

POLYGyny AND MARITAL SATISFACTION IN MUSLIM HOMES IN ILORIN: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Sherifat Hussain-Abubakar

Department of Religions, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

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Idris Abdulsalam Issa

Department of Religions, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between polygyny and marital satisfaction in Muslim homes in Ilorin, Nigeria. Drawing on Islamic jurisprudential principles, it investigates the factors that determine harmony or discord in polygynous households, with specific attention to justice, communication, emotional support, and socio-economic capacity. The study employs historical, descriptive, and analytical methods. Survey data were collected from 100 Muslim women in polygynous marriages in Ilorin, and interviews were conducted to obtain firsthand accounts of marital experience. The findings show that marital satisfaction in polygynous homes varies considerably: 26.67% of respondents were satisfied, 13.33% very satisfied, 20% neutral, 26.67% dissatisfied, and 13.33% very dissatisfied. The study concludes that adherence to Islamic conditions of justice, equitable provision, and emotional care is decisive in determining marital outcomes. Where these conditions are not met, polygyny generates conflict, jealousy, and emotional distress. The study recommends the establishment of Islamic marriage counseling centers in Ilorin and the integration of counseling services within existing Islamic organizations to address marital disputes in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Keywords: polygyny, marital satisfaction, Islamic marriage law, Ilorin, Muslim women

Introduction

Polygyny is a legally recognized form of marriage in Islam, permitted under specific conditions set out in the Qur'an and elaborated in classical Islamic jurisprudence. The foundational Qur'anic text, Qur'an 4:3, "If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one (Ali, 1989)," permits marriage to up to four wives contingent on the ability to treat them with justice, and classical scholars have understood this permission as circumscribed by demanding conditions of equitable provision and fair treatment. Despite the textual basis for the practice, its lived outcomes vary substantially across Muslim communities and individual households (Hamdan, 2015).

In Ilorin, a predominantly Muslim city in Kwara State, Nigeria, polygyny is both culturally familiar and religiously framed. Yet relatively few empirical studies have examined how the practice affects marital satisfaction in that specific context. This paper addresses that gap by investigating polygynous marriages in Ilorin from an Islamic perspective, analyzing the extent to which adherence to Islamic conditions influences marital outcomes for women in such households.

The paper traces the historical trajectory of polygyny in Ilorin and situates current practice within broader Islamic and Yoruba cultural frameworks. It then reviews existing scholarship on polygyny and marital satisfaction. The core analytical sections examine justice and fairness, communication and emotional support, and socio-economic dimensions of polygynous marriage. These are followed by findings from the survey of 100 Ilorin Muslim women respondents and a concluding discussion of policy recommendations.

Historical Trend of Polygyny in Ilorin

Islam did not originate polygyny but regulated a practice that was already widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia and other societies. Before the Qur'anic revelation, men could marry an unlimited number of women without any obligation of justice or equal treatment. Islam imposed a maximum of four wives and established a legally binding obligation of equitable treatment among them (Philips & Jones, 1990; Hussain-Abubakar, 2016; Muhammad, 2005). In Islamic jurisprudence, the institution is known as *ta'addud al-zawjāt*. Classical legal opinion regards monogamy as the baseline for a legally competent adult male, while polygyny is categorized as *mubāh* (permissible) or *mandūb* (recommended) only on the condition that justice among wives is maintained, as required by Qur'an 4:3.

In Ilorin, polygyny is historically associated with the city's Islamic scholarly tradition and its Yoruba cultural heritage. During the pre-colonial and colonial periods, men of wealth and social standing, including traders, scholars, and rulers, commonly practiced polygyny as an expression of social status and religious observance (Hussain-Abubakar, 2015). Co-wives frequently shared a compound, and established patterns of household cooperation helped manage the interpersonal demands of plural marriage.

However, contemporary conditions have altered this picture considerably. Urbanization, rising living costs, and changing social expectations have made the financial demands of polygyny more acute. At the same time, formal education and exposure to broader cultural influences have shifted the marital preferences of younger Ilorin women, many of whom now weigh personal emotional fulfillment more explicitly in evaluating polygynous arrangements (Abdullahi, 2020; Hussain-Abubakar, 2015). The result is that polygyny in Ilorin today presents a more contested and socially complex profile than in earlier periods.

Marital Satisfaction in Polygynous Homes: A Review of the Literature

Existing scholarship on polygyny and marital satisfaction yields mixed findings that vary by context, methodology, and the specific dimensions of satisfaction measured. Hussain-Abubakar (2015) observes that polygyny in Ilorin, once practiced within established social structures that promoted co-wife cooperation has increasingly been pursued without adequate compliance with Islamic conditions. This is resulting in heightened rivalry, emotional tension, and conflict in many households. This deterioration is attributed to economic hardship, individualistic social norms, and inadequate understanding of Islamic marital obligations.

Naseer et al. (2021) find that women in polygynous marriages report higher levels of emotional distress, jealousy, and lower marital satisfaction than their counterparts in monogamous marriages. However, Husain et al. (2024) complicate this picture by showing that some second wives report relatively high levels of satisfaction, suggesting that individual experiences depend substantially on a husband's conduct and a wife's personal expectations. Al-Krenawi and Lightman (2000) extend the analysis to children, documenting higher rates of behavioral and academic difficulties among children from polygynous homes, attributed to resource competition and co-wife rivalry.

A consistent theme across the literature is the role of Islamic ethical compliance. Husain et al. (2024) and Hussain-Abubakar (2016) acknowledge the normative force of Islamic teachings on justice and fairness but note that many women still report neglect and unequal treatment in practice. Bahari et al. (2021) reach broadly similar conclusions in a systematic review and meta-analysis, confirming elevated psychological distress in polygynous households while noting that contextual factors



mediate outcomes. The present study contributes to this literature by drawing on primary data from Ilorin and examining in detail the Islamic normative framework that shapes both the structure of polygynous marriages and the criteria by which wives evaluate them.

Justice and Fairness in Polygynous Marriages

Justice (*‘adl*) is the core condition of lawful polygyny in Islamic law. The Qur'an 4:3 authorizes marriage to up to four wives "... if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one." Classical exegetes including al-Jalālayn (Al-Mahalli & As-Sayuti, 1999) and as-Ṣābūnī (2009), among others agree that the justice required in this verse relates to divisible marital obligations: time allocation, financial provision, and accommodation. However, the emotional inclination, which lies beyond human control, is addressed separately at Qur'an 4:129, "Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire." This verse acknowledges that men cannot achieve perfect equality of feeling but instructs them not to leave a wife "... like one hanging in the air ..."

The Prophetic tradition reinforces the above obligation (Husain et al., 2019). A widely cited hadith warns that a man who has two wives and inclines toward one will arrive on the Day of Resurrection with one side of his body hanging down (Abu Dawud, 2007, Hadith 113). Islamic scholarship interprets this warning as requiring active effort toward equitable treatment rather than passive tolerance of favoritism. The practical scope of justice covers: feeding, clothing, accommodation, speech, intimacy, and other material responsibilities. A man who lacks the financial or personal capacity to meet these obligations equitably across multiple households is not permitted to enter polygynous marriage (Al-Qaradawi, 1994; Philips & Jones, 1990).

Survey data from 100 Ilorin Muslim women respondents indicate that failure to meet these standards is a primary driver of marital dissatisfaction. Women who reported lower satisfaction consistently cited unequal financial provision, differential time allocation, and perceived emotional favoritism as the principal sources of grievance. These findings align with the broader literature and reinforce the Islamic position that justice is not merely an aspirational ideal but a legally binding condition of a valid polygynous marriage.

Communication and Emotional Support in Polygynous Marriages

The Qur'an describes spouses as garments for one another (Qur'an 2:187), a metaphor that conveys mutual protection, closeness, and vulnerability. In polygynous households, where multiple co-wife relationships intersect with the marital bond, the demands on communication and emotional attentiveness are substantially higher than in monogamous arrangements. Hussain-Abubakar (2015) identifies poor communication as one of the primary factors in the deterioration of polygynous marriages in Ilorin, noting that absence of transparency between a husband and his wives creates conditions in which jealousy and misunderstanding escalate.

The Prophetic model is frequently cited in Islamic literature on this subject. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is described in hadith literature as attentive, kind, and emotionally present with each of his wives, setting a normative standard for emotional care in polygynous marriage (Isiaku, 2014; Tahir, 2020). This model extends beyond verbal communication to include regular reassurance, shared time, and demonstrated affection. Where a husband withdraws emotionally from one wife in favour of another, the resulting insecurity is likely to generate conflict and reduce marital satisfaction across the household.

Zaid (2016) notes that co-wife relationships are themselves a significant variable in household stability. Open, respectful relations among co-wives can moderate the emotional demands placed on a shared husband, distribute childcare responsibilities, and create a more stable domestic environment. Survey data from Ilorin show that 25.40% of respondents reported cordial relationships with co-wives and 15.33% very cordial, while 30.17% reported strained relations and a further 29.10% reported tension. These figures suggest that co-wife relationship quality is a significant determinant of overall marital satisfaction and warrants explicit attention in any counseling or educational intervention.

Socio-Economic Dimensions of Polygynous Marriages

Financial capacity is a necessary precondition for lawful polygynous marriage in Islamic law. The Qur'an 65:7, Let the man of means spend according to his means: and the man whose resources are restricted, let him spend according to what Allah has given him. Allah puts no burden on any person beyond what He has given him. After a difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief" instructs that a man should spend according to his means, and Islamic jurisprudence makes provision for a wife's maintenance (*'nafaqah'*) a legally enforceable obligation. In a polygynous household, this obligation is multiplied: a husband must provide adequately for each wife's shelter, food, clothing, and basic needs without discrimination. Al-Krenawi (2012) identifies financial strain as one of the most consistently documented sources of stress in polygynous marriages across diverse Muslim contexts.

Ilorin-specific data support this pattern. Several interviewees identified inadequate financial provision as a central source of dissatisfaction, and the survey data show a meaningful relationship between perceptions of economic equity and overall marital satisfaction. The entry of men into polygynous marriages without the financial capacity to sustain multiple households not only breaches Islamic legal requirements but has documented social consequences. Zaid (2016) links irresponsible polygynous practice in Northern Nigeria to the proliferation of *al-majirism*, the phenomenon of destitute and abandoned children. Although Ilorin's social dynamics differ from those of the far north, the structural risks of financially unsustainable polygyny are relevant to the Ilorin context.

Beyond direct financial provision, social dynamics within and around polygynous households affect marital stability. Interference from relatives, community gossip, and favoritism by extended family members can amplify internal tensions. Islam instructs believers to maintain kindness and patience in family relations and cautions against jealousy and rivalry as asserted in Qur'an 49:11,

O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor let some women laugh at others: It may be that the (latter are better than the (former): Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one) after he has believed: And those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong.

Delwi et al. (2024) find that external social pressures, including community and family interference, are significant predictors of marital dissatisfaction in polygynous households when they are not actively managed.

Polygyny and Marital Satisfaction in Ilorin

The polygyny and marital satisfaction survey was conducted among 100 Muslim women in polygynous marriages in Ilorin in 2025 (Polygyny and Marital Satisfaction Survey, 2025). Respondents occupied varying marital ranks: 60% were second wives, 26.67% third wives, and 13.33% fourth wives. This distribution suggests that while multiple-wife households are common, arrangements involving three or four wives remain a minority.

Overall satisfaction levels showed a divided picture. Of the total respondents, 26.67% were satisfied with their marriages and 13.33% very satisfied, producing a combined satisfaction rate of 40%. A further 20% were neutral. On the dissatisfied level, 26.67% were dissatisfied and 13.33% very dissatisfied, producing a combined dissatisfaction rate of 40%. This near-equal split between satisfied and dissatisfied respondents indicates that polygyny in Ilorin produces strongly divergent outcomes and that structural conditions, particularly adherence to Islamic principles of justice, are decisive in determining which outcome obtains in any given household.

Attitudes toward polygyny among respondents were similarly mixed. 43% indicated openness to polygyny, 37% rejected it, and 20% reported feeling that they lacked a meaningful choice. This last figure warrants attention: one in five respondents felt constrained rather than consenting in their marital situation, which raises questions about the degree to which Islamic conditions of free and informed consent are being honoured in practice.

Qualitative data from interviews reinforced the quantitative picture. Women who reported satisfaction consistently cited husbands who allocated time equitably, communicated transparently, and maintained financial provision without discrimination. Women who reported dissatisfaction identified the opposite conditions: financial favoritism, emotional withdrawal, and lack of communication as primary sources of marital unhappiness. Several interviewees noted that the absence of institutional support, whether from Islamic scholars, community elders, or formal counseling services, left disputes unresolved and tensions unmanaged.

Conclusion

This paper has examined polygyny in Ilorin from an Islamic jurisprudential perspective and assessed its relationship to marital satisfaction among Muslim women in that community. The findings confirm that marital outcomes in polygynous households are not determined by the practice of polygyny itself but by the degree to which the Islamic conditions governing it, namely justice in provision, equitable treatment, transparent communication, and emotional responsibility, are honoured in practice. Where these conditions are met, polygyny can function as a stable and mutually supported marital arrangement. Where they are not, it generates conflict, emotional distress, and dissatisfaction at rates consistent with the broader literature.

The study recommends that Islamic marriage counseling centers should be established across Ilorin to provide accessible guidance to couples in polygynous arrangements, with services grounded explicitly in Qur'anic and Prophetic norms of marital conduct. Existing Islamic organizations should integrate counseling units capable of mediating marital disputes before they escalate. Pre-marital and ongoing education programs should address the legal and ethical conditions of polygyny to ensure that men entering such arrangements understand and commit to their obligations. Women's economic independence, through access to vocational training and entrepreneurship support, should be encouraged to reduce financial vulnerability within polygynous households. Finally, religious and community leaders should engage publicly and

substantively with the contemporary social, economic, and emotional challenges that polygyny presents in Ilorin today.

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