

Polygamy in Islam

(English)

تعدد الزوجات في الإسلام

(إنجليزي)

<http://www.womeninislam.ws>

Marriage to more than one wife at the same time - Polygamy - is a practice as old as the history of man, and is allowed in Islamic law. Among others, Polygamy was well known to the Ancient Hebrews, Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Assyrians, Japanese, Hindus, Russians and Germanic peoples.

All previous revealed religions practiced and condoned Polygamy. The Old and New Testaments are at the foremost in the list of the religious Books that legalized and practiced it.

Many of the Prophets of Allah before Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) entered into plural marriages. Prophet Abraham had two wives; Prophet Jacob had four wives; and Prophet David had ninety-nine wives (may Allah exalt their mention). Prophet Solomon (may Allah exalt their mention) had seven hundred wives who were free noble women, and three hundred other wives who were slave women.

Nowhere does the law of the Prophet Moses (may Allah exalt their mention) set or determine a specific number of wives to which a husband was entitled. The compilers of the Talmud, who lived around Jerusalem, decided upon a certain number of wives for a man, and some Jewish scholars only permitted a second wife or more if the first wife was permanently ill or barren. Still other Jewish scholars did not permit plural marriages at all.

In the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus is commissioned to comply with and complete the Laws of Moses (may Allah exalt their mention) and we cannot find a single quote in the Bible that forbids plural marriage. The prohibition of plural marriages in Christianity came about only as a result of legislation set forth certain segments of the Christian church, and not by the original teachings of Christianity itself.

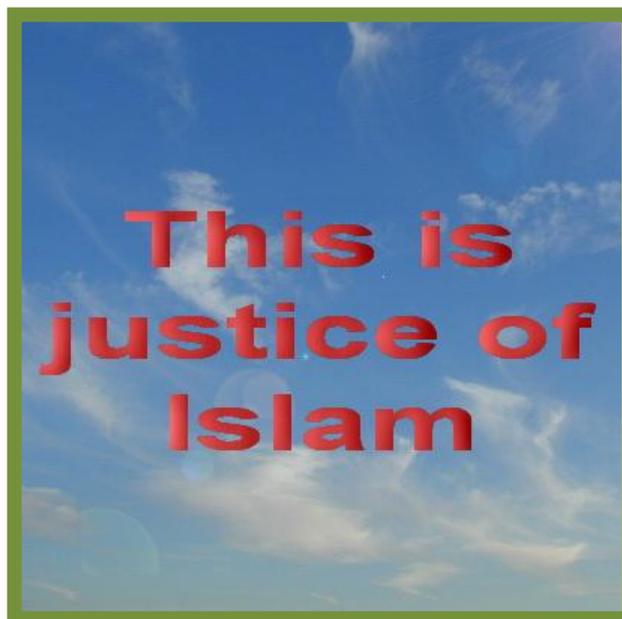
For this reason we find many examples of Christians taking multiple wives. The Irish king, Ditharmet, for instance, had two wives. King Frederick the Second had two wives with the church's approval. Thus, it must be noticed that prohibition was in the hands of the priests of the church, and not in accordance with any universally recognized original law of Jesus Christ himself (may Allah exalt their mention). Martin Luther, the German priest who first established the Protestant sect, considered plural marriage acceptable and advocated it on many occasions.

Polygamy was well known amongst pagan Arab tribes prior to the advent of Islam but there was no limitation for the number of wives, like in the cases of some of the Prophets mentioned above.

With the advent of Islam, the Islamic law condoned Polygamy but a man was limited to only four wives, and specific rules regulated these marriages. There are numerous examples in the authentic traditions wherein the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) obligated those who had more than four wives, when they accepted Islam, to choose four and divorce the rest honorably. Allah, the Most Beneficent, said:

(And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan-girls, then marry (other) women of your choice, two or three, or four but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one or (the captives and the slaves) that your right hands possess. That is nearer to prevent you from doing injustice.) [4:3]

Thus we see that strict justice and fairness in treatment, and avoiding any injustice and wrong practices against all wives, is stipulated and conditional for those who wish to take more than one wife. The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) warned against favoritism saying:



"He who has two wives and is not just between them, he will come on the Day of Resurrection with one of his sides fallen."

[Abu Dawood 2133 & Tirmidhi 1141 and verified]

Justice and fairness, in this context, applies to material things such as expenditure, fair division of wealth, gifts, time, etc. As for emotional matters, such as love and inclination of the heart towards one wife over the other, it is recognized that man has no control over his innermost heart and emotions, as they are involuntary. Allah, the Most Beneficent, said:

(You will never be able to do perfect justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire (i.e. emotions of the heart), so do not incline too much to one of them (by giving her more of your time and provision) so as to leave the other hanging (i.e. neither divorced nor married). And if you do justice, and do all that is right and fear Allah by keeping away from all that is wrong, then Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful) [4:129]

A man who is impotent should not seek any marriage since he is unable to fulfill its basic requirement. He who knows for sure that he is financially incapable of supporting another wife and household, is not allowed to seek another marriage, just as the bachelor who seeks to marry must strive to earn the wherewithal and must be able to sustain his wife and future children. As Allah says, and which can be taken as a general rule:

(And let those who find not the financial means for marriage keep themselves chaste, until Allah enriches them with His Bounty.) [34:33]

Let us take a look of some conditions that befall people of any society, and then assess whether Polygamy is a good solution for the problems that occur, and also the practice of Polygamy is in favor of a woman or against her! The following points prove that monogamy in many situations leads to promiscuity, prostitution or divorce:

1. If a woman is sterile and the husband is interested in having children, should he divorce the woman and marry a second wife? Or, if she chooses to stay married to him, should he take a second wife giving them both equal rights as his lawful wives?
2. If a wife is chronically ill and cannot maintain her marital relations with her husband, should he keep her and take a second wife wherein she remains perfectly honored, cared for and provided for by her husband? Or should he divorce her?
3. Some men are financially strong, and sexually demanding and potent with higher levels of hormonal testosterone. One wife may not be able to fulfill his lawful and natural sexual desire. If the menstrual period or after-birth-confinement period is notably longer than normal, or if she has no natural sexual desire to match that of the husband, or other scenarios, what is better for both husband and wife in such a case? Is it better for the man to remain frustrated and pent up, or seek unlawful sexual satisfaction outside the marriage? Or to acquire other lawful wives who can help to keep him chaste and satisfied?

4. In various parts of the world international and civil wars and other catastrophes often take their toll on men more than women. Even naturally, the demographic number of females, for various reasons, is often more than males in most countries. The best example of this is the case of the First World War, and the Second World War, which claimed the lives of an astronomical number of men who had participated in the fighting, with tens of millions of them being killed. In other trouble spots the disproportionate death ratios are similar. In such a case, if every man had only one wife, what would be the necessary destiny of the women left without lawful marriage to satisfy their social, financial and sexual needs? Some women may be tempted to satisfy their sexual desires in unlawful ways through fornication, lesbian activities or prostitution, a destabilizing factor for any society. The abundance of women without husbands, or male relatives to care and protect their interests, is one factor that helps spread corruption and illegitimate sexual activities in societies. What is better for a society and for such women in this case: to remain single and suffer all the consequences of life without marriage; or to accept to be a second wife with an honest, protective, honorable and chaste man?

Promiscuity unfortunately exists in all modern societies, but should it be legalized or condoned, as is the case under man-made laws, with all the social consequences? In most contemporary societies only monogamous marriage is legal, but extra martial relations are allowed as a socially acceptable substitute for the situations mentioned above, in the form of mistresses, girl friends, escort services, prostitution and common law marriages.

These types of relationships have no merits of their own to stand on, and if the couple does not eventually get legally married, the illicit relationship often leads to abuse and conflict. These illicit relationships are only meant to fulfill sexual interests of the two parties involved without the responsibilities, and abuse the rights of the women in general.

Legally it imposes no financial, social, or emotional obligations, and if the woman becomes pregnant, it is her own problem, with the illegitimate children left without the support of a family and sometimes abandoned to the social service system. Men, generally, are not obliged to admit the paternity of the child, thus not obliged to take financial responsibility for the child. Abortions proliferate in this kind of society. In accordance with

Islamic law, a second, third, or fourth wife enjoys all the rights and privileges of the first wife without an iota of injustice or dishonor to her.

Adultery, fornication and all extramarital sexual relations are strictly forbidden in Islam and the prophet took all measures to protect the society from these social diseases which, if they become widespread, can only bring harm and destruction upon individuals, families, and the basic bond holding the society together as a whole.

The following tradition shows the wisdom of the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) and patience in convincing a young virile man, by eloquent analogies, the injustice of double standards and the evils of wanton desires leading to fornication and adultery. No one would want his own female relatives to be exploited, used and abused, so how, then, can they allow themselves to exploit others?

An authentic tradition narrates:

"A young man came to the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) and asked: "O Messenger of Allah, permit me (with special license) to commit fornication (and adultery)." The people started to rebuke him harshly, but the Prophet sat close to him and asked: "Would you like it for your mother? He replied "No, by Allah, may Allah make me a sacrifice for you!" The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) said: "And thus the people do not like it for their mothers," and continued: "Would you like it for your daughter?" "No" he replied. The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) said: "And thus the people do not like it for their daughters," and continued: "Would you like it for your paternal aunt?" "No" he replied. The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) said: "And thus the people do not like it for their paternal aunts," and asked: "Would you like it for your maternal aunt?" "No" he replied. The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) said: "And thus the people do not like it for their maternal aunts." Then the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) put his hand on the youth and said: 'O Allah forgive his sin and purify his heart and make him chaste (fortify his abstinence from sexual sins).

[Ahmad 22265 and verified]

One might say that this tradition is a practical application of the golden rule as mentioned by the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him):

"None of you [truly] believes until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself." [Bukhari 15 & Muslim 44]

Polygamy in the Islamic society is limited to four wives only; the marriages being performed lawfully with a proper marriage contract, witnesses, etc. The man must bear all financial burdens and responsibilities to his wives and children that arise from his marriages. All the children are legitimate and must be raised and cared for under the responsibility of both parents.

One might ask that, if we permit Polygamy for men, why is not polyandry permitted for women? The answer to this question is simple since numerous natural and physical reasons, as indicated above, preclude this as a viable option. Men in almost all societies of the world have the position, domination and authority over the households due to their natural endowment and strength. Even if, for argument's sake, we forego the idea of their strength and suppose that a woman has two or more husbands, the question will arise: who will have the ultimate authority and leadership of the home - as this would create harmful competition, jealousy, anger and hatred among the husbands and result in great destruction in the society.

Moreover, if a woman were allowed to be married to more than one man, who would be the legal father of the child she bears, and how would fatherhood be convincingly determined? What would happen to the demography of the society after some generations of this arrangement? Would the men be able to remain chaste within their marriage vows in such an arrangement with one wife, or would he be tempted into promiscuity?

The answers to all these questions are obvious. Since a woman can only become pregnant approximately once a year and she can get pregnant by only one man at a time, while a man can naturally impregnate more than one woman on a continual basis, it follows that it is more logical and natural that the man has more than one wife and that she doesn't engage more than one husband.

Above all in Polygamy, the man is responsible for the provision of all of his wives and children, which keeps everything in order, while this is not the case in polyandry, thus impractical from any conceivable angle whatsoever. The following are statements of some Western thinkers who demanded Polygamy and considered it the only solution for the problems they were confronted with in their societies.

Gustav Le Bon, the well-known French thinker, says in his book *Arabic Civilization*:

"Polygamy enables the society to reduce social crisis, prevents the mistress problem and cures the society from illegitimate children."

Annie Besant, in her book on *Indian Religions* says:

"I read in the Old Testament that the closest friend to Allah, whose heart acts upon the Will of Allah, was polygamous. Moreover, the New Testament did not forbid Polygamy except for priests or ministers of the church, who were required to keep and maintain one wife only. Old Indian religious books also permitted Polygamy. It is easy, however, to criticize others in their religious practices. And that is what made people accuse Islam and attack it for its permission of Polygamy.

However, it is strange that Westerners are against the restricted and limited Polygamy of the Muslims, while they suffer from wide scale prostitution and promiscuity in their own societies. A close examining look at the Western society illustrates that only a few pure, chaste and honest men respect their clean marital relationships and honor their marriage to one single wife and have no other sexual relationship outside marriage.

It is an incorrect and inaccurate statement, therefore, to describe a community as monogamous, in which the men maintain a single marriage, while they are indeed having mistresses, girl friends and other means of sexual relationship outside the marriage to their legal and lawful wife.

If we were to be fair and just, we could see that Polygamy in Islam protects, honors, maintains and respects women in society. Polygamy is better than the Western prostitution that permits a man to have a mistress or a girl friend to fulfill his sexual desires with no respect to the feelings, emotions, needs and honor of the women.

The man will disown that woman as soon as he gets his satisfaction. The man has no social commitment or obligation towards the mistress or the girl friend. She is only meant to fulfill his sexual needs of the moment and give him the company he needs temporarily. Even though some people declare both Polygamy and fornication or prostitution as bad and unacceptable, yet it is unfair for the non-Muslims to blame a Muslim for doing the same thing that he does while his society accepts and condones it."

Jawad, a well-known English scholar, says:

"The stiff British system which prevents Polygamy is an unfair and unacceptable system. It severely hurts approximately two million women who have become old maids. These women have lost their youth and were deprived of having children. Thus, these women were forced to throw away the moral values as one throws away the pit of a date."

Mobenar, a member of the previous French Parliament noted:

"There are two and a half million French girls now who cannot find a husband, if we assume that every French young man will marry only one woman. I frankly declare what I truly believe is that a woman will not enjoy a healthy life unless she becomes a mother. I believe that any law which passes a judgment that such a big number of the members of a society should live opposing, contradicting and neglecting to fulfill the natural laws of man on the Earth is but a cruel and savage law that contradicts the simplest meaning of justice and fairness."

In 1959, the United Nations published a special publication stating:

"This publication has proven, by numbers and statistics, that the entire world is now facing a growing problem of illegitimate children, as opposed to legitimate children. The number of illegitimate children has increased 60% in some countries. In Panama, for instance, the percentage of illegitimate births soared to 75% of the total number of births in the country. This means that three out of every four children are illegitimate, born outside of wedlock. The highest percentage of illegitimate births is stated to be in Latin America."

At the same time, the publication proves and indicates that the number of illegitimate births in the Islamic world is almost nil (in comparison with other countries). The editor of the publication goes on to say that Islamic countries are protected against such social problems and disease due to the fact that the people practice Polygamy.