

Different Types of Marriage in Islam

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- compare and contrast the practices of monogamy and polygamy in Islamic countries today
 - analyze the various functions of marriage in societies, both historically and in modern times
 - establish differences between practice and reality in Islamic traditions in regard to polygamy
 - evaluate the similarities and differences between Muslim, Jewish and Christian practices of polygamy
 - assess the implications of misrepresenting Islamic practice in western societies
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Materials

Student Handout: **Islam and Polygamy**

Key Questions

1. Why does Islam allow for men to have multiple wives?
 2. What function does/did polygamous marriage serve for society?
 3. With what frequency do polygamous marriages occur today in Egypt?
 4. Does polygamy differ via characteristics such as age, location and socio-economic status?
 5. How do Egyptian women feel about polygamy?
 6. Are there similarities throughout Islam, Judaism and Christianity concerning viewpoints on practicing polygamy?
 7. Why does polygamy get so much attention from western societies today?
 8. What impacts do these stereotypes have on Islam and Muslim societies?
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Resources

- *Multiple Wives in Islam*. Islamonline.com
 - *Women in Islam: Islam Meaning and Message-Polygamy*. www.jamaat.org/islam/WomanPolygamy.html
 - Abdel-Azim, Sherif. *Women in Islam Versus Women in the Judeo-Christian Tradition: The Myth and the Reality*.
 - Engineer, Asghar Ali. *Polygamy in Islam: Concept and Practice*. People's Union for Civil Liberties pucl.org/Topics/Gender/2002/polygamy-islam.htm
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Islam and Polygamy

Background

Marriage is a custom in countries all around the world which serves a variety of societal purposes. Some purposes include; companionship, reproduction, stability, security, joint economic resources, physical assistance in labor and “love.” Marriages are of two types; monogamous and polygamous. In societies that practice polygamy, the specific type is polygyny, which is having more than one wife (polyandrous unions, of having more than one husband, are much less common). Muslim societies allow for up to four wives, but not without specific rules and regulations. In traveling throughout Egypt I had an opportunity to talk with many young women about their views on polygamous unions and their applicability to the modern world. I based these questions on the premise that polygamous unions are often used as justification that women are oppressed in Islam. The following stories are personal accounts of women ages 19-55 who shared some of their views with me.

These personal interview responses are by Pakinaz and Rehab, both completed university level degrees and are married Egyptian women in monogamous relationships (over 35 years of age).

Question 1:

Why did polygamy evolve in Islam? Were there practical reasons for it in Muslim societies?

Rehab

Actually, before answering these questions, we have to ask ourselves: Was polygamy an Islamic invention?

Polygamy has always been regarded as part of the Islamic religion, but the truth is that It had been practiced ages before Islam.

Scriptural evidence indicates that polygamy among the ancient Hebrews, though not extremely common, was not particularly unusual and was certainly not prohibited or discouraged. The Hebrew Scriptures document approximately forty polygamists, including such prominent figures as Abraham, Jacob, and David.

"After he left Hebron, David took more concubines and wives in Jerusalem, and more sons and daughters were born to him." 2 Samuel 5:13

"He (Solomon) had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines..." 1 Kings 11:3

Polygamy was also part of the ancient Chinese, Hindu, and Arab cultures. All Islam did was restricting it to four wives, and putting the rules to regulate it for the benefits of mankind.

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Question 2: How is polygamy viewed in Islam?

Rehab In Islam we have three degrees for permitted deeds:

1 . obligatory 2. recommended 3. allowed

Polygamy falls in the third category. Polygamy is permitted for many social reasons. However it is by permission and not an obligation or recommendation in the Quran that a Muslim male should indulge in polygamy.

Pakinaz We learn from the Quran and Hadith that when polygamy was first legalized at the time of the Prophet Mohamed (Peace upon Him) it was because thousands of Muslim men died in wars. So many women were left homeless and without any support. After a while when this phenomenon was settled, Quranic verses were passed to the Prophet Mohamed (PUH) to forbid polygamy. But, this had then become very difficult. So, the Quran has set strict rules for a man to have more than one woman to the extent as to make it not only difficult but rather impossible. As the verses of the Koran indicate that a man should strictly fair not only in what he gives in concrete material things (clothes, jewelry, homes, etc.) But more importantly, in emotions. While the first order is possible to practice, God has recognized that no one can really command his feelings as we are all human beings. To break these rules was considered very sinful and the Quranic verses has directly commanded that a man should have only one woman. The verse says (*Wa In Kheftoum All Ta Dellou Fa Waheda.*) Transliterated which means: "If you men are not sure that you will be fair God commands you to have One Woman Only." As in other similar situations, especially in moderate times, men took for granted the verses without abiding to the rest that requires them to follow the rules made by God.

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Question 3:

Is polygamy still needed in society?

Rehab

In Islam adultery, fornication, and homosexuality are prohibited. Marriage is the only permitted way of satisfying sexual desires. This is to maintain lineage and all related rulings such as fatherhood, bearing of sons, inheritance, and corresponding rules related to marriage, expenses, social rights and upbringing of children.

It is known that the number of women outnumber that of men due to endless wars. It is estimated that the number of military deaths in world war one reached ten million, while in world war two it exceeded 25 million. Add to that the wars in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan Africa, and many other countries around the world. You can easily imagine the number of widows, ad single women who will never get a chance to get married.

If every man contents himself with only one woman, then there will remain a huge number of women without experiencing marital life. Likewise, they will be denied satisfying their sexual instincts legally, on which Allah has created the humans. This in turn might lead the women to taking refuge in committing adultery, which results in living a miserable life of single, struggling mothers, and children without fathers.

Sometimes a man marries a great wife, who happens to be barren. If Allah has not legislated the marriage with a second one, he will probably think of divorcing her then, we might ask why would he leave her? Why wouldn't he accept his fate and just live? The answer is simply because we are humans and having children is an instinct in all of us, men and women. Of course if the couple felt that they are satisfied with their lives without children, then polygamy is not an option for them. We might face the same situation if the woman is has an incurable illness that prevents her from living a natural marital life. Would it be better for the husband to leave her and marry someone else, or would he still keep her and remarry while taking care of all her needs.

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Question 4:

What are the preconditions for polygamy within Islam?

Rehab

Allah SWT said in the Quran {“...but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one”....} [4:3]. This verse expresses clearly Allah's purpose concerning polygamy. Marrying more than one - two, three or four - is subject to equity in man's dealing with his wives as to expenditure, accommodation, food, clothing and kind treatment. If a man feels that he will fail to observe such equity, then he is not allowed to practice this choice.

The Quran also its very clear that its very hard for men to fulfill that condition of being just with all wives “but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one ” (4:3) and also another verse that assures the same idea "Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire” (4:129) so God is warning men of the consequences of polygamy. Is this a contradiction then? Absolutely not! It just means that polygamy is permitted as sometimes it’s a must to sustain social balance , but at the same time it’s not recommended otherwise as it’s very hard to be just with more than one woman.

Pakinaz

It says that a man can have more than a woman upon certain conditions such as: serious sickness, fertility problems, insanity, or simply not getting along (which is very normal for human beings!). Other than these conditions, Islam has strictly ordered men to keep One Woman Only as the verses say " If you are (men) afraid from not being fair to All your wives, you are ordered to keep One Only". So, Islam has recognized human beings weaknesses, needs to change, emotional and sexual well being among couples and has put rules to preserve marital relations for the sake of women and their children too, otherwise as it’s very hard to be just with more than one woman.

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Question 5: Are there differences between what is believed about polygamy and what is practiced today?

Rehab Many Muslims understand the real meaning of polygamy. And they try hard to achieve the goals of marriage and to be as just as they can, and by justice we mean equity between wives in everything.

Unfortunately on the other hand, few Muslims intensify the Muslim's social problems in the Islamic poor countries by marrying multiple wives and bringing more poor kids into the society. Others marry a second wife and forget about their first wives and their children. It is true and this happens everyday. But, it doesn't mean that we should prohibit polygamy as the problem is not in the theory, but in the application.

Pakinaz I think men throughout history have taken advantages. Lots of misinterpretations too. They have purposely manipulated these interpretations to their benefit. Islamic rules about marital relations are considered very fair- especially compared to other religions.

Question 6: Have views about polygamy changed over time?

Rehab I think in the past polygamy was more common in Egypt and many other Muslim countries. Now it's getting less common I think this is mostly because of the high life expenses and people strive to get married to one woman.

Question 7: How frequently is polygamy practiced in Egypt?

Pakinaz I have no exact figure, but looking around me it is becoming far less than in old times. This is for many reasons. First more emancipated, independent and enlightened women (reduce numbers). Second, more Muslim men who are honest in practicing Islam, third, for economic reasons, as men realized that it is already difficult to take care of One Woman!

Rehab Actually, I don't have any statistics about the frequency of polygamy in Egypt, but from what I see I think it's pretty low.

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Question 8:

Is polygamy a way of oppressing women? (This question was inserted by Rehab because she thought it would be of interest.)

Rehab

We can't deny that a woman will suffer psychologically if her husband marries a second woman.... But we must bear in mind that polygamy is a choice of women as much as it is a choice of men....might sound odd, but it's true!

Women accept to be second or third wives for reasons of their own..... so we can't say it's a man's choice.

Ok, now what about the first wife.....what if she can't bear having her husband remarried.....what can she do? Actually she has one of two choices.... The first one she makes even before getting married.

First of all, marriage in one of its phases is a legal contract between the wife and the husband. Both partners have the right to add any condition that they think it will help them to protect their future life. So, if a woman thinks polygamy is against her interest, then she has the full right to announce her objection during the marriage contract as a condition for a valid contract or else it will be nullified.

What if the woman accepted polygamy and after her husband got married she discovered that she can't live with it?

In that case she can simply ask for divorce, and if he refused to divorce her, she can always divorce herself from him through a process in Islam called "*kholou*" in which the woman goes to court and the judge divorces her from him.

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Question 9: Would you ever consider polygamy a viable marital option? Explain

Rehab I have to say that is a tough question..... I believe that permitting polygamy is very necessary to maintain balance in society as I mentioned above..... when I got married I had the chance to put the condition to prevent my husband from marrying a second wife as long as we are married, but I refused to do so. I think that if at any time and for whatever reason my husband decided to marry a second wife it shouldn't be the condition that stops him.

If that second marriage was for no reason, I will feel betrayed and I don't think I will accept it. But, if there was any necessity that made him do so, probably I will try to live with it. In case it was so hard for me to get used to the new style of life, then there will always be the second option; divorce.

Pakinaz Yes. As God has mentioned in the Quran and for the situations in which a man will have two options only. Either to betray his wife (and other negative consequences, like losing parental life for kids and living miserably without their supports, the second option is to continue living unhappily with his wife. God wants all his creatures to live happily without breaking natural ties. So, in instances of unhappiness (one of the conditions set for getting a second marriage) the man will have the right to re-marry. God has a condition also for this that the man has to get the consent of his first wife. Equally, a woman has the right to ask for divorce if she does approve the second marriage. In all cases, she has the right to ask for a divorce if she wants to re-marry or for any other plausible reasons. Also, according to Quran, the woman has the right to divorce her husband without his own consent. That is what is called "*Al-Kholee*" which means that she will divorce him in the way as he can divorce her.
