

Polygyny in South Africa

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Abstract

Under apartheid in the 1970s and 80s, sororal polygyny increased the reproductive success of women who participated. Women who entered and allowed polygynous marriage explained its advantages as help from other adult women with child-rearing; sharing workload; increasing the freedom of individual wives; companionship, and economic gain. Polygyny continues in South Africa today despite the universal promulgation of the ideology of Christianity and of jealous and romantic love, replacing the former ideology of cooperation and female solidarity. Reasons currently given by participants are now usually qualified by listing the disadvantages as well; such reasons include companionship, a lack of men worth marrying, to increase the production of children, and the traditional belief that wealthy men should share their wealth widely among other families.

Keywords: Polygyny; Female choice; South Africa

Introduction

In the late 1970s and 1980s, under apartheid, many black women in South Africa willingly entered into polygynous marriages. Europeans already viewed polygyny as “dying out” then, under the influence of Christianity, modernity, and constant exposure to Western ideals of romantic love – what I call the ideology of jealousy and competition, replacing the former ideology of cooperation and female solidarity. In the 1970s and 80s, the most common explanation given by women themselves was the incorporation of additional adult females into their child-rearing unit, especially the husband’s mother; they believed that this increased the likelihood that their children would survive, and a statistical analysis there and in other African countries more recently indicates that they were correct, especially

in the case of sororal polygyny. Related explanations included sharing the household workload with a co-wife, including child-care; greater freedom to come and go, including to work elsewhere and take trips to sell items, knowing that co-wives would take care of things during their absence; and companionship, since the majority of adult men were away working elsewhere for 11 months of the year.

Forty years later, polygyny is still common in many African countries. The current re-study in South Africa in 2014-18 found that most young women now disapprove of polygyny, despite the ideology of romantic love and sexual jealousy, although the reasons for entering such marriages are fairly similar to those found 30 years ago. Both de facto and de jure polygyny continues in South Africa, 25 years after the end of apartheid.

Methods

No attempt to estimate overall rates of polygyny for this population was made; rather, as many polygynously-married women were located and interviewed as possible, with the additional of some men between 2014 and 2018. The original sample consisted of 22 monogamous and 22 polygynous families, all resident in the Johannesburg-Pretoria area. These cannot be considered households in the conventional sense, given that, in all but three cases, at least one wife resided outside this area. Because most discussions of polygyny compare the relative reproductive success of polygynous and monogamous men and women, I collected data on birth rates and survival of children to age 5 for men and women married polygynously, and compared these data with a matched sample of monogamously-married men and women drawn from the same population. I considered only women who were at least 45 years old, on the assumption that their reproduction had been completed. In the current version, 9 polygynously-married women and 3 men were interviewed, as well as 23 unmarried women and 5 unmarried men, in the Johannesburg-Pretoria area, rural KwaZulu-Natal, and urban and rural communities in Swaziland.

Results

I was most interested in the reasons for polygyny given by the women themselves, both women who had accepted additional wives into a previously monogamous marriage, and women who had willingly married a man who already had one or more wives; and, in the more recent study, in the advantages and disadvantages of polygyny given by unmarried men and women, as well as polygynously married men.

The number of surviving children per wife in monogamous marriages is 4.01, compared to 3.87 in polygynous marriages. The number of children per monogamous husband is also 4.01, compared to 10.96 for polygynous husbands. These differences are significant for husbands but not for wives.

When the co-wives were sisters, the number of surviving children rose to 4.7. Unrelated co-wives produced an average of 3.8 children per wife. This difference, although suggestive, is also not significant. Within polygynous marriages, there is a low but significant negative correlation between the number of surviving children per wife and the number of wives. This may be spurious, correlated instead with kinship among co-wives, because the households practicing sororal polygyny were the smaller ones: 4 of the 9 marriages with two wives, 2 of the 10 marriages with

three wives, and none of those with 4 or 5 wives involved sisters.

When the husband's mother was alive, healthy, residing with and actively helping to care for her grandchildren, infant survival per wife for polygynous households was 5.25, compared to 3.36 when the grandmother was absent or inactive. This difference is significant. Children in polygynous households were more likely to survive when they were cared for by their mother's or father's sister or mother.

Respondent's Explanations: 1986

First, many women agree that sharing the household workload with a co-wife is beneficial. They state that help from a co-wife or mother-in-law was a significant factor in their decision to marry polygynously.

Second, many polygynously married women, especially in West Africa, cite companionship and socializing with other women as a benefit of polygyny [1-3]. Women around Johannesburg frequently want a relative or a female acquaintance from their rural home to live with them in the city.

Third, greater autonomy for individual wives vis-à-vis the husband typically accompanies polygyny [4,5]. Women in this study refer especially to the childcare benefits cited above, and also to household and field maintenance in general. They believe that a woman with co-wives has greater freedom to come and go than a single wife does, knowing that co-wives will take care of problems in her absence (personal observation; see also Solway) [2].

Fourth, economic gain is anticipated by some women. One woman regularly makes week-long trips to rural areas to sell items that she purchases at low prices in Johannesburg, while another wife stays in the city to care for their children. These women state that they would have less disposable income if they were each in a monogamous union.

Fifth, help in child rearing was by far the most common explanation given by these South African women for accepting or becoming a co-wife. Typical statements by unmarried, monogamous, and polygynous women alike include, "A woman can't raise children these days without help," "Sisters will always help each other with their children," "African women can't raise children by themselves like whites can," and "I knew Johannes's mother would be very good for our children." In all these cases, "by herself" clearly means without other adult women; the presence or absence of the husband seems irrelevant.

Women state that, because cities are bad places to raise children, they would prefer to leave their children in rural areas even if they were allowed to bring children to stay in the whites-only areas where they have found employment. They point out that they must work to keep their children from starving and that they must have someone else care for their children to go to the city to work.

Finally, the shortage of men, although infrequently cited, was probably of great importance.

Respondent's Explanations: 2018

Rural African women still say that companionship in the husband's absence is an important motivation for polygynous marriage, especially now that homesteads are smaller. Two highly-educated, apparently thoroughly Westernized African women who had become friends at University said that women should avoid the Western ideology of jealousy, stop letting men divide them and present a united front with their sisters.

Africans of all ages, sexes and classes said that there aren't enough men in general, especially men desirable as husbands, because of high unemployment and widespread poverty. If it weren't for polygyny, even more women than at present would have to remain unmarried.

Some women said it is far better to be married to a man with another wife who can help support their children than to have a man with no income and no resources all to themselves. Many also stated a desire to have several children, and that polygyny provides extra resources to increase child survival.

Africans of both sexes seem to accept polygyny among wealthy, high-status men as a means of sharing the wealth. Among families that describe themselves as very traditional, the belief that particularly wealthy people have an obligation to share with less-fortunate others is still extended to believe that such men should help women and their natal families by marrying more than one of them.

Whites universally condemned former South African president Jacob Zuma for having more than one wife, as do almost all young African women who attended posh majority-white schools. In fact, those women were even more contemptuous of Zuma than were whites, and they exaggerated the number of wives he has, counting the deceased and divorced ones as well. They joined whites to explain polygyny as the result of male sexual desire and viewed romantic love as not partible.

Men are rarely asked for their opinion of polygyny by the media, probably because white, Western reporters take for granted that the main motivation of the men is sexual variety, and that men wish polygyny could continue, whatever the disadvantages. One young single man claimed that men reach a sexual peak later in life, while women become disinterested in sex after menopause, so older men need to take a younger wife to supplement his original wife. This man also emphasized the costs to men, however: the difficulty of mediating among members of a large family; the possibility that the wives may unite against the husband; the difficulty of satisfying them all sexually; and the difficulty of keeping them from being unfaithful. Another man said that men with more than one wife always die earlier than other men: "A true polygamist cannot live up to 80 years old. If you are a true polygamist you will die at 60 to 65, because there are lots of issues that you have been keeping in yourself to maintain peace in the family."

Discussion

Costs of Polygyny

Most social scientists, starting from the assumption that marriages are contracts among males for allocating females, have viewed polygyny as a system that benefits men at the expense of women [6]. Sociobiologists, citing studies which show that monogamously-married women have higher birth rates than do polygynously-married women, explain the existence of polygyny in terms of conflict between men and women over unequally distributed resources, where men have more power than women [7]. Where stratification among men is marked, it is assumed that women of all political-economic classes have less power to determine their own marriage partners than do men of similar strata. According to sociobiological theory, if women in such societies have any power to choose, all but the very wealthiest women will prefer to marry wealthy men to obtain more resources for their children. Although the wife lacks the power to prevent the addition of other wives, she will not leave her husband if he marries additional wives as long as the resources available to her and her children exceed those available to the sole wives of poor men.

Why should any woman choose a marriage form that reduces her reproductive success? In some cases, stratification among women themselves ensures that at least one of the polygynously-married wives has more children than the average for monogamous women [8,9]. In most indigenous South African cultures, one of the wives in a polygynous marriage would be designated the "Great" or senior wife, to whom the others had to defer. However, there is no evidence in my data or in a thorough literature review that this phenomenon decreased the reproductive

success of the junior wives. In the present study, for those marriages in which one wife was easily identified as a senior wife, there was no difference in child production or survival between the senior and the junior wives, despite privileges enjoyed by the senior.

In fact, in contradiction to most other studies, the polygynously-married women reported in 1986 did not suffer significantly reduced fertility or significantly reduced child survival compared to monogamously-married women. The difference between the two types of marriage in terms of husband's resources may have been slight in apartheid South Africa. In addition, monogamously-married women may be unable to keep their husbands from diverting household resources to girlfriends, especially where the girlfriends have children [4,10-13]. If a woman who is monogamously married cannot monopolize her husband's resources and direct them towards her own children, no difference in fertility between monogamous and polygynous women would be predicted. Women themselves recognize this in many areas throughout the world today, stating that they prefer to become the girlfriend of a rich married man rather than marry a poor monogamist [4,12].

Women interviewed during this study, in fact, believe that women benefit more from polygyny than men do. One woman said that polygyny allows women to live independently, while forcing some men to remain unmarried.

In South Africa in 2018, although polygyny still does not appear to have significantly higher costs than monogamy, this was impossible to evaluate objectively because of the higher economic status of traditional polygynists.

Benefits of Polygyny

A common saying among SeSotho and Nguni-speakers is, "Without a co-wife, a woman's work is never done"[2]. Many women around Johannesburg agreed that sharing the household workload with a co-wife was desirable. Women stated that help from a co-wife or mother-in-law was a significant factor in their decision to marry polygynously. Kapsiki women in Cameroon also state that polygyny is desirable as long as co-wives do not become enemies, because it reduces individual workloads [3].

Given the common Western view that female sexual jealousy is insurmountable, companionship among wives is never suggested as a motive in Western analyses of polygyny. More traditional women interviewed in this study feel differently. Although women view male consanguineal relatives as appropriate companions, they laugh at the suggestion that their husband could keep them company. In

South Africa under apartheid, the husband of a Black woman employed as a maid could not spend enough time with her to be her companion. Apartheid laws did not allow anyone but the maid to stay in her quarters overnight, and employers and neighbors were much more likely to complain to police if maids' guests are male, whether husbands, boyfriends, sons or consanguineal relatives, than if they were female.

In addition, the U.S. stereotype of an autocratic husband dictating to his subservient wives is regularly contradicted in polygynous marriages throughout sub-Saharan Africa [4,5]. Women feel that each wife has more freedom from the husband's control in a polygynous marriage (although she is subject to criticism by the other wives). In Sierra Leone, where 80% of marriages were polygynous, women stated that they feared economic dependence and domination by their husband in a monogamous marriage where no other women could help them resist his domination [14]. There, men with only one wife control all the household finances, including the wife's income, while polygynously-married women retain full control over their own earnings. Further research is planned to investigate this possibility in South Africa.

Under the conditions obtaining in the "new" South Africa, polygynously married women may now have the opportunity to generate wealth; research will continue. However, removal of apartheid restrictions and attempts by the new governments to achieve equality between the sexes has resulted in increased wage labor for women, which tends to decrease rates of polygyny [7].

Help with child rearing was judged to be the most common benefit of polygyny by South African women themselves. Several women specifically contrasted their own situation with that of monogamously married white women, who, being wealthy, can send their children to nurseries and day care centers and so succeed in raising children "alone".

In all polygynous marriages in this survey, when at least one wife resided in a rural area, all the husband's younger children remained with her. In some families, all co-wives lived in the city, but all the children remained with the husband's mother or the mother of one of the wives.

The most common motive for polygyny articulated by these South African women was the incorporation of additional adult females into their child-rearing unit. The limited supply of men whose mothers are still healthy and active seems to be at least as important a constraint on the ability of South African working mothers to choose monogamy as is the limited supply of men with well-paid

jobs. Children's needs were always cited as the prime consideration, rather than the income earned by working mothers; this income was always described as necessary to the children's survival. The data on reproductive success demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategy. Women believed help was needed to raise children, and those women who were helped by related women who resided with their children had higher rates of child survival than those women who were not helped.

Cooperative child-care and companionship, then, were the main reasons given by informants to explain polygynous marriage. One woman who said she had been raised in a monogamous household stated that she had envied children from polygynous families and was pleased to have provided that level of companionship for her own children. Some wives reversed this, saying that they asked their husbands to marry young girls who would have jobs and send money home, so that they could stay at home with their children.

The support network created by co-wives may be even more important now than it was previously. The substitution of cash for cattle in most bride wealth presentations has weakened or eliminated many of the obligations on women's husband's relatives, cattle-linked brothers, and sons-in-law to support them and their children [15].

Improved reproductive success for females whose mothers are still alive has been noted in various studies of recent human populations as well as studies of non-human primates in captivity and in the wild. Females whose mothers are alive and healthy for the largest percentage of their daughter's reproductive careers has significantly greater lifetime reproductive success than those whose mothers were absent for all or most of their own reproductive careers [16-19]. Here, the presence of either the mother's mother or the father's mother was the only variable of several tested that had a statistically significant effect on reproductive success. Greater attention should be given to aid received from grandmothers and other female relatives, especially in the sociobiological literature.

In Africa and throughout the African Diaspora, Kerns finds that households headed by women allocate a larger percentage of household resources to meeting children's needs than do households headed by men. Where female-headed households are produced by matrilineality, polygyny is typically rejected [20,21]. I suggest that women of the Kaguru and other matrilineal societies are free to choose monogamy because they don't need polygynous marriage to form their female networks. In mostly-patrilineal South Africa and elsewhere, a polygynous family seems to provide an intermediate form: although still

nominally headed by the husband, the family has increased numbers of women, a situation associated with ensuring greater expenditures on the children as opposed to the husband himself. Further research is planned to investigate this hypothesis.

Some young adult daughters of polygynous households were apologetic in 2014-18 when they said that all of their siblings got along very well with each other and with both of their mothers; but the majority view now is, clearly, to stress the fact that tensions inevitably arise in family households, and to blame most of these on the fact that there were actually two different family households in one homestead. They said that it is difficult for the mothers to treat all children equally; sometimes the wives didn't get along well; sometimes one wife had several more children than the other but the husband gave each wife the same amount for household expenses, and so on. But even daughters of polygynous families who were the most adamant that they would never enter such a marriage were likely to add that their father's wives became fast friends after their husband had died, providing companionship and both emotional and economic support.

The dominant theme now is definitely the expectation that marriages must be based on romantic love, and the conviction that such love cannot be felt for more than one person at a time, combined with the claim that one woman should be enough for a man.

Constraints on Women's Ability to Choose

Although none of the polygynously-married women mention such restrictions, monogamous women sometimes suggest that a woman has few choices if her husband decides to marry another wife. Apartheid law stipulated that Black Africans could only obtain houses in areas reserved for whites if they were married, employed, and male. A woman who left or divorced her husband lost her right to live and work in an urban area. Ember and Ember identified a shortage of men, whether the result of war or of differential age at marriage, as an obvious cause of polygyny [22]. Throughout much of the world, high unemployment, sex-biased survivorship, and migrant labor combine to decrease the number of desirable men, especially in rural areas. White feels that higher rates of male migration in Africa are partly responsible for the higher rates of polygyny noted there [5]. In rural areas where the majority of adolescent women reside, there are very few employed or employable men. A woman wishing to marry an employed man may have no choice but to become a second wife (or girl-friend) of a man who is already married as women themselves recognize [4,13].

Conclusions

Solway's excellent analysis of polygyny among the BaKagalagadi of Botswana concludes that polygyny has become too expensive for ordinary people and that even the wealthy choose monogamy, partly to free themselves from traditional kin entanglements [2]. In South Africa, the demand for a marginal, barely surviving labor pool, even today, to ensure that wages are kept as low as possible, may increase the value of polygyny for successful child-rearing. In income-pooling and cooperative child care remain important to household success. Under such conditions, few women can afford to live in nuclear families.

The Herero in Botswana share child-care among as many persons as possible through child-fostering [23]. In many places in Africa today, more and more women seem to be choosing not to marry at all if they have alternative methods of recruiting additional caretakers for their children. Around Johannesburg and Pretoria, Black women whose mothers were alive, healthy, and active were much more likely than women whose mothers were absent or in poor health to have a child without even entering upon the beginning stages of the long process of marriage. One of the monogamously-married women stated that she eventually married only because she was worried about what would happen to her children and her sisters' children when their mother got old.

Some daughters of polygynous households were apologetic when they told me that all of their siblings got along very well with each other and with both of their "mothers," behavior which I have often witnessed in polygynous households; but the majority view now is, clearly, to stress the fact that tensions inevitably arise in family households, and to blame most of these on the fact that there were actually two different families in one homestead: it was difficult for the mothers to treat all the children equally, sometimes the wives didn't get along very well, sometimes one wife had several more children than the other yet both wives received the same amount for household expenses, and so on. But even daughters of polygynous families who were the most adamant that they would never enter such a marriage themselves, those who condemned polygyny most vigorously, were likely to add that their father's two wives became fast friends after their husband had died, providing companionship and both emotional and economic support, which combines the belief in the inevitability of romantic jealousy and the desire for companionship.

The dominant theme is the expectation that romantic love must be the basis of a successful marriage, and the conviction that such love cannot be felt for more than one

person at a time, combined with the claim that one woman should be enough. I do wonder if this theme seems dominant largely because it is the most-often reported one, by white and Westernized African reporters and editors.

I suggest, then, that both polygyny and remaining unmarried but fostering children to relatives are among the current South African strategies used by impoverished women to try to surmount the problems faced by their sisters the world over. Both achieve family groups of cooperating women, some of whom are not co-resident, and both can increase child survival. Where the mechanism is polygyny, women cooperate mainly with unrelated co-wives and affines; where fostering and/or non-marriage are common, women cooperate with consanguineal relatives; and those few women who share a husband with sisters and also receive the help of a vigorous, influential mother-in-law are the most successful of all. Women who seek employment in white urban areas look to sisters, co-wives, mothers and/or mothers-in-law to help them care for children. Such marriages resemble contracts among females to allocate child-care far more than contracts among men to allocate women. From this perspective, polygyny persists in South Africa for the same reason such arrangements are increasing in other parts of the world today, including the United States.

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