



# The impact of polygamy on United Arab Emirates' first wives and their children

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## Abstract

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Exploratory research examined the impact of polygamy on first wives and their children in the United Arab Emirates. Twenty-five first wives reported on how polygamy impacted their lives and the lives of their children through responding to a questionnaire with 14 closed-response and 7 open-response questions. Results obtained from primary and secondary data sources were discussed with focus groups of family members and friends. Relationships were found to be especially problematic when the wife did not know her husband planned to marry again or give clear reasons about his decision to take another wife. Over half the children were reported by their mothers to have experienced psychological effects, reduced educational performance and fathers reportedly spent very little time with them after re-marrying.

**Key words:** polygamy, first wives, child welfare, family welfare

## Introduction

Polygamy is little known in Western countries although such practices are wide spread in Arab countries and other parts of the world even though it is not a universally accepted practice in any of these places. Western readers will be more familiar with research that examines the impact of divorce, illicit affairs or re-constituted families but rarely are they given opportunity to consider normative experiences with polygamy. Nor will Western readers be very familiar with the ways in which polygamy is endorsed within particular cultural frames of reference, having social, economic and religious justifications. This paper offers Western readers opportunity to examine an issue that impacts on families in the United Arab Emirates, highlighting ways in which first wives and their children are impacted through such experiences. As the daughter of a first wife in a large extended family, the principal researcher sought to explore potential benefits arising from polygamy as well as its impact on children.

Three social science research objectives were identified for the study (Sultan Abdulla Al-Shamsi, 2004). The first was to explore the impact of polygamy on first wives while the second was to examine the impact of polygamy on the children of first wives. The third objective was to explore how first wives viewed the relationship their children had with their father and half siblings. In what follows, polygamy is first defined as articulated in the Holy Qur'an and

the reasons for entering into polygamy are identified showing why men decided to marry second wives. Then the exploratory findings from this study are highlighted and discussed, offering comparisons with other research findings from the Gulf Region about the way polygamy impacts on first wives and their children. Implications are drawn for the development of responsive welfare practices with children and families in the UAE and other Gulf Region states, as well as supporting comparative research on the welfare of first wives and their children in Western countries.

## The social and cultural meanings of polygamy

Polygamy occurs when a man has more than one wife, or less commonly, when a woman has married more than one husband at the same time. The word polygamy comes from two Greek words meaning many marriages. The practice of polygamy can be found in many places in both Asia and Africa. Islam restricts the number of wives a man can marry but there are no limits on the number of women a man can marry in the Hindu religion. Polygamy was once practised in countries such as China and Turkey but now laws in those countries prohibit it. US law prohibits polygamy although some American families – especially in the western part of that country – are said to still practice it (*The World Book Encyclopaedia* 2001). While cultural practices in most Western countries seemingly permit adults to enter into relationships with multiple partners, formal marriage to multiple partners is illegal.

Until the Qur'an was revealed 1400 years ago, polygamy was not permitted in Arabic countries. Since then, Islam has accepted polygamy and gives men permission to marry up to four wives at any one time. Clear rules must be followed when men choose to engage in polygamy. In the Holy Qur'an, Allah says *"Marry women of your choice two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to treat justly with them, then only one... That will be more suitable to prevent you from evil"* (Qur'an, 4:3). If a man cannot treat each of his wives equally, then he should only take one wife (Bewely, 1999). Another verse in the Holy Qur'an says *"You will never be able to deal justly between wives however much you desire (to do so). But (if you have more than one wife) do not turn altogether away from (from one) leaving her in suspense"* (Qur'an, 4:129). Thus, while Islam permits and may sometimes encourage polygamy, if men are afraid of being able to treat their wives fairly, they are not allowed to marry again and should have only one wife (Bewely, 1999). While the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) practiced polygamy after his wife Kadijah died, the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was fair between his wives and only married for the reasons allowed (Khalifa, 1999).

In modern times, there remains much misunderstanding about polygamy. In countries like the UAE there can be many problems arising from polygamy because of such misunderstandings when men act without reference to the teachings of Islam (Jameelah, 2001). In one UAE study, Al Toneji (2001) found that when men married again most could not be fair between their wives and faced many problems. Seventy-five percent of participants in that study agreed that husbands with more than one wife faced economic problems because of having to pay for two houses (Al Toneji, 2001). Al Samraee found that in successful marriages, husbands were able to be fair between their wives by spending enough time with them and their children, dealing with them in the same way and providing them with enough money (Al Samraee, 2002). Another UAE study showed how government encouragement was given for men to marry again because the Emirate population was decreasing. Policies were adopted that encouraged polygamy so as to increase the number of Emirati people (Al Darmeki, 2001) although it is difficult to find estimations of the actual proportion of polygamous families overall.

A Kuwait study found that seventy-one percent of women thought men could not be fair between their wives and fifty percent of men in polygamous relationships agreed that they could not be fair between their wives (Abdu Salaam, 1997). Throughout Islam, it is important that husbands tell their first wife whenever he plans to marry again. When husbands do not tell their first wife before re-marrying then he commits infidelity with the first wife and brings new problems into their life (Al Kobesi, 2001). Many Muslim countries have introduced new conditions for men who might be contemplating polygamy. In Egypt, Philips (2001) found that while permission is required from the first wife, few women actually give their husbands permission to marry a second wife. Findings from the same Kuwait study showed that nearly two-thirds of women agreed with polygamy if her husband told her first before he married again but roughly half the men did not agree with telling his wife before re-marrying. When men do tell their first wife before marrying again there are fewer family problems (Abdu Salaam, 1997). Khadijah (2002) found that women in Egypt did not accept polygamy and those who did were mostly poor people who did not know that polygamy means fairness between wives.

Abdu Salaam's Kuwait study (1997) found that women did not agree with men who entered into polygamy because the men did not apply the Islamic principle of fairness between their wives. Two-thirds of women in that study agreed that men did not apply the Islamic condition of fairness while half the men disagreed. Some men offer reasons for polygamy that have been traditionally acceptable, such as when their first wife is infertile, is not giving birth to sons, is physically or mentally ill or when they are widowed (Al Kobesi, 2001). A hospital-based study in the UAE examined the experiences of infertile women, exploring the effects of infertility on their life (Kayata, 2003). Many of these women lived in polygamous marriages because they could not have children. Having children was very important in these women's lives and men who did not have children commonly re-married in order to have children (Kayata, 2003). Another reason for polygamy has to do with men dying in war and the population of men decreasing while the proportion of women increases thereby reinforcing societal injunctions for men to take multiple wives (Al Haneei, 2003).

Other reasons for polygamy reported by Abdu Salaam in the Kuwait study noted Ayoob's findings such as when men had problems with their first wife, when the first wife worked and was busy all the time or when the men sought honour and challenge (1997). Abdullah Al Ansari reported that a lot of men married a second wife because of their own personal needs and desires without really thinking about his family (Lootah, undated). Thus it seems that many in the Arabic world – both women and men – disagree with polygamy for any reason (Abdu Salaam, 1997), noting that studies in other Arab countries found that polygamy was not widespread as in Egypt (4%), Syria (5%) or Iraq (8%). Al-Sharnebi claimed that the first wife is especially affected by polygamy being prone to psychological problems caused by anger and these women are also more likely to visit a psychiatrist or counsellor (2002). Another UAE study (Zeitoun, 2001) found that polygamy contributed to family disintegration but that men were less likely to consider the negative effects of polygamy, marrying again and having more children without contemplating the long-term effects.

A Jordanian study found that polygamy and other family problems influenced children to search for work were more likely to drop out of school, become addicted to alcohol, become involved in juvenile delinquency and develop low self-esteem (*Alfaqer wa Tashqeel Alarfal fe Alordon*, 2002). Zeitoun's UAE study carried out at the Juvenile Care Center in Sharjah (2001) found that polygamy and divorce were associated with almost 95 percent of cases. This study found that one hundred cases aged between 13 and 17 from Sharjah and Northern Emirates were placed in care because of crimes such as theft or indecent practices associated with sexuality. These children came from families whose parents were divorced and the UAE national father was married to more than one wife (Zeitoun, 2001).

There are many types of polygamous family and while polygamy may resolve some social problems in the UAE, such as spinsterhood and population decline, other social problems still result from polygamy such as divorce, marriage problems, absent fathers and psychological problems in children (Al Darmeki, 2001) – all important when considering the special role played by parents in shaping the development of adolescent identity (Santrock, 2002; Al-Krenawi, 2001). Polygamy was also found to be the main factor causing marriage problems between spouses, causing jealousy between wives and selfishness leading to divorce (Shalash, 2003). Al-Krenawi's study amongst Bedouin Arabs showed that polygamy affected children's behaviours, contributed to low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness reinforcing the idea that parental relationships are very important in shaping children's behaviour (2001). Al Kobesi's UAE study showed that children from monogamous families adjusted to school better than children from polygamous families, and that children from different wives rarely developed positive sibling relationships with sibling rivalries and jealousy reported instead (2001).

Zeitoun's UAE study found that polygamy for some people meant having more children, but having more children from different wives meant that the children from these wives did not know each other (2001), highlighting the need for fathers to think about their first wife and the needs of the children from their first wife. A man needs to respect his first wife and his children's rights, and should also spend committed time with his first wife and the children from his first wife (Jameelah, 2001). First wives are frequently left to worry about their life and what they need to live a happy life, or to enable their children to grow up in a happy family. First wives are commonly expected to be patient, and to let their children love and respect their father. First wives are also expected to encourage their children to love their half brothers and sisters from other wives (Yahya, 2001). If men cannot be fair between their wives they should not marry again because there are likely to be many problems. All too often, these problems are not considered before choices are made to enter polygamous relationships.

## Methodology

An exploratory and descriptive design was adopted for this study, using a questionnaire developed by the researcher and her supervisor with 14 closed-response and 7 open-response questions. Purposive sampling with a snowball sampling technique was used to invite thirty, first wives – all Emirati women living with their husbands and his other wives – to complete the survey in their own homes during a four-week period at the end of 2003. The questionnaire was developed in two languages – English and Arabic – to aid understanding by all participants. 25 first wives completed the questionnaires, all UAE nationals living in the nation's capital, Abu Dhabi. It is impossible to say whether this sample was in any way representative of the population of UAE first wives overall.

The researcher met with participants and discussed the research before giving them the questionnaire. Ethical safeguards involved explaining each question and why it was included in the questionnaire. The women were left to complete the questionnaires on their own so as to feel free about answering the questions. Participants were given the research supervisor's phone number and were encouraged to ask any questions if feeling unsure or if faced with difficult questions. None of the participants availed themselves of this offer. Participants were invited to read and sign a consent form before completing the questionnaire guaranteeing anonymity for all information shared. Some time later the researcher returned to collect the questionnaires that participants had placed in a sealed envelope. All the data was assigned a coded number and was stored in a safe place where only the researcher and her supervisor had access to it. Data was entered into an SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and analysed using descriptive statistics, with tables and figures generated to display the results.

Once the data was analysed, the researcher discussed her anonymous results with two small focus groups – one involving four extended family members and the other involving two university student friends – making notes from these focus group discussions to further illuminate themes of importance to Emirati families. Notes were taken in Arabic by the principal researcher about themes highlighted during each focus group discussion. The research supervisor sought to guarantee that cultural safety (Fulcher, 2002) was maintained throughout the data collection, analysis, writing up and presentation stages of the research process. This included ensuring that the principal researcher obtained permission from her family about allowing her research project to be re-drafted and presented for peer review by an international journal. The manuscript was also submitted for additional cultural scrutiny by the parent university to ensure that cultural protocols around dissemination of knowledge were respected. Both the research and its subject matter need to be located within particular social and cultural frames of reference, especially given the many ways in which Western concepts, language and values shape – and sometimes distort – international discourses on child and family welfare (Harrison, 2003).

Finally, this study was limited because of its size to the views offered by a small number of Emirati first wives living in Abu Dhabi using a questionnaire that was not standardized nor validated beyond having face validity. The findings presented here about the impact of polygamy on children were dependent upon reports provided by their mothers. No instrumentation or secondary sources were used to test the reliability of these accounts. Thus, no generalizations can be made from this study about the impact of polygamy on family life in the UAE or elsewhere in the Arab world. The findings may be treated as illuminative, however, pointing to themes worthy of further investigation elsewhere in the world where polygamous marriages are permitted.

## Results

Five of the first wives who participated in this study were aged 20-30 years (20%), four were aged 31-35 years (16%), fourteen were aged 36-40 years (56%) and two were aged 45 or older (8%). One first wife had no formal education (4%), nine had completed elementary school (36%), two had finished preparatory school (8%), seven had attended secondary school (28%) and six had graduated from university (24%). One first wife (4%) did not have children, eight (32%) had 1-4 children, 15 (60%) had 5-9 children and one (4%) had 10 or more children. Twenty-two of the twenty-five first wives in this study were not aware that their husband was going to marry again. Three (14%) learned about the polygamy when their husband told her, eight (32%) when they saw their husband with the second wife, six (23%) learned about their husband's new marriage from friends, and eight (31%) learned from a family member. None of the women found it easy learning about the new wife. Over half of the first wives (56%) found it difficult when they learned about the polygamy and a similar number (52%) prayed about it. Some of the first wives (12%) talked with their family about it. Just over a third (36%) felt sad, some (20%) left their house, a third (32%) cried when learning about it and a few (12%) became sick.

About half of the husbands (52%) offered reasons for wanting to marry again but many gave no reasons (48%). Two of the first wives (8%) had histories of illness and another two (8%) of the husbands married again because of marriage problems. Four of the husbands (16%) took a second wife reportedly because of his own personal needs. Nearly three-quarters of the women (72%) said they actively contemplated divorce but were generally patient and decided not to seek a divorce. Twenty-one of the first wives (84%) thought about what might happen to their children after divorce while one (4%) thought about society's perspective against di-

voiced. Three of the first wives (12%) gave other reasons such as deciding to be patient because their husbands still loved them or because their husband promised to divorce his second wife after two years. All but three of the first wives' families (84%) disagreed with the polygamy.

When asked about how their lives had changed, three women (12%) reported that they now had a better life since their husbands married again while two (8%) reported that life remained the same. More than half the first wives (56%) encountered problems after their husbands married again and six (24%) found they had more responsibilities than before. Five of the first wives (20%) sought help from a counsellor but most (80%) did not. Four visited a counsellor because their children were performing badly at school, getting low grades and were becoming unsociable. One woman visited a counsellor because she faced new family responsibilities after her husband re-married. Only seven first wives (28%) said that they did not face problems after their husbands re-married. Ten women (40%) reported that their husbands demonstrated unfairness between their wives, eight (32%) reported their husbands didn't care enough about their children, and nine (36%) said the fathers didn't spend enough time with their children.

Over half of the first wives (52%) reported that their husbands had children from their other wives. When asked how the polygamy had affected their children, four mothers (16%) reported that their children were affected by the polygamy but the rest (84%) said their children were not adversely affected. The mothers in this study went on to report that some of their children experienced emotional (28%), psychological (56%), financial (24%) and social effects (28%). Three out of five mothers (60%) also said the polygamy had impacted their children's education. Eight mothers (32%) reported that their children had lower grades, six (24%) reported that their children didn't like to study, one (4%) said her child had experienced failure and ten (40%) gave other explanations about how polygamy had impacted their children's lives, including dropping out of school. When asked if any changes in their children's behaviour had been observed, sixteen mothers (64%) said they had not noticed any changes. Nine mothers did notice changes, however, and some reported multiple changes. Three first wives reported more shouting, three said their children had become very quiet and withdrawn, six said their children had become unsociable and five said they had experienced violent episodes. Thus, while most of the mothers reported no adverse effects on their children and had not noticed any changes in their children's behaviour, a good number identified particular social, emotional and educational effects on their children which they attributed to the polygamy.

Only seven mothers (28%) said their children had experienced changes in their dealings with their father. The rest (72%) said that their children's relationship with their father continued as before. Fifteen mothers (60%) said that their children's fathers spent less than two hours per week with his family, three (12%) said that the fathers spent 2-6 hours and only seven (28%) said the fathers spent time every day with his children. Fifteen mothers (60%) said their children felt jealousy towards their father's children from other wives. Almost all of the first wives (92%) felt they needed their husband to spend more time with their children. Almost half of the first wives (48%) said the fathers of their children tried to build relationships with their father's children from different wives. Only three of the women (12%) said the fathers of their children treated their children equally in financial terms. Eighteen first wives (72%) said their husbands had not dealt with their children equally. Only two mothers (8%) reported that the fathers encouraged their children to be cooperative. Only two of the first wives (8%) said the fathers of their children took them shopping, one (4%) said the father went to the cinema with his children, one (4%) said the father took his children to restaurants and three (12%) said the fathers took his children out to eat together. Ten first wives (40%) said they tried to build a strong relationship between their children and their fathers. In summing up, four of the women (16%) felt that society encouraged first wives to divorce, twenty

(80%) felt society expected her to be patient and only one (4%) felt society permitted her to feel jealous.

## Discussion

Most of the first wives did not know their husband was going to marry again. Only one or two knew about their husband's decision and were given clear reasons about why he wanted to marry again, a finding similar to results found in the Kuwait study where sixty-one percent of women accepted polygamy if her husband told her before re-marrying (Abdu Salaam, 1997). Most first wives in this study learned about the new marriage when seeing their husband with the second wife or when learning about it from a family member. This finding prompted angry discussion amongst focus groups of family and friends, most saying when husbands marry again without telling their wives they show disrespect. When learning their husband married again, many first wife participants said they had had to face this difficulty and prayed about it while only a few talked with family members about it. Some did nothing while others felt sad and feared for their children's lives growing up in a polygamous family.

Many of the women never imagined their husbands would be with another woman. Most of the husbands gave no clear reasons for marrying again, although some said it was because their first wife was sick or because of marriage problems. Some husbands married again because their friends encouraged them or because of what the women described as their husband's "personal needs", thereby confirming other research where men were reported to have married a second wife for similar reasons (Lootah, undated). Some first wives said their husbands married again because they did not accept his 'bad behaviour' without explaining what this meant. Most of the first wives considered divorce but did not because of their children, contrasting with Al Mandeel (2000) study which found the main cause of divorce was polygamy. Upon hearing that her husband had married again, the focus groups thought first wives should think only about their children's future, in spite of disagreeing with the polygamy.

When asked about how their family life had changed when their husband married again, one in four reported facing many new problems and responsibilities, a finding consistent with other UAE research findings that confirmed marriage problems resulted from polygamy (Al Darmeki, 2001). Few of the UAE first wives visited a counsellor to get help while Zeitoum (2001) found that many women sought psychiatric assistance. Focus group members thought it was unnecessary to visit a counsellor since first wives can resolve such issues by themselves, or with the help of sisters or friends. Most first wives wanted to solve their own problems, perhaps reflecting themes of shyness or cultural inappropriateness about sharing personal problems outside the family. Problems faced by the first wives included the husband's unfairness between his wives, not caring about his children and not spending enough time with his family, findings consistent with Abd Salaam's Kuwait study (1997) where seventy-one percent of women said men in polygamous relationships could not be fair between their wives. One is reminded that while Islam encourages men to marry one, two, three or four wives, this is permitted only when the husband can demonstrate fairness between his wives – and without fairness – families are likely to face problems. So long as the husbands demonstrated fairness between their wives, focus group members were generally supportive of polygamous relationships.

The first wives in this study reported that most of their husbands had children from their other wives. Over half of the children were reported to have experienced psychological effects from the polygamy and some faced emotional, financial and social effects. These results are consistent with Al Darmeki's findings (2001) showing that children from polygamous families

experience psychological and social problems. Focus group discussions reinforced the view that polygamy impacts children emotionally and psychologically. Polygamy reportedly affected the educational performance of three out of five children in this study. Almost three quarters of the mothers said their children had lower grades and didn't like to study, findings consistent with another UAE study showing how children from monogamous families adjusted to school better than children from polygamous families (Al Khobesi, 2001). Focus group members emphasized that when faced with life problems, children's school performance was likely to be affected. Several of the children in this study were said to have become unsociable and violent, with some being more prone to shouting while others becoming quieter and withdrawn thus reinforcing Al-Krenawi's findings that children from polygamous families had lower self-esteem and experienced a greater sense of loneliness (2001).

Many of the children in this study of polygamous families still dealt with their father as they had done previously although two-thirds of the fathers reportedly spent less than two hours per week with their children thus highlighting the issue of absent fathers (Al Darmeki, 2001). Focus group participants expressed anger about fathers marrying again and spending more time with their new wife or at work. Most children were said to be jealous about their father's children from other wives. This affected their behaviour and psychological state through feelings that their father had been taken away from them, reinforcing Al Kobesi's finding that children from other wives rarely became siblings and were more likely to become enemies (2001). Focus group members generally agreed that they felt jealous because their father had other children from a different wife.

All but one of the first wives thought their husband should spend more time with their children from his first marriage and all thought it was important to think about their children's lives. About half the fathers in this study tried to build relationships between their children, a small number showing equality around financial matters and about a third demonstrating equality in dealings with their children. Few fathers encouraged their children to be cooperative, went shopping with them or took them out for meals. This suggested that polygamous fathers gave insufficient thought to the needs of their children and the importance of fostering harmony and ensuring fairness amongst both children and their wives. Focus group members reinforced the importance of children having strong relationships with their fathers.

Three out of five first wives did not work to build strong relationships between their children and their father although some believed it was very important for children to respect their father. Two thirds of the first wives were encouraged by society to be patient, a finding similar to results found in Yahya's (2001) UAE study. Focus group members thought first wives should be patient because of their children, thereby encouraging others toward good ways. Some suggested that if a husband does not worry about the years he lived with his first wife then first wives should be patient, but the main concern is fairness and first wives and their children are impacted more from polygamy than second wives. One wife commented that husbands should make separate houses for his wives while another chose to live alone without her husband, even though it meant separating the children from their father. A final participant thought when husbands re-marry without clear reasons they steal the rights of their first wife.

## Conclusion

This exploratory research examining the impact of polygamy on first wives and their children highlighted the way that few wives were told about their husband's decision to take another wife. Polygamy was reported to have impacted on their children's education, social behav-



iours, identity and sense of self-esteem. Fairness between wives and families was frequently open to question. More worrying was the small amount of time fathers in polygamous families spent with their children. Society and those around the first wife expected her to be patient and not seek professional counselling. Implications for child and family welfare practice point to the importance of husbands telling their first wife before marrying again, giving clear reasons for his decisions. First wives may think about divorce but they also have to think about their children and how divorce might affect their children. First wives need someone with whom they can talk – a family member, friend or a counsellor – so that they can share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening. Husbands should be encouraged to spend more time with their family, especially after taking another wife, because such absence is likely to impact negatively on his children’s studies and behaviour. Husbands should also try to build relationships between the children of his different wives so as to limit the unhappiness, sibling rivalry, jealousy and painful relationships that frequently emerge between the children and their mothers. Finally, husbands need to be fair and equal between their wives since, as the Holy Qur’an says: “Marry women of your choice two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to treat justly with them, then only one... That will be more suitable to prevent you from evil” (Qur’an, 4:3).

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