

Polygamy is a system of marriage in which one person has more than one spouse. When a man has multiple wives, it is called polygyny and the scenario where a woman has more than one spouse is called polyandry. Islam is generally understood to permit polygyny, but not polyandry. Even though polygyny is legal in many muslim countries, the practice is very rare in most of them. If it is widespread, it is in sub-Saharan Africa, where it is also common among adherents of christianity and folk religions. (Only about 2% of the global population lives in polygamous households, and in the vast majority of countries, that share is under 0.5%. In sub-Saharan Africa, the share is 11%.) ([Facts](#))

The practice of polygyny did not originate with Islam. Judaic scripture and traditions permitted it, and it was practiced until the 11th century. Sephardic jews continued the practice into the late 20th century. The New Testament does not explicitly prohibit it, except in the case of bishops and deacons, and so it continues among Christians to this day in some places. The practice also appears widely in Hindu scripture, and is as common among the Hindus in [India](#) as it is among Muslims in similar geographic, and socio-economic contexts.

Polygyny in the Quran

“And if you have reason to fear that you might not act equitably towards orphans, then marry from among [other] women such as are lawful to you - [even] two, or three, or four; but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [only] one- or [from among] those whom you rightfully possess. This will make it more likely that you will not deviate from the right course.”

“Polygamy is mentioned here in the context of protecting widows and orphans and ensuring justice for them, as men used to marry widows and treat them unjustly. The literature on the circumstances of the revelation of this verse shows that it was revealed after the Battle of Uhud in 625 A.D, where a great number of Muslim women were widowed after their husbands were killed in the war.

In this particular case, widows who were immigrants from Mecca did not have families to support them, so they married men with existing wives for protection. For instance, Omar Ibn el-Khattab, after his daughter Hafsa became a widow, asked Abu-Bakr and Othman Ibn Affan to marry her. Eventually, she married the Prophet (PBUH). This gives us an indication that marriage was the principal social protection system in that era. But the juristic tradition that came much later did not give proper attention to the aforementioned context. Instead, jurists stipulated that polygamy is a permissible practice in general.” ([Rethinking Polygamy](#))

“According to an interpretation suggested by Aishah, the Prophet's widow, this refers to the (hypothetical) case of orphan girls whom their guardians might wish to marry without, however, being prepared or able to give them an appropriate marriage-portion - the implication being that they should avoid the temptation committing such an injustice and should marry other women instead (cf. Bukhāri, Kitab at-Tafsir, as well as Musl and Nasā'i). However, not all of 'Ä'ishah's contemporaries subscribed to her explanation of this verse. Thus, according to Said ibn Jubayr,

Qatādah, and other successors of the Companions, the purport of the above passage is this: "Just as you are, rightly, fearful of offending against the interests of orphans, you must apply the same care: consideration to the interests and rights of the women whom you intend to marry." In his commentary on the passage, Tabari quotes several variants of the above interpretation and gives it his unequivocal approval."

It is obvious that the phrase "two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear...", etc. is a parenthetic clause relating to both the free women mentioned in the first part of the sentence and to female slaves - for both these nouns are governed by the imperative verb "marry". Thus, the whole sentence has this meaning: "Marry from among [other] women such as are lawful to you, or [from among] those whom you rightfully possess - [even] two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [only] one" - implying that, irrespective of whether they are free women or, originally, slaves, the number of wives must not exceed four. It was in this sense that Muhammad Abduh understood the above verse. This view is, moreover, supported by verse 25 of this sūrah as well as by 24: 32, where marriage with female slaves is spoken of. Contrary to the popular view and the practice of many Muslims in the past centuries, neither the Qur'ān nor the life-example of the Prophet provides any sanction for sexual intercourse without marriage.

As regards the permission to marry more than one wife (up to the maximum of four), it is so restricted by the condition, "if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then marry only one, as to make such plural marriages possible only in quite exceptional cases and under exceptional circumstances. Still, one might ask why the same latitude has not been given to women as well; but the answer is simple. Notwithstanding the spiritual factor of love which influences the relations between man and woman, the determinant biological reason for the sexual urge is, in both sexes procreation: and whereas a woman can, at one time, conceive a child from one man only and has to carry it for nine months before she can conceive another, a man can beget a child every time he cohabits with a woman. Thus, while nature would have been merely wasteful if it had produced a polygamous instinct in woman, man's polygamous inclination is biologically justified. It is, of course, obvious that the biological factor is only one - and by no means always the most important - of the aspects of marital love: nonetheless, it is a basic factor and, therefore, decisive in the institution of marriage as such. With the wisdom that always takes human nature fully into account, Islamic Law undertakes no more than the safeguarding of the socio-biological function of marriage (which includes also care of the progeny), allowing a man to have more than one wife and not allowing a woman to have more than one husband at one time; while the spiritual problem of marriage, being imponderable and therefore outside the scope of law, is left to the discretion of the partners. In any event - since marriage in Islam is a purely civil contract - recourse to divorce is always open to either of the two partners. (Regarding the dissolution of a marriage at the wife's instance, see sūrah 2, note 218.)" (Explanation from Muhammad Asad's translation.)

Other relevant verses from the Quran related to polygamy:

"And it will not be within your power to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire it; and so, do not allow yourselves to incline towards one to the exclusion of the

other, leaving her in a state, as it were, of having and not having a husband. But if you put things to rights and are conscious of Him - behold, God is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. “

This refers to cases where a man has more than one wife - a permission which is conditional on the ability to "treat them with equal fairness", as laid down in verse 3 of this sūrah. Since a man very conscious of his moral responsibility might feel that he is committing a sin if he loves one of his wives more than the other (or others), the above verse provides a "judicial enlightenment" on this point by making it clear that it is beyond a human being's control. In other words, that the required equality of treatment relates only to behavior towards and practical dealings with one's wives. However, in view of the fact that a man's behavior towards another person is, in the long run, almost inevitably influenced by what he feels about that person, the above passage - read in conjunction with verse 3, and especially its concluding sentence - imposes a moral restriction on plural marriages. Here, "do not incline towards one with all inclination" - implies the exclusion of one from all affection - "leaving her, as it were, in suspense (ka'l-mu allaqah)"

Reflections

What, according to you, is the connection between justice towards orphans and polygyny, as made in 4:3?

What is Islamic about polygyny?

Discuss the problems with addressing polygyny in the Islamic context today.

Do you think polygyny is a relevant practice today? Should it be abolished by law or should it be protected by law? What should be the role of modern governments in ensuring justice within families?