

# Navigating Polygamy: Insights into Family Dynamics between the Husband, Wives and Children

Wan Zumusni Wan Mustapha<sup>1</sup>, Nur Zafifa Kamaruzaman<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, 70300, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, 70300, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9020005>

Received: 16 January 2025; Accepted: 27 January 2025; Published: 26 February 2025

## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have found the detrimental effect of polygamy on children and wives. This paper presents the dynamics of polygamy and its impacts on the family members. Data collected include content analysis on a documentary about a polygamous family staying on the East Coast, Malaysia. Data also involve observations and in-depth interviews with the informants, namely the husband, his first and second wife and his children from the first marriage. The findings unearth four themes that emerged in the psyche: the psychological and emotional impacts, family function, the wives' marital satisfaction, and the coping strategies of each family member. Findings suggest that despite the husband's claims that the family is functioning well, the wife's and children's experiences are otherwise. The challenges discovered include equality practices, especially in dividing resources and affections, managing conflicts and disagreements, and practising open communication among the family members. The husband, wives, and children share their predicament and how polygamy affects their well-being and emotions. There are also possible symptoms of disturbed mental health uncovered among the informants.

**Keywords:** Polygamy, Psychological Impact, Family Function, Livelihood, Marital Satisfaction

## INTRODUCTION

Polygamy is a state of having multiple spouses at one time. Most of the countries in the world opposed polygamy practice; however, some had legalised it under the name of religion and culture. Interestingly, polygamy is a choice, and the reasons for polygamy vary across cultures. The primary justification given by the husband is it is the practice of a *sunnah* (following the path of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH) to prevent adultery. Therefore, it is an act to look after the widow and their minor children and to ensure a balanced proportion of marriage based on gender since women outnumber men (Rohman, 2013). Some fundamentalists who are pro-polygamy also mentioned that the practice allows the younger wife to take the role of a caregiver to the sick elder wife (Rohman, 2013). Ekerbiçer et al. (2016) claimed that among the reasons for committing to this type of relationship are the wife failing to fulfil the man's sexual desires, the husband falling in love with another woman, or having a conflict with the current wife. Such excuses are misogynist in nature, where polygamy generates a climate to disenfranchise women's standards more than men and disengage the practice from The Prophet's teaching.

This paper presents a case study on the effect of polygamy on a husband, his wives and children. The findings are analysed by linking each narrative with the actors' behaviours to understand the complexity of the family dynamics.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since polygamous marriages operate on a different set of rules from monogamous ones, it can be predicted that the emotions felt by polygamous spouses and family members are also a distinctive, complex, unique, and varied

set. In the study of polygyny among Arab Bedouins done by Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo (2006), the first wives often reported feelings of dismay and shock at first hearing the news that their respective husbands had taken on a second wife.

Undoubtedly, many emotions will erupt, leading to marital and family conflicts in polygamous families (Mariam et al., 2020). This, in turn, may have a deleterious effect on children when they witness their parents' express hostility towards one another or when the mother withdraws and demonstrates depressive symptoms (Nuzha, 2020; Fatin & Limor, 2020, Barut & Samira, 2023).

Paradoxically, men's feeling is taken for granted in a polygamous relationship. This is consistent with the dearth of research in the research database. One of the medical studies identified that polygamous men tended to have a higher erectile function and lower depression scores (Ekerbiçer et al., 2016). On the other side of the coin, polygamous men show a positive reaction to coronary artery disease (Daolah et al., 2017). Al-Krenawi et al. (2013), who actively undertook polygamy research in the Middle East, pointed out that polygamous men usually lived in misery that they often associated with lower education and alcoholism, a precursor of mental health deterioration. Alosaimi et al. (2015) discovered that 4.5 per cent of infertile men recorded to have bipolar and substance abuse, while 10.2 per cent of the barren women exhibited suicidal ideation and depression. In this sense, the inability to procreate would risk the women to have a polygamous relationship, while the normative masculinity values challenged infertile men.

Emotions play a crucial role in the assessment of family functioning. Researchers tend to draw their conclusions by assessing the levels of positive and negative effects, emotional expressions, as well as the levels of respect, conflict, and communication between spouses (Barut & Samira, 2023; Brown et al., 2022; Shaiful Bahari et al., 2021). DeAnda et al. (2020) have also suggested that individual children's mothers' and fathers' emotional adjustment be thoroughly assessed to measure family functioning. Research has also found that family functioning can be linked to levels of marital conflict, marital attachment, overall marital functioning, and children's emotional and social problems (Gadban & Goldner, 2022; Parkes, Chambers & Buston, 2021).

Interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process likely to occur between individuals and/or groups living in interdependent relationships where various background, situational, and personal conditions co-exist. It is not difficult to imagine the dynamics of a polygamous marriage where the wives are required to share everything from their homes and accoutrements to their mutual partners' time, attention, and income. In such situations, conflicts due to rivalries are bound to occur, leading to jealousy, frustration, dissatisfaction, sadness, angst, and many other negative emotions (Gadban & Goldner, 2022). A pervasive contest among co-wives over all resources in the family's material and emotional economy perpetually exists in polygyny, thus giving rise to spousal rivalry and emotional discord (Titilayo, Anuodo & Palamuleni, 2017).

It is not surprising, then, to find that the first wives in polygamous marriages have lower self-esteem and poorer relationships with their husbands than subsequent wives (Barut & Samira, 2023). The research found that senior wives have a propensity to score high in Beck's Depression Inventory, while both first and second wives have high self-esteem scales. This shows although the senior wives highly value their existence as first wives, their marital dissatisfaction and discord are merely caused by their husbands' decision to take a new partner (Yilmaz & Tamam, 2021).

Interestingly, Razak et al. (2021) postulated that well-adjusted husbands in dual marriages are vital to keeping the relationship's climate positive. As a household head, the navigation of the family goals should be straightforward through active and open communication so that the inclusivity of each member can be embedded effectively.

## METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this case study are as follows:

1. To examine the dynamics of polygamous family structures: The study explores the interactions and relationships among the husband, his wives, and children in a polygamous family.
2. To investigate the psychological and emotional impacts of polygamy on the family members, including

- their well-being, marital satisfaction, and coping mechanisms.
3. To understand the challenges of family functioning: The research aims to identify the specific struggles polygamous families face, such as resource allocation, communication, and conflict resolution.
  4. To highlight coping strategies employed by family members: This includes how individuals adapt to the complexities of living within a polygamous family setting.

These objectives are aligned with the overarching goal of providing a nuanced understanding of polygamous families and offering insights into their lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms.

To achieve the research objectives, this case study employed a multimethod of qualitative research, which involved a content analysis of a video documentary titled “From Machang to Kajang”, featuring a polygamous family in Kelantan, Malaysia, and separate interview sessions were undertaken with all the family members featured in the documentary. According to Kasirye (2021), multimethod in qualitative research began with a mission: to uncover the insights behind people's social behaviours and interactions. By diving deep into the dynamics of social life, it aimed to reveal the fascinating motivations and patterns that shape others' relationships.

The content analysis showed their worldview on polygamous life and relationships. This worldview was crucial to understanding their patterns of attitude and sentiments with the lives chosen by their head of family (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The patterns that emerged in the content analysis would be further enhanced and deepened by the in-depth interviews undertaken with the same informants featured in the documentary. The reason for choosing this family stems from its structure, as it formed a complete polygamous family.

Interviews allow the researchers to gain a deeper insight into the informants' lives and how they went about with polygamous life (Frankel, 2000). Interviews were undertaken with the senior and junior wives' families, including the senior wife's children and husband. The junior wife's son was not interviewed because he was underage; he will not be able to give an objective response to the interview questions. Questions revolved around topics such as psychology, self-esteem, family function, marital satisfaction, and the livelihood of a polygamous family. These topics or themes were derived from the content analysis results mentioned above.

Despite using in-depth interviews, observation was also employed in the second data collection phase. Observation as a method is a qualitative research technique that views constant behaviour in the informants' everyday lives and their usual situations (Angrosino, 2018). In this case study, data from the observation was perceived as a confirmatory tool in the documentary narratives, and additional information was provided during the interview to understand their everyday lives and livelihoods on each dedicated theme identified.

All informants had informed consent and were video and audio-taped during the interview. The interviews were conducted in both Bahasa Melayu, the national language of Malaysia, and the Kelantanese dialect, which is spoken widely in the state of investigation. In conducting the latter, a researcher from this team is a native speaker of the Kelantanese dialect to ensure smooth communication was initiated. Data gathered were analysed using thematic analysis, following the rule of thumb by Braun and Clark (2012). All informants gave their consent to be video and audio recorded and observed.

## FINDINGS

The video shows the trip of the husband to his second wife, and he talks about his polygamous marriage and daily activities, such as his second-hand car spare parts and his visit to a mosque. The first wife was interviewed at her restaurant and home, and some activities were also shown at home. The children were interviewed at home and in the workshop.

The thematic analysis unravels four themes that emerged from the data collected. There is the psyche, family role, marital satisfaction, and coping strategies of the polygamous actors. This section will commence with the description of the informants.

### The Background of the Informants

Dollah is 45 years old and owns a family business workshop selling second-hand car spare parts in Machang,

Kelantan, Malaysia. He obtains spare parts in Kuala Lumpur, and he frequently goes there. Dollah went to a Chinese primary school at the town that he was staying. He can converse well in the local Hokkien dialect and Mandarin language, and the proficiency in those languages have helped his business. This tall, thin, bald father of six children looked relaxed most of the time and had a few cars - one four-wheel drive and one red mini-Morris with a large red scorpion painted on it. He usually used that car to take his son, Amin, from the same Chinese school that he went to.

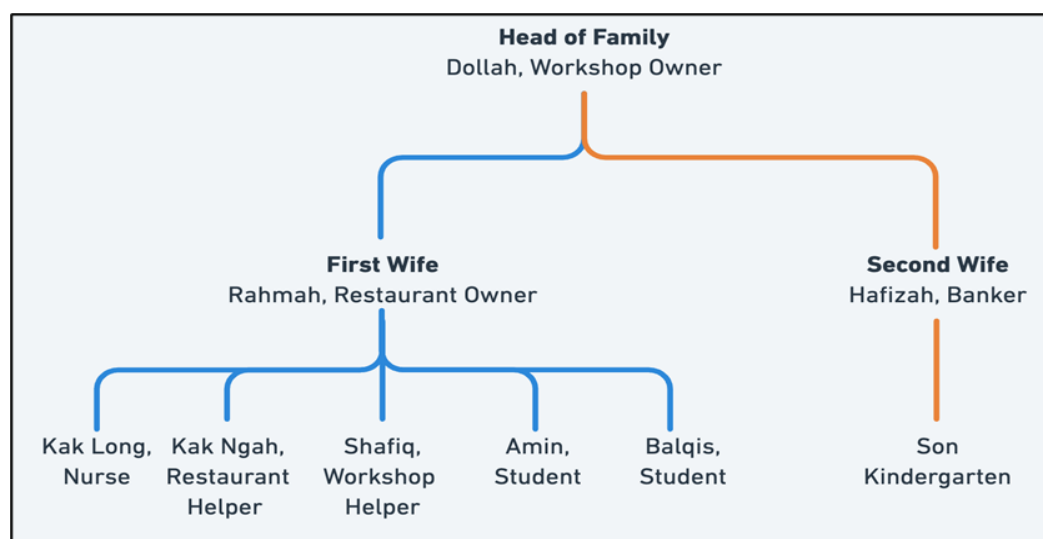
His first wife, Rahmah, is 47 years old. She runs a restaurant in Machang, Kelantan beside a busy road. She starts work from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. She had been married to Dollah for 22 years. Initially, the wife refused to talk to the male researcher because despite Dollah being so open and willing to talk, his wife preferred to speak to a female researcher regarding her experience as a first wife.

Dollah has five children with Rahmah - Kak Long, Shafiq, Kak Ngah, Amin and Balqis. Kak Long is a nursing college graduate from Cheras who works at one of the clinics near their house. Meanwhile, Kak Ngah, the second daughter who had completed secondary school, assists her mother at the restaurant. Shafiq, the third child and the only son of this couple, chooses to assist Dollah in his workshop. The last two children are still in their secondary and primary schools. Only Kak Ngah and Shafiq are interviewed to get the first wife's children's perspective on their polygamous family.

The head of this household had taken a second wife three years after marrying the first wife. However, the second marriage did not last. Dollah admitted that he divorced his former second wife because she caused havoc in his family. The second wife ran away and remarried.

However, he took another second wife for the second time while working as an enumerator in Kuala Lumpur with her. He came clean with Rahmah on his intention, and she consented in front of the Qadhi, a Muslim judge at Machang Syariah court. The second wife, Hafizah, 33 years old, who is also a Kelantanese. She lived in Kajang, Selangor and worked as a banker. Hafizah has a 5-year-old son and attends kindergarten. Dollah would travel to Kajang from his house in Machang, 470 km away, twice a month to meet Hafizah and his son. He left at dawn to drive 7-8 hours to stay 3-4 days per trip. Figure I show Dollah's current family structure.

Figure I The Polygamous Family Structure



## The Psychological and Emotional Impacts

This section delves into each family member's emotional and psychological perspectives when adapting to the new family structure established by the head of the household. It is crucial to determine whether the acceptance of this structure is uniform across all the family members. Typically, the success of a polygamous family hinges on the husband's skilful leadership. His ability to navigate the complexities of relationships and foster unity among diverse individuals is vital. Ultimately, the goal is cultivating an environment where every member can coexist peacefully and harmoniously despite the challenges in such a multifaceted family dynamic.

Dollah has been married to Rahmah for nearly 22 years. He met his second wife, Hafizah, as an enumerator for a research project in Kuala Lumpur. Hafizah had just ended an engagement, and they married two months later. Dollah was straightforward with Rahmah about his intention to take a second wife. His first wife understood his desire and granted him permission in the Machang court.

Meanwhile, Rahmah faced humiliation and ostracism from the kampong folks and the Machang community because they could not accept her decision to allow her husband to take another wife. She was the first in her village to go to court and sign her consent. In front of the judge, she explained that their physical separation influenced her decision due to his work in Kuala Lumpur when the truth is, her husband could not justify his reasons for wanting a second wife at the Syariah court.

Despite that, Rahmah cared for the second wife and the baby during the confinement. She ignored all negative remarks from her family members and the kampong folks. The kampong folks were furious at her “kindness”. When she and her husband visited the second wife in Kajang, she slept with the second wife while her husband slept in the living room. At midnight, the house's stillness was suddenly pierced by the delicate jingle of the second wife's ankle bracelet. She could hear the soft, rhythmic sound as the woman carefully tiptoed to the living room, where her husband was sleeping, waiting for her. Knowing what was about to happen, she felt a pang of sadness but chose to close her eyes, surrendering to the night in hopes of finding peace and rest despite the turmoil in her heart. The faint sounds of movement faded into the background as she tried to embrace sleep, wishing to escape the reality that enveloped her.

### Family function

A polygamous family often grapples with numerous conflicts arising from family dynamics and functions. This complexity is heightened by the challenge of maintaining equality and fairness among the different nuclear families involved. As individuals navigate the intricacies of a polygamous marriage, questions frequently arise about how best to balance the needs and interests of each family unit, fostering harmony amidst the inherent dynamics of their intertwined lives.

For Dollah, informing the first wife to take another wife was not a hardship. He believes in openness to his desire since the decision would involve Rahmah's life and his family with her. He was firm in his accord, stating that the reason was that he was working in Kuala Lumpur and would be seeing the girl often. Marrying her would be preventing adultery, despite the fact he would have a place to stay while working there. As he expressed:

*“When I started polygamous for the second time, I was working in KL in R & D. I told my first wife. I wanted to get married. At first, I was cautious about fighting again. But if I don't tell her, she might know from other people. I believe it is better to get married than commit sins (adultery). She (first wife) gave a positive reaction. She went to KL and met the second wife”.*

(Dollah, 45, Husband)

Dollah elaborates on his perspective by sharing various hadiths<sup>1</sup> and discussing the complexities and responsibilities of polygamy. He reflects on his journey, expressing that he has embraced the challenge of being a husband to two wives with a deep sense of commitment. For him, this choice is not merely a personal matter but a divine obligation that he seeks to fulfil to the best of his abilities. His remarks reveal an underlying conviction that the path he has chosen aligns with the teachings of his faith as he endeavours to carry out his duties by what he believes to be God's will. Through his words, he subtly conveys a desire to frame his actions as righteous and justified within the context of his religious beliefs. He mentioned:

*“As humans created by Allah, to be truly fair, no one can be just except our prophet. As Moslems, we must remember what happens has been destined in Loh Mahfuz. We must carry one. We must throw the regret. No one but many become the victims. I feel it's all fair. I don't know what else do they want”.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Hadith refers to the sayings or narrations of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ's speech, his deeds, acts of approval & disapproval (verbal or by way of action) about something (Islam, 2018).

He continued,

*“They have to understand. If I don’t have to give – I don’t mind two weeks here (Kelantan) or two weeks there (Kajang). As for me, I have to improve myself. We both must understand each other’s role. As for maintenance, I have given whatever I can afford. For me, there’s not an issue. I have given. It’s hard to say about love.... it’s the same for both. Spend time, go for a holiday...I’ve done that and tried to do that. To be truly fair is difficult. But I try my best to do the right thing”.*

(Dollah, 45, Husband)

The interview shifted to the first wife’s perspective on the family function. Besides being labelled as a loyal wife, Rahmah’s expressions were otherwise. Although Dollah is running the workshop, which he built on Rahmah’s land, the business did not help with the family expenses, particularly the family with Rahmah. The first wife is independent, strong, and dependable, but somehow, Dollah takes her characteristics for granted. While narrating her answers to the researcher, she expresses her discontent with caring for her family:

*“He (Dollah) doesn’t really care. I handle almost everything – my kids’ study expenses, sending kids to school, kids buying books – it’s all on me. He never gave pocket money. I had to use my card”.*

(Rahmah, 47, First wife)

The dissatisfaction with Dollah’s role as the head of the household intensified when Rahmah expressed her concerns about the unequal treatment and financial burden she experienced from him. Frequently, Rahmah felt that the second wife received more attention than she did, even though she was always there to assist Dollah whenever he faced financial difficulties.

*I read his message. The ‘other’ wife asks for money, he gives. When I go to pasar malam [market], I bring my own money. When the ‘other’ wife message, “I have no money”. Then I read his Sent folder, which showed that he had sent money. “I’ve sent RM50. Go and withdraw it”.*

(Rahmah, 47, First wife)

On the other hand, the second wife, Hafizah, had to put pressure on Dollah for monthly maintenance. In Islam, a husband should spend his money to give sustenance to his wife for food, drink, clothing, shelter and other human needs (Pejabat Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2024). This sustenance is essential to ensure the family's livelihood and the family members’ psychological well-being. In Hafizah’s case, she did not receive what she expected:

*“I feel like I have to cheat every month. He assumes I always have money”.*

(Hafizah, 33, Banker)

The polygamous relationships in their families also impact children. Often, the children feel muted in expressing their feelings, believing that their opinions are not valued. They observe behaviors and listen to remarks around them, forming their judgments in silence. Typically, their only outlet to discuss their feelings is with their siblings. Dollah’s children with Rahmah also express their views on polygamy, particularly emphasising its association with money,

*“Polygamy, I can’t accept if the partner is unfair. You must be fair. Love must be equal according to Quran.”*

(Kak Long, 23, Nurse)

*“Polygamy? No. it’s hard. Pity the wife. Please don’t do it unless you can afford it. Otherwise, don’t.”*

(Shafiq, 18, Workshop Assistant)

The researcher recorded the children’s memories on the day of the polygamy, and the reflection was often unpleasant. On the day of the marriage, the children hoped the father would return that night; however, they did

not see him for a few days. This had wrecked his son, Shafiq. Most days after the ceremony, the children hardly meet their father since he is often not home.

*"I was 10...still young. It was quiet at home...I knew when my father got married. He left just like that. He didn't come home. But what can I do? My siblings and I – lack of...and hard for us to see our father when he was polygamous because he was not at home. We went to school on our own".*

(Shafiq, 18, Workshop Assistant)

Kak Long, the eldest daughter, resented her father's marriage to a second wife and felt anger when she overheard him talking to her mother. She was particularly disappointed by the harsh, scornful, and abusive way Dollah spoke to his first wife. Despite these challenges, Rahmah constantly reminded all her children to study hard to avoid ending up like her. However, Kak Long turned a deaf ear and shut her eyes to the humiliation she felt from her mother and the villagers.

### Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is essential to a successful marriage, as both partners commit to maintaining and nurturing the relationship. In polygamous relationships, marital satisfaction often depends on the husband's effective leadership and the cooperation of the wives in fostering a positive and healthy environment for their children. In discovering the marital satisfaction in this polygamous family, a question asked, "Can you share what makes you happy in these marriages?", to all the actors.

Dollah responded with a smile and ended it with a slight grunt as he remarked,

*"It's tiring, but it's my responsibility".*

(Dollah, 45, Husband)

He expressed that his married life is happiest when he spends time with Hafizah and their son in Kajang.

In Rahmah's view, she started roughly in her married life, ostracised by the Dollah family because of her poor family background and the fact that she is two years older than her husband. Although Dollah's family opposed their intention, they followed the plan. She knew her future would be bleak with his family, but she was confident that Dollah would take care of their new family. It won't take long for her despair with Dollah behavior,

*"After the second year of marriage, we fought a lot because he's a womaniser. In the second year, he married without me knowing. I only knew when his wife gave birth. My heart broke because we got married without my parents' consent. I'm hurt until now".*

(Rahmah, 47, First wife)

Rahmah is determined that Dollah is meant to be in her life, and she believes that staying together as a family is how it should be. As mentioned earlier, she defended Dollah's decision to seek a second marriage, insisting that the court approve it. Concerned about the possibility of Dollah being unfaithful to another woman, she reluctantly gave her consent in the name of religion. None of his 15 siblings attended the wedding, so Rahmah sought friends to accompany Dollah. She also prepared the bridal gifts and cooked yellow glutinous rice for the solemnisation ceremony. Although it was never easy, she believes her actions contribute to the family and her faith. She added,

*"I ironed his baju Melayu (for the wedding). He hugged and kissed me. He didn't come back that night. I waited...he didn't come back".*

(Rahmah, 47, First wife)

Sometimes, Rahmah monologues with herself about her actions. Keeping herself busy is one of the ways she could avoid feeling oppressed in her household, besides working very hard for her restaurant. When she

reminisces about her communication with her husband, they do not frequently have a serious conversation about expenses, household affairs, feelings, or the children. It leaves a huge downfall in her self-esteem. Most often, Dollah assumed everything was in order if the wives did not complain. Rahmah said,

*"I used to talk to the wall at 2 to 3 a.m., I asked why this happened to me. I move the furniture, I fold the clothes, clear the cobwebs, I keep myself busy... I feel like I am living in a dilemma. I can count how many words I talk to him in one day. I leave home early in the morning and come back in the evening. Evening, he goes out for patrol".*

*"That's why I'm strong. No more tears to cry. I don't mind if he's not around, but he needs me... it's so hard...my heart is always hurt...I'm so jealous."*

(Rahmah, 47, First wife)

Hafizah craves more attention and time with her family as a younger wife. She admitted that when Dollah visits, she feels complete as a family. At the same time, she is also tolerant of the days spent with the son and her since she understands that Dollah has more children with Rahmah and sometimes, he is not feeling well due to frequent travelling. Life becomes even more complicated when Dollah adopts a cold and distant demeanour, avoiding discussions about improving their marriage. Many of the issues Hafizah raises during conversations could be resolved more effectively if Dollah openly communicated with her. Consequently, she often ends up resolving these issues independently and keeping them to herself.

Similarly, Hafizah echoes her disappointment,

*"Sometimes, there's nowhere to pour out my feeling. Although we're married, there's no discussion. I don't feel like married. I can live without him. Better if he lets me go."*

(Hafizah, 33, Banker)

The themes of marital dissatisfaction and emotional neglect align with findings by Alfayumi-Zeadna et al. (2019), who noted similar stressors in polygamous families.

### **Coping strategies of polygamous actors**

Coping strategies are methods used to manage stress in life. These strategies help individuals navigate challenges, even when times are tough. In the context of polygamous families, all members are affected both directly and indirectly when a father takes a second wife. This decision can lead to significant changes in their lives, often resulting in emotional pain and hardship. Hafizah copes with her dissatisfaction by keeping it to herself and considering a divorce from her husband, viewing it as a validation of her worth if the marriage were to end.

*"I'm playing with my son despite no woman playing kites. But I don't care. I see 'others' [the first wife] happy with my husband, but I'm alone, without a husband. My son told me this year, why don't I get a divorce? What can I do? I've asked many times for a divorce from him. I'm so sad. There are so many stories I keep. I feel cheated, but I never told him".*

Unlike Barut (2023), who emphasized high self-esteem among senior wives, this study found pervasive feelings of self-doubt and isolation. Unlike Hafizah, who would ask for a divorce, Rahmah's coping strategies rely on her acting skills. She pretended to be calm in public, especially in front of her family members. Since she interacted with many customers at her restaurant, she would converse and share her problems with men, believing they could offer better advice. However, she was cautious of those who might exploit her sad stories. Rahmah also advised others never to snatch another's husband. Rahmah knew her husband needed her, although he had Hafizah as his second wife.

The researcher asked Hafizah about the first wife's feelings regarding polygamy. She replied that it was unimportant to know her feelings since she had received permission to marry Dollah. Hafizah also shared with

the researcher that Rahmah had the opportunity to meet her and discuss Dollah's characteristics before marriage. However, Hafizah later validated these traits with her husband despite Dollah denying them. After several years of marriage, she realised that Rahmah's sharing was somewhat accurate, but it was already too late.

## DISCUSSION

This article aims to unravel the dynamics of polygamy and its impacts on the family members. Multimethod analysis was made, which included a content analysis of a documentary featuring the informants' families, observation and in-depth interviews. The results recorded five themes that emerged, namely the psychological and emotional impact, family function, marital satisfaction, and coping strategies of a polygamous family. It is interesting to uncover that the husband, the head of the family, perceived that the wives could handle minimal problems. He mainly had to keep both families functioning as usual; hence, he did not welcome serious discussion from the spouses. He has undertaken his duties as long he can maintain the allocated visits to both wives. However, the spouses thought otherwise. The failure of the husband's open communication had bred marital dissatisfaction from both wives. All these behaviours were observed closely by the children and gave misleading signals about polygamous marriage.

Polygamy is emotionally damaging as it increases stress in family life (Alfayumi-Zeadna et al., 2019). More often, women are subjected to maltreatment, voicelessness, and helplessness in many polygamy relationships. According to Afif (2007), women are subjected to cultural expectations such as childbearing, child-rearing, taking care of the elderly in the family, cleaning, cooking, and many more. Those who work outside the house are still subjected to domestic chores despite formal work during the daytime. Frequently, the double shift practice is widely accepted in society, and it has taken a toll on women's mental health (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Busfield, 1988). For example, Ekerbiçer et al. (2016) uncovered that polygamous woman tended to emotional difficulties such as "anger, jealousy, competition, loneliness, unhappiness, and lack of intimacy with their spouses". The situation becomes worse when social support is absent within the family (Alfayumi-Zeadna et al., 2019). Shaiful Bahari et al. (2021) found similar psychological distress among wives in polygamous families, underscoring the global relevance of this issue across cultural contexts.

In a patriarchal structure, men are preferred over women. Janadhna et al. (2011) mentioned that the status of women in the family is usually disassociated with economic significance; in fact, women are perceived as a burden to the family. Hence, during the help-seeking for a mental breakdown, men will be given priority and often not blamed. On the other hand, women are frequently denied health, and they are forced to live in misery until they suffer dysfunction in everyday life. The help-seeking for women would be the folk healers, which their treatment usually doubted. With such stereotyping that women should be strong in all conditions, women are subject to negative labels and taken for granted when they fail to function as per the cultural script where they belong (Raphael et al., 2012).

The slow erosion in the love and commitment between a couple, over time, through a loss of the ability to provide financial support, communication breakdown (both emotionally and physically), and finally, the loss of trust between husband and wife was also evident from the findings. The emotional dynamics of spouses amongst the husband, the first wife, and the second wife are far more complicated and problematic because a polygamous husband and both his co-wives must manage and cope with a greater variety of marital situations and emotional challenges in their familial relationships, spousal interactions and family life. This finding aligns with Brown et al. (2022), who emphasized the critical role of shared emotional experiences in maintaining marital satisfaction. Dollah's failure to engage in meaningful communication reflects the broader challenge identified in patriarchal family systems, as highlighted by Raphael et al. (2012).

Polygamy is usually situated in patriarchal countries where children are valued as the parents' physical and emotional labour (Elbedour et al., 2007). In collective societies, children are perceived as future manpower, emotional support, and social and economic security to the parents. Therefore, polygamy is one mechanism that could multiply procreation. Little research has mentioned its benefits to society at large. For example, Elbedour et al. (2007) it found that children belonging to a polygamous family are more content as they have cohesive siblings, less risk of having mental disorders since many could babysit them, and less violence at school compared to monogamous families. On the other side of the coin, children without their biological mother around

exhibit a sense of insecurity that they become aggressive (Tajudeen & Khan, 2018). The finding is seconded by a systematic literature review that highlights children in a polygynous family prone to have a mental disorder, social problems, and lower academic achievement (Al-Sharfi et al., 2016).

The wives experienced lower self-esteem, less life satisfaction, less marital satisfaction and more mental health symptomatology. One of the noteworthy symptoms is depression. Depression is a gendered phenomenon that invades individuals silently (Ussher, 1991; Conrad, 2005; Ussher, 2011). For a polygamous relationship, the senior wives are expected to perceive the news of the second marriage news with a strong heart (Alhuzail, 2020). Such suppression eventually affected the children, especially the daughters. According to the authors, children from a polygamous family experience dissonance between cultural practice and modern family arguments. The daughter used to feel invalidated since support from her mother was absent. As a result, these children would develop at least three coping strategies, namely normative, rebel, and combined coping.

The findings have several practical implications. First, they highlight the impact of polygamous marriages on family dynamics and child development. Dysfunctional polygamous relationships can fragment family structures, often leading to favouritism, jealousy, and neglect. Secondly, polygamous relationships can exacerbate socioeconomic challenges and mental health issues. The observed financial strain on first wives, as echoed by Rahmah's narrative, is consistent with Hochschild & Machung's (2012) concept of the 'second shift,' where women shoulder dual burdens of work and household responsibilities." Mismanagement of family finances can deplete resources, making it difficult to meet basic needs and potentially leading to anxiety and depression within the family. In this context, the findings could inform mental health services, law enforcement, and financial literacy programs for family members.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex dynamics and far-reaching impacts of polygamous marriages on family members, particularly spouses and children. While Al-Krenawi (2013) explored polygamy's impact in Middle Eastern contexts, this study provides a unique perspective on Southeast Asian families, particularly focusing on cultural dynamics in Malaysia. The first wife predominantly expressed financial strain, whereas the second wife focused on emotional neglect. This demonstrates a need for communication strategies in polygamous families to mitigate financial inequities.

The findings indicate that communication breakdowns, emotional neglect, and patriarchal cultural norms lead to marital dissatisfaction and mental health issues among wives while also creating a fragmented and stressful environment for their children. Given the findings of Al-Sharfi et al. (2016) on children's mental health in polygamous families, interventions should include child-focused counselling to address the emotional fallout highlighted in this study. Future research could explore the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of children in these situations, as this instability may contribute to long-term behavioural and mental health issues. By understanding these effects, policymakers can create interventions to support these children and their families.

Although polygamy may offer some perceived societal benefits, such as more extensive family networks and shared responsibilities, these advantages are often overshadowed by the emotional and psychological toll it imposes on individuals. Policymakers, mental health professionals, and community leaders must consider these findings to design targeted interventions that address the specific needs of polygamous families, promote open communication, and provide mental health support to improve overall family well-being.

## REFERENCE

1. Alfayumi-Zeadna, S., Froimovici, M., Azbarga, Z., Grotto, I., & Daoud, N. (2019). Barriers to postpartum depression treatment among Indigenous Bedouin women in Israel: A focus group study. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 27 (3), 757–766. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12693>
2. Alhuzail, N. A. (2020). Being a girl in a polygamous family implications and challenges. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 37(1), 97-107. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-019-00623-w>
3. Al Krenawi, Alan. (2013) Mental health and polygamy: The Syrian case. *World Journal of Psychiatry*. March 22; 3 (1): 1–7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3782180/>

4. Al-Krenawi, A and Slonim-Nevo, V. (2006) Success and Failure Among Polygamous Families: The Experience of Wives, Husbands, and Children. *Family Process*, Vol. 45, No. 3. Pp 311-330.
5. Al-Krenawi, A. (2001). Women from polygamous and monogamous marriages in an out-patient psychiatric clinic. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 38, 187–199.
6. Al-Sharfi, M., Pfeffer, K., & Miller, K. A. (2016). The effects of polygamy on children and adolescents: a systematic review. *Journal of family Studies*, 22(3), 272-286. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2015.1086405>
7. Alosaimi, F. D., Altuwirqi, M. H., Bukhari, M., Abotalib, Z., & Saleh, S. (2015). Psychiatric disorders among infertile men and women attending three infertility clinics in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. *Annals of Saudi Medicine*, 35 (5), 359-367. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647273.2016.1245448>
8. Angrosino, M. V. (2018). *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research*. SAGE Publications.
9. Barut, A. (2023). The psychosexual and psychosocial impacts of polygamous marriages: a cross-sectional study among Somali women. *BMC Women's Health*, 23 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-023-02830-1>
10. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology*, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
11. Brown, C. L., Chen, K.-H., Wells, J. L., Otero, M. C., Connelly, D. E., Levenson, R. W., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2022). Shared emotions in shared lives: Moments of co-experienced affect, more than individually experienced affect, linked to relationship quality. *Emotion*, 22(6), 1387–1393. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000939>
12. Busfield, J. (1988). Mental Illness as Social Product or Social Construct: A Contradiction in Feminists' Arguments? *Sociology of Health and Illnesses*, 10 (4), 521-542.
13. Daoulah, A., Lotfi, A., Al-Murayeh, M., Al-Kaabi, S., Al-Faifi, S. M., Elkhateeb, O. E., & Al-Shehri, M. (2017). Polygamy and risk of coronary artery disease in men undergoing angiography: an observational study. *International Journal of Vascular Medicine*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1155/2017/1925176>
14. DeAnda, J.S., Langlais, M.R., Anderson, E.R. and Greene, S.M. (2020), After the Marriage Is Over: Mothers' Separation Distress and Children's Postdivorce Adjustment. *Family Relations*, 69: 1113-1127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12434>
15. Elbedour, S. A. L. M. A. N., Bart, W., & Hektner, J. (2007). The relationship between monogamous/polygamous family structure and the mental health of Bedouin Arab adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 30(2), 213-230. <https://doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2006.02.003>
16. Ekerbiçer, H. Ç., Resim, S., Efe, E., Bahar, M. R., Altunören, Ö., Küçükdurmaz, F., & Benlioğlu, C. (2016). A Comparison of Sexual Function, Psychological Status, and Sociodemographic Characteristics of Turkish Men within Polygamous and Monogamous Marriages. *Balkan Medical Journal*, 33 (4), 383-389, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5152/BALKANMEDJ.2016.16459>
17. Faisal Kasirye. (2021). An Overview of Mixed and Multi Method Research. *Advance*. <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.14681643.v1>
18. Faten, G., Limor, G. (2020). "I Have No Hope": The Experience of Mothers in Polygamous Families as Manifested in Drawings and Narratives. *Frontiers in Psychology*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2020.608577>
19. Gadban, F., & Goldner, L. (2022). Mother-Son Rejection and Triangulation in Polygamous Families: Probing the Spillover Effect and the Compensatory Hypothesis. *Families in Society*, 103 (2), 221-234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389421992311>
20. Hochschild, A., & Machung, A. (2012). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. Penguin.
21. Islam. (2018). Types of Hadith. Retrieved from <https://www.islam.org.uk/hadith/types-of-hadith/>
22. Kleinheksel, A., Rockich-Winston, N., Tawfik, H., & Wyatt, T. (2020). Demystifying content analysis. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(1), 7113. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7113>
23. Mariam, A.M., Sahlawati, A.B., Muhammad, A., Salasiah, H., Hamjah, Zulkefli, A., Mohd, Ridhuan, M.J., Naqibah, M. (2020). Pendekatan Mengurus Konflik dalam Rumah Tangga Bermadu. *Journal of Al-Irsyad*, Vol. 5, No. 1., 253-265. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53840/ALIRSYAD.V5I1.98>
24. Muhammad Ajib, A.B., Intan Hashimah, M.H., and Syazwani, D. (2019). The Impact of Polygamy on

- Family Functioning. Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences: A Compilation of Short Essays. UPSI. Farhana et al. (Eds.). 133-140.
25. Nuzha, A.A. (2020). Being a Girl in a Polygamous Family Implications and Challenges. Tradition, Vol. 37, No. 1. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10560-019-00623-W>
26. Parkes, A., Chambers, S. and Buston, K. (2021), Nonresident Fathers' and Grandparents' Early Years Support and Middle Childhood Socio-Emotional Adjustment. Fam Relat, 83: 358-374. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12752>
27. Pejabat Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan. (2024). Al-Kafi #1916: Adakah Suami Wajib Menyatakan Secara Khusus Nafkah Yang Diberikan Kepada Isteri. Retrieved from <https://www.muftiwp.gov.my/ms/artikel/al-kafi-li-al-fatawi/5516-al-kafi-1916-adakah-suami-wajib-menyatakan-secara-khusus-nafkah-yang-diberikan-kepada-isteri>
28. Raphael, B., Nadelson, C., Taylor, M., & Jacobs, J. (2012). Human Rights and Women's Mental Health. In M. Dudley, D. Silove, & F. Gale (Eds.), Mental health and human rights: Vision, praxis, and courage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
29. Razak, M. A. A., Amin, A. S., Hashim, I. H. M., & Drani, S. (2021). Adjustment of Polygamous Husbands. International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Science, 11(6), 891–900. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v11-i6/10220>
30. Rohman, A. (2013). Reinterpret polygamy in Islam: A case study in Indonesia. In Rohman, Arif. (2013). Reinterpret Polygamy in Islam: A Case Study in Indonesia. Int J Hum & Soc Sci Inv, 2(10), 68-74.
31. Shaiful Bahari, I., Norhayati, M.N., Nik Hazlina, N.H. (2021). Psychological impact of polygamous marriage on women and children: a systematic review and meta-analysis. BMC Pregnancy Childbirth 21, 823. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-021-04301-7>
32. Shepard LD. 2013. The impact of polygamy on women's mental health: A systematic review. Epidemiol Psychiatric Science. 22 (1) : 47-62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796012000121>
33. Shepard, LD, Panos, P, Thompson, C (2010). Perpetuating polygamist tradition: An exploratory qualitative study of Senegalese women. Journal of Global Social Work Practice 3. <http://www.globalsocialwork.org/vol3no1/Shepard.html>.
34. Tajuden, M., & Khan, Y. A. (2018). Towards Understanding Aggressive Behaviour of Nigerian Adolescents: Focus on Family Structure. International Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics, 120(6), 7737-7747.
35. Titilayo, A., Anuodo, O., & Palamuleni, M. (2017). family type, domestic violence and under-five mortality in Nigeria. African Health Sciences, 17(2), 538. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ahs.v17i2.30>
36. Yılmaz E, & Tamam L. (2018). The relationship between polygamy and psychiatric disorders in Turkish women. International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 64(8):821-827. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764018814275>