

POLYGyny AND THE DYNAMICS OF FAMILY INSTABILITY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Polygyny, which is permitted in Islam under strict ethical conditions, remains one of the most debated aspects of Muslim family law. Although it is intended to serve important socio-moral purposes, it is often associated with family instability in contemporary discourse. This paper examines the causes of instability in polygynous households from an Islamic perspective and proposes possible solutions. The paper adopts historical, descriptive, and analytical research methods. The historical method traces the development of polygyny in Islam, while the descriptive method explains the nature and practice of polygynous marriages. The analytical method evaluates the extent to which instability affects polygynous homes and assesses these challenges through the lens of Islamic teachings. The paper reveals that instability is not inherent in the institution of polygyny; rather, it results from the failure to uphold the Islamic principles of justice, fairness, and responsibility. It concludes by recommending premarital counseling and gender-sensitive education as essential measures for promoting stability and harmony in polygynous homes.

Keywords: Polygyny; Islam; Justice; Instability; Harmony.

Introduction

Etymologically, the term polygyny is derived from the Greek words poly (many) and gyne (woman or wife), referring to the marriage of a man to more than one woman. It is the most common form of polygamy in Islam; it is restricted to a maximum of four wives, defined as a situation in which a man has more than one wife simultaneously. Although often used interchangeably with polygyny, polygamy generally refers to a marital system that permits a man or woman to have more than one spouse at the same time (Abdullateef, 2020). Historically, polygyny predates Islam and was practiced across various civilizations and religious traditions, including Ancient Egypt, China, India, Africa, Judaism, and Christianity (Abdulkareem, 2012). However, in pre-Islamic Arabia, the practice was largely unrestricted and often characterized by the neglect of women's rights and the absence of regulations ensuring justice and fairness (Naksomboon, 2013). Islam therefore reformed the institution by limiting the number of wives to four and making justice a fundamental condition for its practice, thereby transforming it from an unrestricted social custom into a regulated institution aimed at promoting family stability, compassion, and accountability (Shodehinde, 2013). Accordingly, Islamic law permits a man to marry up to four wives, provided he can deal with them justly. As Allah states in (Q4:3):

فَأَنْكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَى وَثُلَاثَ وَرُبْعَ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ
أَيْمَانُكُمْ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَى أَلَّا تَعُولُوا

...Marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four. But if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one, or the one whom your right hands possess (captives). That will be more suitable, to prevent you from injustice.



Polygyny and Family Structure

Having established the historical background and legal framework of polygyny in Islam, it is pertinent to examine its role in shaping family structure and addressing certain social realities. Islam permits polygyny under specific conditions, allowing a Muslim man to marry up to four wives provided he is able to maintain justice and fairness among them. This provision serves social and welfare objectives, including the care of widows, orphans, and other vulnerable members of society. Some scholars argue that polygyny offers a structured framework for addressing demographic and social challenges that may arise within communities. Philips contends that opposition to polygyny in some societies stems partly from differing views on family organization and marital responsibility, while Islamic law emphasizes legal responsibility and maintenance for all spouses and children involved (Ahmad, 2007).

Similarly, Abdul Azeem highlights demographic disparities in some societies where the female population exceeds the male population, arguing that polygyny may provide one of several responses to such social realities. From an Islamic perspective, marriage remains the foundation of a stable family structure and an orderly society. (Philips, 1984) Consequently, Islamic family law recognizes both monogamy and polygyny as lawful marital arrangements, each serving particular social needs and circumstances. In this regard, proponents of polygyny maintain that it reflects the flexibility and comprehensiveness of the Islamic marriage system in addressing diverse human and societal conditions (Khan, 1996).

Criteria for Polygyny in Islām

Having examined the role of polygyny in family structure, it is necessary to consider the conditions and responsibilities that govern its practice in Islam. Polygyny is not compulsory in Islam; rather, its basic ruling is *Mubāḥ* (permissible) and may be recommended for those capable of fulfilling its obligations. Consequently, monogamy is preferable where a man fears he may be unable to uphold the principles of justice and fairness required in polygynous marriages.(Hamdan, 2015) The practice of the Prophet (Ṣ.A.W.) further illustrates that polygyny was often associated with social welfare objectives, as most of his wives, except 'Ā'ishah, were widows.(Abdullahi, 2018) Therefore, a man intending to practice polygyny must possess the intellectual, emotional, and psychological capacity necessary to manage multiple marital relationships responsibly. As the head of the family, he is expected to demonstrate sound knowledge of Islamic teachings, emotional intelligence, and the ability to address conflicts and differing personalities among wives while maintaining harmony and justice within the household. (Ibn Majah, 2007, Hadith 1977)

In addition to mental and emotional preparedness, financial capability is a fundamental requirement for polygyny. Islamic law obligates a husband to provide equitably for the needs of his wives and children, including accommodation, food, clothing, healthcare, and education. Financial inadequacy often contributes to marital strain and undermines the objectives of polygyny; therefore, prospective husbands should carefully assess their financial capacity and maintain effective financial planning before undertaking such responsibilities (Shodehinde, 2013) Furthermore, premarital counseling plays an important role in preparing individuals for marriage, particularly polygynous unions, by equipping them with the knowledge and skills required for successful family life. Counseling, which reflects the Islamic tradition of *Naṣīḥah* (sincere guidance), has historically served as a means of resolving domestic conflicts, promoting mutual understanding, and strengthening family relationships within Muslim communities (Ishaiku, 2014)



The Dynamics of Family Instability in a Polygynous Household: An Islamic Perspective ***Al-Qism (Days Sharing Among Wives) and Polygyny***

Building on the ethical model governing polygyny, Islamic law requires that fairness be observed in the distribution of marital rights, including time allocation among co-wives (*al-Qism*). While monogamy is the default marital structure in Shariah, polygyny is permitted conditionally, with justice serving as a central requirement for its validity. One of the objectives of marriage in Islam is the attainment of tranquility, affection, and mercy between spouses, as stated in (Q30:21) "*And among His signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He put between your affection and mercy. Verily, in that indeed are signs for people who reflect*". Achieving this objective in polygynous settings depends largely on equitable treatment by the husband, particularly in the allocation of time, companionship, and attention.

Al-Qism linguistically refers to division or allocation, and juristically it denotes the structured sharing of nights among wives, though classical jurists differed on its precise regulation. Maliki jurists generally limited allocation to one night per wife but emphasized fairness as the overriding principle, while later Maliki scholars allowed flexibility based on consent and circumstances. The Hanbali school maintains that equal rotation is required unless consent is granted, while the Shafi'i school allows limited variation but discourages prolonged preference for one wife due to potential harm to others. The Hanafi school, however, adopts a more discretionary approach, leaving allocation to the husband's judgment provided justice is maintained. (Abdullateef, 2020). These juristic variations indicate that Islamic law prioritizes equity over rigid uniformity, making fairness the substantive criterion rather than equal time in absolute terms.

Contemporary family studies on polygynous households in West Africa indicate that unequal time distribution often contributes to emotional dissatisfaction, perceived neglect, and intra-family tension, even when financial provision is adequate. Conversely, cases where husbands maintain transparent scheduling systems and rotate time equitably tend to report higher levels of marital stability and reduced conflict among co-wives. (Shodehinde, 2013) From an Islamic analytical perspective, *al-Qism* is not merely a procedural arrangement for intimacy but a broader mechanism for ensuring psychological security and social cohesion within the household. Even in situations such as pregnancy, illness, or menstruation, jurists maintain that entitlement to scheduled time remains, reinforcing that the objective is companionship and emotional presence rather than purely physical relations. When applied effectively, this principle strengthens trust and reduces rivalry, whereas neglect of structured fairness tends to exacerbate instability within polygynous families.

Al'Adl (Justice) and Polygyny

Having enumerated the principle of equitable time allocation, Islam stresses on justice (*al-'Adl*) as a foundational requirement in polygynous marriage. The objective of marriage is to establish peace, affection, and mutual mercy between spouses, grounded in fairness and trust. These values are intended to strengthen family cohesion and reduce relational tension. However, in contemporary contexts, maintaining strict equity in polygynous households is often challenging, particularly in balancing emotional attention and material provision. Husbands are therefore required to make sincere efforts to treat their wives fairly and avoid preferential treatment that may lead to resentment or mistrust. (Rahmin2019) The Qur'an affirms the ethical treatment of women, commanding kindness, while a Prophetic tradition warns against unjust preference between wives, stating that;

"a man who inclines excessively toward one wife will appear on the Day of Resurrection with a physical sign of imbalance". (Abu Dawud ,2007, Hadith 113)



Islamic teachings further require that justice in polygyny extends beyond emotional inclination to include equitable provision in housing, clothing, food, and companionship. While complete emotional equality may be difficult to achieve, observable fairness remains a legal and moral obligation. Family studies in Muslim societies reveal that perceived favoritism in polygynous households often contributes to marital dissatisfaction and intra-family tension, particularly when economic or emotional resources are unevenly distributed. From this perspective, justice is not merely an ethical ideal but a practical mechanism for sustaining stability in complex family structures.

Pre-modern and contemporary Islamic scholarship consistently affirms that justice is a non-negotiable condition for polygyny, as emphasized in (Q 4:3) and (4:129). Exegetes such as al-Jalālayn, al-Sabūnī, and al-Shawkānī interpret these verses as primarily referring to fairness in marital obligations, particularly in treatment and provision. (Adnan, 2004) When justice is neglected, the consequences often include emotional distress and weakened family cohesion, reflecting a deviation from Islamic legal and ethical standards. In this regard, justice in polygyny functions not only as a legal requirement but also as a safeguard for maintaining stability and preventing family disintegration.

Al-Istibdāl (Wife Retirement) and Polygyny

To maintain continuity with the preceding discourse on the legal limits of polygyny in Islamic law, particularly the emphasis on justice, this section further examines al-Istibdāl and its implications for contemporary practice. Historical records indicate that, prior to Islam, women in various societies were often subjected to weak marital regulations, both in the Arabian Peninsula and in other civilizations, where social structures tended to marginalize women in marriage practices. (Rahim, 2001) Some historical accounts describe pre-Islamic marital arrangements as largely unregulated, with distorted kinship boundaries and widespread social and moral irregularities, as noted by A. Rahim, who reports the existence of marital plurality and instances of familial boundary violations in some pre-Islamic contexts. (Rahim, 2001) These descriptions highlight the context in which Islamic legal reforms were introduced to regulate and reform existing practices.

The term Istibdāl is derived from the Arabic root *badala*, meaning to replace or substitute. In Islamic legal usage, it refers to replacing one wife with another, as indicated in (Q4:20), "*And if you wish to have (one) wife in place of another and you have given one of them a heap of gold, then take not from it anything; would you take it by slandering (her) and (doing her) manifest wrong*". This verse permits such substitution while safeguarding the financial and legal rights of the wife, particularly her dowry. Classical jurists and exegetes agree that Istibdāl is legally recognized but must operate within ethical constraints and valid justification. From a legal perspective, it does not inherently require exceeding the prescribed limit of four wives in polygyny, as its application is bound by juristic conditions and procedural fairness.

In contemporary practice, some deviations have been observed where certain individuals extend polygynous practice beyond its legal limit through informal wife substitution, a practice locally referred to as Wahare in parts of Northern Nigeria. Bello describes it as a situation where a husband with four wives negotiates the retirement of one wife to facilitate the marriage of another, while the retired wife remains under his care but without marital relations. (Bello, 2019) Contemporary socio-legal analysis suggests that such practices often emerge from inadequate legal awareness or weak enforcement of Islamic marital regulations, leading to deviations from established juristic standards.



From an Islamic legal standpoint, polygyny is strictly limited to a maximum of four wives at any given time, and any practice that bypasses this limit falls outside legitimate juristic approval. Contemporary Islamic legal scholarship therefore emphasizes the importance of regulatory oversight through recognized Shari'ah institutions to ensure compliance with marital laws and prevent informal practices that undermine legal and ethical order. Strengthening legal literacy and institutional enforcement is increasingly viewed as essential in addressing such deviations and preserving the integrity of Islamic family law.

Conclusion

In sum, Islamic teachings on polygyny indicate that, while the practice is permissible, it is accompanied by clear moral, social, and spiritual obligations intended to ensure justice and family stability. Key principles such as Qism, Al-'Adl, and Al-Istibdāl represent Islam's emphasis on safeguarding the rights and welfare of all parties involved. However, cultural misinterpretations and neglect of these principles have contributed to instances of abuse and instability within polygynous households. When properly observed within the ethical and legal framework established by Islam, polygyny can contribute to social stability, strengthen family cohesion, and support women's welfare, thereby fulfilling its intended role as a regulated and socially responsible form of marriage. The implications of the findings of this paper expand to both Islamic legal practice and contemporary family governance. First, they highlight the need for strengthened Islamic marital education to ensure that intending husbands and wives clearly understand the ethical conditions governing polygyny before marriage. Second, they underscore the importance of institutional support through premarital counseling, family advisory services, and stronger engagement of religious authorities in regulating marital practices. At a wider societal level, the findings recommend premarital counseling and gender-sensitive education as essential measures for promoting stability in polygynous households.

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