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## Polygamy

Now I had a problem. If men and women are equal, what about all of the things that are unequal? What about polygamy, and veiling, and men being in charge of the women and on and on?

Well, there was only one thing to do: take each bull by the horns. One by one I wrangled with them all. Some it has taken me years to resolve, and with some, I still have occasional little question marks swimming in my head.

So now let's bring out the first and worst: polygamy

POLYGAMY... the very word sent chills down my spine.

Among my friends and sisters this is 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 that the Quran does not advocate whole scale polygamy. As we will see, it is mentioned within a social context, and given very rigid boundaries.

However, we must also recognize that our attitudes are deeply affected by... that's right, our old friend culture. Strange as it may seem to us, there are societies where polygamy is readily accepted, and sometimes even requested by the women.

You might find it interesting to read some of the stories of Mormon polygamous marriages. I was quite astonished by the obvious affection multiple wives can have for each other, and the strength with which they support this aspect of their faith. Of course, not all polygamous marriages are good, no matter

what society we are talking about. Then, neither are all monogamous ones.

In cases where polygamous marriages are good, the women can be 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.

Serious objection to Mormon polygamy did not come mainly from Mormon women, but from outside the community. In fact, it seems to have been one of the major causes, if not *the* major cause, for the terrible persecution of this group. However, some of the Old Testament prophets had more than one wife, so to the Mormons polygamy is clearly allowed by God. Abraham is an example of one of these prophets:

*Abram's wife Sarai had borne  
him no children.*

*Now she had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name  
was Hagar,*

*and she said to Abram,*

*"You see that the Lord has not  
allowed me to bear a child.*

*Take my slave-girl;  
perhaps I shall found a family  
through her."*

*Abram agreed to what his wife said;*

*so Sarai, Abram's wife, brought her slave-girl, Hagar the  
Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.*

*(Genesis 16:1-3 - Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Ver-  
sion, 1991)*

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

There is a general understanding among Muslims that a man may have up to four wives at one time. 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.

It is not only Mormon women who have positive experiences in polygamous marriages. When I was first being introduced to Islam I had a friend from Turkey who shared her childhood experience with polygamy. She had grown up next door to a polygamous family where the father had two wives. The two wives were like sisters to each other, clearly loving each other dearly. For the children it was wonderful because they essentially had two mothers. Such a situation could be very good. However, I think that it would take a special mix of people to make it work, and a great deal of work on everyone's part to keep things fair and loving.

Clearly such fairness and consideration are not always the case. I'm sure you have heard the same kind of horror stories I have. You may also have 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 recently mentioned that men there often convert to Islam simply because then they can legally marry more than one woman!

These are some of the tamer forms of "acceptable" polygamy. However, they are culturally acceptable, not necessarily Quranically acceptable. As I reassured you earlier, the Quran mentions polygamy within a social context:

*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)*

Clearly, when you have a society that is physically under attack and there are large numbers of widows with children, a means must be provided to care for them. Polygamy offers a refuge and emotional support within a family setting, and a father figure for otherwise fatherless children.

Looked at from this angle, maybe polygamy is not such a bad idea... at least for the widows and orphans. But what about the poor original wife and her children? The Quran says that the husband must be perfectly fair in dealing with his wives. If he is afraid he cannot be, he should not get into the situation.

This next verse makes it clear that being fair is really impossible:

*You can never be equitable  
in dealing with more than one wife,  
no matter how hard you try.  
Therefore, do not be so biased  
as to leave one of them hanging  
(neither enjoying marriage,  
nor left to marry someone else).  
If you correct this situation and  
maintain righteousness,  
God is Forgiver, Most Merciful.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:129)*

The two verses together really discourage polygamy. One tells men that they must be fair in dealing with their wives, and the other tells them that they cannot ever really do that. It seems to me that this leaves very few circumstances where polygamy can be practiced within the guidelines of the Quran. It certainly does not mean that a man can put aside his old wife and marry a pretty young thing to boost his ego!

Yusuf Ali's footnote for Verse 4:3 indicates that he understands the Quran's "recommendation to be towards monogamy." I would certainly agree.

Clearly, the circumstances need to be unusual to warrant polygamy. Whatever those circumstances, if the husband is not certain that he can be perfectly fair to all parties, he should not take the chance of going against the Quran, thus harming his soul and bringing pain to his family.



I have reproduced here one of the most rational approaches I have found to the issue of polygamy. It comes from Appendix 30 entitled POLYGAMY, of Rashad Khalifa's 1992 translation of the Quran. I found it very helpful to read this viewpoint from someone 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).

[Reproduced with kind permission from the Khalifa family from *Quran: The Final Testament*, Rashad Khalifa, 1992]

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