (Scheidel, 2009, p. 284). Today, predominantly in the Middle East and Africa, polygamy is legal (Al-Krenawi, & Yuval-Shani, 2008, p. 205); however, in some countries—primarily in sub-Saharan-Africa--polygamy is illegal, but its practice is not criminalized.

Studies on polygamy have revealed its negative affects on wives, children, and even husbands, increasing conflict within households-- particularly the ubiquitous competition between co-wives. Evidence has also shown that children of polygamous marriages suffer from more health problems than those of monogamous households. In sub-Saharan Africa—the poorest region of the world with the highest incidence of polygyny—it has been suggested that polygyny may be a contributing factor negatively affecting economic development (Tertilt, 2005). Furthermore, in societies where polygamy is practiced, the status of women appears to be undermined. This may be attributed to the possibility that the wife is afraid of displeasing her husband for fear of another woman entering the home and dividing the affection and resources of her husband (White, 1978, p. 58). Studies of polygamous marriages have also shown a pattern of young women entering into their first marriage with much older male spouses (Henrich, Boyd, & Richerson, 2012; Al-Krenawi, 2014). More importantly, polygamy contributes to upholding and perpetuating the notion of men’s superiority over women. Thus, the practice has consequences beyond impacting the individual lives of the women in polygamous households. This article begins with a review of polygamy and monogamy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It then provides data relating to the extent of polygyny in the Middle East and Africa, considers the factors that contribute to the incidence of polygamy in these regions, and concludes with an examination of its effects on wives, children, and husbands.

Historically, Judaism permitted polygyny as a legitimate form of marriage, and in some cases even made it necessary. For example, the Hebrew Bible made it obligatory for a man to marry his brother’s widow when there was no male issue. Levirate marriage—the practice of the surviving brother marrying the widow of his deceased brother—resulted in polygamy if the surviving brother was already

married. Seduction and enslavement could also lead to polygamy. For example, a married man who seduced a virgin was required to marry her if her father consented. Similarly, a married man who owned a male slave, then offered him a female slave as his wife, decidedly owned that wife and any children that she bore him. When the male slave was emancipated, the master could add the slave's wife and her children to his own household, thus beginning a polygamous relationship. At a later date, the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud required that, if after ten years of marriage and the wife is still barren, he is to take a second wife in order to provide offspring. Polygamy was, however, never common among Jews; rather, it was primarily practiced by kings, members of the aristocracy, and the rich. Moreover, in the early eleventh century of the Christian era, Rabbi Gershom ben Judah of Metz forbade Jews to practice polygamy, under penalty of excommunication. After this rabbinical ban on polygamy, Ashkenazi Jews of France and Germany began practicing monogamy, while the Jews in Muslim lands, including those in present-day Spain and Portugal, ignored the ban. However, the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa continued to practice polygamy into the twentieth century (Witte, 2015; Ginzberg, 1902; Greenstone, 1905; Jacobs & Abrahams, 1904; Schechter & Jacobs, 1904).

The Greco-Roman world in which Christianity emerged gave privilege to monogamous relationships as it was considered to be the only form of marriage that could produce “legitimate and heritable widows and children” (Witte, 2015, p. 104). Long before the rise of Christianity, the Greeks viewed polygyny as “a barbarian custom or a mark of tyranny” (Scheidel, 2009, p. 283). In reality, however, the existence of concubinage could lead to polygyny. Married men were allowed to have sexual relations with their female slaves—relations which could lead to offspring. Early on, the Romans allowed a married man to keep a concubine, as long as they did not cohabit; however, Roman law later prohibited a man from keeping a wife and a concubine at the same time, yet they were free to have sex with slaves and prostitutes. Although polygamy was illegal in Roman law, it was not criminalized until the middle of the third century of the Christian era. Until then, if a married man took a second wife, she would be treated as a concubine or a prostitute without a right to inherit from him, and any children born as a result of the relationship would be considered illegitimate. In subsequent years, parties guilty of the crime of polygamy incurred the sentence of “infamy,” which entailed social stigma including certain sanctions, such as the loss of the right to hold public office. After the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the Christian emperors upheld and extended these prohibitions on polygamy. The first time that the canon law of the church prohibited polygamy was around the last quarter of the fourth century. Basil the Great, one of the pre-eminent Doctors of the Church, referred to polygamy in one of his Canons as a sin, assigning four years of penance. He did not, however, consider polygamy to be a serious offence. In his view, adultery was far more serious, assigning fifteen years of penance to anyone guilty of the act. In the first millennium of the Christian era, despite the laws of the state and the church, many

pious Christian Germanic kings practiced polygamy. In fact, some powerful lords, land barons, and clerics kept “harems of wives, concubines, female slaves, and servant girls” (Witte, 2015, p. 125). Only toward the end of the first millennium was monogamy slowly enforced in the Christian West (Witte, 2015, p. 126). During the Reformation era and beyond, there were cases of royalty, aristocrats, and communes engaging in polygamy, as well as incidents of theologians and writers advancing arguments in favour of polygamy. However, in the West, monogamy has been an established norm for several centuries, with the exception of a few small groups of “fundamentalist” Mormons. There are many Christians in Africa who practice polygamy and do not consider it to be contrary to their religion (Falen, 2008, pp. 56–57; Zeitzen, 2008, p. 38). They do, however, consider Western Christians who prescribe monogamy while pursuing sexual relations outside marriage, to be hypocritical.

Unlike Christianity, which originated in a society in which the existing laws privileged monogamy, Islam emerged in an environment of widespread polygamy--a pagan Arab society which did not set a limit on the number of wives a man might have, including female slaves. The Qur’an limited the number of wives a man was allowed to have to four, in addition to any number of concubines he wished to maintain. The Qur’an did not abolish slavery; hence, the institution of concubinage continued in Muslim society until modern times. For a brief period, during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim men were also permitted to take *temporary* wives-- a type of marriage called *mut’a*, also referred to as *sigha*. While Sunni law later banned this form of marriage, it remained legal in Twelver Shi’ite Islam and is currently widely practiced in Iran—the most important single factor contributing to polygyny in that country. The institution of concubinage has, however, disappeared in the Islamic world as a result of the abolition of slavery—a process that began in the nineteenth century with the introduction of successive bans on the slave trade in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. Today, polygamy continues to be legal and practiced in most Muslim countries around the world. The first Muslim country to ban polygamy was Turkey, in 1926; but despite its criminalization, polygamous marriages continue to occur predominantly in rural areas and among the Kurdish population. Tunisia banned polygamy in 1956, after which the practice disappeared. To date, no other Arab country has banned polygamy. The Muslim-majority Republics of the Soviet Union and Bosnia and Herzegovina had also banned polygamy, and although the ban was not lifted after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, there is evidence that it is returning to the region. For example, while Tajikistan was under Soviet rule, polygamy never completely disappeared, but has become widespread since the country’s independence in 1991. A 2010 survey indicated that one in ten men in Tajikistan had more than one wife (Qodir, 2011; see also Cleuziou, 2016).

Despite centuries of polygamous practice throughout the Muslim world, it was never a common phenomenon. The ruling elites in Muslim societies had many wives and concubines, but the vast majority of Muslim men lived in monogamous unions. Polygamy was more prevalent among the Shi’ites than the

Sunnis because of the legality of *mut‘a* marriage in Twelver Shi‘ite Islam. Statistical data on the rate of polygamy in various Middle Eastern and North African countries is available from around the middle of the twentieth century onward. For the earlier part of the century, the information is sporadic. In 1906, 7.3% of married men in Algeria were polygamous (Fargues, 2003, p. 253, n. 11); in the following year, the rate of polygamy in Egypt was roughly 6% (Baron, 1994, p. 165), and in Damascus, was 12.1% (Okawara, 2003, p. 64). In the 1950s, the proportion of men in polygynous unions was at 2–3.2% in Algeria and Libya, and 6.6–7.5% in Morocco and Iraq (Chamie, 1986, p. 57, Table 1). In the latter part of the 20th century—the 1980s and ‘90s-- the proportion of women in polygynous unions was around 3–5% in North Africa (excluding Tunisia), Palestine, Iran, and Syria, and 9% in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula (Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2005, p. 527 and p. 596, Table A.4). Scholars argue that polygyny is showing “clear signs of decline” in the Middle East and North Africa (Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2005, p. 527).

Overall, the rate of polygyny across the Middle East and North Africa is significantly lower than in sub-Saharan Africa, where it is most widespread in West Africa and the Sahel. With the exception of Mauritania, 29% to 67% of women aged 35 to 44 live in polygynous marriages, compared to Central Africa and the 17 countries of East Africa where the corresponding figures range from 4% in Madagascar to 39% in Uganda. Polygyny is least prevalent in the five countries of Southern Africa, where only 14% of women aged 35 to 44 live in polygynous unions (Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2004, p. 471, Table 4, and pp. 528–529, Table A4).

Similarly, the incidence of polygynous marriages with three or more wives is lower in the Muslim Middle East and North Africa than in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Joseph Chamie, Director of Research for Migration Studies in New York and former Director of the United Nations Population Division provides figures for the distribution of polygynous men in ten Arab countries spanning over a number of years, by counting the number of wives they have maintained. His data shows that a large majority of these polygynous men had kept only two wives, and a relatively small number had three or four. For example, about 11% of polygynous men in Iraq in 1957 had three or four wives, while the corresponding figure for Algeria in 1966 was less than 3% (1986, p. 58, Table 3).

Causes of polygyny

Many factors may contribute to the incidence of polygyny in society, including economic and cultural factors. Reasons for men becoming polygynous and women consenting to become additional wives may vary from one individual to another. In some contexts, women are desired for their reproductive as well as productive roles. In farming societies, for example, a larger family means a larger

pool of labor to work the land, enabling polygamous families to accumulate more land and wealth. Among tribal populations, polygamy may be practiced in order to keep the family and the tribe strong. Polygamy can also be a marker of status. For example, wealthy, powerful, and noble men may contract polygamous marriages in order to demonstrate their higher social standing and wealth. For widows and their children, polygamy may serve the purpose of obtaining shelter and support, and in societies where women are heavily dependent on men, cultural norms may require that men of means marry widowed relatives, even when they already have a wife.

In some contexts, the desire to have children, particularly sons, may eventually result in a polygamous marriage as the barrenness of the first wife is one of the most common reasons for a man taking a second wife (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 60). Another determinant may be when a man's first wife has not borne a son. For instance, according to Hindu custom, a man who has not had a son with his first wife, is entitled to marry again, despite the legal ban on polygamy in India (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 34). Among the Bedouins in the Naqab (Negev) desert, polygyny may occur when a man wishes to have additional sons, and owing to pressure from his male kin, is prompted to enter into a polygynous marriage against his own desire. The status of women and men in Bedouin society largely depends upon the number of children one has, especially sons. It is estimated that more than one third of the Bedouin families in the Naqab are polygamous (Marey-Sarwan, Otto, Roer-Strier, & Keller, 2016, p. 107).

A study based on interviews with ten bigamous Bedouin families in a town in the Naqab found that the reason most frequently given by husbands for their second marriages was to increase the number of sons and thereby the family's strength. One husband commented that "many sons is a blessing, ... to be with seven boys is not like with one, boys have power, I wanted to give power to my family, the first wife did not bring many sons, so I got her a backup" (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006, p. 315). In another study, a male interviewee from a Bedouin village made the following statement regarding the causes of polygamy: "Sometimes, men get married in order to bring a lot of children because children are power, and sometimes it happens that a man must marry again because his first woman gives birth only to girls" (Marey-Sarwan, Otto, Roer-Strier, & Keller, 2016, p. 114).

Scholars have also identified the practice of *arranged* marriages as a contributing factor in the continuation of the practice of polygyny. Arranged marriages are not uncommon in the Middle East and North Africa. The strictures on courting that exist in these regions--constraints stemming from religious and cultural sensitivities relating to physical contact between adults of the opposite sex--often prompt the couple to marry before fully knowing each other, thereby increasing the chances of an unhappy union. A man who is emotionally dissatisfied in his first marriage, may be induced to seek love in another marriage without divorcing his first wife. Among the Bedouins of the Naqab, first marriages are usually arranged by parents when the parties are young, whereas marriage to a second wife is "in many cases a result of

free choice—out of love or as a manifestation of independence” (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006, p. 313; see also Al-Krenawi, 2014, p. 9). One of the bigamous husbands interviewed in a study on polygamy in this region related the following regarding his second wife: “I loved her and she loved me and we decided to get married. With my first wife there was no love, my parents chose her and I traded for my sister and got married, but in the second time I was the one who decided” (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006, p. 317).

It seems apparent, however, that a man’s desire for sexual gratification is an important factor contributing to engaging in polygamy. Some men may justify their subsequent marriages to young women by reference to their sexual needs. As one of the Bedouin-Arabs in a study on polygamy in the Dhofar region in Southern Oman stated: “... my wife was getting old to give me all that I need. So I remarried” (Profanter & Cate, 2009, p. 235). Another participant in this study said: “I am a man like any other man, I want to live a normal life, my wife was getting older and sick which is what reduces the sexual relation between us ... my wife didn’t do what I needed that’s why I decided to marry again...” (p. 235). An interviewee, who was in his 40s and whose first wife was two years younger, explained that he did not maintain sexual relations with her because she was “old” (pp. 235–236). Some older men argue that taking additional *young* wives can rejuvenate them (see, for example, Zeitzen, 2008, p. 72, discussing Malaysia).

Nina Nurmila’s book-length study (2009) on polygamy in Indonesia, which is based on her fieldwork in 2003–2004, provides other examples of men taking additional wives for selfish reasons. One of her male interviewees—an uneducated, low-income earner—commented on the advantages of polygyny: it was safer and cleaner for him to have two wives than to engage in extra-marital affairs; he did not have to pay for prostitutes; and with his wives’ financial support, he had been able to build a better house than the one he had. Many wives are working as domestic servants, earning most of the family’s income (p. 125). This particular case also shows that, although polygamy often was and continues to be associated with wealth, prestige, and nobility, men from lower social classes can also practice polygamy. Zeitzen’s statement that “poor men are monogamists all over the world” is not fully accurate (2008, p. 14). Apart from contemporary examples, such as those provided in Nurmila’s study (pp. 124–125, 128–129, etc.), historical studies furnish examples of *poor (italicized)* polygamous men. Based on an examination of census data from four villages in the Delta region of Egypt in the nineteenth century, Kenneth Cuno observes that polygyny was not “unusual” among rural “lower-income households” (2015, p. 71), as the wives of poor men worked to support themselves and their children, contributing to the household’s income.

Like men, women may have many different reasons for entering into polygynous unions. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, women may prefer marriage to a wealthy polygynous man than to a

monogamous union with a poor man due to their dependence on men for resources like land and livestock. In other parts of Africa, polygyny is more prevalent among the poor than among the wealthy. Malay women have reported various other reasons for becoming second wives, including “financial support from the husband,” becoming “wealthy,” gaining status by marriage to “a powerful man,” “love,” “pregnancy,” and the possibility of having “more time on their own” through sharing their polygynous husbands with other women (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 72). Among Arab Muslims, the social and cultural expectations for women to marry and have children are rationale for engaging in polygyny. Many women prefer to become *additional* wives than to remain single (Al-Sherbiny, 2005, p. 19; Slonim-Nevo, Al-Krenawi, & Yuval-Shani, 2008, p. 205). Chamie’s study (1986) on Arab countries also sheds light on women’s motivations for entering polygynous unions. He found that divorcées and widows constitute a significant proportion of the women who enter into marriage with married men. For example, in Egypt from 1968–1978, more than half of the *additional* wives were divorcées and widows, and in Jordan from 1972–1979, about two-fifths (p. 59, Table 4). In the Middle East and North Africa, divorcées—and to a greater extent widows—experience far greater difficulties finding a single man to marry than a woman who has never been married (Chamie, 1986, pp. 59–60). For many divorced and widowed women, the prospect of becoming an additional wife is preferable to remaining single when facing the lack of opportunities or dependence on others for support, particularly for widows with young children. Remarriage enables divorcées to rid themselves of the stigma of divorce-- even women who are able to support themselves may find it preferable to become a *junior* wife. A young woman who lives on her own risks gaining a bad reputation, as well as being subjected to sexual harassment.

Chamie’s study also shows that many women who have never been married, often become additional wives; however, this does not mean that most Middle Eastern and North African women find it acceptable to become additional wives. In that same period as above (1968–1978), of all the first-time brides in Egypt, only 4% entered into a marriage with a married man; and from 1972–1979, 5% in Jordan (p. 60, Table 5). Many of these first-time brides may have been motivated by a desire to have children which, as noted earlier, is expected of women in Middle Eastern and North African cultures. These *junior* wives also enjoy greater favor with their husbands. Unlike societies in Africa and elsewhere in which the first or *senior* wife has a higher status than the other co-wives, often enjoying privileges not shared by the *junior* wives, senior wives in the Middle East and North Africa lose status while junior wives often receive preferential treatment, such as a greater share of the resources of the household (Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017, p. 197).

Effects of polygyny on wives

Although many single, never-married women in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in Muslim societies in other parts of the world, *choose* to become additional wives in the hope of improving their status and situation, the *first wives* almost never welcome the arrival of additional wives. Their reactions are similar to those of wives in other cultures. A review by Jankowiak, Sudakov, and Wilreker (2005) of ethnographic accounts of 69 non-sororal polygynous cultures from all over the world (with the exception of Europe) revealed that most women react to the arrival of a co-wife other than a sister) with “anxiety, frustration, and aggression” (p. 91). Similarly, in his study of a sample of 100 women in Kuwait--half of whom were first wives in polygynous marriages and the other half were a control group--al-Sherbiny found that the immediate reaction of the first wife to her husband’s taking a second wife involved a nervous breakdown, emotional upset, or outbursts of anger (2005, p. 26).

Given the hardship that first wives experience following the arrival of second wives, many consider exiting their marriages. Evidence suggests that in some contexts, polygamy leads to an increased incidence of divorce. A 2001 report by the Sociology Department of King Saud University in Riyadh concluded that the practice of allowing men to marry up to four wives was the principal cause of divorce in the country (cited in Souaiaia, 2008, p. 164, n. 52).² Similarly, in Malaysia, polygynous marriages usually lead to the divorce of the first or second wife (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 70). In Indonesia in the 1950s, polygyny was cited as the second most important cause of divorce, following economic causes (Nurmila, 2009, p. 22). Some of the women in Nurmila’s study on polygyny in Indonesia had chosen to leave their marriages, since they preferred divorce to polygyny, despite the negative consequences of divorce (pp. 14, 108, 110; for detailed discussion of two cases, see pp. 103–108). In the cases of these women, education and economic independence were important factors enabling them to leave their unhappy marriages (p. 111). Nurmila also notes that women may get a divorce **upon** becoming aware of their husbands’ intention to marry again (p. 33).

Many times, however, wives of polygamous husbands feel that they have no option but to stay in the marriage. The fear of losing their children is often a main factor. As one Bedouin woman participant in a study noted: “Women do not like that their husbands marry another woman, but they have no choice. The husband says to her: there it is, if you do not like it, go to your parents. Who is ready to leave her children and go to her parents? Who . . . who?” (Marey-Sarwan, Otto, Roer-Strier, & Keller, 2016, p. 114). Similarly, in her study of polygamy in Indonesia, Nurmila found that first wives may choose to stay in their marriage for the sake of their children (2009, p. 163, n. 30). One of the participants in her study

was even prevailed **upon** to return to her husband after divorcing him, mainly for her children's sake (p. 98).³

The stigma attached to divorce and its negative consequences for women also acts as a deterrent, preventing many wives from leaving their polygynous husbands. A study among Palestinian women in Israel living in polygynous unions found that although they were “thoroughly dissatisfied” with their marriages, “the majority were fearful to leave these marriages out of a fear of...becoming a divorcee” (Al-Krenawi, 2014, p. 133). Nurmila's study (2009) of polygamous families in Indonesia likewise revealed that the stigma of divorce was a concern to some women. When a marriage failed, society assumed that it was the wife's fault (p. 108). In a study on Bedouin Arab families, a second wife who had been tricked into entering into a marriage with a married man noted: “Now, what can I do? ... Go back to my parents? You know we are a cruel society, and no one will marry a divorced woman” (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006, p. 322). Women may, however, have other reasons for staying in polygynous marriages, despite the hardships ~~that~~ they experience. Some Muslim women in Nurmila's study did not seek divorce because of their religious devotion and acceptance of polygamy as an institution sanctioned by Islam.⁴

Many studies point to the fact that, regardless of their status as *senior* or *junior* wives, women who are in polygamous marriages—no matter where they live-- often experience hardships that ~~over time~~ eventually lead to mental health issues. A recent systematic review of the literature found that there was “a significant difference in mental health” between women in polygynous marriages and women in monogamous marriages (Shepard, 2013, p. 59). Among other issues, wives in polygynous marriages experienced ~~there was~~ a higher prevalence of somatization, depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism. One of the studies included in this review was carried out in 2008 among persons attending traditional healing practices in two districts in Eastern Uganda (Abbo, Ekblad, Waako, Okello, Muhwezi, & Musisi). It found that ~~married~~ females with co-wives were over three times more likely to report psychological distress than females in monogamous marriages ~~women~~. When asked, (~~Among~~) the men in polygynous marriages expressed that (~~married men, however,~~) “having more than one wife was not associated with psychological distress.”

Another study (Daoud, Shoham-Vardi, Urquia, & O'Campo, 2014) found that, compared with women in monogamous marriages, the women in polygynous marriages reported a higher rate of symptoms of depression and rated their health as “poor.” This study was conducted in 2008–2009 among some 460 Arab Bedouin women (age 18–50) in southern Israel, and approximately 22% of these women were in polygynous marriages. The researchers also examined the contribution of education, socioeconomic position, household characteristics, and social support to mental health. The socioeconomic position of the participants was assessed by the family's source of income and the husbands' education. Household characteristics were also assessed, such as whether women shared living

spaces with co-wives or lived in separate households; whether they were related to their husbands (for example, by consanguinity); and (by) the number of children that were in the household. They found that polygynous women's education, socioeconomic position, and household characteristics provided little protection against poor mental health, while social support seemed to provide *some* protective effect. The authors also noted that their findings regarding women's education was not in line with some of the previous studies, which demonstrated that women's education does have a protective effect on their mental health (p. 398).

As was mentioned earlier, in Muslim societies, first or senior wives lose status when their husbands take additional wives. Senior wives in these societies have been found to be particularly vulnerable to psychological, social, and economic harms. A recent study among senior wives in polygynous families in Aleppo (Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017)—the first such study to have been conducted in Syria—revealed that polygyny has a direct link to psychological harm experienced by senior wives.⁵ The findings of this study are consistent with those of many earlier studies on the experiences of senior wives across the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, including the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Turkey (see the studies cited in Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017, p. 202). This latest study in Aleppo examined the psychological symptomatology, self-esteem, and life satisfaction of 276 women--163 from polygamous marriages (all *senior* wives) and 113 from monogamous marriages. The wives and husbands in monogamous unions had a significantly higher level of education than their counterparts in polygynous marriages. The monogamous wives were also more satisfied with their economic situation than the senior wives (p. 200), and compared to the wives in monogamous unions, senior wives reported significantly lower self-esteem and satisfaction with life. They senior wives also reported more symptoms of “somatization, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism” (pp. 200–201, and Table 2). “Somatization” is the tendency to experience and communicate psychological distress in the form of physical symptoms. Owing to the stigma attached to mental illness across societies in the Middle East and North Africa, senior wives in this region often express their psychological issues through somatization, reporting body aches, headaches, insomnia, fatigue, and nervousness (p. 203).

Researchers believe that there is a link between co-wives' experience of mental health issues and marital conflict. Anthropological studies have shown that co-wife conflict is ubiquitous in polygynous families. In their review of ethnographic accounts of non-sororal polygynous cultures from around the world, Jankowiak, Sudakov, and Wilreker found not a single culture in which co-wife interactions were harmonious (2005, p. 91, Tables 1–2). In 31 of the 69 cultures sampled, co-wife conflict was endemic; that is, relationships were generally characterized by “deep-seated contempt, manifested routinely in acts of physical and/or verbal aggression” (p. 85). In 30 of the 69 cultures studied, co-wife relationships were

characterized by underlying resentment, and in only 8 of the 69 cultures (12%) was there found to be a low degree of co-wife conflict, where “pragmatic co-operation” was “spiked with incidents of intense hostility” (pp. 85, 91). The authors derived the level of conflict from interaction reported among co-wives within the first five (~~or so~~) years of a marriage. Based on the remarkable consistency in the women’s responses across these 69 cultures, the authors concluded that, although the sample was small, it was nevertheless representative (pp. 84–85). Their study revealed that a principle cause of co-wife hostility was the women’s competition over gaining “sexual access” to their shared husband, as well as “emotional intimacy,” with sexual access being related to fertility concerns. In 60 of the 69 cultures, sexual and emotional access was reported as a cause of co-wife conflict, especially in the early stages of a plural marriage (pp. 87–88; see also p. 93, Table 3). Gaining material resources and defending or advancing the interests of one’s own children were other important factors that led to co-wife conflict (p. 87 and p. 93, Table 3). For example, a woman could get angry if a co-wife or her children received an unequal share of the husband’s material resources. The authors also emphasized that although conflict is present in monogamous marriages as well, the intensity and duration of conflict among co-wives in polygynous marriages distinguish the two marriage systems (p. 93).

Even in cases where all parties in a polygamous marriage accept polygamy, the relationships cannot be completely free from jealousy and conflict, as illustrated in Nurmila’s study (2009) involving devout Muslims who considered polygamy to be sanctioned by the Qur’an. One of the husbands in the study reported that his first wife often expressed her jealousy with outbursts of anger, hitting him, swearing, and asking for a divorce, after which she would ask for forgiveness, then later repeat the same behavior. This first wife was an active member of an Islamist political party, and her husband was a wealthy entrepreneur and an Islamist political activist. His second wife was a religious teacher. The first wife had approved of her husband’s desire to take a second wife and had even chosen a good friend of hers to become his second wife (pp. 119–120). Despite all this, she still experienced severe distress in the marriage. In another instance, a first wife told Nurmila that her husband’s second marriage had made her feel miserable. She was unhappy about sharing her husband with another person and described it as “hurtful, very hurtful.” She observed: “My husband is usually beside me every night. Now, when my child is sick, he is not here.” She had, however, developed a strategy to deal with the pain and distress:

“... when I feel jealous, I try to cope with it by involving myself with many activities, such as reading the Qur’an, playing with my children outside the house, making cookies or taking my children to my parents’ home” (p. 87).

In yet another example, a second wife was more jealous than the first since she felt that she did not have enough time with her husband. In this case, the first wife had actually prepared a roster for her husband, indicating when each of the wives could sleep with him. According to the roster, he was free to spend any afternoon that he wished with his second wife, but could spend no more than one night a week with her. This arrangement often made the second wife jealous because, as she put it, it felt like he was more of “a guest” than a husband (p. 126). Her husband was a university lecturer, a Dean, and a religious preacher and had met his first wife in a mosque where she was studying Islam. He had married his second wife in secret. The co-wives had known each other from junior high school and from a Qur’an reading competition in which they had often participated. In their case, the fact that they both considered polygyny as an Islamic practice may have helped them to better accept the difficulties it entailed (pp. 116, 125–126).

Effects of polygyny on children

Research also shows that, in addition to wives, the children of polygamous families also suffer. There are studies that show a negative correlation between polygamy and child nutrition. A recent study of short- and long-term child growth, which used a large data set from the nationally representative Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) of 26 African countries, revealed evidence of malnutrition and stunting among children in polygynous households. The authors of the study found “a sizable and negative correlation between polygyny and child growth” (Wagner & Rieger, 2015, p. 115),⁶ ~~They also~~ and draw attention to the possible long-term effects of polygyny: “The correlation between polygyny and child growth may increase in importance over time. Malnutrition correlates with cognitive ability and thereby school achievement, which in turn is linked to adult human capital” (pp. 125–126). In support of this statement, they cite a long-term study in Guatemala that suggests that “a child’s early nutritional status has considerable repercussions on his or her economic success later on” (p. 126).

Some, but not all studies have found that polygyny has a negative effect on the child survival rate. One such study examined the relationship between family structure and “under-five” mortality in 22 sub-Saharan African countries using data from the Demographic and Health Survey (Omariba & Boyle, 2007). The authors considered three types of family structure: polygynous; monogamous; and female, lone parent. Their analysis included a total of 510,047 children, of which 14.4% had died before their fifth birthday (pp. 535–536). When comparing the mortality rate of children of monogamous unions with those in polygynous and lone-parent families, those in lone-parent families were 16.3% more likely to die, compared to 24.4% in polygynous families (pp. 536, 538). Using two surveys for each country, including results from the most recently available DHS, the study assessed that the relationship between

child mortality and polygyny did not vary over time; however, their findings could not explain the mechanisms through which polygyny negatively affected child mortality (p. 540). One existing theory posits that the addition of wives, and eventually their children, diminishes the available household resources per capita and consequently compromises the welfare of the children (p. 530). The authors also found modest but significant cross-national differences, largely related to familial factors, including maternal education and socioeconomic status. They concluded that improved maternal education and household socioeconomic status would greatly contribute to securing child survival (p. 539). In the context of discussing child survival, it may also be noted that according to some studies, polygyny in Africa often leads to intense reproductive competition among co-wives, since children are essential for gaining access to their husbands' resources. Unfortunately, this environment of competition subjects the children to maltreatment by their mother's rivals. "If a co-wife dies," Zeitzen observes, "it can spell the death of her children through neglect as well" (2008, p. 60).

In some contexts, although children's survival may not be at stake, their well-being may still be negatively affected by polygamy in other ways. Researchers have identified a range of risk factors that can affect children in polygynous marriages, including "family conflict, family distress, the absence of the father, and financial stress" (Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Caridine, & Abu-Saad, 2002, p. 258). For example, in comparison with children of monogamous marriages, children in polygynous families experience a greater incidence of marital conflict, which may lead to other problems, among which are "poor social competence," "poor school achievement," and "misconduct and aggression" (Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Caridine, & Abu-Saad, 2002, p. 258). However, a comprehensive review of the literature by Elbedour and his colleagues, published in 2002, indicates that findings on the effects of polygyny on children have proven to be inconsistent. They argued that many polygynous cultures, such as Bedouin-Arab, can mitigate its negative effects and enable children to thrive, especially the older ones. They observed that older children are able to move freely within their collective community in which families are connected and are thus less likely to be exposed to parental conflict and tension than younger children. Moreover, given their "developmental stage and relative cognitive maturity," they are able to cope with the stressful experiences associated with polygyny (p. 266). The younger children, however, display a host of mental and somatic symptoms, such as "high levels of anxiety, hostility, and aggression"; "headaches" and "stomach pain"; and "difficulties with learning and school adjustment." Eldebour and his colleagues attribute this to the fact that they are "more dependent on their mothers, more exposed to episodes of parental conflict, and more confined to their homes" than their older counterparts (p. 266).

A ~~later~~ systematic review of the literature published in 2016 indicates that both younger and older children were negatively affected by polygamy (Al-Sharfi, Pfeffer, & Miller). The participants in the studies included in this review ranged in age from 6 to 18 years. The authors concluded that, in

comparison with children and adolescents from monogamous families, those from polygynous families had more mental health and social problems and lower academic achievement. The psychopathological symptoms studied included obsession and compulsion, paranoid ideation, depression, hostility, and others. In many cases, the differences found between young people from polygynous versus those from monogamous families were statistically non-significant; however, it was clear that children and adolescents from polygynous families experience more psychological problems than those from monogamous families. In fact, *none* of the studies included in their review found that young people from monogamous families experienced *more* mental health problems than those from polygamous families (pp. 276–278). Young people from polygynous families also reported higher levels of social problems compared with those from monogamous families, including less family cohesion, weaker relationships with their fathers, heightened sibling conflicts, strained relationships with friends, and poorer adjustment to the school system and to the society of other children (pp. 279–281). In three of the studies that reported on academic achievement of young people (pp. 278–279), their review found that academic achievement was lower among young people from polygynous families than from monogamous families, as measured by examination results or school reports. The authors also drew attention to similarities between children and adolescents from polygynous and monogamous families in areas of self-esteem, anxiety and depression, and concluded that further research was needed on the effects of polygyny on young people.

Case studies on polygynous families provide insight into the psychological hardships that young people in these families experience. One of the first wives who participated in Nurmila's study (2009) on polygyny in Indonesia reported that, after her children found out that their father had taken a second wife, they became indifferent to him; one of them said: "I feel like I do not have a father" (p. 126) Another first wife reported that her husband spent most of his time with his second wife; his visits with the first wife and their children were only once a week, later reducing these visits to once a year, and eventually he stopped coming home at all. Her children reacted by saying: "Let us assume that father has passed away" (p. 131). Nurmila also found that, in addition to emotional pain, most children born to subsequent wives suffered economically. The exception was those few cases where the father was very wealthy (pp. 138–139). The comments of the youngest son of one first wife illustrates this combination of emotional and economic suffering:

"I found out about my father's second marriage when I was in my second year of junior high school. Initially, I felt hurt, but I tried to forget it. What could I do? We have been suffering because my father spent more money on his second wife, even though we needed more money for

our education. Now, I do not want to think about it. I just want to think that I do not have a father anymore. I do not want to be like my father, who has more than one wife” (p. 142).

In another case, a twenty-five year old son told Nurmila that his father did not give his children enough attention. This father, a wealthy religious leader, had four wives and twenty children from seven marriages. Although he could recognize his children, he did not remember their ages or their names (pp. 127, 141–142).

Effects of polygyny on husbands

Although in comparison with women and children, men are generally less affected by problems associated with polygyny, research indicates that to some extent, they also suffer. A study carried out by Al-Krenawi, Slonim-Nevo, and Graham (2006) included 315 Bedouin-Arab men from the Naqab: 156 from polygynous and 159 from monogamous families. The monogamous men were more educated than polygynous men, but the educational level of both groups was very low. There were no significant differences in economic status between the two groups, but more polygynous than monogamous men were unemployed. The study also found that men from polygynous families had more psychological problems than men from monogamous families. The mental health issues that were examined included somatization, obsession-compulsion, depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation, as well as other symptoms of mental health concerns. Moreover, compared with men from monogamous families, polygynous men perceived their family functioning as far more problematic, experiencing less marital satisfaction and unsettled relationships with their children (p. 178).

In another study, some of the polygynous husbands expressed regret at taking another wife. One husband stated:

“This is my big mistake in life, like a person that goes in through a red light and remains handicapped. I will have to live with this handicap all my life; I cannot get rid of her [the second wife]. She drives me crazy. At the beginning she was like an angel—everyone fell in love with her, but she is a Satan with the face of an angel” (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006, p. 317).

Another husband said: “My life was quiet, normal, like any husband and a wife and their children. Now it is all changed, shouting all day long, crying, fighting, it is terrible” (p. 317).

Profanter and Cate’s study (2009) indicated that some Muslim husbands experienced the Qur’an’s requirement to “treat co-wives justly” as a burden. Their study included 103 polygynous men among the Bedouin-Arabs of the Dhofar region in Sothern Oman. Profanter and Cate observe that the “methods and strategies” that these men adopted to attain justice involved “an immense amount of stress—emotional,

psychological, physical, and financial—and extensive organizational talent to account for justice among two, three, or even four wives” (p. 224). Some of the men admitted that they treated their wives unjustly, while a significantly greater number confessed that they did not divide emotional attachment justly among their wives. Many were affected by the negative relationships in their households. One man observed: “It is highly questionable that a man can love all his wives the same. Remarriage leads to social and family problems and misunderstandings between wives. With every new marriage, there are problems from all aspects of life” (p. 232). Another husband reported: “Sometimes I spend more time with one wife, then the second wife feels jealous and envious. Of course because of these acts, problems may happen” (p. 233). A low-income father of 23 children stated: “My children suffer a lot from this marriage financially because I am not capable of providing everything they need and also educationally because I am not capable of providing a good education for them” (p. 233). Another interviewee said: “The relationship with my children from the first wife changed, they do hate me a little. Problems happen every single day because of the feeling of jealousy between the wives” (p. 234).

Nurmila’s study (2009) of polygynous families in Indonesia also provides examples of unhappy husbands. In one case, a man who was a middle-income earner had secretly married a much younger woman as a second wife and started to spend most of his money on her. He had even taken out a large loan to support her luxurious lifestyle, but then lost one of his two jobs. At the time of the study, he and his second wife were living together and were financially constrained. He was feeling regret about having taken a second wife and neglecting his first wife and children (pp. 130–131). In another case, a husband who was trying hard to treat both of his wives justly became physically and mentally exhausted. Sexual jealousy between the co-wives was a major contributing factor, and in turn, the family’s finances declined. In the end, although costly and a lengthy process, the first wife managed to persuade her husband to divorce his second wife (pp. 96–97).

A case study from Indonesia

Perhaps the worst of all the cases studied by Nurmila (2009) was the one involving Lina, Hadi (not their real names), and their children in Bandung, the capital of West Java province. In 2004, at the time of the interview, Lina was 39 and Hadi was 49. Lina was a secondary school teacher, had a Bachelor’s degree in Islamic Studies, and was studying for her Master’s degree at one of the Islamic universities in Bandung. Hadi was a respected local council member and a lecturer at an Islamic university in the city, and he too was continuing his education, studying for a doctoral degree. They had married in 1985 and had six children, but in or around 1997, when she was pregnant, Lina found out that Hadi had secretly married another wife, four years younger than her. On discovering his secret marriage,

Lina suffered a nervous disorder as well as a heart attack (p. 102). After she gave birth, Hadi wanted to have intercourse with her but she was still angry and hurt and attempted to refuse him. Despite her wishes, Hadi violently forced her, and continued to rape her once or twice a month until she decided that she could no longer stand his violence, eventually surrendering to his sexual demands without resistance. They often had arguments, and Hadi would hit her on the face and kick her feet until they were black and blue. Finally, he pushed Lina so violently that it resulted in her breaking her left arm. She reported him to the police but ultimately withdrew her report for the sake of her children, as they had been quite upset at seeing their mother treated so violently, and even more so by the arrival of the police and the presence of many journalists who had arrived to cover the story involving this prominent couple (pp. 100–101). After this incident, Lina asked Hadi for a divorce, which was granted. She took the three younger children with her to live with her parents, while the three older children lived with Hadi; however, he continually prevailed upon her to return to him. She consented, mainly for the sake of her children (pp. 98, 101). During her divorce, Lina's oldest son had had an accident; it was believed that he had attempted suicide owing to the emotional distress he was suffering because of his father's second marriage and his parents' divorce (pp. 101, 139). Hadi had been violent toward their children as well, and at one point, dragged their daughter by the hair so violently that her hair was pulled out. The children had become even more upset after Lina's divorce from Hadi, so she eventually consented to return to her husband, mainly for the sake of her children (pp. 98, 101). Lina returned to Hadi on the condition that he would divorce his second wife. Hadi agreed to this, but after remarrying Lina, he refused to divorce either of them, and continued to mistreat Lina. She wanted to leave him, but each time, she would change her mind because of the children, eventually deciding to have as little interaction with Hadi as possible:

“If I only considered my husband's betrayal, I would not live here anymore, but I must also consider my children. Therefore, I try to be here. I often avoid my husband by locking myself in my room when my husband is home, so I can save myself from being hit or touched by him. I feel disgusted and I hate him. I only come out from my room when my husband has left the house” (p. 102).

It was not only Lina who ignored Hadi; her children did the same. By avoiding him, they showed their disapproval of his second marriage and the way he had treated them and their mother. They also indicated that they did not love him, knowing that this hurt him:

“Now I know the way to hurt him, not by confronting him or by having an argument, but by avoiding and ignoring him. He seemed to be disappointed if nobody in the house asked him

where he wanted to go or where he came from. It was not only me who avoided him, but also my children” (p. 103).

After the divorce and before remarrying Hadi, some of Lina’s male friends had expressed interest in her; however, she would be offended if the man who approached her was already married. Having suffered severely at Hadi’s second marriage, she had come to the conclusion that a “good woman” would not want to become a second wife. “It is important for women to be morally educated,” she told Nurmila, “in order to reject being the second wife” (p. 101).

Lina’s case is a powerful reminder of the harms that polygyny can cause to entire families. It shows that although wives and children suffer most because of polygyny, husbands also pay a price. The choices that husbands and women who become additional wives make have inescapable consequences for all the members of the families involved, consequences that may last for years.

Attitudes of Muslim thinkers and publics to polygyny

The harms that polygamy can cause have long been known in societies that have practiced it. Muslim reformist thinkers and scholars have for over a century been writing about the need to restrict polygamy. Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), the renowned Grand Mufti of Egypt, argued that the Qur’an permitted polygamy on the condition that justice is observed between co-wives, and stated that one had to be confident that he could fulfill that condition before taking a second wife (‘Imára, 1993, vol. 5, pp. 163–164). He also maintained that in this day, polygamy entails evils that make it impossible to educate a community in which the practice is prevalent (‘Imára, 1993, vol. 5, p. 164). In a *fatwa* published posthumously, he further noted that taking more than one wife was permissible only if its necessity was established before a religious judge (*al-qádi*) (‘Imára, 1993, vol. 2, p. 93). In Abduh’s opinion, it was justified for a man to take another wife if his first wife was barren (‘Imára, 1993, vol. 2, p. 92).

Qasim Amin (1863–1908), the Egyptian lawyer and nationalist author, maintained that polygamy was a reflection of the inferior position of women in a society and was indicative of an intense contempt for them (‘Imára, 1989, p. 393; Amin, 2000, pp. 82–83). He argued that taking a second wife was justified only when the first wife was afflicted with a disease that prevented her from fulfilling her marital obligations or when she was barren. He held that although polygamy was permitted in the Qur’an, in view of the evils that it gives rise to, a ruler had the authority to ban it, with or without conditions, for the common weal of the Muslim community (*al-umma*) (‘Imára, 1989, p. 396; Amin, 2000, pp. 85–86).

The Tunisian scholar and reformer al-Tahir al-Haddad (ca. 1899–1935) believed that polygamy had “no basis in Islam”; rather, it was “one of the evils of the pre-Islamic era” that Islam had attempted to restrict (Husni & Newman, 2007, p. 63). He maintained that the Qur’an in verse 4:3 made polygamy

conditional on observing justice between co-wives, but at the same time indicated in verse 4:129 that complying with that condition was impossible: “You will not be able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager” (p. 63). He further stated that the Qur’an defines marriage “as an institution based on love, compassion and tenderness between two people” and asserted that one could not “divide these feelings and its effects among one man and several women” (p. 63). He wrote that “just as a man needs to feel that his wife belongs to him alone, so too is a woman driven by the feeling that her husband is hers alone” (p. 63). He also referred to the dissension created in polygamous families and related a sad story concerning a woman and her two small children who had been evicted from the marital home by the husband at the instigation of his elder children from a previous marriage. He noted that this was but one example of the calamities caused by polygamy (p. 64). In al-Haddad’s view, polygamy was incompatible with the equality of men and women. He envisaged that it would be possible over time for Islam “to establish equality between man and woman in all things...” in the same way that it was possible for Islam to abolish slavery (p. 51).

Today, attitudes towards polygamy in Muslim-majority countries are changing as growing numbers of people are becoming aware of its harms. Muslim publics in Southeast Asia do not fully approve of it, even though it is permissible in Islamic law and in the legal codes of their countries (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 71; Nurmila, 2009, p. 22). Malay women, for example, almost universally condemn polygamy and consider its sanction in Islam conditional and “next to impossible for a mortal man to live up to” (Zeitzen, 2008, pp. 71–72). Many Malay men keep their second marriages secret from their first wives, as well as from the wider public (Zeitzen, 2008, pp. 71, 73). In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the state has attempted to promote polygamy, but the great majority of Iranians today disapprove of it. Similarly, polygamy does not enjoy the support of the majority of people in other Muslim countries of the Middle Eastern region. The results of values surveys from *nationally representative samples* of adults carried out in 2001–2003 found that only 11% of Iranians, 10% of Egyptians, 19% of Jordanians, and 45% of Saudis agreed that it was acceptable for a man to have more than one wife (Moaddel, 2007, p. 213 and p. 221, Table 9.3). As these figures suggest, the ideal of monogamous marriage is increasingly taking hold among both Muslim women and men, and polygamy will one day be limited to a very small minority.

Notes

¹ Polygamy is the practice of having more than one spouse at the same time. Polygyny is the specific form of polygamy in which a man has more than one female consort. In contrast to polygyny, which has been common throughout history, polyandry—the form of polygamy in which a woman has more than one male mate—has been rare. In this article, polygamy and polygyny are used interchangeably.

² According to the report in question, Saudi courts granted between twenty-five and thirty-five divorces a day.

³ It was Lina, whose story is told later in this article.

⁴ See the cases of Arsa and Aida (not their real names) discussed by Nurmila, 2009, pp. 81–84, 110–112. They were both members of an Islamist organization and supporters of an Islamist political party.

⁵ The data for this study was obtained before the start of the current Syrian conflict.

⁶ The authors used the weight-for-age and the height-for-age z-scores (WAZ and HAZ). The weight-for-age z-score (WAZ) is a short-term measure of malnutrition, while the height-for-age z-score (HAZ) is a measure of the long-term accumulation of nutrition and indications of stunting. Their sample size was 117,639 (HAZ model) and 126,539 children (WAZ model). The children were under five years, and less than 30% of them lived in polygynous households.

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