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PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS AND COPING MECHANISMS OF WOMEN INVOLVED IN ISLAMIC POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGES

Gintarė Sereikaitė-Motiejūnė

Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania
gintare.sereikaite@fsf.vu.lt

Abstract

This study explores the coping mechanisms and religious beliefs employed by women in polygamous relationships to manage emotional distress, and the extent to which this approach challenges or reinforces patriarchal structures within these relationships. Data collected a closed Facebook group for Muslim women only reveal that women in polygamous relationships often experience psychological and emotional distress. To cope, they commonly resort to religious faith, acceptance of fate, and compromise with co-wives. While these strategies help manage emotional distress, they can potentially reinforce patriarchal structures within these relationships. The research provides a nuanced perspective, arguing that these coping mechanisms can be seen both as a form of resistance against and an acceptance of patriarchal norms. The study also underscores the need for further research into factors such as stress

levels, coping skills, and marital factors that can impact behavioral, emotional, and cognitive outcomes in polygamous marriages. To conclude, in polygamous relationships, women often use avoidance and religious justification as coping mechanisms. While these strategies provide temporary relief or spiritual comfort, they don't address the long-term psychological harm or inherent gender inequalities.

Keywords

Polygamy, Polygyny, Islam, Marriage Cognitive Dissonance

1. Introduction

The practice of polygamy has a long history, dating back to ancient times. Polygamy continues to be a complex and multifaceted institution, with varying degrees of acceptance and legality in different societies. According to Rohmadi et al. (2022) , the term 'polygamy' etymologically stems from the Greek words 'apolian' and 'gamos', signifying 'wife' or 'partner'. In essence, it refers to having multiple wives (or husbands) concurrently.

Polygamy is a marital practice where one person marries multiple partners. It comes in several forms, primarily polygyny, polyandry, and group marriage (Zeitzen 2020).

1. **Polygyny:** This is the most common form of polygamy, involving a man having more than one wife at the same time (Shepard, 2013). This form of polygamy often arises in societies with increasing complexity and socioeconomic stratification (Galieva, 2021).
2. **Polyandry:** This is a less common form of polygamy that involves a woman being married to more than one husband at the same time.
3. **Group Marriage:** Also known as a polyamorous relationship, this form of polygamy involves multiple men and women being married to each other simultaneously.

In the article (2016, 346) Brandon highlights that polygamy was widely accepted because it could maximize fecundity and ensure paternity, thus benefitting males who invested in parenting. Despite the ideal of multiple wives, it is noted that most men in polygamous cultures remained socially monogamous due to resource constraints and the scarcity of females.

Indeed, polygyny is recognized as the most common form of polygamy (Rawson 2011; Ember et al 2007; Dantie et al 2021), however the term "polygamy" is often used to refer to polygyny, further emphasizing its prevalence (Mwambene 2018; Murdock and Provost 1973; A.R.A. 2006).

While a considerable volume of research has delved into the socio-cultural and religious foundations of polygamy, there's been a comparative dearth of focus on the psychological coping strategies that women in these relationships employ. These women often navigate emotional turmoil and cognitive conflict, managing these challenges through a range of tactics, including avoidance and religious justification.

The central question of this research is "How do these coping mechanisms and religious beliefs aid women in polygamous relationships in handling emotional distress, and to what degree do these methods challenge or support patriarchal structures within these relationships?"

The objectives of the research would therefore be to:

1. Investigate and dissect the coping strategies utilized by women in polygamous relationships,
2. Examine the role of religion, specifically the tenets of Islam, in legitimizing polygamous marriages and its influence on women's perceptions of their relationships,
3. Assess the impact of these strategies and beliefs on the overall emotional well-being of women involved in polygamous relationships.

Moving forward, the next chapter will delve into other research focusing specifically on the practice of polygamy within the Islamic context, providing a deeper understanding of its prevalence, acceptance, and influence on the lives of Muslim women.

2. Polygamy in Islam

In the context of Muslim families, the practice of polygamy is guided by the Holy Quran, which allows a man to marry up to four wives simultaneously. In the Quran 4:3 it is said: „And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hands possess [i.e., slaves]. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]. “¹

However, this permission comes with the explicit condition of ensuring equality and justice in all material possessions that a man holds. This verse could be interpreted as advocating for monogamy in situations where a man might not be capable of maintaining justice and equality amongst all his wives.

¹ <https://quran.com/4/3?translations=17,19,20,22,84,18,21,95,85,101>

In relation to polygamy (Rohmadi et al. 2022), the research probes into the ancient origins of this practice in human societies. The authors highlight that polygamy was an established custom even before the advent of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula. This type of polygamy could be termed 'unlimited polygamy', where there was no notion of fairness among wives, and husbands had unrestricted choice. However, historical records indicate that the practice was also tied to one's social standing, with a free man permitted to wed four women, while a male slave was only allowed two.

The topic of polygamy in Islam is intricate and contentious, with varying interpretations of the Quran and Hadith resulting in diverse practices across Muslim societies globally. The Quran does allow for polygamy, but only under stringent conditions. Abou El Fadl (2018) maintains that polygamy isn't a broad sanction, but rather a restricted allowance meant to be invoked under exceptional situations.

The husband is expected to provide for all his wives equally and treat them with fairness. Some scholars contend that the Quran's allowance for polygamy was designed for specific scenarios, such as war or famine, while others maintain that it's a universal permission that can be utilized at any given time.

Mahmood Mamdani, a renowned scholar and author, provides an in-depth exploration of the practice of polygamy within Islam (2000). This work stands as a comprehensive and authoritative source on the subject, delving into the historical development of polygamy within Islamic societies, and investigating the social and economic factors that have influenced its practice over time.

Mamdani's study of Quranic and Hadith interpretations related to polygamy, coupled with diverse legal judgments, offers a sophisticated comprehension of the subject. He argues that polygamy is not intrinsically linked to Islam but is a practice molded by particular historical and cultural situations. In his book, Mamdani notes that polygamy was relatively rare during the early periods of Islam, gaining more prevalence in subsequent centuries.

Moreover, Mamdani argues that polygamy has often been utilized to justify the subjugation of women and maintain patriarchal social structures. His viewpoint resonates with the argument presented by Judith Tucker, where she discusses how polygamy can reinforce patriarchal norms and contribute to gender inequality within Muslim societies (Tucker, 2008).

Polygamous marriages are not universally perceived negatively. In his book "An Introduction to Islamic Law" (1983), Joseph Schacht offers meaningful insights into the historical and legal aspects of polygamy in Islam. He presents the argument that in Arab societies, polygamy has been a traditional practice, with supporters touting its social and economic advantages and its potential solution to various societal problems. For instance, the societal structure and cultural endorsement of polygamy could serve as protective elements for children, offering them additional caregivers and a sense of belonging (Hamdan et al 2009, 785);

Debra Majeed's research involving a small subset of African American Muslims in polygamous marriages records some co-wives' attempts to recast multiple-wife marriage as an empowering structure rather than an abusive one (Majeed, 2016, 86). This highlights that the lived experience in polygamous marriages can greatly depend on the socio-cultural backdrop, particularly in terms of whether such marriages are viewed positively or negatively (Ibid. 81).

The article also explores the subject of polygamous marriages within European Muslim immigrant communities, underlining that the acceptance of these marriages hinges on cultural norms and the unique needs and difficulties encountered by involved individuals. For example, it presents a case study of a Pakistani couple where the husband takes a second wife in Pakistan to meet his need for a caregiver, while his children remain in the UK. Another case involves a Turkish couple where the man marries a second wife in Turkey to father children as his first wife is unable to conceive. These marriages were influenced by customs and practices from their home countries and were molded by the circumstances of migration (Ibid. 84).

Within these communities, the article draws attention to two instances where husbands covertly took second wives, which sparked fury and resentment from their first wives. The gendered power dynamics and religious sanction of polygamy significantly influenced men's behaviors. Ethnic minority women in Europe had greater access to resources and options to abandon undesirable marriages compared to women in their homelands. However, not every woman possessed the means to break free from polygamous marriages, particularly in precarious situations like domestic abuse or migration (Ibid. 85-86).

The article concludes that polygamous marriages, often spurred by male desires for care, a "better wife," or heirs, largely favor men. These marriages, shaped by transnational social spaces, allow men to keep multiple wives hidden or lure vulnerable women into them. The difficulties of such unions, mainly borne by women, often lead to family disputes. Migration

changes gender dynamics, increasing women's autonomy and making it easier for them to exit unsatisfying marriages. However, women in their home countries might accept being second wives due to dependency on men. Despite some potential advantages, the chapter emphasizes marital discord and divorce in polygamous marriages, echoing existing research that links them more with problems than harmony (Ibid. 89-90).

3. Evolving perceptions and challenges of polygamous relationships in modern societies

In the modern era, some communities are beginning to question and challenge the long-standing gender roles and power imbalances prevalent in polygamous relationships. This has prompted a reassessment of the legal and societal structures that govern polygamy, with a growing call for enhanced safeguards for those participating in these marriages.

Scholarly works highlight the causes of diminished wellbeing in polygamous marriages, such as the pressure on resources due to an expanded family size and discord between co-wives. These issues can potentially lead to the breakdown of the family unit (Elbedour, et al., 2002). The effects are especially severe on initial wives, who frequently perceive their husbands' subsequent marriages as distressing incidents (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001; Ozkan, 2006). Shepard (2013, 47) indicates that mental health problems are more common amongst women in polygamous relationships compared to those in monogamous ones.

Judith Tucker's "Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law" (2008) provides a detailed exploration of gender roles within Islamic law, particularly focusing on polygamy. Tucker scrutinizes the practice of polygamy in Islamic jurisprudence, highlighting how it is intertwined with socio-cultural contexts and gender norms. She contends that polygamy fortifies patriarchal structures in Muslim societies, evident in the power dynamics and 'gendered space' regulations within these relationships. Despite its traditional roots, polygamy has ignited debates about gender equality and individual rights. It's crucial to note that experiences within polygamous relationships can significantly differ.

Nina Nurmila's "Women, Islam and everyday life: Renegotiating polygamy in Indonesia" delves into the intricate dynamics of polygamous marriages in Indonesia. Through interviews, observations, and court record analysis, Nurmila investigates how Muslim women within these marriages balance their roles and rights. She argues that these women aren't wholly victims or fully empowered, but instead negotiate their positions and exercise their agency

differently. Some may accept their husband's additional wives due to societal pressure or economic reasons, while others actively oppose polygamy through legal action or ending the marriage.

In recent times, the spotlight of academic research has increasingly been directed towards the psychological health of women in polygamous relationships. This surge in interest is indicative of a broader acknowledgment of the unique mental health challenges these women face. These challenges stem not just from societal pressures or biological factors, but also from experiences that can be equated to encountering violence or undergoing trauma.

4. Theory. Cognitive dissonance by Leon Festinger

Scholarly research suggests that women's involvement in polygamous relationships isn't solely due to religious devotion but also certain societal circumstances complicating their spouse-seeking journey. While Islamic scriptures provide guidelines for fair treatment among wives, many women still experience mental distress in polygamous marriages.

Polygamy's principles aim to foster societal justice by caring for widows and orphans and ensuring fairness among wives concerning finances, time, and attention. However, the real-life experiences of these women often contrast with the religious intent of justice and equality, leading to a clash between their beliefs and reality, known as cognitive dissonance.

Leon Festinger, in his 1957 book "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance", introduced this influential idea stating that people naturally seek psychological consistency to align their beliefs, values, and perceptions.

Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (1957) suggests that people naturally seek harmony among their thoughts and actions. The theory postulates that when conflicting cognitions related to behavior arise, they create a dissonance, which can be mentally and physically distressing.

This dissonance becomes apparent when someone notices a discrepancy between their actions and beliefs, such as endorsing a conflicting viewpoint (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Festinger (1957) proposed that this discomfort compels people to act in ways that alleviate this unease, leading to what is known as dissonance motivation. As a result, people are inclined to adjust their attitudes, values, or behaviors to eliminate or evade these inconsistencies.

In my research, I will explore not just the emotions and worries women confront but also their reactions to these sentiments and their methods for resolving them.

5. Methodology. Virtual ethnography

The research was conducted on a closed, women-only Facebook group where posts related to challenges women experience in Islamic polygamous relationships were examined. Additionally, comments providing solutions to the distress women feel in these relationships were also analysed. The methodological approach used in this study is cyber-ethnography.

Cyber-ethnography, also known as virtual or digital ethnography, is a novel research approach that applies ethnographic methods to study cultures and communities formed via computer-mediated social interaction (Hine, 2000). Given its focus on an online Facebook group, this approach was suitable for the present study.

The data was examined using thematic analysis, a technique aimed at identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a six-step coding process that included familiarizing oneself with the data, generating preliminary codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and finalizing the report.

Data was gathered from posts and comments within the Facebook group. Due to the sensitive nature of the discussions and the group's privacy settings, all data was anonymized to safeguard the participants' identities. Strict ethical guidelines were followed due to the private nature of the Facebook group and the delicate subjects discussed therein. Permission was obtained from the group administrators prior to data collection. All collected data was anonymized, and no personal identifiers were used in the research.

6. Coping Strategies and Gender Disparities in Polygamous Marriages: A Critical Analysis

A literature review of various academic sources revealed that women engaged in polygamous relationships often encounter several challenges, predominantly psychological. One such challenge is the sense of inferiority experienced by these women.

Does a husband looking for another wife mean he is loving the first less? How can I remind myself that I am enough in a moment where you feel like you are lacking something?

The woman, while not offering a reason for her husband's decision to marry another woman, largely holds herself responsible, feeling insufficient or thinking that her husband's affection for her has decreased.

Most of the replies to this question primarily employ a religious viewpoint to justify a man's choice to enter into a second marriage:

It's hard out here sis, good men are far and few between. Sisters need husbands.

It's a struggle between the fact that it hurts vs. It's halal and is his right if he has the means.

Look at your co as a sister and not a rival and Insha Allah you will receive that promise of our Rabb for the first wife who's patient.

Remember she's your sister in Islam and the best of the Muslims are those who want for their brother/sister what they want for themselves.

When polygny is done correctly, it is a tremendous reward and greatly improves all marriages involved.

Several themes emerge from these responses. Firstly, the comments do not take into account the woman's emotions, but rather aim to prove that polygamy is an acceptable practice in Islam, a right that cannot be challenged, and therefore, as a Muslim, it must be embraced. It seems from these remarks that no additional explanation is necessary for the wife - justifying the action with religious adherence is considered sufficient. As a result, women are not seizing the chance to ponder on or debate the issue of polygamy in Islam independently or with religious scholars. As noted by Muslim feminist Wadud, men's perspectives, their interactions with women, and their own ideas have not only constructed their personal interpretation of Islam but also defined it for women. The male viewpoint has been presumed to be the standard, fundamental, and universally applicable experience in defining what it means to be a Muslim (Wadud 2006, 96). This mindset is also reflected in these women's responses.

It would be practical to investigate the reasons behind a man's wish for an additional wife and delve into how a woman, who is struggling with her husband's choice, might react. However, as the comments demonstrate, these questions are not being considered.

In this scenario, there's a clear tension between the implementation of religious traditions and individual feelings. Although religious observance is regarded as correct and unquestionable - as stated in Islam, "Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship" (2:185) - it results in adverse emotions. Suggestions to mitigate this tension involve striking a balance, practicing endurance, and focusing on the spiritual side. Whether this can be seen as an effective element in reducing discord is hard to determine.

Nonetheless, within the responses, you can also discover more detailed suggestions on how to alleviate such conflict, such as allocating time and centering attention on oneself:

If YOU feel you are lacking in something, work on it! We grow constantly as humans, you don't need to be perfect we all have our flaws, but work on what you don't like and it'll build your confidence.

Focus on edifying yourself in his absence, so he can see your progress regardless of the other wife he chooses or the other woman who may catch his eye.

A marriage can get better after he remarries. Keep it peaceful, relaxing, pleasantly surprising, use his next marriage as your opportunity to get into the best shape of your life physically, mentally, and emotionally if you and co can hold one another accountable and share mutual responsibilities then that is even better! You will discover so much about yourself. Insecurity is normal just do not stay in that place for too long and know how and when to challenge any negative thoughts with an improvement to your personal character rather than an expectation to see a change on someone outside of yourself.

These comments clearly encourage a woman to focus on her own development - highlighting her progress in physical, spiritual, and emotional areas. This situation bears some resemblance to divorce cases where women start to prioritize their self-care more (Sakraida 2005; Cortez 2016; Konstam et al 2015; O'rand et al. 2005). However, while there are similarities, the events of a divorce in a monogamous relationship and a woman entering a polygamous marriage should not be directly equated. Nevertheless, it's worth mentioning that the emotional experiences and disappointments in both situations show likenesses.

Again, it becomes clear that these proposed solutions mainly address the immediate concerns or problems of an individual, potentially easing personal dissonance only in the short term. However, they do not deal with the core of the problem - the inherent disparity women confront within the framework of polygamous marriages.

In polygamous scenarios, the woman frequently experiences the majority of emotional distress, a burden that stems from decisions made solely by the man. This suggests that the woman's opinions, choices, and emotional health are often overlooked or ignored. The deep-seated systemic problem here is the power and agency disparity between genders within polygamous unions.

So, while these suggestions or approaches may provide temporary solace or an illusion of resolution, they fall short of tackling the core issue. They neither contest nor aim to alter the patriarchal systems that sustain such inequalities, nor do they strive to empower women within these relationships.

Upon reviewing various forum discussions, it's evident that certain themes consistently emerge in women-centric conversations. A woman in her post asking:

I've done a regrettable act. I have gone through husbands messages with his 2nd wife (she lives abroad). <...> I've only been in polygyny (1st wife) for 5 months and I've worked SO hard to heal. <...> He married a single mother who desperately needed a husband and I supported (after a lot of contemplation and dua). <...> I'm extra hurt because just a couple weeks ago <...> he said he has a hard time connecting with her nice and that if he says something nice to her, it feels forced and not genuine. He said he always thinks of me <...>

So hearing all of that from him and then reading his actual messages to her has crushed me. I <...> can't sleep/eat properly, becoming short tempered with my kids. I break down and cry at random times during the day. Nothing brings me joy anymore. SubhanAllah this is so hard.

In this situation, the fundamental problem primarily originates from the man's dishonesty and his close relationship with his second wife. The resultant cognitive dissonance is due to the woman's initial acceptance of Islamic practices that she deemed suitable. However, the intimate connection between her husband and his second wife has caused significant psychological turmoil.

The comments bring to light an interesting and somewhat unexpected perspective - to ignore the presence of the second wife and choose to remain uninformed about the additional relationship. This strategy could potentially avoid feelings of envy or other negative emotions. This is perfectly exemplified by the following comments:

For myself, I stay away from my husband's phone. <...> I keep earplugs in my purse when I'm with him in the car and at home. I don't want to hear anything. I choose to live in my own little bubble. I apply the rule that Allah knows best for me and I force myself to remember that "curiosity killed the cat"

Another commentator drew a parallel to this scenario as dwelling in a realm of illusions, where you are cognizant of the existence of a second wife, but for the preservation of your emotional stability, you deliberately bury that awareness.

Thing I learnt in poly marriage is to live in delusion to a certain extent. Now what done can't be undone. But u can choose how to take it. Since u said he spoke to u about being nice to her jus couple of weeks n den seeing e msg, jus make urself belief this occurs aft e change to be better with her etc.

Referring to another post where a woman, having spent three years in a polygamous relationship, finds it hard to accept polygamy and feels upset when her husband visits another woman, the solution proposed for her situation encourages self-delusion:

my sister although I understand you very well but for the sake of peace just assume he's on a business trip whenever he's not around

So, seen from this angle, ignoring another relationship can be considered a type of survival strategy to handle cognitive dissonance. However, the woman who narrated her experience suffered severe emotional turmoil due to the incorrect practice of polygamy. Wadud would immediately question the grounds for this marriage, which was the second wife's unstable financial situation. According to Wadud, this viewpoint is essentially gender-prejudiced, presuming women to be financially dependent and incapable of self-support.

Revisiting the subject of coping strategies, other experts have suggested similar methods:

It's hard... feelings never change, only thing u can do is react differently, change your thoughts, detach yourself from him. Make it about you and Allah, change focus from husband to Allah.

Polygamy is a hurtful trial but it's an easy one compared to what many women go through in Dunia.

Two main themes surface from the entire conversation in this thread. The first one suggests a disconnection from the awareness of the second relationship and all its related specifics. This situation is entirely different from the initial part of the study where a woman wished for her husband to marry a second wife who would act as her helper and friend. In that case, the focus was on the woman's own needs; but in this case, the justification for polygamy was targeted at another woman allegedly in need of financial support.

The second viewpoint involves understanding polygamy from a religious perspective - polygamy, when conducted correctly following Islamic principles, is guided by religious duty. This situation can be seen through the prism of the effort-justification paradigm, which is a method to reduce cognitive dissonance. In this context, the dissonance can be diminished by enhancing the perceived allure of the outcome, leading to a harmonious state of cognitions. Here, the reward can be viewed as the implementation of the 'correct' Islamic tradition (according to Prophet Muhammad's teachings) or divine repayment in this life and the next.

The effort justification paradigm suggests that when people put substantial effort into a cause (in this case, polygamous relationships), they can justify their situations and perceive the result as more worthwhile. This might potentially clarify why some women remain committed to these relationships despite encountering negative emotions. However, from the viewpoint of Muslim feminism, this incentive of religious reward might not hold, as the practice in this particular scenario - marrying to provide financial stability for the second wife - is considered unsuitable.

7. Conclusion

The first coping mechanism, avoidance or the creation of an intentional barrier from the knowledge of their husband's second relationship, is often employed as a means of self-preservation. By choosing to remain uninformed about their husband's interactions with his other wife, these women can maintain a semblance of peace and normalcy in their lives. However, this approach does not come without its drawbacks. While it might provide temporary emotional relief, it often involves elements of self-deception and denial which, over time, could lead to more profound psychological harm. This could manifest as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and even physical symptoms due to chronic stress.

The second mechanism involves viewing polygamy through a religious lens, thereby giving it a form of sacred sanctioning. In this perspective, the effort-justification paradigm comes into play, where individuals who invest significant effort into an endeavor tend to rationalize their circumstances and perceive the outcome as more valuable. For these women, the 'effort' translates to their emotional struggle, and the 'outcome' becomes the perceived spiritual reward for adhering to religious principles.

However, this approach, while providing a sense of spiritual solace, does not address the deep-seated issues of gender inequality and lack of agency that are often inherent in

polygamous relationships. The unequal power dynamics, coupled with societal and cultural pressures, can leave these women feeling trapped and helpless, further exacerbating their emotional distress.

From a Muslim feminist perspective, the justification of polygamy for the sake of providing financial stability for the second wife may not be seen as valid. This perspective argues that such a practice does not align with the core Islamic principles of justice and equality.

Therefore, to truly address the emotional distress experienced by women in polygamous relationships, a more comprehensive and multifaceted approach is needed. This includes challenging patriarchal norms, promoting gender equality, and empowering women to assert their rights and agency within these relationships. Additionally, legal reforms, educational initiatives, and support networks can play a crucial role in creating a safer and more equitable environment for these women.

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