

3 Polygamy

Now I had a problem. If God created men and women equal what about all of the ways Islam treats them as unequal? What about polygamy, and veiling, and men being in charge of the women, etc.?

Well I could see only one thing to do: take each “bull by the horns”, so to speak. One by one I wrangled with each apparent inequality. For some it took me years to resolve my issues, but now I cannot think of an issue God has not helped me resolve. Perhaps one will become apparent to me in the future, but now I am at peace.

Let us look at the first and worst past issue: polygamy

POLYGAMY—the very word sent chills down my spine.

Among my friends and sisters they seem to find this the scariest aspect of Islam. The thought of having to share your husband with *another woman* terrifies the married and unmarried alike. Even those who say they **never** want to marry find the very thought of polygamy disgusting.

Before we go any further let me reassure you the Quran does not advocate whole scale polygamy. As we will see, the book mentions it within a social context and gives it very rigid boundaries.

However we must also recognize our attitudes remain deeply affected by our old friend culture. Strange as it may seem to us, societies exist where polygamy plays a big part in life and sometimes women even request it for various reasons.

You might find it interesting to read some of the stories of Mormon polygamous marriages. The obvious affection multiple wives can have for each other and the strength with which they support this aspect of their faith quite astonished me. Of course not all polygamous marriages succeed for everyone involved no matter what society we discuss. Then neither do all monogamous ones.

Where polygamous marriages do succeed the women can provide loving support for one another. In a hostile environment such support might mean the difference between survival and death. For early Mormon settlers it often meant the difference between isolated loneliness and caring female companionship.

Most serious objection to Mormon polygamy did not come from Mormon women but from outside the community. Polygamy seems to have created one of the major causes, if not *the* major cause, for the terrible persecution of this group. However some of the Old Testament prophets—for example Jacob, David, and Solomon—had more than one wife. Thus to Mormons God clearly allows polygamy.

In the era of the Old Testament polygamous marriages created an accepted way of life that provided many benefits, even for the women. To name a few it gave women other female companionship, helped with birthing and raising of children, and provided more hands for accomplishing daily tasks.

I am not aware of anything in the New Testament that forbids polygamy, but in his letters Paul seems to indicate a preference for marrying only once. Marrying only one wife appears as one of the requirements he gives for becoming either a bishop or a presbyter. (Please see 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6.)

Now what about polygamy in Islam? We all recognize the typical stereotype of the Arab sheik with his harem. In many parts of the Muslim world this stereotype became the way of life. In these areas multiple wives indicate a man's wealth and social position.

A general understanding exists among Muslims that a man may have up to four wives at one time. This comes from Verse 4:3, the next verse quoted below. Although in some situations the older wives may lose some of their status when new wives come into the family, the first wife traditionally retains a special position.

Not only Mormon women have positive experiences in polygamous marriages. As a new Muslim I had a friend from Turkey who grew up next door to a polygamous family where the husband had two wives. The wives lived like sisters, loving each other dearly. They provided a wonderful life for the children who essentially had two mothers. Such a situation can create a great environment for everyone. However I think it takes a special mix of people and a great deal of work on everyone's part to keep things fair and loving.

Such fairness and consideration don't always exist. You may have heard the same kind of horror stories I have. You may also know friends who have been approached by foreign Muslims looking for American wives, though they have families at home.

Sometimes lust even controls the religion and not the other way around. A dear friend from India mentioned men there often convert to Islam because then they can legally marry more than one woman.

I have shared some of the tamer forms of "acceptable" polygamy. Though culturally acceptable, that does not always make them acceptable according to the Quran. As I reassured you earlier, the Quran mentions polygamy within a social context. The Quran gives caring for orphans as the only reason allowed for polygamy:

If you deem it best for the orphans, you may marry their mothers—you may marry two, three, or four. If you fear lest you become unfair, then you shall be content with only one, or with what you already have. Additionally, you are thus more likely to avoid financial hardship.

(Quran: The Final Testament 4:3)

When you have a society physically under attack large numbers of widows with children must be provided for. Polygamy offers a refuge and emotional support within a family setting and a father figure for otherwise fatherless children.

Looked at from this angle polygamy becomes a good idea, at least for the widows and orphans. But what about the poor original wife and her children? The Quran says the husband must be perfectly fair in dealing with his wives. If he fears he cannot do so, he should not get into the situation. This next verse shows how difficult fairness becomes:

You can never be equitable in dealing with more than one wife, no matter how hard you try....

(Quran: The Final Testament 4:129)

The two verses together discourage polygamy. One tells men they must be fair in dealing with their wives and the other tells them they cannot ever do so. This leaves very few circumstances where polygamy can be practiced within the guidelines of the Quran. For example, a woman may request her husband to take another wife or the need of orphans for a father moves a married couple to consider polygamy. It certainly does not mean a man can put aside his old wife and marry a pretty young woman to boost his ego.

Almost all of the translations of these Quranic verses I have read indicate God prefers monogamy under most circumstances. I would certainly agree.

The circumstances required by the Quran for polygamy rarely exist. Whatever those circumstances, if the husband does not know for certain he can treat all his wives fairly he should not take the chance of going against God's law, thus harming his soul and bringing pain to his family.

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I have reproduced here one of the most rational approaches I have found to the issue of polygamy. It comes from Appendix 30 of Rashad Khalifa's translation of the Quran. I found it very helpful to read this viewpoint from a man who grew up in a Muslim culture:

POLYGAMY

Polygamy was a way of life until the Quran was revealed 1400 years ago. When the earth was young and under-populated, polygamy was one way of populating it and bringing in the human beings needed to carry out God's plan. By the time the Quran was revealed, the world had been sufficiently populated, and the Quran put down the first limitations against polygamy.

Polygamy is permitted in the Quran, but under strictly observed circumstances. Any abuse of this divine permission incurs severe retribution. Thus, although polygamy is permitted by God, it behooves us to examine our circumstances carefully before saying that a particular polygamous relationship is permissible.

Our perfect example here is the prophet Muhammad. He was married to one wife, Khadijah, until she died. He had all his children, except one, from Khadijah. Thus, she and her children enjoyed the Prophet's full attention for as long as she was married to him; twenty-five years. For all practical purposes, Muhammad had one wife—from the age of 25 to 50. During the remaining 13 years of his life, he married the aged widows of his friends who left many children. The children needed a complete home, with a fatherly figure, and the Prophet provided that. Providing a fatherly figure for orphans is the only specific circumstance in support of polygamy mentioned in the Quran (4:3).

Other than marrying widowed mothers of orphans, there were three political marriages in the Prophet's life. His close friends Abu Bakr and Omar insisted that he marry their daughters, Aisha and Hafsa, to establish traditional family ties among them. The third marriage was to Maria the Egyptian; she was given to him as a political gesture of friendship from the ruler of Egypt.

This perfect example tells us that a man must give his full attention and loyalty in marriage to his wife and children in order to raise a happy and wholesome family.

The Quran emphasizes the limitations against polygamy in very strong words: “If you fear lest you may not be perfectly equitable in treating more than one wife, then you shall be content with one.” (4:3) “You cannot be equitable in a polygamous relationship, no matter how hard you try.” (4:129)

The Quranic limitations against polygamy point out the possibility of abusing God’s law. Therefore, unless we are absolutely sure that God’s law will not be abused, we had better resist our lust and stay away from polygamy. If the circumstances do not dictate polygamy, we had better give our full attention to one wife and one set of children. The children’s psychological and social well-being, especially in countries where polygamy is prohibited, almost invariably dictate monogamy. A few basic criteria must be observed in contemplating polygamy:

1. It must alleviate pain and suffering and not cause any pain or suffering.
2. If you have a young family, it is almost certain that polygamy is an abuse.
3. Polygamy to substitute a younger wife is an abuse of God’s law (4:19).¹

Most of the other translations of the Quran that I have read agree that polygamy should be practiced only in unusual circumstances.

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For most American women, just the thought of polygamy horrifies them. The following story shares a good example.

Invitation to Polygamy

Have you ever found your actions to be totally misunderstood? When I was a young woman, I knew nothing about traditional Muslim society, where men and women generally do not interact unless they are from the same family, or married. There, women who are very open with men are generally considered to be loose.

The first Muslim I ever met was a Palestinian doctoral student studying at the university in my hometown. A family friend in another state had asked my parents to make him feel welcome in our small community. He had come to dinner a couple of times while I was still in high school.

When I graduated and went to the university I would run into him once in a while. I was always very friendly, not realizing that my friendliness was being misread.

One day he caught up with me in a deserted hallway, and “popped the question,” asking me to marry him. I was not at all ready to consider getting married, especially to

¹ Reproduced from *Quran: The Final Testament*, © by Rashad Khalifa, 1989.

someone I really hardly knew. Not only that, but I knew that he had a wife and family back home and I was terribly shocked.

“But you have a wife and children already!” I finally stammered.

“Yes, but they are far away and you are here,” he replied grabbing my wrist. Had I been in anything but a public place, I would have been terrified. As it was, I felt quite threatened.

I twisted myself loose and pulled away from him shaking my head. I don’t remember what sparked the tirade that followed. He began to insult me, my parents, the United States.... At the time I was stunned and just wanted to bolt. Now I realize that he probably felt humiliated and was simply venting.

Since then I have met a number of women who have been approached by Muslim men to become second or third wives in polygamous marriages. Not all have had the benefit I had of knowing that the man was already married.

—Anonymous, U.S.A.

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As mentioned earlier, dangers exist in polygamy for Western women, especially for women involved with brothers from Muslim countries who may have other wives back home. Our next story from me as Iman relates just such a case. (As I explained in an endnote for the Acknowledgements, Iman was a name given to me before I became a Muslim.) I have fictionalized this piece, including changing names to protect some of the characters.

Brush with Polygamy

Sandy, a sister from my mosque who became my friend while she struggled through a divorce finally began to date again. For a long time, she had moped around with such a glum face that I had almost forgotten her normal cheerful nature. Slowly she began to recover from her trauma. And finally, about ten months after the divorce, she started seeing other men socially, but always in public places.

Even then she was not her real self until almost two years after her marriage fell apart. But things continued to get better for her.

One day this pretty and again vivacious sister bounced into the mosque office glowing like a neon sign. Her smile could have lit up the city!

“Salaam Alaikum², Sandy. What’s got you so happy?” I asked her.

“Well, you know I’ve been seeing a lot of that hunk Daud, right? Guess what he asked me last night!”

² Salaam Alaikum is the Arabic for “Peace be upon you”. This is a common greeting among Muslims.

She held out her lovely left hand and sure enough, there was an engagement ring sparkling on her ring finger. No wonder she glowed. Knowing how miserable she had been, I was almost as happy for her as she was.

About four months passed with Sandy in a cloud of bliss. It seemed as if her life was really back on track again.

Until suddenly one day she came slinking into the office with a scowl on her normally cheerful face. She had also clearly been crying, as her red eyes and smeared makeup showed.

I walked over to her and put my arms around her.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

Dejected, she shook her head.

“All couples have disagreements in the beginning,” I ventured in my most reassuring voice.

“Oh it’s worse than that!” she almost exploded. “He’s already got two wives and a bunch of kids back home in West Africa!”

‘Whoa,’ I thought. ‘I should have seen that one coming,’ remembering back to Daud’s suave behavior and the easy way he had with women.

“Is that a deal-breaker? After all, polygamy is allowed in the Quran.”

“You bet it is! He’s all but lied to me this whole time. Saying that I was the only one he loved and he could not live without me. Writing me love poems and sending flowers like I was the love of his life. Yah right! And just how did he end up with all those kids? And doesn’t he love any of them?” she sputtered.

What could I say to that?

“I threw his ring back at his lying face when he finally told me what he should have shared much earlier! I never want to see him again in my life,” she sobbed as she ran out of the office.

It took quite a while for poor Sandy to come back from this second heart breaker. But with the loving care of her mosque sisters and the healing power of Quran, she began to be herself again at last.

The next time I saw Daud he had his arm around another unsuspecting innocent. Unfortunately, I did not know the girl who looked like a nice young lady or I would have gone to her and enlightened her about that man. But having been caught in uncomfortable situations when I tried to help where help was not wanted I stopped myself from getting involved.

But I certainly was relieved that my dear friend and sister had escaped from this unscrupulous man.

Please, all you sisters; remember that polygamy is allowed by the Quran, but only in certain situations—mainly to help children without a father. Don’t let yourself get caught with your eyes closed in the polygamy trap!

—*Iman, U.S.A.*

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I have known a few women involved in polygamous marriages. I don't believe it has been a very easy situation for any of them. However, I think almost all of them have found it a good spiritual experience. It certainly provides one way to work on learning to trust God and to deal with our selfish human natures.

None of these women had children involved, which maybe made things a bit easier for them. In any case, almost all of them would choose to enter into their situation again. That indicates to me the value of their marriages and the growth those marriages provided for my friends' souls. It certainly has helped me to look at the issue in a more favorable light than I would have otherwise.

God is the One in control of everything, including the human heart. So He knows who will benefit from time in a polygamous marriage and who will be damaged by it. As far as I can see none of my friends were damaged.

The one sister I know who grew up in a polygamous family found it difficult in many ways but that difficulty fueled her striving to become one of the best in her field of study. Though it was not easy for her, ultimately it was one of those blessings in disguise that God often gives those whom He knows will benefit from them. And I believe that this sister definitely did benefit, as did all of the people that she helped throughout her professional life.

So though polygamy is often not easy for sisters it may well provide great benefits in spiritual and other growth.