

Chapter 8: Polygamy

If you fear that you cannot act equitably toward orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two, and three, and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice between them, then marry only one; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course. (4:3)

Fatma: How does Islam justify polygamy?

Sayyid: Scholars have a variety of reasons justifying polygamy, such as a woman's inability to continuously provide her husband with conjugal relations during times of menstruation, pregnancy, or a wife's barrenness. Scholars also cite the disproportion of marriageable women compared with the availability of marriageable men.

Although, the described reasons may be manifested to a certain degree, still they do not facilitate the true nature of polygamy. Polygamy may be an option [a solution] for certain people, male and female alike, or in specific cases, or for future situations.

Often times, when polygamy becomes the subject of discussion, it is criticized. Polygamy is not an obligated rule; it is a permissible act. The unsurpassed and most productive of all marriages are monogamous, and most Muslims practice monogamy. Contemporary scholars do not recommend or encourage polygamy, but still it is available to be utilized as a solution if people are faced with extraordinary cases or circumstances.

For some people, or in some circumstances, polygamy might serve as a remedy. For example, in some countries, the stigma of a widow or a divorced woman may be a deterring factor in remarrying. Conventionally, men who marry for the first time will not marry such women. Given the circumstances, what would be the best solution?

Do these women remain unmarried for the rest of their lives? What if there were ethical and financially capable men who wanted to sincerely shelter and protect these women? Would this not be considered a noble act?

Fatma: Critics often cite that Islam favors polygamy as a continuation of male dominance, tyranny, and

lechery.

Sayyid: Such comments are baseless and contradict the principles of Islam and the intended purpose of polygamy. Islam objects to any man who practices polygamy as a means to exploit women for his personal enjoyment.

Islam was not the initiator or promoter of polygamy. Polygamy was being practiced long before the existence of Islam. Jews, Christians, and many other cultures practiced polygamy, and some still continue to do so. Famous prophets practiced polygamy, such as David, Solomon, and Abraham. In fact, Islam was the only religion that restricted and regulated polygamous marriages.

Fatma: What are the restrictions governing polygamy?

Sayyid: Before the advent of Islam, polygamy had no limit on the number of wives, and the wives in polygamous marriages were often inequitably treated. When Islam made its ruling on polygamy, it restricted it to include three criteria:

1. It is not for every man.
2. The limit is four wives.
3. The wives must be treated equally.

“If you fear that you will not do justice between them, then marry only one; this is more proper.”
(4:3)

Islam made it incumbent upon the husband to solely sustain and maintain his wife financially. As I mentioned earlier in “Matrimonial Rights,” the husband is the exclusive provider for his family. Not every man is capable of providing and maintaining financial sustenance for one woman, let alone several, in addition to all of his children.

Marriage requires financial security, and if a man wishes to practice polygamy, then he must be capable of providing an equal livelihood for his families, such as similar homes and financial disbursement. Otherwise, he is not permitted to marry more than one woman.

Beside the financial aspect, Islam also established rules of behavior for polygamous marriages. There are numerous guidelines that state the particulars of behavior. For instance, the husband’s time must be equally distributed among the wives; he spends his nights and days equally between the wives.

If the husband takes one wife on a vacation or a trip, then he is required to take the others at intervals as well. If the husband provides a gift to one of his wives, then he must present the other wives with gifts of equivalent values.

Polygamous marriages in Islam are based on the fundamental principle of equality; therefore, favoritism,

privileges, or neglect in any manner from the husband toward the wives is not permitted. Traditions of the Prophet give fair warning to polygamous husbands who do not practice equal justice and fairness between the wives.

Fatma: What about the emotional aspects of couples? How does Islam manage to regulate emotional fairness in polygamous marriages?

Sayyid: When the Qur'an makes its point on incorporating justice in polygamous marriages, it is referring to materials and behavior. The husband must accommodate each wife with an equivalent lifestyle and treat each one amicably.

As far as emotions are concerned, they arise subjectively, rather than through conscious effort. However, the Qur'an does refer to this point.

“You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire.” (4:129)

An emotional feeling is a state in which humans have no authority, and the Qur'an affirms this. Although, humans may not have full control of their feelings, they do, however, have full authority over their behavior. A husband in a polygamous marriage must not openly display his emotions among the (favored) wife or behave in a manner that reveals his heart is more inclined toward one of the wives.

Fatma: What is the correlation between orphans and polygamy?

If you fear that you cannot act equitably toward orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two, and three, and four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them then only one. (4:3)

Sayyid: It was customary in the pre-Islamic era for men to foster orphaned girls. Traditionally, if orphaned girls had any means, then the fostering men would marry them and acquire their possessions. Too often, these husbands mistreated and reneged paying orphaned wives their mahr [the marriage gift]. After the advent of Islam, Allah banned such practices and introduced a correlated degree of treatment between orphans and multiple wives [polygamy].

The essential point regarding this verse is that, in the English translation of the Qur'an, the excerpt **“to deal justly”** is mentioned twice in the same fashion. However, in the Arabic text, two different words are used to explicitly define a level of treatment between marrying orphans and marrying ordinary women in polygamous marriages.

The first one addresses the manner of treating the orphans in marriage. **“If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans: Wa'in khiftum 'al-laa tuksitu,”** as compared to the polygamous treatment that is termed, **“Fa-'in khiftum 'al-laa ta-diluu: But if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly.”** The words **“Ksit”** (tuksituu) and **“Adil”** (tadiluu) are the two varying degrees of treatment. **Ksit** (tuksituu) is a superior level of justice, equity, and fairness, and it applies to the

treatment of orphaned girls in marriage.

Adil (tadiluu) is a typical form of fairness, and it is applied to the treatment of non-orphan wives in polygamous marriages. The manner of treating the orphans in marriage far exceeds the manner of treating wives in polygamous marriages. The reason for this is that orphaned girls were more vulnerable to exploitation by men because they did not have a father or family supervising and defending their honor.

This is unlike the situation of non-orphan wives of polygamous marriages who had fathers or male relatives monitoring their lives. Therefore, the Qur'an gives warning and advice, that if men cannot treat the orphaned girls in an excellent fashion then they should refrain from marrying orphans and opt to marry other women.

Fatma: Why do you suppose Islam did not abolish polygamy?

Sayyid: Currently, there are some societies that still require and want polygamy. Furthermore, there are societies in which the spiritual intention of polygamy (providing sanctuary for some women) is ardently accepted and not stigmatized.

Some women in such societies are not offended, intimidated, or hesitant on the subject. In some cases, polygamy serves as a solution for certain societies where women desire companionship and protection; hence, to abandon polygamy would be an injustice to those women.

Fatma: Although it may be commonly asked, I believe it is important to explain why the Prophet had several wives.

Sayyid: Before the Prophet had several wives his first marriage was monogamous. The Prophet was married to his first wife, Khadija, for twenty-five years until she died.

My views as to why the Prophet had many wives are three: humanitarian, political, and those that were considered to be exceptional cases.

First, the marital history of the Prophet reveals that all of the women he married were either divorced or widowed with the exception of one virgin. During that era, there were no social institutions that provided a safe haven for such women.

In most cases, these women needed a husband to shelter and protect them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Prophet, as a statesman and humanitarian, was obligated to assist them. In one instance, he married a widow with six children whose husband died defending Islam.

Second, some of the Prophet's marriages had political indications. The institute of some marriages in Arabia had a connotative trademark, a political alliance. When people married outside of their homeland, they became closely affiliated within their spouse's community. Most of the wives who the Prophet

married came from various social classes, tribes, and countries; therefore, he was able to defend and propagate Islam through marital alliance.

Third, some women proposed marriage to the Prophet. Once, for example, a woman stood before the Prophet and asked him to marry her. The Prophet did after the permitted revelation.

“When a believing woman had offered herself in marriage, if the Prophet wishes to marry her, a privilege for you only, not the rest of the believers.” (33:50)

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